

Suttons Bay Congregational Church
John 10:22-30 *Lost In Translation*

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22Then came the Feast of Dedication at Jerusalem. It was winter, 23and Jesus was in the temple area walking in Solomon's Colonnade. 24The Jews gathered around him, saying, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly."

25Jesus answered, "I did tell you, but you do not believe. The miracles I do in my Father's name speak for me, 26but you do not believe because you are not my sheep. 27My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. 28I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. 29My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. 30I and the Father are one."

Come Tuesday I will have been your minister for two years. And so I think I've been here long enough now that I can air a grievance I've had about this church since before I started this ministry. I've been hesitant about telling anybody about this issue for fear that someone might take offense or feel defensive about a previous minister. But, we know each other well enough for me to just be perfectly candid. I do not like the Bible we use during worship. There, I've said it. Now before you storm out, let me explain.

The Bibles that you find in your pews, and likely on many of your bedside tables at home, indeed I have just such a Bible on my own night stand, the one I received when I was confirmed, is the New International Version of the Bible. It is one of many translations of the Bible that is available. Now in defense of the New International Version, allow me to share with you the following description from the Bible Gateway website.

The New International Version (NIV) is a translation made by more than one hundred scholars working from the best available Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek texts. It was conceived in 1965 when, after several years of study by committees from the Christian Reformed Church and the National Association of Evangelicals, a trans-denominational and international group of scholars met at Palos Heights, Illinois, and agreed on the need for a new translation in contemporary English . .

The Committee held to certain goals for the NIV: that it be an Accurate, Beautiful, Clear, and Dignified translation suitable for public and private reading, teaching, preaching, memorizing, and liturgical use. The translators were united in their commitment to the authority and infallibility of the Bible as God's Word in written form.

Now that's all well and good, but as with nearly any translation of any message, there was a particular perspective from which this translation was written. And while it is a fine translation—it is not the version I prefer to use when I'm searching for the historical meaning or doing rigorous academic study of the text. Indeed, for those purposes and in all of my sermon preparation, I use the New Revised Standard Version. Now as with most things these days—Biblical translations have become political. Generally, it is evangelicals and more conservative religious traditions that use the New International Version while more progressive or mainline traditions turn to the New Revised Standard Version. And the difference is simple—the primary intention of the translators. The New International Version was translated to be *Accurate*,

Beautiful, Clear, and Dignified and to communicate the text as the infallible word of God. The New Revised Standard Version, as described on the website of the National Council of Churches, “stands out among the many translations because it is “as literal as possible” in adhering to the ancient texts . . . it draws on newly available sources that increase our understanding of many previously obscure biblical passages.” The NRSV translators did their work giving little consideration to any particular theology or theological perspective but rather approached the task of translating from an academic perspective.

Now it may seem that I’m just doing mental gymnastics up here and you could all care less about what version of the Bible you use—or you may use a certain Bible because it’s the one your Grandma gave you or the Bible of your childhood. And again, that’s fine. Shoot, I still sometimes use a mint-green covered Precious Moments Bible, New International Version, that Keara Slyker gave me in a 7th Grade Christmas gift exchange. But I still hold that, for real academic study of the scriptures, we need to be careful about the version we’re using because the translator’s word choices can make a difference—a HUGE difference in the way we interpret and apply the scriptures to our every day lives.

Take, for example, today’s reading from the Gospel according to John. Go ahead and take out the bulletin insert so you can follow along. We’re looking at verse 25 that begins, “Jesus answered . . .” Jesus is answering the Jewish authorities who have asked him—point blank—if he is the Christ. In the New International Version, from here on out in this sermon referred to as the NIV, the translation reads as follows “I did tell you, but you do not believe. The miracles I do in my Father’s name speak for me . . .” Whereas the New Revised Standard Version, from here on out in this sermon referred to as the NRSV, reads, “I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father’s name testify to me.” The NIV uses the word “miracles”. The NRSV uses the word “works”. Now if we’re reading this passage because it makes for an interesting story, then there’s not much of a difference, indeed many of you may not have even noticed it. However, if we’re reading this passage because we are Christians who look to Jesus as a model and guide for our choices and behaviors then there is a difference, a very important difference.

In the NIV, Jesus expects that people will know he is the Christ because of the miracles he performs. In the NRSV, Jesus expects that people will know he is the Christ because of the works he performs. In other words, Jesus expects that people will know who he is not because of his words but rather because of his actions. In the NIV, those actions are miracles. In the NRSV, the actions are works. And here’s where we come in—none of us, to my knowledge, can perform miracles. However, all of us can do good works. For the translators of the NIV, the point is that Jesus could perform miracles—therefore he could be no one else but the Christ. Because the translators of the NIV had a more evangelical agenda—which I am not discrediting or affirming I’m only pointing out what they themselves said of themselves—because they are evangelical, they want to lift Jesus up, set him apart, and make him “more than” your average human being. To say he performed miracles is a very good way to do this. However, the NRSV, written without that kind of theological agenda, simply refers to Jesus’ works. It doesn’t ascribe to him any super-human abilities. And indeed my argument against the NIV is not against its theology—for indeed that is my own theology—that Jesus could and did perform miracles. However, when I read the NIV I say to myself, Oh, Jesus revealed his relationship

with God through the miracles he performed. It makes it about Jesus. But when I read the NRSV I say to myself, Oh, Jesus—a human being like me—did good works that revealed that he had a relationship with God. Uh, oh. Now it's not just about Jesus, but it's also about me—and you.

When it was just about Jesus performing miracles we were off the hook because no one here can walk on water and so we can't be expected to be like Jesus. However, if we're talking about good works, well now, there's something God made all of us capable of doing. The NRSV is more applicable to us in our roles as followers of Christ. The NRSV isn't just about Jesus, it's about everyone who wants to follow him. The NRSV holds us accountable to doing good works just as Jesus did so that others might know that we love God not by what we say, but rather by what we do. For, according to Jesus, it is our works that reveal our love for God. That could be why Jesus refused to say that he was the Christ. He could say it, but the people would not believe it. But if he did Christ like things, well then, he was showing them God's way. But by that point, the religious leaders had become so disassociated with the ways of God, they had so perverted and politicized what it meant to follow God, that they did not recognize the work of God even as they witnessed it in the works of Jesus. Yes, Jesus' works included miracles, but Jesus' God-revealing works were certainly not limited to miracles.

And it is this important reality that is lost in the NIV translation of this passage. God is not revealed only through the miracles, but also through everyday acts of kindness and love. And while we can't perform miracles, we can certainly perform everyday acts of kindness and love. And when we do, well then, that's when we can be Christ to others.

Christ—at least the walking around on earth Christ that people could see, and hear, and touch—is no longer among us. However, before he left this earthly life he bestowed upon us the Holy Spirit, not just so we would always have the presence of God with us, but also so we would be empowered to continue the work of Christ. It reminds me of a sermon I heard at a funeral this past fall. My good friend Julie's father, Dominique, passed away. He lived with cerebral palsy and when I say he lived—I mean he really lived. Dom knew how to have a good time. He knew how to work hard. And he tried so hard throughout his life to be all that he could be in spite of the severe limitations his crippled body and severe speech impediment placed upon him. At his funeral, the priest talked about Dom's spirit finally being free from the prison of the body it had inhabited and now his spirit was available to us all so that we could continue to share the goodness, love, and joy that Dom had during his too short earthly life. She likened this to Christ's resurrection and subsequent appointing of us to continue his work. When Jesus was a human being he, like Dom, endured the limitations of a human body and human life. However, when he died as Jesus, and was resurrected as Christ, and finally bestowed upon us the Holy Spirit thus giving us the ability and privilege of doing his work in the world—suddenly his sphere of influence multiplied exponentially. No, none since him have been able to walk on water or turn water into wine or make a dead person rise from the grave. But there have been many millions who have been able to work to heal the wounded, free the oppressed, feed the hungry, and be present with the lonely. And perhaps this is the greatest miracle Christ ever performed—the miracle of making broken, wounded, lonely, and sometimes desperate people like you and me into beings capable of doing works that are so sweet and so good that people

know Christ because our works. Surely it would be a tragic thing if the miracle of this truth was lost in translation.