

'Far More Than All We Can Ask or Imagine...'

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Excerpts from Ephesians 2 through 4

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Send-off for the Sigmon-Siler Family's Year in Cuba

Now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us—that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross. So he came and proclaimed peace to those who were far off and to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to God, built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. Each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore it is said, "When he ascended on high he made captivity itself a captive." The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for building up the body of Christ.

I pray that, according to the riches of God's glory, God may grant that you be strengthened in your inner being with power through the Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Now to the one who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus for all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

—Excerpts from Ephesians 2 – 4

Jesus has broken down the dividing walls between us, putting an end to hostility and inviting us all into the work of reconciliation through the cross.

I have many snapshots imbedded in my memory from the journey that Kiran, Mark, Linda, and I took to Cuba a year and a half ago. But the picture that stays most clearly with me is one that visited us in our last minutes on Cuban soil.

We had to get up at 4:00 in the morning that last day. I'm sure weariness contributed to the punchiness Mark and I felt as we approached the ticket counter at the airport in Havana. I spied a warning sign in Spanish, with pictures and English translation.

On the list of things that we weren't allowed to bring on the plane were "catapults." Mark and I cracked our own selves up picturing somebody trying to drag one of those Roman catapults with a big rock into the airport to check it on to a plane. Or struggling to stuff it into the overhead compartment. The accompanying picture made clear that the appropriate translation would have been "sling shots."

A few minutes later, in the food area of the airport, we saw a sign greeting "Clientes Estimados," which means "Esteemed Clients." But the unfortunate translator had written "Estimated Clients." As I was settling into my seat on the plane, I was pondering how challenging it is to overcome differences of culture and language.

On that packed flight to Cancún, I was in a window seat next to an elderly Cuban man, a retired farmer with a creased face and calloused hands. In typical Cuban style, he spoke Spanish very rapidly and swallowed many of his words, but I believe that what I'm about to tell you is true.

He was on his way to visit his family in Florida, whom he hadn't seen in many years. He had never been on a plane before. When the flight attendant brought around the customs forms we needed to fill out and hand in at the Cancún airport, I finished mine and then noticed that my seatmate didn't have a pen. I handed him mine. He asked to see my form. Placing it next to his, he started to fill out his form, copying from mine, beginning with my name.

He grew up in the years before the revolution, when Cuba was a playground for wealthy North Americans, when vast resources were channeled into luxury hotels and gambling casinos, into night clubs

and golf courses, rather than education for its children. When I realized that he didn't know how to read, I intervened and guided him through the process. He was able to write his name by copying it, letter by painstaking letter, from his passport. He didn't know, or didn't have, a street address.

When he was done, he smiled triumphantly. And I realized that, in that snapshot of a moment, we had overcome virtually every obstacle that I could think of that divides human beings: language, nationality, gender, class, race, age, education.

When our plane landed in Cancún, the elderly farmer popped out of his seat and headed toward the door, anxious to be on his way. Other people filed in behind him in the aisle. Then he turned around, worked his way back to our row, and held out his two rough hands to me. I offered mine in return, and he clasped them warmly. "Buen viaje, pastora," he said to me, smiling. Have a good trip, pastor. "Buen viaje, señor."

His name was Lázaro. In English, Lazarus. It's a name that appears twice in the gospels. The first reference, in Luke, describes a rich man who dresses in purple and feasts sumptuously, while a poor man named Lazarus lies at his gate, hungry and covered with sores. When both men die, the rich man finds himself in torment and begs his ancestor Abraham to send Lazarus to cool his burning lips with water. Abraham tells the rich man, "You are the one who in life fixed the great chasm between you and Lazarus. He cannot cross it now to come to you."

In our time, it is our own nation that has fixed the chasm between us and Cuba. Another snapshot that will stay with me came early in our trip, on the 12-hour drive from Havana to Camagüey, where Iglésia Getsémane, our sister church, is located. The four of us were sardined with our driver into a tiny French Peugeot, with 200 pounds of medicine, vitamins, school supplies, sheets, and towels—plus a toilet seat and Kaki's beautiful wedding dress. Driving most of the length of Cuba's only major road, which had almost as many horses and ox carts as old cars on it, and plenty of potholes, we passed through vast stretches of sugar cane, clusters of trees, and fields of sunflowers.

Placed sporadically along the way were objects of a sort that I had never laid eyes on before—like gigantic spools, with enormous spikes projecting out from all sides. Kiran explained that Cuba has a great fear of an invasion from the United States, and of U.S. planes using Cuba's only major thoroughfare as a landing strip. If such a reality were to appear imminent, Cubans across the country would be instructed to roll the massive spikes out onto the road to keep the planes from landing.

It might seem natural to dismiss this as a national paranoia. But in early 1959, within the first month after the triumph of Cuba's revolution, the CIA was already plotting an invasion, and the U.S. has made repeated attempts in the years since. According to *Perspectives on Cuba and Its People*, a history book written by friend and fellow United Church of Christ pastor Ted Braun, 612 U.S. assassination attempts on Fidel Castro have been documented—involving everything from poison pills, to Mafia hitmen, to the gift of a diving suit contaminated with a fungus known to cause a disabling skin disease and respiratory failure. When these tactics failed, our country determined to undermine the revolution through an economic blockade, which remains in place.

I've tried to ponder what would be the opposite of those massive spiked spools and the 50-year threat that prompted them and has kept them there. The best I can come up with is a flesh-and-blood family sent as ambassadors of peace, arriving on Cuban soil with a strong faith, a spirit of openness, and outstretched arms.



Our scripture passage tonight from the Letter to the Ephesians opens with the statement of our belief that Jesus has broken down the dividing walls between us, putting an end to hostility and inviting us all into the work of reconciliation through the cross. Tonight we celebrate the good news that Leigh and Joy, Kiran and Mark, have chosen to embrace this calling in a unique and special way, by spending a year with our sisters and brothers in Cuba.

Tonight's passage goes on to say that "Each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift... The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for building up the body of Christ."

So I want to give thanks tonight for our evangelist Leigh, who sparkles with delight and daring and good news—and is bound to offer a smile and a hug to anyone who wants to be her friend. And I give thanks for our apostle Joy, who glows with the beautiful sensitivity of the quiet contemplative, always learning, always open, and eloquent, and anxious to share the mysteries that unfold for her. I give thanks for our teacher Kiran—recently voted the best teacher by her colleagues—who shines as a courageous advocate for hurting women and a compassionate catcher of newborn babies. And for our pastor-prophet

Mark, who blazes with passion in his proclamation of liberty to the captives; who we know will bring a tender spirit to inmates and new chaplains in Cuba as he goes about the work of equipping the saints.

There's an odd sentence tucked between those two sentences about gifts that I just read: "Therefore it is said, 'When Christ ascended on high he made captivity itself a captive.'" No commentary I consulted offered much enlightenment on precisely what this means. But I take it to mean that imprisonment has been made a prisoner of the grace of God. No dark corner behind bars is beyond the reach of the good news.

It has to be said that we do not let you go for a year without mixed emotions. I'll miss not getting to play more piano duets with Joy and hearing Leigh's violin melodies wafting over Swan Mountain Farm—along with Mark's calls to the sheep to come for supper. I'll miss your invitations to join you on walks and gather at your table for Kiran's homemade sushi or Mark's pizza. And someone I know is going to be singing "This Little Light of Mine" religiously until you come home.

But we know what a rare and wonderful opportunity this is. And we also understand that when the scripture says that we all have access to the Spirit and are "built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God," it means that, though there may be miles between us for a while, we're still living together in the same house.



The second reference to Lazarus in the gospels appears in John. This Lazarus was one of Jesus' dearest friends, and when he died, Jesus wept. He went to the cave tomb where Lazarus had been laid and called out to his beloved friend. Lazarus staggered out of the cave, dazed by the light, still wrapped in the strips of burial cloth. "Unbind him," commanded Jesus.

You are taking a step to unbind policies of our government that have tried to stifle the lifeblood out of Cuba; that have attempted to wrap us all in a shroud of mutual enmity. You are calling forth more light, helping to open up what we pray will be a growing resurrection of relationship between our two societies.

Kiran, Mark, Joy, and Leigh, you are crossing a chasm that has been in place for a long time. You are seizing a rare moment in history, walking through an open door. And we thank you. We know that you will face challenges in the year ahead. But when times get tough, I encourage you to remember, Kiran and Mark, our arrival in dark and dusty Camagüey last January—and tell that story to Joy and Leigh. The electricity was out all over the town, and from our perspective, every shadowy street looked identical, with its chock-a-block houses row upon row. Navarro, our driver, took us in many circles, cranking down his window every few blocks, shouting, "Amigo! Amigo!" to get someone's attention, asking for directions. Finally, a young man on a bicycle offered to lead us to Pastora Angelita's house.

Which was wonderful—except that he didn't seem to know a very direct route either. But we careened through the narrow, pitch-black streets, following while he pedaled furiously in the path of our headlights. We decided that he was our angel for that night, and we dubbed him Gabriel.

The truth turned out to be even more fitting. His real name was Moisés—or, in English, Moses. He had led us through the wilderness into the promised land of Angelita's home—a land flowing with rice and beans and gaseosas. And, with generous smiles and embraces.

There will be a Moses when you need one. There will be angels. And there will always be the prayers and love of your Circle here, holding you close.

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And there will always be the prayers and love of your Circle here, holding you
close.***

These final words from Ephesians are our blessing to you:

We beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

We pray that, according to the riches of God's glory, God may grant that you be strengthened in your inner being with power through the Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. We pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Now to the one who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus for all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

We cannot begin to imagine it all. We eagerly await the stories. *Buen viaje!*