

New York City: At the name of Jesus

January 15, 2020

“Language is love.”

My student from Nepal spoke the words with a wide grin before our English-as-a-Second Language Class. It was below freezing outside our cluttered and crowded makeshift English classroom. We were located on the third floor of the English Language Institute in New York City. Our lesson centered on the story of the three wise men, a story I was familiar with from years of Sunday school and Wednesday night Bible studies, but my Nepali and Bangladeshi students experienced it for their first time in English.

“Mr. Mohammed, can you read the title for me?” I asked. He smiled and nodded his head up and down quickly.

Mr. Mohammed needed the most help pronouncing words. I typically would read a sentence him and have him repeat it back to me. He was eager to say anything in English, even if he wasn’t saying it right and was thankful for my help with words he did not know. At one point, I was having difficulties explaining the story of the three wise men to him. Each time I moved on to a new sentence, Mr. Mohammed needed help understanding how that new sentence connected to the one before it. He could understand fragments of the story, but he could not put the story together. However, I noticed he was quick to pick up names. One name always made him smile and look up at me. That name was Jesus. Whenever I said a sentence with the name Jesus as the subject, he perked up and repeated “Jesus” back to me.

“Ohhh, Jesus!” Mr. Mohammed said, as his eyes brightened.

Looking back on that day, I doubt that he understood most of the story of the three wise men—maybe less than half. Furthermore, I never got to articulate the gospel with him. He did not understand my English very well, and I was unable to spend time outside of class with him. But I know this for sure; Mr. Mohammed took away a great impression of the name of Jesus. Whenever he heard that name, his face changed. That name was all he needed to hear. It reminded me of what God commanded us to do in 2 Corinthians 4:5: “For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake.”

I was reminded that the gospel didn’t depend on my eloquent speech. It didn’t depend on my speech, period. Being an English major, I had hopes of explaining the good news of Jesus as precisely as I could to Mr. Mohammed, but none of that worked. God had unequipped me physically, dis-enabling me to express myself. Yet, through this physical unequipping, this language barrier, God reminded me I was equipped spiritually. I had to depend solely on God to explain who Jesus is, since my words would never be enough. I had to depend solely on the name of Jesus, and his name was more than enough. One word from God spoke to Mohammed more than all my words ever could. This is because the language of Jesus is the language of love. Through the Holy Spirit, all can interpret its meaning.

Chris Williams, a student at the University of Texas at Tyler, served in New York City with Go Now Missions during Christmas break.