

Envisioning
Habakkuk 2
August 30, 2015

Two months ago, I made a decision - a decision which both my parents *and* my children immediately told me was a terrible mistake.

But there was no turning back at that point, and so I have had to live with the consequences of this decision.

It's a decision that may ultimately bring great shame and embarrassment upon me, and by extension, this church -- all of you. And for that I can only say: "I'm sorry."

I have been waiting for the right moment to tell all of you about it, and I decided that this sermon was that moment. Here's what I did -- the choice I made:

Two months ago, I said yes to appearing in Fairfield's version of *Dancing with the Stars*. On Saturday night, September 26, at the Patterson Club, six "celebrity dancers" will take the floor in a dance competition to benefit a great little nonprofit called Inspire -- and I, God help me, am one of them.

After hearing about this, both of my children expressed profound relief that on September 26 they would be out of town, far *far* out of town. David, on the other hand, God bless him, was *very* encouraging. "It'll be great, he said. "You love dancing at wedding receptions, so this should be right up your alley." "Yeah", I said, "oh yeah. I think I'll be fine!"

And so I genuinely thought ... until my first lesson.
That's right, you get a series of lessons with a professional dance instructor,
to choreograph your dance, teach what you need to know.

What I needed to know turned out to be, well, everything.
How to turn around without tripping on my own feet.
How to kick to the right without falling down to the left.
How to move my hands, my hips and my feet at the same time.
And most of all, how in the heck to remember from one moment to the next
what I was supposed to be doing.
I knew I was in trouble when my really lovely instructor said,
very sweetly, "you're so courageous to be doing this."

So, again, I apologize for the ignominy I may be bringing upon us all.
By the way, fellow church member Tony Hwang is also doing it,
but I get the impression that he actually knows what he's doing.

Here's the thing, though, in all seriousness --
I am enjoying this, and what I'm really enjoying is finding out about a world of
artistry that I had not fully comprehended before.
I know this sounds incredibly stupid, but:
I really didn't know how hard it is to dance, really dance,
to be an artist who uses your body to express what you feel.
My instructor can move herself around in all sorts of beautiful ways.
She's like - Gumby. Gumby on a playdate with the Pillsbury Doughboy.

But what *really* strikes me, moves me, really -- is her ability to create:
to stand there in a stark empty room, with a piece of music playing,
and say "I picture us moving like this for this part,"
and before you know it she's invented a whole dance piece.
That ability to start with nothing,
and then create something beautiful -- or at least, when *she* does it --

that's amazing to me.

The creativity of an artist dazzles me --

that capacity to see what isn't yet, and then to create it.

This congregation has a lot of folks with the capacity to do that -- we have watercolorists and sculptors, photographers and dancers, architects and landscape designers, and for sure musicians -- all of you doing what I find amazing and inspiring:

you imagine things into being.

Just as for instance, Chris Gulotta, whose business is to go into your house, look around at your furniture and your pictures and your stuff and re-imagine it all as something completely new, seeing what you couldn't.

Or John Giannicchi, or Joe Holland, or Fred Zarrilli, who sit down in a quiet place with a guitar or a keyboard and create a song that an hour earlier didn't exist.

That's artistry.

Taking what is and imagining what can be.

Or starting with a blank slate and creating a work of art.

Believe me, my instructor is starting with a *really* blank slate, and God bless her, she is working her tail off to create something.

That capacity, that creative capacity, that imagination to see what doesn't yet exist, that's a Godlike ability.

I mean that exactly as I said: to create is to be like God.

Because God -- first and foremost and beyond all -- God is Creator.

The very first story in our scriptures, thousands of years old, depicts God as an artist.

And the world was without form, says Genesis chapter 1, *and God created* -- mountains, lakes, sea creatures, rainbows, animals, flowers, US.

Pretty imaginative stuff.

God is a painter, a weaver, a musician, a choreographer --

God is a sculptor, as I talked about with the kids this morning with our playdough.
God imagined us into being,
imagined a world into being,
a world created for good.

But the world's not done yet.

It's a creation that God keeps working on.

And that God needs our help with.

One of the church's descriptions of who we are as humans, one that I really like,
is that we humans, we are co-Creators with God.

It's there in the Catholic catechism *and* in our denomination's statement of faith,
too -- Catholic or Protestant, they say the same:

we are called to help God *complete the work of creation*.

'Cause all you got to do is look around a bit and see that there is still plenty of
work to do.

This world is far from perfected.

Which means that we're all called to be artists.

We're all called to imagine the world as it could be:

a place of peace, of justice,

a place where all God's people are free from hungers of body and soul.

We're all called to be choreographers of a better dance,

painters of a more beautiful canvas,

lyricists for a new song,

sculptors of a better vision.

I've been thinking about this a lot.

I don't mean the dance competition -- although, yes, I do lose sleep.

I've been thinking, I mean, about this idea that we are called to be co-creators,
which is to say that we are called to dream a better world,
imagine what could be.

I've been thinking about it because of, actually, politicians.

Fifteen months out from the presidential election, with a large cast of characters and still growing, there's no shortage of people to have opinions about already, and Lord knows we've **got** both characters and opinions. And something I've been struck by is a phrase that's repeatedly used by folks to explain why someone has captured their heart: "Because they tell it like it is," their admirers say. Or "I like him cause "he calls it like he sees it."" (That's on both sides of the aisle.)

Nothing wrong with that.

There's a place for truth-telling ... goodness knows we long for truth-telling.

But here's what I've realized.

People of faith -- us -- actually aren't so much called to just *tell it like it is*, or *call it like we see it*.

We're actually meant to tell it as it *should* be.

To call it like **God** sees it.

To imagine, that is, a world better than what now is and to proclaim that.

Remember the George Bernard Shaw quote, made more famous by Robert Kennedy:

Some people look at what is, and say why --

Others look at what could be, and say why not.

We are asked by God to dream of what could be,

to imagine the world as it is possible,

and to be divine artists at work, co-creators with the God of Love.

That's why I had Mike read that little excerpt from the book of Habakkuk.

Habakkuk is a little book, in the section of the Bible called 'the minor prophets', which I've always thought was not a very nice thing to say about Habakkuk and his friends.

Habakkuk was a prophet who did his best to help his people imagine the world as God meant it to be,

did his best to call people to be co-creators with God.

And in this one little section, God says to Habakkuk,
tell the people what can be, what this creation is meant to be:
Write the vision, God says,
make it plain on tablets, so that all can see.

We are meant to be people of the vision,
people who imagine the world as it can be, should be.
People who take what's handed to us: all the chaos and beauty and evil and
good,
and work with God to create what God imagines should be.
We are meant to be choreographers and painters,
sculptors and songwriters,
dreamers, artists, creators.

Here's a story to tell you what I mean.

Every Christmas, out in the Narthex of the church,
our middle school youth group puts up a Christmas tree called the Giving Tree.
On it they hang tags, paper ornaments, each one a request for a needed gift.
The requests come from several different places, different agencies we work
with.

But there are always about twenty that come from a social worker in Bridgeport,
Kim, with whom we've been partnered for many years now.
Kim works with children in tough circumstances; in poverty, in shelters, in foster
care.

We've been working with her for ages. And year after year,
there was always one name she gave us that caught my eye,
because it was unusual, to me anyhow.

Sixto, male, age 12.

Sixto, male, age 13.

Sixto, male ... you get it.

Last Christmas: Sixto, male, college student, age 20.

Two years ago, I found out who Sixto was. He emailed me to offer thanks for the church's kindness, and in the course of our email conversation told me that he was now in college, and invited me to read his blog online and stay connected.

And I did.

And this is what I learned: I learned that Sixto had entered the foster system when he was 11 months old, taken away from a home of poverty and abuse. He'd been adopted at age 9, but then abandoned by his adoptive mother -- literally abandoned: he came one day to an empty apartment. Back into foster care he went, and that's when his name began appearing on our Giving Tree.

Year after year, continuing in foster homes, his name on our tree year after year.

And what did Sixto do? He imagined something better.

He saw what could be and said 'why not.'

It wasn't just that he imagined getting himself to college, somehow.

He dreamed a vision of other kids like himself, foster kids, doing that, too.

So he began to create. He persuaded teachers at his school to give volunteer time to tutor kids like him after school so they could be ready for the SATs.

But that didn't seem like enough, he knew they needed help with basic skills in math and reading.

So he got himself up to Hartford and convinced lawmakers to give funding for extra tutoring for kids in care.

In 2011 he entered college. And he kept imagining a world that would be better for kids like him, kids in care.

He kept dreaming and creating.

This is what he did next: he founded his own non-profit, Think Of Us, it's called.

An organization dedicated to helping kids like he was:
foster care kids who need extra support, extra direction, extra love.
It's their to help them with school,
to learn how to interview for jobs,
to help them know what they are capable of.

Three months ago Sixto was invited to the White House,
where he was named one of the year's 'Champions of Change,'
one of twelve young people from across the country honored for inspiring and
empowering others toward a better world.

That's what it means to be a co-creator with God.
Not just "telling it like it is," or "calling it like you see it,"
but seeing it as it should be,
and proclaiming it as it can be.

Sixto has imagined, dreamed, envisioned something new and beautiful --
a world where kids like him have the chance to grow and learn and accomplish;
a world where kids like him are not overlooked but cherished and nurtured.
Out of what was hard and hopeless, he has created possibility;
from what was hard and cruel, he has fashioned a new reality of caring and
embrace.

That's artistry. That's creativity. That's a vision, written plain for all to see.

And God looked at it and said "this is Good."

I am not an artist. I can't draw. I can't sing, as you know from when I get too
close to the microphone.

And Lord knows I am not a dancer.

But with God I can be creative. ANd so can each of you.

Wlth God we can see the possibility for a world yet to be,

we can proclaim the vision so that others see it to,

and by God's grace we can be at work in this world to finish what God started.

Sixto, our Glving Tree child, has been doing just that.
So too are we called, each one of us,
to be co-creators with the GOd of love.
Let's get to work. Let's imagine. Let's do.
Amen.