

Movie Message: The Terminal
1 Corinthians 9:19-23
June 22, 2008
St. John United Methodist Church
Anchorage, Alaska
David Beckett, D.Min.

Our movie message for today comes from The Terminal. The preview will set the stage for our story.

Viktor Navorski has just landed in New York. He is ushered into administrative offices where he meets with some unsettling news. Viktor sits down with the airport administrator, Frank Dixon. Frank tells Viktor that he has some bad news; Viktor's country no longer exists. The problem is that Viktor cannot understand what is being said.

Communication is hard enough when two people speak the same language. Without a translator communication between Viktor and Frank was doomed from the start. When Christianity was a fledgling movement it spread mainly due to the efforts and the skill of Paul. First, Paul spoke Greek, the prevailing language of the region, and was educated in Greek traditions. He was well suited to the task of taking the gospel to the Greek and Roman world. In our scripture for today he writes about his strategy. "I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some." (1 Corinthians 9:22)

What he means is that when travelling to a new city he was able to speak to people about Christ using language and customs they would understand. He began, not with the gospel, but with the people. He was able to determine the kinds of words and images and reasoning needed in each unique setting in order to communicate the truth of Jesus Christ. If the gospel had been entrusted to people like Frank Dixon, Christianity would have become a dead sect.

How about you? When you walk into a new setting are you able to translate what you want to say into a language others can understand?

A snowbird from the North wanted a week's vacation at a Florida campground, but was concerned about the accommodations. Uppermost in her mind were the toilet facilities, but she was too proper to write toilet so she abbreviated bathroom commode to BC and asked in her letter if the campground had its own BC.

The campground owner was baffled by this euphemism, so he showed it around, but nobody knew what it meant. Finally, someone said, Oh, that's simple. 'BC' means 'Baptist Church.' She's asking whether the campground has its own Baptist Church. So the owner sat down and wrote:

Dear Madam,

I'm sorry about the delay in answering your letter, but I am pleased to inform you that a BC is located just nine miles north of the campground and is capable of seating 250 people at one time. I admit it is quite a distance away if you are in the habit of going regularly, but no doubt you will be pleased to know that a great number of people take their lunches along and make a day of it. They usually arrive early and stay late. The last time my wife and I went was six years ago, and it was so crowded we had to stand up the whole time we were there. It may interest you to know that there is a

supper planned to raise money to buy more seats. They're going to hold it in the basement of the BC. I would like to say that it pains me greatly not to be able to go more regularly, but it is surely no lack of desire on my part. As we grow older, it seems to be more of an effort, especially in cold weather. If you decide to come to our campground, perhaps I could go with you the first time, sit with you and introduce you to all the folks. Remember, this is a friendly community.

Communication is hard. Misunderstandings are easy. Cartoonist Rube Goldberg tells the story about the time he traveled to Europe on an ocean liner. He was assigned to a table with another single passenger. His companion was a Frenchman who spoke no English. Goldberg spoke no French. Each night the Frenchman would be the last to arrive for dinner and he would come to the table, click his heels, bow, and say, Bon Appetit. Goldberg says, I would get up and reply, 'Goldberg,' and shake his hand and sit down. This routine went on for three or four nights. Then one day, Goldberg happened to mention this to an acquaintance. You know, it's the strangest thing. I'm sitting with a Frenchman in the dining room and at each meal he tells me his name's Bon Appetit and I have to tell him who I am. No, no, said the other man. That's not his name. That's a French phrase for good appetite. Oh, said Goldberg, I feel so stupid. Well, I'm going to have to correct that. That night, Goldberg came to the table late and the Frenchman was already seated. Goldberg bowed, clicked his heels and said, Bon Appetit. The Frenchman stood up and said, Goldberg.¹

In the movie Viktor was able to communicate with others but it was entirely due to his efforts to learn English. No one took the time to learn his native tongue of Krakosia. His desire and work to learn English opened doors to communication and understanding. Viktor is befriended by three airline employees. But it wasn't exactly friendship at first sight.

Viktor Navorski is a very patient man. He waits for hours and hours in various lines. Every day he waits for two hours only to have his application denied. Every day he hears the word that he is "unacceptable."

Do you know what it feels like to know someone thinks you are unacceptable? It's one thing to DO something unacceptable. It is another to be told that you ARE unacceptable.

Keith Hernandez is one of baseball's top players. He is a lifetime .300 hitter who has won numerous Golden Glove awards for excellence in fielding. He's won a batting championship for having the highest average, the Most Valuable Player award in his league, and even the World Series. Yet with all his accomplishments, he has missed out on something crucially important to him -- his father's acceptance and recognition that what he has accomplished is valuable. Listen to what he had to say in a very candid interview about his relationship with his father: "One day Keith asked his father, 'Dad, I have a lifetime 300 batting average. What more do you want?' His father replied, 'But someday you're going to look back and say, "I could have done more.'"²

¹ Gary Smalley & John Trent, Ph.D., The Gift of Honor, p. 116.

² -- Bruce Larson, *Where Will You Be When You Get Where You're Going?* 3.

Do you feel that you work and work but still someone finds it is not good enough? It's amazing how much energy we can invest into our marriages, our studies, our work, our appearance. We think we're doing it because it's the right thing to do, but mostly we're doing it to please someone. We're doing it to be acceptable to someone. Who in your life are you working hard to please?

What often happens is that when we get in this kind of pattern it becomes easy to apply this kind of thinking to our relationship with God. We come to think that God needs our improvement in order to be acceptable. We believe that we need to get our act together before we can trust God.

In 1675 a fire devastated London England. Nine years later Sir Christopher Wren laid a foundation stone in what would be his greatest architectural achievement--the building of St. Paul's Cathedral. It took him thirty five long years to complete his task, and when it was done he waited breathlessly for the reaction of her majesty, Queen Anne. After being carefully shown through the structure, she summed up her feelings for the architecture in three words: "It is awful; it is amusing; it is artificial." Imagine how you would feel if words like these were used to describe the work of your life! But if you were to read the biography of Sir Christopher Wren you would learn that upon hearing these words from his Queen he heaved a sigh of relief and bowed gratefully before his sovereign. How could this be? The explanation is simple: In 1710 the word awful meant "awe-inspiring," the word amusing meant "amazing," and the word artificial meant "artistic." What to our ears might sound like a devastating criticism were in that time words of measured praise.³

In the movie Viktor did not allow the harshness of a New York airport to touch his soul. He simply moved on. Why? Because he knew his mission. We learn the reason he has come to America: to honor a promise he made to his dying father. When you focus on your mission you don't allow yourself to get sidetracked or distracted.

Our mission as a church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. It's the same mission Paul had when he walked into city after city. We need to learn at least two things from him. Take the time to respect the people by learning their language and customs. And always remember that you are a child of God. You could never be unacceptable to God.

³ Brett Blair, SermonIllustrations.com, 1999. Adapted from Illustrations from Biblical preaching, 1993, p. 403.