

Yesterday in my sermon, I said I'd share the story of meeting my best friend in a McDonald's in Moscow. Well, almost...

On a North Park College choir trip to Sweden, Estonia, and Russia in the summer of 1993, I was fascinated by new cultures and new places. I had seen many new and unfamiliar things in the past two weeks, but I had also seen a shocking number of familiar ones as well. And I was struck by how similar my American culture was to that of Sweden, Estonia, and now Russia. Having been taught again and again that Russia was so amazingly different than the US – this is how we justify all kinds of horrible things – that I was shocked to see such familiar surroundings.

On a day's outing in Moscow, we were given the option of going to a local Mall for the afternoon or going to a local Monastery. With no interest whatsoever in shopping (I was rather enjoying being away from the constant spending of my own culture), I chose to see the Monastery. My friend Kirsten chose the mall. Kirsten and I had been friends since high school back in Michigan where we attended the same youth group. In fact, we had set up one of my best friends Steve with one of her best friends Anita, a relationship that didn't last very long but still drew the four of us closer. Kirsten was missing our home culture and so chose to go to a familiar place, the mall.

When I returned to the hotel for dinner together with the choir, Kirsten ran over with her usual bubbly enthusiasm and thrust the wrapper of her quarter pounder with cheese in my hands with a triumphant smile. I had to feign interest in a quarter pounder with cheese wrapper even if it was in Russian. She saw the face excitement and told me to open the wrapper. I did and was shocked at what I found. On the wrapper was a note, written to me by my best friend from high school, none other than Steve of "Steve and Anita blind date" fame! Kirsten was walking through the mall when Steve, who just happened to be traveling in Moscow at the same time, called out to her across the mall. He had stopped at the McDonald's there and once they had gotten over their shock at seeing each other at a McDonald's in a mall in Moscow, she shared that I was on the same trip. Steve couldn't attend the concert, so he wrote me a note instead on the most accessible notepad around, his burger wrapper.

This world seems so large when we are young, when "the next town over" feels much like Mars. Yet as we grow up and become more traveled and more familiar with the world, we find that it isn't so big after all. We find that other cultures are not as alien as we imagine or as foreign as we are led to believe. In fact, we find much that is familiar no matter how far we travel. What we find as our world-reach broadens is that that "other" we've heard about isn't so "other". And soon we find we can accept, respect, and even befriend people from all walks of life.

So before you hear about anyone from a neighbor to a foreign ruler and think them "other", think about all you have in common, and maybe try to find a little more respect for them. As a friend recently told me, everyone is influenced by their unique take on their unique culture which forms their unique perspective, and that is one thing we all have in common. So don't pigeon-hole, or demonize, even make assumptions about anyone. See them for the individual God made them to be, and seek to find God's Image impressed upon them, whether obvious or not. Because if we can find the familiar, and see God's fingerprint in their life, then we can love better, accept easier, and understand more fully everyone around us.