June 9, 2019 (Pentecost Sunday)
TEXT: 2 Peter 3:14–18
TITLE: Lost & Found in Translation
By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

Imagine traveling by plane to a foreign country. You arrive and notice that things look different and the language is different. So you orient yourself by looking for things that are similar. The stop sign is still a red octagon even if the word on it says "Halt" or "Arret." If you're in England, the cars look like regular cars, although the drivers are in the passenger seat and they're driving in the wrong lanes. There's no Giant Eagle or Rita's ice cream in sight, but you see a place with vegetables out front that is likely a grocery store, and over there is a gelato stand that quickly chases all memories of Rita's out of your head.

Going to a different country means you have to do a lot of translating—not just of words, but translating what you see and experience into categories that make sense based on your life here at home. One author said "*translation is not a matter of words only, but of making intelligible an entire culture"* (Anthony Burgess). It is like holding in your hand a batch of photographs of all the things you're used to and then comparing them to what you see in this foreign land so you can understand what's going on around you. Here's what a restaurant or bank looks like in Pittsburgh; here's what I see now that I'm in Prague or Peru. Our inclination is always to start with what we know and then see how other people and places compare to what we consider to be "normal."

When I was a junior in college, I had the opportunity to study in Austria for a year. Being overseas meant that for the first time in my life I understood myself to be an American—as a person in a category different from the Austrians, Spaniards and Italians I would meet. To my European friends, I represented an entire country—everything from California to New York City and I was responsible for every policy that originated in Washington, D.C. I'd never truly had to be an American before, because almost everyone I'd known was also an American. That was what was "normal." But then I learned that my normal is not everyone's normal and that American culture is different from cultures in other lands.

Let's go deeper. Translation work is not just limited to languages we speak or cultures we visit. When I returned to college after my time in Austria, it was the early 80s and the AIDS crisis was unfolding. Suddenly people I knew were dying of some strange disease that no one talked about. I had grown up in a time when derogatory jokes about gays and lesbians were acceptable banter and part of comedians' television routines. I was heterosexual, so that was the lens through which I saw the world. When I met people who were homosexual, it was like seeing a different culture – a variation of life that by my own definition was outside what was normal. But when friends were dying and there was so much anger and secrecy and shame directed at people I cared about, I saw that my definition of normal was inflicting pain on others, literally killing them. The culture that needed to be transformed, translated, expanded, was not theirs but mine.
Here are examples of several cultural areas that need faithful translation.

1) America gives us a historical vocabulary and frame of reference, but it is not the defining culture for the entire world. 2) Our sexual identity shapes our intimate relationships, but cannot be presumed to be normative for all people and all relationships. 3) I grew up in a small farming community, yet too often city dwellers speak about rural communities with words of disdain and jokes about those "hillbillies." 4) At the Carnegie Museum of Art now, there's a great exhibit called "Access+Ability." It challenges our bias that normal life means you don't have neuropathy or numbness in your feet, your ears are fully able to hear, and your hands can write without a tremor. The exhibit shows the creative ways these physical limitations are overcome so people can fully engage in so-called "normal" activities.

5) One of the hardest categories to translate is that of race. In Daniel Hill's book White Awake, he describes attending a friend's wedding, a friend who happened to be from India. When Daniel remarked that he wished he had a culture as rich and beautiful as the Indian traditions he experienced at this wedding, his friend stopped him and said, "*Daniel, you may be white but don't let that lull you into thinking you have no culture. White culture is very real. In fact, when white culture comes in contact with other cultures, it almost always wins. So you need to learn about your culture.*" That's a powerful and troubling insight: When white culture comes in contact with other cultures, it almost always wins. If that is a true statement, it is not because white culture is by definition better than other cultures, but that white culture has used tools of power, prejudice and privilege to subjugate other cultures. If the truth of that premise troubles us, then it is time to do some translation work. 1) A stop sign with a different word on its red octagon can still be an effective stop sign—so our version need not be considered the best version. Likewise, many faithful Christians speak languages other than English. There is much we can learn from them. 2) We have come to understand, thankfully, that "love is love is love is love is love." Especially now, during Pride Month, heterosexism must no longer be a weapon used to exclude and wound others who love. 3) The big problems facing the world—nuclear weapons, climate change, disease control—all require multinational solutions. Now is not the time for American bombast, presidential temper tantrums, and isolationist policies. And 4) hopefully, by God's grace, we can step away from a "white culture" that dominates and denigrates, so we can live into the full truth of a faith where in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave nor free, whites or persons of color.

Earlier we heard the story of Pentecost, how men and women disciples of Jesus were gathered in one place when the Holy Spirit came upon them. It came like a rushing wind. It stirred them up like being touched with fire. And it sent them out into the streets of Jerusalem—out from their locked room of a mono-linguistic gathering with only one approach to faith into a crowd of different languages, different people, diverse expressions of God's creative love. The people they encountered were astonished because they were hearing about Jesus in their own languages—in words and images shaped by their experiences, their norms, their metaphors. This God revealed in the risen Christ wasn't treating them as foreigners—the ones needing to translate their life into the categories of this new faith. Rather on that day God was translated into their world, into their culture and their language. That was the miracle of Pentecost! The

gospel only becomes the gospel once it is translated into multiple languages! That was true then and is true now.

For about a decade now, we've included some Spanish in our worship liturgy. We started doing this when some Spanish speaking friends started attending our church. It was basically an act of hospitality—a simple way to say "You're welcome here." Could we have used French, German or Korean? Sure, but at that moment, the new guests spoke Spanish. So why do we keep including Spanish in our worship service? We still do it for Maria Elena and others who don't speak English well and for any friends from Casa San José who might find their way to us. But mostly we do it for us—to remind us that Jesus didn't speak English. To remind us that white culture must not always dominate when it confronts other cultures. To remind us that it can be wonderful to create a space for other languages in our faith vocabulary, so that when we hear Jesus say "I am the bread of life," we remember that for many Asian cultures, bread is not a common daily food; rather rice is—so perhaps our ears need to be open to hearing Jesus say "I am the rice of life, the nourishment that sustains all life."

Translations are not easy. They require stepping back from a position of privilege and allowing other words to define what it means to be human—or, in our case, what it means to be a person of faith. This is especially true when we read scripture in <u>our</u> language and then are tempted to impose a narrow meaning on the words in the bible. The author of 2 Peter warns us that even some of the writings of the apostle Paul are hard to understand. Back in that day, some false teachers were distorting Paul's meanings to fit their own views about God. Similar false interpretations, especially about homosexuality or gender roles, still happen today. That is why it is important always to read Paul's individual words in light of all the letters that came from Paul. And if there is still confusion or uncertainty, compare Paul's words to the words of the gospels and the rest of the bible. The deep truth of God's word about sexual identity and gender, about economics and race and justice can be lost in translation when it is confined to one or two little verses arising from a limited cultural setting. The gospel was never meant to stay locked in a room in ancient Jerusalem. Pentecost is the reminder that God's truth is found in translation—in encounters with others of faith, the children of God the world over.

One last time: The gospel of Christ is lost in translation when we restrict it to what we consider to be normative simply because that is what we're comfortable with. The wind of Pentecost blows us out of this mindset, out of this claustrophobic, fearful faith so that new life in Christ can be found in new translations—out there in God's diverse and wonderful world. Jesus said, "Those who lose their life for my sake will truly find it" (Matthew 10:39) Thankfully Pentecost reminds us how true that statement is. AMEN.