

Welcome

I took German all through high school, and after I graduated, I got to visit Germany for three weeks. I was excited because I had only learned classroom German, but since I would be living with a German family for three weeks and going to a German school for three weeks, I would have the chance to learn real German - the slang, the casual way people spoke.

Sure enough, in the first week, I picked up a word - *guile*. I had never heard it before, but I could tell from context it meant "cool". They'd say, "Oh that movie I saw was so *guile*," or "We went out last night. It was so *guile*."

I was feeling pretty confident about myself, so I slipped this new slang word into my own conversation. I don't remember what we were talking about, but someone asked me, "How was it?" and I replied in German, "Das war so *guile*!" It was so cool!

The German students around me lit up. "You know *guile*! Oh wow! It's so cool you know our slang! Who taught you?"

I puffed out my chest a bit and shrugged. "Ja, Ich bin sehr *guile*." Yeah, I'm very cool.

They all started laughing, and definitely laughing *at* me, not with me. Uh oh.

My host brother put his hand on my shoulder. "You don't know what *guile* means, do you?"

I stammered. Uh... it means cool?

He laughed again. "It means..." I could tell he didn't know the English word. "It means you see a pretty girl and get very excited."

What?! Apparently, horny had become slang in German. And you could use it to describe things, but not people. You certainly don't announce to a room full of people that you're very *guile* - unless you wanted them to laugh at you.

That was my first big translation blunder, but it certainly wasn't my last - not on that trip and certainly not in my life. As I've traveled to places where I don't speak the language well, or tried to learn Spanish so I can communicate better here in Texas, our multicultural, multilingual world, I've found that really communicating with each other can be a challenge - especially when we speak different languages.

I want to talk about translating how we talk about Jesus today. Because a lot of the same translation issues come up when we talk about Jesus. Fewer and fewer people speak Church these days. And without a common language for our faith conversations, we're not really communicating.

The heart of sharing good news is love, and love is the heart of translation too. Let's talk today about how we can love our community enough to learn to speak their language. After all, this is what God has done for us. By coming to us as Jesus, God with us, God speaks our language so we can be in relationship with God. That's good news worth celebrating!

Message

We're in the Church season of Epiphany, the season that follows Christmas. Epiphany celebrates the God came not just for us, but for the whole world. Appropriately, then, our Epiphany series this year is called Good News for a Change. We're talking about how to talk about Jesus... with anyone. The \$20 word for this is Evangelism, and it's a word with enough baggage to make just about anyone break out in a nervous sweat. Whether you've been preached at or sat through those classes on how to preach at people, Evangelism conjures to mind that combative, confrontational, in-your-face kind of approach, or maybe just having no idea how to talk about Jesus with people we really care about.

Throughout this series, we're going to explore a lot of the ways we get Evangelism wrong, and why it's a lot more fun than we would've imagined. We began by talking about what the Gospel even is - that it means "Good News". Then we spent some time asking how God is good news - both in our own lives and in the lives of people we care about.

Today, then, let's stay there. So we have good news, and we can begin to imagine why that good news - that God loves us and wants to be in relationship with us - why *that* good news would be exciting to someone we know.

How do we communicate that to them?

Traditionally, this is where Evangelism training comes in. We memorize a formula like the Romans Road or the Four Spiritual Laws.

They're true - they're practically all Scripture, but they also assume that the person you're talking to has a worldview informed by the Scripture.

Take the first stop on the Romans Road - Romans 3:23. It says, "For all have sinned and fallen short of God's glory."

If someone doesn't have a church background, they don't really know what Sin is - they'll likely assume it's bad stuff we do that makes God mad. And the idea of glory is more complicated today than it was in the ancient world - we typically associate people who chase glory with arrogance and pride. So just quoting this verse with no context could end up communicating to someone that God is a glory hound who only cares about himself and is angry when people don't live up to his impossible expectations.

That's not very good news, and if that's where the conversation starts, you're not probably going to get very far.

That's the big drawback to formulaic approaches to Evangelism. They assume everyone already has a shared language, and to a large degree even a shared set of beliefs. That may have been more true 50 years ago, but it's not the case today.

[Scripture Slide] And more to the point, it's not what Jesus' good news sounded like. Turn with me to Luke 4. After his baptism, Jesus began his teaching ministry. He travelled from town to town, joining them for their Saturday synagogue worship, and preaching. If you grew up with travelling evangelists, this is something like what Jesus did.

He was great. The people *loved* him. He began to get famous. And then he returns to the town where he grew up, Nazareth. What was Jesus' Good News for his hometown people? Let's read together his good news proclamation:

Jesus returned to Galilee, filled with the Holy Spirit's power. Reports about him spread quickly through the whole region. He taught regularly in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

When he came to the village of Nazareth, his boyhood home, he went as usual to the synagogue on the Sabbath and stood up to read the Scriptures. The scroll of Isaiah the prophet was handed to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where this was written:

"The Spirit of the LORD is upon me, for he has anointed me to bring Good News to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim that captives will be released, that the blind will see, that the oppressed will be set free, and that the time of the LORD's favor has come."

He rolled up the scroll, handed it back to the attendant, and sat down. All eyes in the synagogue looked at him intently. Then he began to speak to them. "The Scripture you've just heard has been fulfilled this very day!" -- Luke 4:14-21

Now especially if you've been through evangelism training, you're not going to recognize what Jesus was doing here as evangelism. There's no Romans Road, no spiritual laws at all. He doesn't mention sin, or his death on the cross or the resurrection.

And yet Luke chooses this as the first record of what Jesus himself considered good news.

Weird, right?

If you dig into this a bit - or a lot, it starts to make sense: Jesus is speaking to his fellow Jewish people. They're heirs of God's promises to Abraham, and they've been living in a spirit of defeat for 500+ years, ever since Babylon destroyed their Temple. Jesus is quoting a prophet who promised a new day was coming, one in which God would scoop up every oppressed, broken person and bring about a new day of hope, healing and justice.

Jesus reads that prophecy and then says, "This is coming true right now. I'm the one bringing all this about. The God you've been waiting for has come to you. I am in the process right now of setting the world right, of bringing about justice and peace."

Which is really good news, especially if you're one of those oppressed, broken people.

But isn't it fascinating that if Jesus had walked in here today (and he was just some famous preacher not, you know, *Jesus*) and said this, it wouldn't mean the same thing to most of us. Just those words *by themselves* don't have that same weight, the same meaning to all of us because we lack the context.

The same thing happens when we take our evangelism tools out into the world. Words, concepts and truths that have deep meaning for us may be gibberish to other people who lack our context. We can talk about salvation, resurrection, the Holy Spirit and more and if the people we're talking to don't have the right context, if they don't speak our language, they're still not going to understand.

For Christmas a couple of years ago, I bought my wife a couple of novels in Spanish. I was told they're amazing pieces of literature. And Amanda can read them because she's fluent in Spanish. I can't make heads or tails of them because I barely have restaurant Spanish.

Or think of it like a cooking show. I love to cook, but I'm not a professional. I watch cooking shows like *Chopped* or *Beat Bobby Flay* and they throw around all kinds of words that I've maybe *heard* before, but I don't know what they mean. They say they're going to blanch some vegetables, and then they put them in a pan. I have no idea what's happening. But the judges, other professional chefs, go, "Ah, now she's blanching the vegetables. Really smart move."

What?

That's how people can feel when we try to talk with them about Jesus. Because they don't understand our language.

So what do we do? We have a couple of options. We can take time to make them experts in our language - like I did with that Isaiah passage a few moments ago. We can unpack the context and work hard to teach them what they need to know to make the good news comprehensible.

That's an option. It's a good option if you have a willing conversation partner, someone who's open and curious.

But maybe a better option is to enter into their world, to learn their language. Let me give you an extreme example.

How many of you have heard of Bronies? These are adult men who love the new incarnation of My Little Ponies cartoon that launched in 2010. Originally somewhat of a joke, it has developed into a whole movement, with its own conventions and fan groups that have organized and do charity work.

Imagine you have a friend or relative who considers himself a Brony. Let's call him Brock. He's 26 and has felt pretty socially isolated most of his life - until he found this online fan community around a cartoon he genuinely enjoys.

How would you talk about Jesus with Brock if you wanted to enter fully into his world? Well, here's how Matt Mikalatos did it:

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I'm guessing that for most of us (me included), those last few paragraphs were barely comprehensible. It's only because I know the Jesus story that I can make some guesses at what was going on there.

But they weren't for me, were they? They were for my friend, the Brony. If that friend were real, if it were someone in my life I care deeply about, it's easy for me to imagine doing the work to learn to speak their language.

And *that's* the important piece here. Do we love people in our lives enough to learn to speak their language? To meet them where they are? To watch for God working in their lives and speak that to them in language they understand?

Obviously that's something we value as a church - we work hard in our preaching and how we communicate from the platform. And we do that because that's what God has done for us.

And we do that because that's what Jesus did - God became human. He learned our language. When we went to Nazareth, he used the prophet Isaiah. When he went to a wedding (like we saw last week), he used wine. Jesus is endlessly creative.

God didn't insist we learn religious language. Jesus taught using stories about parents and children, farmers, bosses and employees. Because he wanted us to understand the good news.

Communion + Examen

[Communion Slide] Jesus gave us a meal, something we can easily understand. He spoke to us in our language.

1. With whom is God inviting me to share the good news of Jesus?
2. What do they care about?
3. How can I translate Jesus' good news into their world?

Assignment + Blessing

Ask someone you know who doesn't know Jesus to talk through the good news with you. Ask them to help you translate unfamiliar ideas and concepts into language they understand.