

May 22, 2016

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Ephesians 2:13-18

Four months ago, at the end of our church trip to India, I waved goodbye to our awesome mission team, and as they boarded a plane home to JFK, I boarded a plane in the other direction, to China. I was off to see our daughter Brigitta, who's working there for a couple years.

On the plane, I watched a couple movies, and then fell asleep for awhile, waking as we made our descent. And it actually wasn't until the wheels hit the tarmac that it hit me:

I was *completely* unprepared to be there.

The previous three weeks had included Christmas in all its joyful chaos,

and 12 days of India, which is always intense,

and I had just not gotten around to being ready for **China**.

I suddenly realized that I didn't even know how to say 'Hi'!

Now, David will tell you that in preparation for our trip to Italy,

I had an Italian language CD in the car for several months,

to teach us all kinds of potentially useful phrases.

So you'd turn on the car and hear

I've lost a filling: o perso un'otturazione.

I like that sense of being ready to talk.

I carry a phrasebook everywhere overseas.

I want to be able to communicate, however ineptly.

But there I was, in China, with no phrasebook -- I wouldn't be able to tell anyone if I lost a filling.

I approached passport control with trepidation.

The man behind the counter grinned cheerfully.

"nǐ hǎo!" he said.

and I said " nǐ hǎo! – right!! I should have remembered that!"

-- which made him look a little more anxious about letting me in.

Nǐ hǎo, I thought. Great. But other than that, I had nothing.

Of course I was staying with Brigitta, who had picked up some of the language in her few months there already --

she could count to ten, get a cab, and order drinks for us.

That helped. But for the most part, I spent the next week

communicating with gestures,

pointing, and holding up fingers.

And constantly giving a thumbs-up, which I hoped wasn't an obscene gesture.

Mostly this worked.

Until the day Brigitta and I -- and my parents and sister, who had joined us -- we were wandering through the alleyways of Beijing, the hutongs, they're called --

Wandering and exploring, when suddenly a sign caught my eye.

"World's Best Paper Cutter", it said, and it was hanging over a little doorway, that, when I entered, led into a tiny room.

And at the back of the room, perched on a bed,

was a little man, who was significantly disabled,

his arms ended just past his elbows, his legs were bent beneath him.

But he was holding scissors in his right hand, and making delicate little cuts in a piece of paper.

And all around the room were his paper cuttings: cut-out designs of monkeys, and dragons, children at play.

I picked up a monkey papercutting, and read the price, and handed over the money -- 30 kuai, the equivalent of five dollars -- what a great souvenir.

He thanked me, in Chinese; I did one of my silent smiling nods and a thumbs up.

And then I saw another cutting, **so** beautiful, a tree -- it reminded me of the cooper beech out here.

It was also just 30 kuai, another five bucks.

I set the money down on the bed, smiled, waved and turned to walk out.

He started shouting -- I didn't know what he was shouting.

I turned back, startled, and he gestured to the cutting I'd take, and I gave it to him, and he pointed to the pricetag. I'd missed a zero.

This one was **300** kuai -- 50 dollars.

I was mortified, I was embarrassed,

I wished desperately I could say "I'm so sorry, I wasn't trying to pull anything over on you."

I wanted to say "I can't spend 50 dollars on this, but it is beautiful."

But instead, I set the tree cutting down, and turned to leave.

And then I heard this voice.

A strange voice. It sounded electronic, like a droid was talking to me.

The voice said "Stop, Lady. Stop, Lady."

I turned back.

He was holding up his phone, the little man, and speaking Chinese into it, and whatever app he had there, it was translating his words for me.

"Long time." it said. "Long time to cut tree."

"Four weeks."

"Difficult. Difficult."

I looked again at the 50-dollar tree.

Every leaf, I now saw, was meticulously cut.

Of course it was difficult. Of course it took him four weeks.

It's beautiful, I said out loud, and his phone translated that for him, and he smiled.

And suddenly I wanted that tree more than anything,
as much to honor this artist as to have the tree.

I gave him the 300 quai.

I keep thinking about the little man,
and the beauty of his paper cuttings.

I keep thinking about how amazing it is that we live in a time when you talk into a handheld computer and you're understood.

I think about the phrase 'lost in translation' and I realize that in *that* moment I experienced, something was actually *found* in translation:

I found a glimpse of this man's life and craft:

I saw four weeks of sitting on that bed, creating beauty out of paper, cutting leaves on a paper tree.

And I think of how many moments in our lives -- how many places in our world --

are longing for us to *find* each other in translation.

It doesn't need a smartphone in your hand.

If you were here in church back in early March,

you heard the folks who traveled to India with me as they each got up here and shared their stories.

And maybe you remember the story that Jackson Stearns told,

Jackson, who will receive his Eagle Scout award right up here this afternoon.

Jackson is a wonderful photographer,

and he of course took his camera to India;

he came back with amazing pictures of kids and traffic and monkeys.

But the story he told here was of the day in India that he put *down* the camera.

We had taken a bunch of kids on a field trip,

and had handed out beach balls to all of them, which were a big hit.

So balls were flying through the air,

and there was Jackson,

standing on a low wall overlooking,
taking pictures of the chaotic fun going on.

"Until," he said, "a stray ball came my way.

Naturally, I hit it back.

The girl who had knocked it my way hit it back again.

I put down my camera, and started playing a game of keep it up with
her.

Pretty soon two other girls came over, and we broke into teams of two.

We were laughing and having fun,

when suddenly it occurred to me that none of us had spoken a word to
each other.

I only spoke English, they only spoke Telugu,

yet we were still able to organize this game and were having lots of
fun.

In that moment," Jackson told us that Sunday,

"In that moment, I realized that we may speak different languages,
have different appearances,

and live literally a world apart,

but at our core we were all human beings,
who have the same inherent ability to *feel each other's expressions*,
which communicates beyond what language can.”

He spoke no Telugu, they spoke no English.

But there was nothing between Jackson and those kids that was *lost*
in translation.

Instead, so much was *found*.

Translated by laughter, translated by play, translated by smiles,

Joy was found in translation.

I love the way Jackson put it:

we didn't need to speak each other's language,

we could *feel* each other's expressions.

Found in translation.

In church circles, formal church circles anyhow,
many Sundays of the year have a special name.

There's Christ the King Sunday, and Ascension Sunday,
and Transfiguration Sunday,

and David and I are both not very good at keeping track of them.

I apologize if we missed celebrating a particularly favorite Sunday of yours.

But today, I noticed in the official church calendar, is Trinity Sunday,

a Sunday on which preachers are supposed to explain the Trinity to their congregations.

How God can be three and one at the same time.

Theologians have been tying themselves in knots over this for centuries, and we're supposed to do it in fifteen minutes.

Well, I'm going to give a shot at doing it in one minute.

The Trinity, I think, is just a way of saying that, number one, God, yes, is the Creator who made the awesomeness in which we live, and who created us in love, for love.

And, number two, that God also decided showed up on earth in person, figuring that we needed a little guidance, a little saving from ourselves.

And, thirdly, that God is that magic that happens between folks when something is *found* in translation,

God was that laughter between Jackson and a couple Indian schoolkids,

God is *every* moment when someone *feels someone else's expression*.

That third thing, that magic, is the Holy Spirit, and it is pretty cool when it happens.

When something wonderful is found in translation.

Four summers ago, on our Appalachia service trip,

Art Thurnauer and Courtney Ruble and their work crew invited me to come along one evening,

as they took the homeowner they were working for, Shandell, out for ice cream.

Just so you know, Alida, Art said to me 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 felt in that little house in China when I didn't know how to talk to the artist with the scissors.

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 was saying.

Jesus Christ is our interpreter.

Jesus Christ is our interpreter.

Later, quietly, Art and I each took a picture of that white board with those words on it -- ***Interpreter here, J.C.***

It's a picture that hangs on my office wall, these four years later.

I keep it there so that I will always remember the truth Shandell reminded us of:

That the Holy Spirit speaks in ways deeper than words;

that there are moments where nothing is lost in translation --

instead, everything is **found** in translation.

That Christ is the great interpreter.

That's what the scripture passage that [Emily/Kelton] read to us was saying,

that passage from the Letter to the Ephesians.

The Christians in Ephesus, the Ephesians, they weren't a homogeneous bunch.

They had come from two wildly divergent backgrounds;

some had been observant Jews all their lives,

the others had grown up worshipping the Greek gods – especially the goddess Artemis, she was huge in Ephesus.

So these were really different folks.

But here they were all together in one church, as one body, one family

--

And isn't that amazing, isn't that cool, says Paul in this letter.

Isn't it wonderful that *in Christ Jesus*, he writes, *you who once were far apart have been brought near*

Because Christ is our peace;

he has made all into one

and has broken down the dividing wall...

*so that he might create **one** new humanity in place of the two.*

Christ is our peace;
Christ our interpreter;
and it is God's own Spirit that creates the moments
when all are made one,
when love is found in translation.

But you've got to be paying attention, right?
You've got to keep your heart wide open to those moments;
keep your hearts wide open to other people;
you've got to be willing -- as Jackson said -- to **feel** another person's
expression.

The Spirit travels between people on pathways of love,
and on highways of compassion.

And we have to keep those roads passable.

The way we find one another,
is when we are open, one to another.

We live in a world, in a time,
where much, it seems, is lost in translation.

Where even those who share the same words
cannot understand each other,
talk past each other or at each other.
Much these days is lost in translation.

God calls us to find each other.

God calls us to be open to each other,
so that the power of the Spirit,
alive between us

may create a world in which is nothing is lost in translation, but all is
found.

A world in which **love is found in translation.**

Amen.