

The Word of God

Matthew 13:1-9

As many of you know, my family and I are just recently back from a wonderful trip to Italy and Greece. We saw some incredible sights and also had the opportunity to experience living within somewhat different cultures. I was struck by how we all tend to operate in our lives within particular orientations or assumptions. Some of them are culturally based – different in Italy, Greece, and America. There are so many different orientations that it is far beyond our ability to understand or embrace even a small percentage of them. But we can respect them and accept, even if by faith, the validity of other peoples' orientations. The same is true for different orientations of religious faith as well.

The Ask Jack sermon series begins today. This represents a different orientation for me in terms of my sermons. I usually begin with a passage of scripture then investigate what it meant originally. Then I seek to apply that meaning to our current situation. In this series, however, I am beginning with questions you have asked. So, rather than read the scripture lesson first, I will begin with the question, then the questions that that question has raised for me. Today's question is this: "why are there so many versions of the Bible and why do some people become irate about some of them?"

I love this question. The truth is I can only speculate as to why there are so many versions, but the question that brings up is, just how many version of the Bible are there? How many translations of the Bible are there in English? I don't know for sure, but the research I did this week opened my eyes. For example, before the King James Version in 1611 – the authorized version, the gold standard for English translations -- there were at least nine other versions. John Wycliffe, in the 1380's, translated the Latin version into English because almost no one knew Greek. It was met with resistance. After all, Latin had been good enough for the church for a thousand years. Why cheapen the Bible by translating it?"

It was William Tyndale's translation in 1534 that formed the basis for the King James version. Eighty percent of the King James' New Testament and ninety percent of its New Testament come directly from Tyndale. There were nearly forty translations into English during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. But the twentieth century brought a veritable explosion with over 100 translations! The major versions were these: American Standard, Revised Standard, New English Bible, New American Standard, New International, New King James, and New Revised Standard.

So, why have there been so many versions? Virtually every translation had the intent of being either more accurate in terms of the literal meaning of the text in its original languages (Greek and Hebrew) or of providing a clearer meaning in terms of today's language and culture. Human beings need to know and we want to know with more accuracy and more clarity. There seems to be a human need for deeper meaning – a desire to dig more deeply coupled with a belief that we will find something newer or clearer to shed light on old issues. We find ourselves with greater scientific knowledge

and a desire to bring it to bear on the great questions for which the Bible has been a primary source.

Christians emphasize belief perhaps more than the other major religions. What we believe is very important to us. If we can only understand more clearly what those writers said originally, then we will have the answers for life. I am not so sure that's true, but it fosters much of the ongoing work of translating and retranslating the Bible.

Most biblical translations have been the product of individual persons and their unique faith journeys. These scholars seek to give expression to their own perspective and to offer it for the benefit of others. If enough of us were familiar enough with Greek and or Hebrew, there might be as many versions of the Bible as there are people on the journey. As it is, I suspect each one of us has our own version anyway.

Now, let's shift direction to the second part of that original question. "Why do some people become [so] irate about some of the versions?" The title of this sermon is *The Word of God*. That's also an unofficial title often given to the Bible. How we understand this idea of the "word of God" will have a great effect on how you feel about the Bible. So, what does the "word of God" mean to you?.

Jesus was the Word of God according to John 1. He was the creative energy and the wisdom of God. He was a living human document pointing to and clarifying God for us. The Bible is the Word of God when it is the creative energy and the wisdom of God. It is the living document pointing to and clarifying God by telling us about all those people whose lives were living documents -- words of God.

Do you know who else is the "Word of God?" You and me -- we carry in our lives the revelation of God. It only seems that there are lots of versions of the Bible. Compared to the number of people who are living words of God, there really are not that many translations of the Bible at all! So, why do some people get irate about some versions? Clearly it's not the versions themselves. I have never heard of anyone getting irate about the 1904 Adolphus S. Worrell translation of the New Testament or Ronald A. Knox's 1955 *The Holy Bible: a translation from the Latin Vulgate in Light of the Hebrew and Greek Originals*.

It is only when a particular translation becomes identified with a particular faith movement or organization that people can start to get irate. "This one is more literal!" That one is more inclusive!" "But this one is more beautiful!" These are good and reasonable arguments to have and it's possible to come to some agreement. Divisiveness erupts, however, when we attach more to them than just a translation. We become irate when *our* translation becomes a reflection of *our* church or *our* identity! Ironically, that is the very time when the Bible, and perhaps we ourselves, stop being the living word of God.

The Bible passage for today is a parable told by Jesus. The parable of *The Sower* is a story about four types of soil or four types of people. Perhaps it is about four aspects or

life phases of each person. As a farmer scatters seed on the ground, the parable concerns what happens to the seed as it falls on each of the four types of soil. God plants the seed in our lives. The seed has the potential of growing and flourishing. Where the seed is unable to penetrate or find fertile conditions, however, it is unable to grow. Where the seed penetrates and is able to germinate, there is an abundant harvest. The hearer is challenged to find the meaning by seeing her/himself in the parable.

The Sower plants a life-giving Word. When the soil is fertile and receptive, there is a bountiful crop. When the soil is hard, resistant, and impenetrable, nothing comes to life. You have the word of God and you are the word of God. But for that word to grow in your life and benefit you and others, the soil of your life has to be receptive. It has to be broken, cultivated, and fed. This is not an intellectual process, but a matter of your will.

The church is not here to defend our version of the Word against someone else's version. To win such a confrontation is to lose the life of God within us. This congregation exists to help each of us break, and cultivate, and feed our lives so that they will be receptive and fertile to that Word -- that life of God. Ultimately, you and I have to choose to be receptive. We have to choose to grow. And we have to choose to love ourselves and others with the actions of our lives.

There is a familiar story told about a woman who dreamt that a new shop had opened and, out of curiosity, she went in. To her surprise, God was behind the counter. "Oh," she said, "What do you sell here?" "Everything your heart desires," said God. Hardly even daring to believe her ears, she decided to ask for everything a person could wish for. "I want health, and happiness, and wisdom, and peace of mind," she said. And as an afterthought she added: "Not just for me and my family, but for everyone in the whole world." God smiled: "I think you've got me wrong, my dear," God said. "We don't sell fruits here, only seeds." (*Invitations*, Francis Dewar, p. 118)

You become the living Word of God in the process of growing in that Word. The seeds are given, but the fruit must be grown. Come, grow with us. Amen.