

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Sermon Title: Christ's Diplomats

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 5

Pastor: Rev. Dr. Alida Ward

Last week, as many of you remember, was our annual Appalachia Sunday. Which meant that there wasn't a sermon preached from this pulpit -- instead, we listened to the Word of God coming to us from that lectern. Ten different folks, five at each service, teens and adults, got up there and told story after story of how they experienced God last summer on our Appalachia mission trip. Pete Corbett told us about the painfully shy boy in the family his crew worked for, who on the last day of the week took them up into the mountains to a swimming hole that only the locals knew -- that was his gift to them. Naomi Zarrilli talked about the moment when the dad of her family brought his paycheck home, and the family's celebration -- and realizing for herself how much abundance we take for granted. Story after story, of gifts received and wisdom gained, little epiphanies of God's love and presence, and big epiphanies too.

I had a story I wanted to share -- but last week was their time, not mine. So I share it with you today. You know, I think, that the group we take to the Appalachia Service Project is so large that we divide up and go to 3, sometimes 4, different counties where ASP has homes waiting for us to work on, families for us to serve. This year our group ended up spread into three states - Kentucky, West Virginia and Tennessee. What I do during the week is drive from place to place, work with our teens in each place, see what they're up to.

On Thursday of our ASP week this year, I was in Johnson City, Tennessee - my last stop. Art Thurnauer and Courtney Ruble and their crew invited me to come along that evening, as they

took the mom of their family, Shandell, out for ice cream. Here's the thing, Art said, as we headed out, Shandell is deaf and mute. She can't speak, and she can't hear you when you speak. She can use sign language, but none of us know it. So we've been writing notes to her all week, we bought a little whiteboard and a pen for her.

Shandell and I sat next to each other in the van as we headed for Dairy Queen. I had so many questions I wanted to ask -- about her kids, about her husband, about her life and thoughts and how she managed. And she had questions, too -- how many kids, how old, what were they like. So I scribbled away on the whiteboard, and she scribbled back, but her writing was labored, and communication was slow. And I felt that frustration of not being able to communicate, the same feeling I get when I'm in India and kneeling beside a little kid in the slums and not able to ask what they're feeling. And I figured Shandell must be frustrated too. So I grabbed the whiteboard and I wrote "I am so sorry we don't know sign language" and I put four frustrated exclamation marks at the end. She took the whiteboard back and read it, and she began to smile. This huge, wonderful smile. And she wrote this, she wrote: **Interpreter here. J.C.** And it took me a moment, because I was still busy being frustrated. Then I realized what she had written. We do have an interpreter here, she wrote. Jesus Christ is our interpreter.

I began to cry. What is it, what did she write? asked the kids in the van. I told them, and they lost it too. And later, quietly, Art and I each took a picture of that white board with those words on it -- Interpreter here, J.C. ... so that we would always remember the truth that a woman named Shandell reminded us of: That the Holy SPirit speaks in ways deeper than words; that God's love transcended all boundaries, that Christ who came to reconcile all the world to God is the one who builds bridges, from one to another, always.

That's what the Apostle Paul was telling his friends at the church in Corinth, in that passage from his letter that John read to you just now. The reason Christ came to us, he was saying, was to show us how much God loves this world, how much God wants to bring people closer to God,

and closer to one another. Think of yourself, Paul urged, as ambassadors for Christ.

Ambassadors for Christ, entrusted with the ministry of reconciliation. Think of yourselves as the ones who build the bridges, do the work of reconciling. Use the power of Christ's love to connect people in ways deeper than words. You have an interpreter here, he might just well have said.

You have an interpreter: Jesus Christ.

Thursday night in the Len Morgan Youth Barn, we had some guests on hand. The Men of God, they call themselves. Actually, MOGz is their real name -- a rap group who all got to know each other when they ended up at Pivot Ministry in Bridgeport.

Pivot Ministry is a home for those whose battles with addiction have led them to the end of the road -- to jail time, to overdoses, to loss of their families. No one who goes there is coming from anywhere pretty. This church knows Pivot pretty well, we support them with our love and our prayers and our money. This church knows the leader of MOGz really well -- Chris Faett, whose grandfather Art Samuelson was a Deacon of this church. Chris used to spend his summers here; I've known this church for 24 years, he told the kids at SPF on Thursday night. I've been an addict for almost that long. And what all of these guys found at Pivot, Chris and his friends, was a God who loved them, a friend named Jesus who had never given up on them. So now they want to get the word out. They want to be ambassadors for Christ. They want to connect kids to each other, to their own true selves, to their God. Marcus, one of the other singers, said this to our teens. *Rap music is the easiest way for us to communicate to you, the best way. So we're using that as our language tonight. We're using our language to interpret GOD's love to you tonight, we believe that Christ is using us tonight, and we know that he is here in this room. We know he is here in this room.* The interpreter is here, they were saying. Jesus Christ the interpreter.

And they rapped for us for an hour, and yes, they let us know the darkness of the place they'd been in, but what they really wanted us to know was the light of faith they live in now. I know, they told us, that each and every one of you in this room is carrying something heavy, I know that, and I want you to know that you are loved, and you are not alone, not ever, and you are a child of God. A Child of God. And when they finished, they asked us to say Hallelujah, and our kids were a little startled but they shouted Hallelujah, and then they asked if we had any questions, and from behind me a girl who was there for the first time raised her hand a little timidly and said "could you do another song?"

They were ambassadors for Christ, building bridges between themselves and each young person in that room, building bridges between each teen and their God, using the language of music, shaking the roof rafters with rap, all to connect us through the great interpreter himself.

That's what we're supposed to do, each of us. Okay, not rap necessarily, I don't mean that. But be ambassadors for Christ. Interpreters of God's love, inspired by the great interpreter himself, JC. Finding the language to connect people one to another, finding the love to connect ourselves to others. That's what we're supposed to do. And you know what, we are working pretty hard here to do just that. We do that when we take kids to Appalachia and sit them down on a front porch in a holler in Kentucky next to a grandpa who's never left that holler. We do it when people of this church, Lynn Davies and Kathy Thackaberry and Andy Gleeman and so many more go to Mercy Center in Bridgeport and sit with immigrant women to teach them and to love them.

We do it when the women of this church go and sit with Muslim and Jewish women at a synagogue in Bridgeport and share stories together.

We do it when our high schoolers -- as they will do tomorrow -- go to Calvary St. George's church not just to make dinner not just to serve it to the hungry and homeless, but to listen and encourage and hug and care.

In all those ways, and so many more, we work to connect, to be ambassadors, to be the hands and heart of Christ the great interpreter, JC who speaks only the language of love.

But we are always called to do more, to seek more boundaries to cross, more divides to bridge, more ways to interpret, more places to connect.

One person who really **did** that, who really **lived** that, is someone I didn't know of until two week ago, probably a great many of us didn't know of. The attack in Benghazi, Libya, which killed our ambassador to Libya has led to fierce debates over foreign policy, and arguments and confusion over what happened and why and how. What shouldn't be lost sight of is the life at the center of all this, the life of someone who, it seems, lived always as an ambassador, not just when the nameplate on his door said so. I spent a good while yesterday on a website put up by Ambassador Chris Stevens' family, a website which they hope will not only share the story of their son, their brother, but which will inspire others to live as he lived. This man whom both Hillary Clinton and John McCain called friend spent his life passionately committed to the idea that people could be brought together, that East and West could build those bridges of understanding. The picture on the website is of Chris Stevens and an Arab man laughing together, and it is beautiful; no less beautiful than the testimonials that people, American and Libyan, Israeli, Saudi have posted on the site. The Libyan doctors who treated him in the ER, who knew him well because of his keen interest in improving their hospital, sent expressions of heartbroken grief that they could not manage to save his life.

One Libyan man wrote this: *Chris Stevens was loving to all people, there were no restrictions on his visa.*

"With sadness we grieve, and we shed tears," wrote another, *"we will achieve your vision if it takes one hundred years."*

Person after person, with names like Hassan, and Anne, and Austin and Mahmud, David and Ibrahim, each one grieving and thanking God for someone who made them all feel significant, each one showing the power that one life can have, one life passionately committed to connection, to interpretation, to truest ambassadorship. You are ambassadors for Christ, wrote Paul, to you is entrusted the ministry of reconciliation. Surely Chris Stevens' life was something like what Paul had in mind.

And us? all of us here in this place? We too are called to live lives something like what Paul had in mind. To us, too, is entrusted the ministry of reconciliation.

We are ambassadors for that one whose presence I felt in a van bumping down a road toward a Dairy Queen in July. *The interpreter is here*, Shandell wrote. *J.C.*

May we joyfully take on the work of translating his love to all his brothers and sisters. *Amen.*