

Britt Carlson
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11 o'clock am

Community Church of Issaquah
Issaquah, WA

“CHURCH: Companions of God”

John 15:12-17

A few years ago my younger sister Paige and I went out to visit my middle sister Siri while she was living in Thailand.

Siri had become friends with this older Thai woman Pilaiporn who I think she met on a bus.

Pilaiporn was wily. She often had a trick up her sleeve and a gleam in her eye. So when Siri took Paige and I over to meet her for the first time, Siri said we had to be very careful not to get sucked into going to the karaoke bar.

See Pilaiporn loved to take Siri to the karaoke bar with her and her bevy of older Thai men admirers, and it would be three in the morning before she would consent to take Siri home. (This had happened numerous times).

So Paige and I go and meet Pilaiporn and have a great time and get to see her home and of course she asks if we want to go to karaoke and Siri very politely declines and say “Oh I’m so sorry, my sisters are so tired and we have a long day tomorrow.” And Pilaiporn sort of grumbles but consents and we all pile into the car of one of Pilaiporn’s admirers who’s going to take us home when Siri catches Pilaiporn with that gleam in her eye telling this guy in Thai not to take us home but to take us to the karaoke bar and

that she would follow behind in her own car! Sneaky, sneaky Pilaiporn!

Now the LORD might not be quite as sneaky as my sister’s friend Pilaiporn, but when you read the Bible you get a sense that God’s people are always a couple of steps behind what the Lord is up to in the world. All too often we’re the ones sitting there smiling, ready to be driven home, absolutely unaware that the car is about to head in the exact opposite direction we thought it was.

Or at least that’s what our life looked liked before we were Christians. See before we were Christians we didn’t know how to speak God’s language. Directions, invitations and challenges—the words we needed [in order] to know what was happening around us—were being spoken to us, and yet it went over our heads like Paige and I hearing Pilaiporn speak in Thai. We knew all those words from the pulpit or from our parents or in the Bible meant something but they didn’t really hit us in our hearts. They didn’t *mean* anything. God was speaking a new language, but we couldn’t understand it.

But, you know what? It’s not easy to learn a new language! How many people here have sat through high school Spanish or sat staring at Rosetta Stone on a computer

screen? New languages are complex. It's not just stringing vocab words together. Taco-uno-quiero does not a Spanish sentence make. It takes a lot of work for a teacher to get students to really comprehend French or German or Spanish—to take it inside themselves to the point where they are able not just to fill in a blank on a test but to *speak* it, to *embody* it, to *use* it communicate in the world.

Jesus is a teacher who is teaching for comprehension. Jesus doesn't want his disciples to remember the flash cards for the test and then promptly forget them. Jesus wants you to speak God's new language for the rest of your life.

And so Jesus gets a little creative in how he teaches. Like a good teacher, he uses all the tools in his pedagogical tool belt. Sometimes he gives it to the disciples straight: Blessed are the meek. You can worship either God or mammon—not both.

But sometimes Jesus has to be a little bit subtler. Like a Spanish teacher who disguises learning vocabulary with songs and games, Jesus has to be a little sneaky, a little shrewd, a little wily to get past the barriers human beings put up against learning God's new language, God's new way of being in the world. So Jesus uses parables.

Now in a parable the words are all there—but the *meaning* of the words isn't necessarily readily apparent. Just ask

Adult Forum. Last week Duane had us read the parable of the shrewd manager who cheats his master of large sums of money and then is commended for it! You can recognize each one of the words in the story, but it's a challenge to understand the words enough to be able to live them in your own life.

But you know what, it's not that Jesus is being obscure just for the sake of being obscure. It's that removing spiritual cataracts is hard, delicate work, and humans aren't always willing to go under the surgeon's scalpel.

When the disciples ask why he uses parables, Jesus explains, “The reason I speak to [people] in parables is that ‘seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.’ For this people's ...ears are hard of hearing, and they have shut their eyes; so that they might not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and understand with their heart and turn—and I would heal them.’”

In other words, people are like my sisters and I sitting in that car in Thailand waiting to be taken home, waiting to find rest, but the difference is that they have decided that they are too tired at the end of the end of the night and don't even care about where they're actually headed just as long as they're in the car—any car. It's easier just to ignore the mysterious words being spoken all around them than to actually figure out what they mean.

Now some of you might be wondering right about now when in the world are we going to get to our Scripture passage for today. And it's right now. See in John chapter 15, we get a picture of what it looks like to live with your ears open to God's new language. We're getting the lesson plan to God's language learning program, and it's this: "Abide in Christ and Christ in you." **In other words, it's the immersion method.** How do you learn God's new language? By being *immersed* in Christ. By being **IN** Christ and Christ being **IN** you. *Abiding* 100% of the time in an environment saturated with the grammar and syntax and vocab of the God revealed to us in Jesus Christ.

In fact, this is how we were supposed to learn God's language in the first place. We weren't supposed to have to sit down at a desk and pour over the grammar of our faith. We were supposed to walk in the cool of the evening with God, learning intimacy with the Lord like infants— simply abiding in the presence of people fluent in the language of Christ and intuitively learning how to speak and be Christian.

Now there is a name for the gathered presence of people who are fluent in the language of Christ. And that word is the church. For next five weeks, we are going to be learning about what the church is. And the first letter of my sermon titles are very cleverly going to spell out the word C.H.U.R.C.H., church. But the first thing that we need to learn about the church is that the **church is the group of people**

who can be friends with God because we are the ones learning to speak God's language. We're the ones who have signed up for the class, and are beginning to have our lips get used to the new vowels and consonants of the Christian life. We're the ones willing to look a little stupid as we fumble with vocab words and try to figure out the meaning of God's sentences. We can look stupid because the church's end goal is such an amazing one: to be friends, conversation partners with God.

This is what God wants for us. Just listen to the words of Jesus, "I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you *friends*, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father" (John 15:15). Jesus isn't like my sister's friend Pilaiporn having plans for our lives that we weren't quite aware of. Jesus **wants to** share his plans with us. We just have to learn how to understand what Jesus is saying and how to speak back to God. It's a process that never stops.

Just think about what it means to be friends. To be friends with someone you have to speak the same language. You know, I've gotten to travel quite a bit. And I've made myself look stupid in many different languages, and what I've learned is that you can get pretty far without speaking the same language. You can communicate with hand signals, you can laugh over seeing someone trip, you can pour concrete or cook meals.

But I've also learned that if you don't speak the same language, you can't know someone's heart. You can't know what their dreams are, what their plans are. You can't know what their hopes for their children are. I can remember as I got better and better at Spanish, I understood the nuances of what was being said to me—and that meant I understood the nuances of the *person* across from me. I saw more and more clearly that the Spanish-speaking people I knew had their own hopes and aspirations and frustrations and thoughts— that they were their own people.

That's how our relationship with God develops also. As we learn God's language, we can see God more and more clearly not just as a projection of ourselves. We can see that God has God's own plans for the world. That God had God's own thoughts and desires and plans that don't always line up with ours. We can recognize that God is not us—and that is the first step for a real friendship to begin.

It's a journey that takes our entire lives. Learning a new language takes time and practice. I wonder are you spending the time you need to get to know God? Are we taking the time we need to learn our new language well? Or are we beginners who know the vocab words: grace, forgiveness, reconciliation, hope, but haven't internalized the faith deep enough inside ourselves to speak those words with our lives? Friendships take daily

work—and our friendship with God is no different. We need to be immersed in Christ. And we need Christ to be immersed in us. Our God is the mighty Counselor, the great Teacher. God is willing to teach us how to be friends with him if we simply stay in God's presence. That's how much God wants to be friends with us. The Lord not only gives us a new language, but teaches us how to speak it. Thanks be to God.

In a moment here, we are going to have communion. We are going to break bread together. When we come to the table we are declaring that we are friends, companions with God. See the word, companion means the one who eats bread with another. What a beautiful picture. God is moving us toward the table. God is trying to gather his friends all together so that they can enjoy a family meal together. This is what we were made for. We were made to be God's friends, sitting around a table, sharing memories, enjoying one another's company, living in the joy of companionship. This is the church. A people who are sharers with God, friends, table companions, speakers of the same language. Amen.