

Translating God's Wonderful Works

Sermon for Pentecost Sunday

Sermon Text: 1 Corinthians 2:12-16



Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. ¹³ And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual. ¹⁴ The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. ¹⁵ The spiritual person judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one. ¹⁶ "For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct Him?" But we have the mind of

Christ.

A big part of our mission work is working in foreign languages and trying to translate these languages. And if nothing else works, we can consult Google Translator. But with Google Translator, the danger of a misunderstanding is likely and there are many examples of this. Through all this, we notice that it's not only important to translate a word but to also translate the meaning. Quite often, words that are meant to be funny in one language are rude in the other language or even mean something completely different. This can lead to terrible misunderstandings.

Disastrous misunderstandings happen all the time because people can't understand one another. The Apostle Paul also talks about a tragic misunderstanding in his first letter to the Corinthians. Here it's about the spiritual person and the natural person. There is an insurmountable barrier between these two so that the natural person and the spiritual person can't understand each other at all, and there is no Google Translator that can overcome this barrier. The Apostle Paul talks about this tragic misunderstanding and wants to cry out to heaven about it. He summarizes: The natural person hears nothing about the Spirit of God – he has no antenna for it and no translator. He is completely clueless about spiritual truths. Yet Paul tries to overcome this barrier with great compassion. In his letters, we get an inkling of the compassion with which he tries to reveal and explain spiritual truths to people. And translation work still hasn't stopped even after two thousand years. We don't want to accept that people can't understand the message of the Gospel. We don't want to accept that people come to church and say, perplexed, something like: "I understand every word you're saying... but can you explain it all to me again... I have no idea what you believe in!" And yet we are quite astonished that even today, people come from far away and their hearts are opened to believe the Gospel. That is truly a Pentecost miracle! It is a miracle in which the Holy Spirit Himself becomes active and reveals spiritual truths to people, which must remain hidden to the normal person. This very thing happened on the first Pentecost. The people were amazed in all of Jerusalem and said: "Everyone could understand the Gospel in their own language." They were amazed at this and praised God. This linguistic miracle at Pentecost must continually happen. That's what the first Pentecost was about and what it is about today in 2023! This is also what mission is about – it's about bringing God's Word to the people. It's about opening the eyes of those who think all this is foolishness so that they can understand. This doesn't always happen so spectacularly like at the first Pentecost celebration. It usually takes a lot of time and patience and effort and also many tears. Yet we should never tire of speaking the Gospel and working to ensure that we as a church find a language that our fellow human beings can understand. Sharing the Gospel with people who live here in Germany and hardly have a relation to the church, it takes on a different shape. But it also takes on another form when we live with migrants in Germany who arrive here from countries all over the world and hear, perhaps for the first time, the Gospel through a translator. In the process of understanding, we have only one thing in common with the miracle of Pentecost in the Book of Acts – there is no confusion of languages. Back then, and still today, God doesn't expect people to move out of their natural condition into a kind of super-dimensional world. No, they could then and still can understand everything with the mind God has given them. "They're speaking our language!" the amazed observers said at the first Pentecost service. We therefore conclude: Whoever wants to become a Christian doesn't need to give up his own language and culture. He also doesn't have to abandon his intellect. When the Holy Spirit talks with

us, then it's exactly as we are. He wants to reach into our language and into our God-given culture. And this is also a wonderful gift of the Holy Spirit – that we can admire Christians from all countries in their respective peculiarities. People from Iran perform for us some of the most wonderful songs from their own culture. Some songs they composed themselves through the power of the Holy Spirit. And even the old German hymns are well received by some of the Persian Christians and they can see and appreciate the beauty of the other culture. God works with us just as we are. When a person comes to us and wants to be baptized, he doesn't suddenly receive a halo or some other hair color, he also doesn't speak differently, nor does he dress differently. He remains the same. Yet everything becomes different because the Holy Spirit is inside him. God's Spirit comes to us, but it is still very different from us and needs to be translated so that we know what is happening. **"[We have] the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God,"** writes the Apostle Paul. Without the Holy Spirit, it is like we are in a foreign land or even on another planet. We constantly see things happening and can't understand at all what it all means. Paul says that to the human mind, all this is foolishness. And Paul goes on to say: **"we have the Spirit of God and understand everything through Him."** So we notice that in understanding the Holy Spirit, we aren't without resources. We don't have Google Translator but we have something much better, we have the mind of Christ – He is the translator within us. Human understanding says that Christ on the cross is the epitome of powerlessness. Everyone despises Him and expects nothing from Him who does not even have the strength to help Himself. And yet, in that very place, the power of God became most clearly visible. This power can fight against our worst enemies: sin, death, and the Devil... it was and is the power that saved the world. The human understanding hears nothing of it. In the normal human mind, one person died horribly among many others. The miracle of the Holy Spirit is that Christ works powerfully in our life. "For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God." (Romans 8:14) We can't prove this experience of the Spirit of God and yet the Spirit is there, moving us again and again, especially when our human spirit falters. This can happen when we realize that we have reached our limits. This can happen when we realize that our body, our time, our human strength has limits. We then have the feeling that the foundations of our existence have begun to shake – we suddenly become sick and don't know how to go on. We also don't know how to go on in light of the many sufferings that happen in our world. These limits that we continually come up against show us that we are powerless. He who has been there since the beginning of the world, wants to translate what suffering means for us and for our world. He wants to translate that even in old age as well as in sickness and after so many other sufferings in addition to when our life takes a turn that we can't understand, His infinite love still embraces you and holds you. What would we be without this translator? We experience this limit in our congregational work too. Even when we invest time and money into all possible projects and mission strategies... When it comes to proclaiming the Gospel to people, we sense limitations. Our power simply won't get us anywhere. **"It must be spiritually discerned,"** the Apostle Paul tells us. We need the translation of the Holy Spirit. Then we notice that the Holy Spirit is also powerfully active in other people. The wonderful thing is that the Holy Spirit doesn't use us like robots. Instead, He uses us exactly as we are and since He made us, He wants to use us as He made us – with our intellect, our special talents. The Holy Spirit can bring an amazing message to all people.

Perhaps the children in Sunday School understood this better than the adults. When asked what the Holy Spirit empowers us to do, they say: The Holy Spirit helps me hug my mommy. The Holy Spirit helps me visit my grandma in the hospital. The Holy Spirit helps me give some food to the beggar. The Holy Spirit helps me forgive my brother who just tattled. The children understand. The Holy Spirit... is not human... but He does nothing without man. Amen.