

October 1, 2012

Next door to us in a three-room thatched-roof mud house lived a man and his wife. I'll call them Jack and Jill with their two children, Little Jack and Lori. Every morning Jack, a steady, courteous, kind man, got on his bicycle and rode out to fill his large basket with green bananas, which his wife then sold a few at a time to people passing by the yard. She was always busy cooking, washing dishes, hauling water, washing clothes or diapers. Lori was still a baby in arms. Little Jack looked about two years old. At first he was afraid of us, never having seen white people before, but after a while he loved coming to sit on our porch to watch what was going on at our house.

Jill was curious about us but not willing to show how much. She had a saucy, challenging way of talking, and the habitual suspicion of someone whose mother often tricked her as a child in order to get her cooperation. My way of connecting with her was to go sit in her yard on a straw mat and ask her to teach me new words in her language. After a few sessions of this, she began to think I was somehow taking advantage of her. "Why don't you ever teach me any of your language?" she complained.

"Okay, get a notebook and a pencil and I'll help you learn anything you want to say in English, too," I replied. Jill had been to school through fourth grade, then dropped out and got married. But she had a bright mind and could read and write. "Tell me how to say these things," she demanded. "I am walking on the road. I am washing clothes." Then she revealed a little more about herself: "Yesterday I went to my mother's. Here I am with my two children." Instead of telling her how to spell them, I let her write the words phonetically as sounded best to her. I figured that way she could remember how to pronounce them later.

After a while our conversations began to take a different tone. "Is it true that white people can wash clothes with either the right or the left hands? Could a person from your religion marry a person of my religion? Would you ever change your religion? Is it true that white people only marry one woman or one man? Is there divorce in your country? Can you and your husband pray together?" I hastened to assure her that white people divorce sometimes, but that as Christians we believe God's plan is for one man and one woman to marry for life. We do not practice polygamy.

One day as we talked I asked Jill, "What profit does your religion bring to you?" She shrugged and immediately answered, "Oh, none. Why, what profit does your religion bring you?" I said, "Well, knowing Jesus is a huge benefit to me. He paid for my sins and forgave them all. He gave me eternal life so when I die I can live with Him in heaven. He helps me with all the things I need most, like patience and love and joy and peace, when I am not able to have any of those things by myself. He listens to my prayers and gives me so much help, always. And He is such a wonderful Friend! Wherever I go, Jesus is with me." She looked quite startled, then quickly changed the subject.

But another day she asked as we sat together eating fried cassava root with hot pepper lime sauce, "If someone asked you to leave Jesus, would you change your religion?" "Oh, I could never leave Jesus. He's done so much for me." She shook her head in disbelief. "You Christians really take your religion seriously." She grinned. "And you try to learn our language harder than we try to learn yours!"

