

May 23, 2021
Pentecost Day (B)
United, Oak Park

Some Translation Necessary

While growing up in rural northeastern Iowa, I often thought of Chicago as the place that people went to whenever we wanted to experience something bigger. There aren't any major league professional sports teams in my home state, so a lot of people cheered for the Cubs or the Bears when their games were broadcast on T.V. If we traveled anywhere by air, more than likely we would have had to catch a connecting flight to our ultimate destination through O'Hare airport. And if we wanted to see a live performance of a major theatrical production, we might best have come to Chicago as well. By the summer that I turned 10, I had also been introduced to the Marshall Fields store on State Street, had gone up to the 40th floor of the Prudential building (which was the tallest observation platform in the city at that time), and had spent a day at Brookfield Zoo.

In the nearly twenty years that I've now lived in the Chicago area, I don't often think about going to those common tourist destinations that meant a special trip for me several decades ago. Going near O'Hare

airport is a regular occurrence; indeed my wife's corner office at the Lutheran Center on Higgins Road could almost stand in for an air control tower if something ever happened to it. As someone who isn't exactly a newcomer here, I've also learned that expressways can be clogged with traffic at nearly any time, and not just in the morning inbound or evening outbound directions that you would expect to be especially busy during prime rush hour drives.

I've appeared at Cook County's various courtroom locations for jury duty on a number of occasions and have encountered either the best or the worst of government bureaucracy there, depending on your point of view. I can navigate most of the el system without looking at a map. I've learned that my preference for ketchup on an occasional hotdog is something that brands me as a non-Chicago native. I've also now lived in this area for a longer stretch of time than I have in any other area of the country throughout my entire life. Maybe I'm as much at home here as anywhere.

But these days I do certainly think of Chicago as a global city, because it's a place where we can be in regular contact with people who are from many places around the world. I expect to see signs in front of

many stores and on billboards that are not in English. I expect to hear accents from workers at drive-through windows that are often difficult to understand. It's what living in an area that has a diverse population has conditioned in me.

I had a very specific encounter with this type of diversity when I spent most of a day last month being treated in the E.R. at Northwestern Memorial Hospital for some significant side effects from my chemotherapy treatments. After waiting for a number of hours to be seen by the medical team who was able to respond specifically to my needs, I ended up on a gurney within a space that had solid walls on two sides, but had temporary plexiglass and aluminum panels filling out the two remaining sides, along with an aluminum-framed door that the various medical professionals had to open each time they came to check in on me. It was a rather makeshift arrangement built for current pandemic realities, but otherwise everything you might expect in a large urban hospital.

In the five hours I was in that space, I had an opportunity to hear all kinds of things that were going on around me, and since I was not up

to fiddling with the usual diversions I've often come to enjoy on my cellphone, what I heard from the spaces going on around me provided me with a kind of entertainment for a while.

Though I suspect that the temporary wall sealed off with duct tape prevented most of the air passing between me and an occupant in the space next to mine, the sound insulating capabilities were poor, and I could easily hear what was going on there. I soon learned that the patient next to me was a man just a few years older than me who was originally from Bosnia, and though he was conversant in small bits of English, his preferred way of communicating was in his native Bosnian language.

Though Bosnians do not make up one of the largest ethnic groups in Chicago, I've also learned—according to the Encyclopedia of Chicago—that approximately 40,000 Bosnian war refugees settled in this area during the 1990s, making Chicago the largest American destination for people from that region. Still, it's hard to imagine that even a large urban hospital with a lot of resources would have a network of people always on site to translate from the many languages that could possibly

be needed on any given day. So the hospital staff was using a live human translator who they connected with through an electronic tablet.

From the unfolding conversations, I learned that the Bosnian patient had been dealing with acid reflux problems, but some of his symptoms could also have been a sign of heart disease, so the medical team treating him were making an appointment for him to follow up with a stress test in the following week.

After about the third time that the Bosnian to English translation service was used, the next-door patient thanked the staff and the translator, since the only other way that he could have communicated his needs would have been having his son or daughter take off time from work to spend the day with him.

Throughout that whole time I was impressed at how sensitive the E.R. physicians were to the Bosnian patient's needs and priorities. The Bosnian man was a Muslim, and it being at the beginning of the holy month of Ramadan, he had not had anything to eat or drink since before sunrise that morning. It was quite possible that his decreased intake of water that day had contributed to his acid reflux problem. But the E.R.

physician didn't disparage the man's religious practices, he simply encouraged the Bosnian man to drink fluids as soon as it was permissible for him to do so later in the day. It was a fine example of when a large institution actually responded with care to its role in dealing with the many intricate challenges of operating in a city with so many global influences.

But even beyond that, I think it may serve as a modern-day parable to explain the mission of the story that we have heard every Pentecost Day from the second chapter of Acts, where we read that "there were pious Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem" (CEB).

Among the challenges that the infant Christian church had to deal with right away, according to the book of Acts, was the mission of including people from a vast territory who spoke many different languages and who had different cultural and religious expectations. Early Christian leaders learned how to adapt quickly to the many global opportunities that were before them, while at the same time focusing on what was truly essential to their common work and mission.

Our life today isn't necessarily all that much different. We have a number of hurdles in our own day and time that we are grappling with in 2021. One of the obvious tasks for us today is to bridge the gaps between the privileges that many of us enjoy in this society and serving people who experience numerous forms of racial and economic injustice. And as we consider returning to some kind of new normalcy in day-to-day lives following more than a year of physical isolation from many other people, we need to be attentive to the fact that some people have managed pretty well, working from home and adapting their lives to safer procedures, while others who were deemed to be *essential workers* often had to show up to jobs that had few safeguards and benefits in place, and that may not have provided them with a living wage either.

Indeed we all face bewildering challenges every day as we try to interpret the latest health and safety guidelines while still in the midst of a global pandemic. Our severely polarized political environment has not helped us one bit in navigating these things either. But living together with neighbors who do not always speak, or think, or act exactly like us is indeed our current reality. And there are many opportunities for us to enact God's mission for the needs of the whole

world whenever we try to overcome many of the barriers that often get in the way between us and other people.

I would wager that I'm not at all alone in noticing that I don't live now in anything like the context that I grew up in years ago. Even if you've always lived around this area for most of your life, it probably doesn't seem like the kind of place that it once was. But no matter whether people are encountering 21st-century Chicagoland, or experiencing the first Christian day of Pentecost, God's spirit gives us all the ability to communicate with the great diversity of humanity. The universal mission of the church is still very much the same, and *some translation will be necessary*. It's also incumbent upon all of us to make whatever accommodations are needed for engaging as truly global citizens in the neighborhoods we have come to know for ourselves.