

A Woman Came

by Angie Nichols



Not one made any attempt to oblige my invitation; “Draw or write something on your paper sack so you will know which one is yours.”

Skinny hens and their chicks swirled in and out of the small thatched room where some forty women gathered, mercifully protected from the African sun and dry wind. They, in colorful fabric and head covers, sat on grass woven mats. I stood above them, awkward and nervous, speaking an obviously odd request through an interpreter.

The story of the alabaster jar must be told. Jesus said so (Matthew 26:13). The plans were carefully written, the supplies brought halfway around the world. None of these Nigerien women had the opportunity to learn to write or read, so as an activity to get things rolling, I set out a box of colored pencils and instructed them to draw on and decorate a white paper sack. As the three-day Fulani women’s conference progressed, their sacks would serve as a place to collect the items we would make as we learned and studied the story of the alabaster jar. But at the critical moment of first impressions, blank stares met my eager, yet timid request. I repeated the invitation to the interpreter using words that seemed less complicated. I don’t know if West Africa is home to crickets, but in my memory of this event, thousands mocked me with deafening chirps.

A woman sitting to the right of where I stood quietly spoke a single sentence over the problem, and the translator interpreted back to me. “We don’t know what to draw, because you haven’t shown us how.” He let me in on the issue: most never had a reason or opportunity to hold a pencil, and they didn’t know how to use one. Suddenly the gap between what I had in common with the group proved me unqualified to even touch the Great Commission, let alone carry it to Africa to these women.

I sat down next to a woman and put a red pencil in her hand. Then I took her hand in mine the way I had my kindergarten students’ back in my teaching days. I scribbled a circle shape and then drew a stem underneath it with a green pencil. Holding the bag up for everyone to see, I said, “Flower!” to the interpreter. He translated. A few offered a compassionate smile for my pitiful drawing.

Just when I thought to scrap the whole project as a very bad idea, one woman shyly took the pencil and drew a tiny bug. I feverishly asked how to say “good” in their native language of Ffulde. “Whoa-dee” came the answer.

“Whoa-dee! Whoa-dee! VERY, VERY Whoa-dee!” I said to the heavens.

I realized my request for their participation in this activity was far from a safe or simple one. They watched how she held the pencil and did likewise. Suddenly sacks with pictures of millet pounders, water buckets, and other simple designs began to fill the room with conversations, friendly teasing, and laughter. One woman took a risk, and her offering gave courage to everyone watching and set the tone for the remainder of our time together. I learned her name was Aissa. Something about her quiet bravery wrecked my heart in a beautiful way. I latched onto her like the new kid at school latches onto a friendly soul who scoots over and makes room on the bus.

And in one simple moment, the Spirit of the living God brought the message of the alabaster jar to life before opened eyes.

The story of the alabaster jar teaches that one woman who came boldly, while even yet afraid, caused eternal gain in God’s kingdom. She came to Jesus with her most treasured gift and poured its precious contents upon His feet in a socially obscene display of bare naked truth.

“She has done a beautiful thing to me,” (Matthew 26:10) Jesus said of her.

The story of the alabaster jar teaches us all to risk everything for an eternal affair, a unique and personal love requited.

What is your alabaster jar? Your fragrant offering?

Pour it out! When Jesus locks you square in His gaze and calls it “beautiful,” nothing of this world compares. Your one risk just might give courage to everyone watching.