

PENTECOST 11B – August 5, 2018
What A Difference A Comma Makes!
(Ephesians 4:1-16)

I suppose it wasn't until I was in catechism that I first realized that the Bible had to be translated into English. In other words, that it didn't fall down from the sky to us ready-made in our own language.

The reality, of course, is that the Bible wasn't written in English at all. Instead, as you probably know, the Old Testament was written in Hebrew, and the New Testament in Greek.

However, at some point early in church history, the Hebrew and Greek of the Bible were then translated into Latin. Which, for centuries thereafter, only the most highly educated could read and understand. Even in the church, in fact. Simple parish priests often *themselves* couldn't read or write in Latin or, if at all, very little. As a result, they mostly memorized the words of the Mass.

That's why it was such a big deal when Martin Luther, hiding out in the Wartburg Castle, took the initiative to translate the Bible into German. Because for the first time common, every day people – not just the educated elite – had access to the scriptures; provided they were literate in their own language, of course. (In fact, finally having the Bible in their own language actually *promoted* literacy, in all likelihood.)

And why it was the same big deal when John Wycliffe translated it into English, and countless others subsequently translated it into their own native tongues as well; a process which still continues to this very day...

But it's not as easy as it sounds; translating, that is. For instance, when missionaries in the northern part of Alaska, where the Eskimos live, were trying to translate the Bible into their indigenous language, these missionaries encountered a common difficulty in the translation process. You see, whenever you attempt to translate something into another language, including the Bible, one of the biggest challenges you face is the reality that not all cultures and languages necessarily have words for all the same things; even rather common or ordinary things.

In this particular case, the missionaries were initially stumped when they discovered that there was no word in the Eskimo language for "joy." So the translators struggled and struggled... and got nowhere fast. Imagine their dilemma. How do you translate Paul's famous declaration in Philippians 4:4, for example: "Rejoice in the Lord always, again I will say, rejoice," when the language you're working with doesn't even have a *word* for "joy" or "rejoice"!

Then they noticed, however, that the happiest, the most joyful moments in those Eskimo villages seemed to be in the evening when the people fed their sled dogs. They'd go out, and the dogs would yelp and wag their tails and get all excited. And so, out of that experience and that observation, the missionaries finally found the word for joy that they were searching for all that time. They decided to use a word which literally means "wagging their tails."

Which makes the rendering of Philippians 4:4 truly interesting, as a result, don't you think? "Wag your tail, again I say wag your tail."

Sometimes, however, mistakes are made. The Bible Society of South Africa reports that in an early draft of the Bible into Southern Sotho (one

of many South African dialects), the typesetter typed “j-w-a-l-a” (which means “beer”) instead of “j-w-a-l-o” (which is translated as “so”). As a result, then, Genesis 1:9 became: “And God said: ‘Let the water under the sky be gathered into one place... and it was *beer*.’”

Then again, the Gospel of John says that God’s son turned water into *wine*. So why couldn’t God turn the oceans into beer? Just saying...

But there are other challenges and difficulties as well. For example, the covenant name for the God of Israel in the Old Testament is “Yahweh” sometimes pronounced “Yahveh.” When Moses insisted on a name for God, you may recall, God responded by saying “I am who I am” – or Yahweh.

This name was so sacred, however, that by the second century B.C. the Jews refused to use or even speak it. So, as a result, whenever an ancient Jewish scholar came across the name “Yahweh” he would substitute the word “Adonai” instead, which means “Lord.”

But here’s the thing. The Hebrew language at that time had no vowels. The system of, what are called, vowel points had not yet been invented, you see. Therefore, “Yahweh” was simply written Y-H-W-H. And the assumption has always been that these ancient Hebrews simply *knew* what the missing vowels *were*, and therefore didn’t have to actually write them down.

However, in an attempt to be helpful, later scholars added to those four consonants YHWH – and rather artificially, I must add – the vowels from the word “Adonai,” making it “Yahovah” or “Jehovah”; which is what we find in the King James Version of the Bible, for instance.

Modern scholars, though, believe that a more accurate pronunciation is, again, “Yahweh.”

Now, turning to the *New Testament*, the difficulty, however, is not a lack of vowels, as in the Old Testament, but instead the lack of punctuation, believe it or not. In other words, punctuation had to be *added* when translating the ancient Greek manuscripts of the New Testament because *that’s what was missing*. And this, too, is not as easy as it would first seem, either.

For instance, let’s just consider how the use, misuse, or even *lack* of use of something as simple as a “comma” can make a huge difference in the meaning of a sentence. To help you understand what I mean here, and to actually *visualize* what I’m talking about, I’ve included that blue insert in your bulletin this morning.

In the first example, we have “Most of the time – COMMA – travelers worry about their luggage. Makes perfect sense. But notice what happens when you *omit* that simple, little comma. It becomes, “Most of the time travelers worry about their luggage.” (I guess if *I* were traveling from a different dimension I might be concerned about my luggage as well!)

In the second example, the lack of a comma makes it sound like you’re teaching someone how to *cut and paste kids*, instead of encouraging kids that *they’re* the ones who are going to learn how to cut and paste.

In example number three, the meaning of “Let’s eat, grandpa” is much different than “Let’s eat grandpa,” isn’t it?

And how about the job application that was presumably missing a comma between the words “cooking” and “dogs,” which made it seem like the prospective employee liked “cooking dogs,” as opposed to “cooking” AND “dogs,” among other things.

Turning the insert page over, the Oxford comma is apparently optional. But when it’s NOT used it can result in a rather odd, even humorous, statement. In other words, leaving out a comma between the names Kelly Minogue and Kermit the Frog is entirely permissible, apparently. But *without* a comma in between them, it can make it sound as though your parents are actually *named* Kelly Minogue and Kermit the Frog. Which I doubt was the intent here.

Finally, I also had to include the last example, a classic one, which includes the use of a “colon” as well as commas. In this famous example, a college professor once wrote some words on the chalkboard, and then asked the students to add the proper punctuation. Notice the results!

All the male students wrote: “A woman, without her man, is nothing.”
Rather chauvinistic, wouldn’t you say?

But notice how the *female* students responded: “A woman: without her, man is nothing.” What a huge difference! Right?

Well, I’m sure by now that you’re wondering where I’m going with all this. Again, my point is that a comma, a simple little comma, can make a huge difference in the *meaning* of a sentence.

Remember, also, what I told you about translating the New Testament. Because the ancient manuscripts did not include punctuation, it had to be added *later*. But, as we just saw, in that example of male and female college students, exactly *where* you place that punctuation can have a profound impact on what actually is being communicated.

You with me? Which leads us to verses 11 and 12 of our second reading this morning from Ephesians chapter 4...

In verse 11, we read: “The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers... In other words, God apparently intended that there be individuals called to certain leadership positions within the church. So far so good. No problem here.

But then in verse 12, we read exactly *what* these church leaders are called to do. And this is where it gets really interesting. Because in the much beloved and influential King James Version of the Bible – many people still to this day say that it’s their favorite translation – there is actually an *extra comma* that’s been added. And that use of an extra comma has profoundly affected how we view the role of pastors and other leaders in the church for over 400 years now.

Verse 12 in the King James Bible reads as follows: “to equip the saints” – *COMMA* – “for the work of ministry” – *COMMA* – “for building up the body of Christ...”

In other words, there are three separate tasks delineated here:

1. Equipping the saints
2. The work of ministry, and

3. Building up the body of Christ.

Did you catch it? Snuggled in there, right between equipping the saints and building up the body of Christ, is the expectation – at least in the King James Version – that apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers are called to do the work of ministry. Apparently all by themselves, in fact.

But notice how all the more recent translations of the Bible – in part based on ancient manuscripts that were not available when the King James Version was produced in the 17th century – including the reading in your bulletin this morning – notice how all the more recent versions translate verse 12: “to equip the saints for the work of ministry” – *comma* – “for building up the body of Christ.:

Do you see it? Instead of *three* tasks or responsibilities assigned to pastors and the other leaders in the church, there are now only *two*:

1. To equip the saints for the work of ministry, and
2. For building up the body of Christ.

Two, not three. And, most importantly, notice here that the work of ministry is not something that only *pastors* do. Instead, the work of ministry is something we *all* share as baptized Christians. For each and every one of us, our *baptism* is our call to participate in the work of ministry.

It's not something that only those who are ordained can or should do. It's something that all the baptized are called to *share in!*

Or to put it another way, the role of the pastor is not to do the work of ministry singlehandedly, as we've been inclined to think about it for the past few hundred years – ever since the publication of the King James Bible. Rather, the primary responsibility of the pastor is to equip *others* to use their own gifts for ministry as well.

Pastors, as baptized Christians themselves, are certainly called to do the work of ministry. But they're not called to do it alone! That's my point here. We are all in this together.

In other words, the church is not the place where Christians come to *receive* ministry. It's the place where all the baptized come to be *equipped* for ministry. And then sent out into the world to use their unique gifts and talents in service to God, and in service to others. Which, in fact, is really the same thing, right? As Jesus once famously pointed out...

Or as I expressed it in last week's sermon, we are called to be *participants*, not simply recipients.

Next week, I believe, we are going to have something called "enlistment" Sunday. As members of Hope, we are going to have an opportunity to think and pray about, and then commit to a certain area of ministry.

It's actually going to be more of a "draft" Sunday, instead of an "enlistment" Sunday the more I think about it, however. The word enlistment implies a choice, doesn't it? We currently have an all-volunteer military, don't we? And for far too long that's also how we've looked at ministry as well. As a choice.

But back in the old days, however, you were *drafted* into the service. You didn't *have* a choice, did you? Uncle Same called and you went.

Well, consider this. As Christians, again each and every one of us, we are *called* into ministry by and through our baptism. We're in a way *drafted*.

We always have a choice, of course, in *how* we serve. But not *if* we serve.

As our second reading this morning put it: "I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the *calling* to which you have been *called*... But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift."

In other words, we've all been *gifted*; differently to be sure. But we've all been gifted. Then we are *called* through our baptism. And, finally, in the church we are *equipped* to serve in Christ's name *using* those gifts.

Someone once made a wall hanging for me with the following words on it: "What you are is God's gift to *you*... What you become is your gift to *God*."

And that, my fellow Christians, is what using our God-given gifts for the work of ministry is all about.

Amen.

WHAT A DIFFERENCE A COMMA MAKES!

“Most of the time, travelers worry about their luggage.”

vs.

“Most of the time travelers worry about their luggage.”

(Just exactly who’s worried about their luggage?

Travelers or *time travelers*?)

“We’re going to learn to cut and paste kids!”

vs.

“We’re going to learn to cut and paste, kids!”

(Are we learning how to *cut and paste kids*?

**Or simply encouraging kids that
they’re going to learn how to cut and paste?)**

“Let’s eat, grandpa.” vs. “Let’s eat grandpa.”

(Punctuation can potentially save lives.

Especially those of grandfathers!)

From an actual job application:

“Interests include: cooking dogs, shopping, dancing, reading,
watching movies...”

What they undoubtedly meant was:

“Interests include: **cooking, dogs, shopping...**”

*(I’m guessing potential employers would not be too interested in
hiring individuals whose interests included “cooking dogs.”*

Unless, of course, it was a reference to grilling hot dogs!)

The Oxford comma is an optional comma before the word 'and' at the end of a list. Some feel that its use is unnecessary. Omitting the Oxford comma, however, can sometimes result in odd misunderstandings. Such as:

"I love my parents, Kylie Minogue and Kermit the Frog"

What are you actually saying here?

**That you love your parents, Kylie Minogue,
and also Kermit the Frog?**

or

**That you love your parents, and your parents are named
Kylie Minogue and Kermit the Frog?**

Finally, an English professor once wrote on the chalkboard the following words: 'A woman without her man is nothing' and then asked his students to punctuate it correctly.

All the male students wrote:

'A woman, without her man, is nothing.'

However, all the female students in the class wrote:

'A woman: without her, man is nothing.'

COMMAS MAKE A HUGE DIFFERENCE!

