

Excerpts from my journal, written in chronological order.

Those are the slums. She pointed at a cluster of buildings off in the distance. The clay and brick houses seemed to be one entity, as if the complex were a live monstrosity, slowly creeping over the hillside on which it was built. The red, sleeping shelters were dotted with color and clothes lines, all the while exerting an ominous aura that seemed to loom over the area like a dark cloud. I shivered, full with both anticipation and nerve as it offered a glimpse of what was to come. We were headed to the outermost prefecture in Sao Paulo, one riddled with violence and poverty. It was clear, without prior knowledge, throughout the journey just where we were headed. Over the hour car ride, the de-evolution of the condition of the buildings, the appearance of the locals, and the increased silence of the minister, Mara, indicated just how much closer we were getting.

The clinic was alive with activity. Old Chinese doctors, who were Chinese by blood only, not by culture nor language, bustled around, setting up shop. An optometrist took one corner, isolating it with a black curtain. Two dentistry students took another, testing their instruments as they discussed different techniques. A psychologist welcomed patients that sat on wooden benches in queue and Lisa took blood pressures next to her. I, however, was lost. I was in a foreign place, unable to communicate, unable to help. I was helpless, even incompetent, and felt in the way. Frustrated with myself, I quickly jumped at the opportunity to participate in street evangelism and spread awareness of the clinic with Leandro, Felipe and Werica, local Brazilians that had come with the medley of doctors and dentists.

Hola, mi amigo! Puedo orar para ti? With a huge smile on my face, I clapped an arm around the local's shoulders, a guy about my age, and prayed for Him. Leandro graciously translated my English.

Father God, may you richly bless this brother and friend. May he come to know You, to know about Your everlasting love and Your abounding grace. I pray for reconciliation and I pray for joy and peace. I thank You for this humbling opportunity. Amen.

With eyes opened, I grasped his arm in farewell. *Deus chabing seu, mi hermano.* His thankfulness and appreciation was written across his face and his genuinity reinvigorated my spirit. *This is Love*, I thought, overwhelmed with the Spirit. *This is how Jesus feels. This is how God feels about all of us.* Indeed, the Spirit filled me in that moment and for the remainder of the evangelizing period. It was a duration of renewal for me, as I was humbled by the opportunity to become God's vessel. Truly, it was through God's grace and the power of the Holy Spirit, that we, without even speaking the language, could touch and reach out to the inhabitants of the slums and yearn for their reconciliation from the bottom of our hearts.

We continued for several more hours. It was humbling time for me, one that greatly encouraged me. As we walked among the poorly maintained streets, among the sun-kissed locals, the unfinished brick houses, the multitude of brightly colored garages, and their relics (motorcycles, bikes, cars) from the past century, and as I took in the run-down neighborhoods and the patchwork buildings, I re-affirmed my commitment and my passion to my dream. I re-fueled my dedication to my goals, and perhaps even caught a glimpse of what God has in store for my future. My helplessness fired my determination to become a doctor. My inability to

communicate re-kindled my love for languages. My heart, filled with love by the Spirit, burned once again to bring the Good News to the ends of the Earth, and to serve the people that God loves. It was a time of renewal for me, one that I had desperately sought after in the midst of exams and classes, and one that God graciously provided. It was a day where I was constantly reminded of God's grace and the power of faith. A day of worship and fellowship, a day of new sights and new people. Indeed, how beautiful are the feet of those who bring the Good News.

Let it rain, Father God. Open the floodgates of Heaven.

She was 17, maybe 18. Her mellow, brown, curled hair was parted in the middle, natural perhaps, and rested on her left shoulder, atop her striped black and white blazer. Her powdered face was concentrated, always focused on the music or the translating, save for a smile or two of appreciation between songs.

He was a Youth Pastor, not much taller than me. He had a distinct Brazilian look, with lack loafers, faded jeans, and a red flannel shirt. His hair, geled upwards, complemented the scruff on his face. Our inability to communicate seemed to bother him at first, but as we both got used to the translating, he seemed to mind it less and less.

It was their passion for worship that truly set them apart. His voice and his skill on the guitar, both masterful and elegant, faded into the background when he worshiped. Indeed, he led with a Spirit-filled passion and charisma worthy of King David's courts. In moments like this one, I thanked the Lord a thousand times for guiding me to have a passion for drumming and music.

When they played, the music and the talent took a backseat to the passion they played for. It was worship as God intended. It was praise glorifying to the Father, among brothers and sisters in Christ: uplifting, encouraging, and powerful. It had been a long time since I had experienced such Spirit-led worship, one that gave life and color to the music. Worship that compeled even the angels in the room to sing and dance. Worship that cried out to the Living God with voices that lifted hands to Heaven. And indeed, in moments like that one, we cried, "let it rain, Father God. Let your presence flood this place. And may Your Name be glorified."

Amen. Let it rain. Open the floodgates of Heaven. Let it rain.

There are moments when God brings everything together, moments when he ties the loose ends. I was fed up, annoyed at being here. I didn't sign up to be a middle-school retreat counselor. In no way was this satisfying work. Working in the Brazilian street churches was much more gratifying. *Oh, ye of little faith.* That's what Jesus would have said to me.

You guys have to make a skit and perform it on Thursday. Every groups going to do it, and we, your group leaders, can't help you.

They were reluctant at first, and the ideas came slowly in the beginning. But as they started talking, the ideas came cascading out.

- *Let's have two good students that try to resist peer pressure.*
- *They can try to do drugs! You know, how like what Teacher Ruth was saying in her lesson.*
- *They could be at a party when that happens. With lots of dance music.*
- *You two can be the drug dealer's friends.*
- *Okay, so you two start by saying that you want to study. With...you two.*

- *But then, you two leave and get approached by you.*
- *Okay and I'll offer them drugs. And I'll want to trick them because they'll be taller and smarter than me.*
- *Okay, can you play some music when they enter the house? We'll pretend to dance and smoke and drink and do drugs.*
- *And then you two be the cops.*
- *You're under arrest!*
- *Okay and then when they're in jail, you can be the missionary and tell them about God!*
- *Have you heard of Christ?*
- *We believe! Hallelujah!*
- *Okay and Teacher Crystal, you come a month later and take them to church.*
- *Then you guys refuse drugs because God loves you and you've changed your ways!*

I stood by and watched them work, discuss, laugh, and plan. I laughed with them, guided them when necessary, and loved them. It made the scarce hours of sleep, the immaturity and the rebelliousness of the kids, the countless hours of planning, and all the embarrassments and doubts that I had at the beginning of camp just melt away. They were so pure, honest, and simply adorable. I loved them, from the bottom of my heart, and only after a few days. If I could love kids I'd only known for a few days, how much deeper is God's love for us! Indeed, God works in mysterious ways.

The soft light of the setting sun kissed the field of tall grass. Yellow tips that transformed into green roots rustled in the soft wind. The field gave way to green, sloping hills. Brown and black cows grazed beyond a wire fence. To the left, a dense bamboo forest chattered softly, swaying in the wind, its leaves alive and dancing. A concrete well lay directly before me, underneath an old brick shelter. A missing shingle was surrounded by brown, iron squares, red veins of rust intermingling with the metal. It was solitude, where we are least alone. I felt the Spirit talk to me in that moment. *Prepare to witness the awesome Majesty of the Lord.*

Come, Lord Jesus, Come. Descend on this place with Your Holy fire.

Let us not grow weary of doing good. I can't remember the number of times I repeated that phrase, but it must have been in the hundreds. My sleep debt was hitting me, and its interest rate was almost more than I could bear. Every chance I got to rest was precious beyond words. And sometimes I would ask, *what keeps me going?* And then I would remind myself, *the Lord, for whom I am working.*

Never forget how powerful hospitality is, especially to the weary and to the foreign. Mouth-watering meats, rides to and from, offering to be tour guides. The comfort and joy they brought was so much more powerful and relieving than they realized. Indeed, the body of Christ is alive and well throughout the world. Our God is the same God, the same Maker of Heaven and Earth, and indeed, the body of Christ is beautiful, glorifying and Holy beyond words, a shining glorious Bride.

Tiny, plump fingers with soft touches. Shining, pure, honest faces. High-pitched, simple voices. Minds that work with no intent of subterfuge or hurt. Yet, at the same time, so needing of help in every little thing: of direction towards purpose, of prevention from harm. It's working with

kids like this that reminds me, one, of how much I want to be a father, and two, a little bit of how our Father in Heaven must view each and every one of us.

Indeed, through the sufferings and trials we face, we are reminded that God does not test us beyond our capabilities. In our exhaustion from the first camp, God provided relief in the form of extra team members. In our daily weariness, the hospitality of our brothers and sisters in Christ encouraged us. And when we asked, when we begged and cried out, God heard us. *You, indeed, are a faithful God, forever unchanging. I praise and worship Your Holy Name. Amen.*

I was filled with a Spirit of Joy. Exhausted, I woke up, my head pounding, my stomach hurting, my throat scratching, and my nose running. My mind was foggy, as if a cold substance had enveloped my brain, slowing my neurons. VBS made it a little better. The nap during lunch didn't. But despite my irritation with everyone and everything, Yet, once the afternoon camp started, it was like I became a different person, not of my own volition. The skits were funnier, the activities more meaningful, the kids were cuter, and teaching was enjoyable. Indeed, even the kids seemed to be affected by the Spirit. They were lively and more willing to participate and open up about their lives. It was in this moment, we were minded of the power of prayer. God hears, and He answers, and His grace is more than sufficient.