

# “Lost in Translation”

*Matthew 28:16-20*

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If you have ever received a book that is written in a language that you did not comprehend, you know the value of a translator to make sense of things.

Sometimes, however, despite the best efforts of scholars and linguists, there are some words and colloquial expressions that fail to make it across the linguistic divide intact. In such instances, we say that the word, the phrase, the expression, or the thought is “lost in translation.”

Comedians use this common experience to great effect. Some of the funniest scenes in movies occur when a person is speaking expansively in one language and the translator offers a one-word treatment. We all know, of course, that something has been lost in translation – we just aren’t exactly sure what.

Such is the case in today’s scripture lesson from the Gospel According to Matthew. Many of us know this passage as “The Great Commission”: “Go therefore and make disciples. . .” This is the English translation of words that were probably originally spoken in Aramaic (the common language among Jews in that region at the time); and written-up in Greek (the language employed by the writers of the New Testament books).

Greek can be a very precise language. Where English has *one* word for “love,” the Greek language has *four* separate words that would all be translated into English as “love.”

Now, I am not making a case for the undoing of what has been done over the past 2,000 years of Christian history and practice. Scripture plainly teaches us that it is the Holy Spirit – the third, co-equal member of the Trinity – Who is our tutor, helper, and guide. Yet, if we are to be as faithful and dynamic in our day – with *all* of its challenges – as the men and women in the book of Acts who turned their upside-down world right-side up, we do well to consider these words of our resurrected Lord; and consider what encouragement for us today may have been lost in translation.

Cognizant of the limitations of our English translation of a Greek text, I invite you to look with me at Jesus’ final instructions to us, His church, before ascending into heaven: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations. . .”

The word “go” to our ears seems like an order to leave Point A and immediately proceed to Point B. Go!

For many of us – hearing these words as children or young adults – it seemed as if all else in our lives was to be either discarded or put on indefinite hold while we were dispatched from Point A for Point B; and Point B (we knew) was someplace we did not want to live.

Lost in translation is an appreciation of the Greek language’s greater emphasis on the *kind* of action for the verb “go” than for *when* that action takes place. In the Greek, it is a verb that is *progressive* or *continuous* in its tense. It is a word that is more than merely starting at Point A and finishing at Point B; it includes the activities that occur *between* Point A and Point B.

Knowing this, a more useful and accurate translation is: “*As you are going*, make disciples of all nations. . .”

Where are you going this week? What appointments are on your calendar, and whom will you see this week? Even with the restricted movements we have observed during the novel coronavirus pandemic, we are *going*.

This coming week, you may have conversations and interactions with people that do not know Jesus. This coming week, you may socialize with people that may never darken the door of a church building. This coming week, you may well find yourself sharing a dark corner of life with strangers.

We *are* going! If we are to go as our Lord commanded, we must *be* Jesus to those who do not know Him. We must *be* the church to those who will not come. We must *be* the light for those who are in darkness and need a beacon of hope.

Many of us, young and old, have taken ourselves out of the Lord's service because we think that Point B is with the poor people in Appalachia, or in a far away place where people have not heard the Good News – and, frankly, we don't want to go. (If this is you, I have news: God probably doesn't want you in Appalachia or on a distant mission field, either.)

I have known people who have answered the summons to service in broken inner-city neighborhoods, depressed rural locales, and in distant mission fields. They *want* to go! But that isn't Point B for them any more than it is for us.

Our Point B is heaven. Heaven is our destination. Heaven is our true home.

The scriptures remind us – time and again – that this world is not our home. The scriptures remind us – time and again – that you and I are mere visitors here. Sojourners. Pilgrims.

Before Jesus returned to heaven to prepare a place for you and me, so that where He was we might be also; He set us on a course to heaven and told us to make disciples – followers – along the way.

Our paths may be different. You go to places that I do not, or cannot go; and I have access to places that you do not, or go places that you cannot go. Yet, as we each are going, whether in the pursuit of our career, or education, or the business of living; we each have the same mandate to “let our light shine before men that they will see our good works and glorify our Father in heaven.”

These “good works” – among other places – are referenced in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount: Be gentle. Be empathetic. Seek peace between people. Be the light. Turn the other cheek. Go the extra mile. Love your neighbor. Love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you.

The great 20<sup>th</sup> century theologian [Karl Barth](#) said: “Take your Bible and take your newspaper, and read both. But interpret newspapers from your Bible.”

I have made it my practice to rely on the scriptures to inform my response to what I read in the newspaper or hear through the electronic media. As your chaplain, I encourage each of you to do likewise. Even a casual reading of a newspaper over the two weeks would confirm that our nation, and our world, is in crisis.

At all hours of the day and night from coast to coast, our fellow-citizens are having conversations about equal opportunity, racial equality, fairness, and the rule of law.

I will not claim to have *the answer*, but as a disciple of Jesus I do have *the response*: Be gentle. Be empathetic. Seek peace between people. Be the light. Turn the other cheek. Go the extra mile. Love your neighbor. Love your enemies.

“Pray for those who persecute you, in order that you show yourselves to be [children] of your Father who is in heaven, for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.”

Some people believe that it is naïve or unrealistic to go through this life following these commands. Others believe that, while laudable, it is impossible to love justice, to do mercy, and to walk humbly with our Creator because the scaffold that props-up injustice is too big, or because the root of evil is too deep. Yet, as disciples of Jesus, you and I are commanded to let our light shine *wherever* we may go!

Our God never assigns a task without also giving the tools. In this task, we have – first and foremost – the Holy Spirit. Last Sunday, we celebrated Pentecost as it marked the giving of the Holy Spirit. The person of the Holy Spirit is not a gift *from* God; the Holy Spirit is the gift *of* God.

The Great Commission is the task. The Holy Spirit is the power that makes us *more* than adequate for *any* circumstance in life. This is the common theme of the Book of Acts: Ordinary men and women; living in extraordinary times; letting their light shine.

You have heard the hymn, “This Little Light of Mine.” You may have thought of it was a Negro spiritual, but it is not. It was composed in 1920 as a children’s song – by a white man named [Harry Dixon Loes](#), who taught music at the Moody Bible Institute in Chicago and composed more than 1,500 songs over his lifetime.

The song is simple. There are only three verses in the original composition, the second verse connecting with the heart of Jesus’ Great Commission: Everywhere I go, I’m going to let it shine!

As God’s children, will you and I let our light shine *as we are going* through this troubled world to our true home in heaven?

Here ends the preaching of God’s word. Amen.