

Westminster Presbyterian Church + 533 S. Walnut St. + Springfield, IL 62704

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At Home in Christ

John 15:4a

Two weeks ago today our John Calvin Tour group was in Paris. Our group worshiped that day at the Reformed Church of the Oratoire near the Louvre. This was a unique experience for most members of our group because the service was entirely in French. It gave us the opportunity to be part of a service where people worship very much as we do but in a different language which in this case was the language of John Calvin. For those who seemed a little hesitant about this activity I suggested that sleeping through a sermon in French is probably no more difficult than sleeping through a sermon in English! I had emailed the pastor in advance explaining that I knew their service was in French but that we wanted to participate anyway. I could tell from his polite but awkward reply that his English skills were no better than my French. During the service he offered a word of welcome to us in French, identifying us as the group from Illinois (pronounced Illinawa), which is what the French speakers who named this state would have called it.

When we arrived at the church the first person we met was a woman named Madame Paula Kline. She had not heard from the pastor that we were coming but she recognized right away that we were Americans. She explained to me that she had lived in Virginia for many years and that she loved Americans. When she saw us she assumed that we had made a mistake and did not know that the service would be in French. She couldn't imagine that Americans would choose to be in a French speaking service. When I explained to her that we knew the service would be in French and that we wanted to be there anyway, her mouth fell open in a shocked expression. This was for Madame Kline a very unlikely encounter.

We see a similar dynamic at work in the 8th chapter of the Book of Acts. There we read about a leader in the early church named Philip. He is led by the Spirit to walk along the Gaza road where he has a very unlikely encounter. He sees on the road the chariot of a very important man. An official of the Ethiopian court has come to worship in Jerusalem and is now on his way home. Again Philip is prompted by the Spirit to approach the chariot and engage the official in conversation. He then discovers that this foreigner is trying to read Scripture and is unable to understand what he is reading. The Ethiopian is looking for help and Philip is able to meet his need.

This is a pivotal moment for Philip which teaches him what it means to be part of the church that God is bringing into being. The Ethiopian represents a class of people which Philip had been taught to exclude. Foreigners usually knew better that to even try to worship with Jews like Philip. But now Philip must come to terms with the fact that God has placed him in relationship with someone who is clearly outside the pale of what is acceptable. When Philip helps the Ethiopian to understand the scriptures he discovers that their lives are joined by a powerful bond. They both abide in Christ. They are both part connected to the vine that Jesus describes in John 15. When the Ethiopian seeks the baptism of the church Philip is ready to respond. Baptism becomes a sign of the bond they share in Christ. An unlikely connection had been established between them that would change Philip's perspective of the world.

When Madame Paula Kline realized that the foreigners who appeared at the door of her church had truly come to worship she did everything in her power to enable us to do that. There was no worship bulletin. We had to follow verbal announcements in French to find the hymns and responses. When Madame Kline saw that we did not understand she pointed to the pages where we needed to turn. Throughout the service she was on the move giving signals to keep us in touch with what was happening. When the service ended she made sure that we found our way to the reception area where refreshments were being served. She rounded up other English speaking members of the congregation to engage us in conversation. She pointed the way to the bathrooms. She did everything in her power to extend to us the hospitality of that congregation.

Before we left Madame Kline took off the Huguenot cross that she was wearing around her neck. That cross had become for persecuted French Protestants a sign of recognition during the genocide of the late 17th and 18th centuries. She handed it to me and said, "Don't worry, this is not a family heirloom. But I want you to have it as a bond between your congregation and ours." As you can see I am wearing that cross today. When we left the Reformed Church of the Oratoire we were connected to that community in a way that we could never have anticipated. Barriers of language and culture did not matter. All that mattered was the Christ who invites us to abide in him. In that place we knew we were at home in Christ.