

June 4, 2017  
Pentecost Sunday  
Acts 2:1-21

### **NOT LOST IN TRANSLATION**

Everyone is familiar with the expression “Lost in translation” right? We use it figuratively when there is a communication breakdown. Like someone will say something and the listener hears something very different from what the speaker intended to say. Chaos ensues. Ultimately multiple people are trying to sort it all out and someone will say well the message got lost in the translation. It’s also used literally by book reviewers when a popular book is translated into a language other than the original.

I have been thinking about this phrase lately because my new favorite author is Fredrick Backman who is Swedish. Who has read *A Man Called Ove*? Did anyone not like it? It’s been high on the New York Times best seller list for over two years. The film came out a couple of weeks ago and it is doing great at the box office also. That’s when we found out the correct pronunciation. I don’t know if I can quite get the vowels and the accent right, but it’s more like Ooovuh. That certainly got lost in the translation.

But the reason I’ve been thinking about the expression is because reading the book, I knew it must have originally been written in Swedish, but it seems like nothing gets lost in the translation. Since reading *Ove*, I have read the other two novels by Backman that have been translated and they are at least as good. There is just something about his use of language that makes them so compelling. I can’t put it into words exactly. His third book is titled “*Britt-Marie Was Here.*” I don’t want to give too much away, but the main character is a 63-year-old homemaker going into an employment agency looking for work because left her husband of 25

years. She found at he was having an affair when he had a stroke at the girlfriend's apartment. This is our first introduction into Britt-Marie's character.

"The girl who works here [at the employment agency] has staggeringly short hair, Britt-Marie thinks, like a man's. Not that there's anything wrong with that, of course—it's modern, no doubt. The girl points at a piece of paper and smiles, evidently in a hurry. "Just fill in your name, social security number, and address here, please." Britt-Marie has to be registered. As if she were a criminal. As if she has come to steal a job rather than find one. "Milk and sugar?" the girl asks, pouring some coffee into a plastic mug. Britt-Marie doesn't judge anyone. Far from it. But who would behave like that? A plastic mug! Are we at war? She'd like to say just that to the girl, but because Kent is always urging Britt-Marie to "be more socially aware" she just smiles as diplomatically as she can and waits to be offered a coaster."

Do you not get a pretty good impression of Britt-Marie just that quick?

Translating is actually a cottage industry. It's not something a computer can do. I mean a computer could take a Fredrick Backman novel and translate it literally, or maybe even translate it and edit it so that the style and grammar conform to English standards. But it takes a human being who understands not just both languages, but both cultures to do the job right so that nothing, not the slightest nuance gets lost in translation. People with the right combination of education, language skills, and cultural awareness and sensitivity are rare and those who are really good at it are sought after. I've read some reviews of a Man Called Ove that are as complimentary of the translator as they are of the novel.

Of course, Biblical scholars have been struggling with the problem of translation since the third century. That is why there are so many different versions of the Bible. There are over 100 in English alone. The oldest manuscripts we have today are translations done hundreds of years after the original writings. So, there is no one around anymore who can truly know the cultural environment in which the originals were written, or even what the originals actually said. Although 2000 years of scholarship has come up with some pretty reliable understandings. Still.

Anybody who thinks their literal interpretation of a modern translation, which is a translation of a translation of a translation, is something that God dictated to the writers is just wrong. Lots of things got lost or misconstrued and then reconstrued in the translations over the centuries.

But translation isn't what is going on in our Pentecost story today. It's going on in the words as we read them today, but it isn't what was actually happening that day.

The story is familiar to most of us here. We envision 12 first century men in robes, kneeling or standing in pious prayer with little flames of fire over their heads. But that isn't actually what the text says. Something *like* flames appeared. Something *like* the sound of the wind rushing was heard. It's not all that clear where this was happening—inside or outside—and who was there at what point. It is apparent that a group of disciples had gathered for Pentecost numbering about 120. Probably not literally exactly 120. But definitely a lot. Just say, one hundred twenty followers of Christ, men and women, and all of them began testifying; teaching about the glorious acts of God in Jesus Christ. As Peter points out, it is the fulfillment of ancient prophesy, when, through the Prophet Joel, God declared that he would pour out his Spirit upon all humans; upon slaves, sons and daughters, men and women. Acts 2:17-18

So, these 120 believers in Christ came spilling out into the crowd that had gathered for the festival of Pentecost. The crowd consisted of Jews from all over the ancient world who had immigrated or were on pilgrimage to Jerusalem because it was a place where Jews were permitted comparative freedom to practice their religion and preserve their cultural traditions even under the rule of the Roman empire.

And these 120, many of whom were from the region of Galilee—not known for being the seat of higher education—are able to speak whatever language they

need to speak and be understood. They are not just magically translating their own words into a whole slew of foreign languages. Somehow the listeners are hearing something that goes beyond words. God is pouring out his Holy Spirit upon all humans.

In the most recent scholarly interpretation of the Book of Acts, theologian Willie James Jennings comments on the relevance of this passage for the modern world: "The followers of Jesus are now being connected in a way that joins them to people in the most intimate space - of voice, memory, sound, body, land, and place. It is language that runs through all these matters. It is the sinew of existence of a people. My people, our language: to speak a language is to speak a people. . . . God speaks people, fluently. " God wants Christ's disciples "to speak people fluently too."

The miracle of Pentecost isn't that a bunch of uneducated followers of a man named Jesus could suddenly speak in foreign languages. The miracle is that the crowd of Jews who didn't know Jesus heard what they were saying. Nothing was lost in the translation.

Pretty much every Sunday when I get up here, I feel like I am stumbling around trying to speak the language that will connect with everyone—those who speak the same language and those who don't. I'm trying to speak people. Sometimes I think I need to take a remedial language class in people-talk. But sometimes there are moments of connection and understanding that rise above the words and it seems the Pentecost miracle happens. When the message of God's love, forgiveness, and salvation is spoken, heard, felt and most importantly, understood, nothing gets lost in the translation.

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.