

Translating the Gospel

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Jesus went through one town and village after another, teaching as he made his way to Jerusalem. Someone asked him, "Lord, will only a few be saved?" He said to them, "Strive to enter through the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able. When once the owner of the house has got up and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and to knock at the door, saying, 'Lord, open to us,' then in reply he will say to you, 'I do not know where you come from.' Then you will begin to say, 'We ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets.' But he will say, 'I do not know where you come from; go away from me, all you evildoers!' There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, and you yourselves thrown out. Then people will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God. Indeed, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last." Luke 13:22-30

A man named Herbert Howe taught in the classics department at the University of Wisconsin-Madison for 25 years. He chaired the department during a time of exciting growth in the 1950s and 60s. He co-authored a book in 1959, *Classics in Translation*, that was still in print when he died, 51 years later, in 2010, and it was still the number one all-time top-selling title from the University of Wisconsin Press ~ not the same as a New York Times bestseller, but still impressive.

Herbert Howe is not to be confused with the great Anglican musician Herbert Howells, But Herb Howe was also Anglican, a lifelong Episcopalian and member of St. Andrew's Church, in Madison, where I was rector for nine years. Herb was diligent in his attendance and always sat in the front row, directly below the pulpit. The modesty screen in front of the front pew had a flat top, like the one here at Ascension, where Herb would lay out his well-worn Scripture texts in the original Hebrew and Greek, sometimes with assorted other reference works.

As a preacher, I always knew Herb would be there in his front pew, so I tried to be particularly careful whenever I made reference to the Greek text.

If Herb was here in the front pew today, following along in the Greek text as the Gospel was read, his eyebrows may have raised at the word *sOzomenoi* (σωζόμενοι): "Someone asked [Jesus], 'Lord, will only a few be *saved*?'” In our English translation, *saved* is a verb, but in the Greek it's a noun, and this is the only instance of this Greek word in the New Testament. The text could therefore be translated as "Lord, will there only be a few *saved-ones*."

Interesting as *sOzomenoi* may be to a scholar, neither the meaning of the question in today's gospel nor the theological implications are significantly changed if the word is rendered as a verb or a noun. The cosmology of the New Testament as a whole arguably suggests that some humans are or will become right with God and will be *saved* ... and others not.

More provoking to our understanding of the text may be how Jesus answers the question: *Strive to enter through the narrow door*. Or so we heard in our English translation. But as Herb Howe would have seen, the Greek word here, *agonizesthe* (ἀγωνίζεσθε), has two distinctive features. First, the root of the Greek word is *agon*, from which we get our English words *agony* and *agonize*. Jesus is not merely saying to put a little effort into your salvation. He urging us to recognize that religion is not a hobby. *Put your whole heart and mind and soul and strength into it. If you are experiencing some genuine agony, you may be on the right track.*

In addition, the Greek verb tense here commends *continuous* effort. *Always be striving* would be closer to the original and may influence how we understand what Jesus is commending. And the

neighboring word for *enter* also suggests continuing action and could more accurately translated as *to be entering*. So, therefore: *Always be striving to be entering the narrow door*.

You may be wondering: Is this just a little excursion into arcane language study? Or is there something for us here and now? To always be striving to be entering the narrow door invites us to look for salvation in the present moment and in the ever-shifting circumstances and relationships and opportunities and challenges of our lives. Where is the presence and call of God *now*, in this moment? How can I more faithfully move toward it *now*?

Your narrow door, or mine, may be a salvation that comes by finally cleaning up some mess that has only been worsening due to our neglect.

Or reckoning with some aspect of our financial condition and better understanding our money and God's claim on it.

Or finding one small way to get involved, taking a first step, in a matter of public social concern in our neighborhood, our city or our world.

Maybe we need to admit how we are ageing and recognize the need to reprioritize our energies and commitments.

Maybe our narrow door is a long-familiar door ~ carrying on in some work of love even if we thought or hoped that we'd be done with it by now. .

Always be striving to be entering by the narrow door.

Herb Howe comes to my mind this morning in part because of questions of translation, but also because he himself seemed *always to be striving to be entering*. When I met Herb in 1998 he'd already been retired for almost two decades, but he was still so full of life and curiosity and even ambition. He soon told me that he had a life goal to swim around the world ~ not literally, but he'd been calculating his laps at one of the university's Olympic-sized pools. Two years later, in 2000, around Thanksgiving, he reached his goal. There was some lovely coverage by the local press. And then, the next morning, with no press there, Herb went back to the pool, and the next morning, and the next morning.

Swimming around the world may not seem like an inherently spiritual work, but Herb's feat does seem illustrative of what it means to *keep on striving*. I wonder in what realms of life, in what commitments, you and I show such fidelity and perseverance. What is the God-given door of salvation that remains open before you or me? *Always be striving to be entering*.

One Sunday at St. Andrew's, Madison, when I had done my best to illuminate some Greek word in the text, Herb waited in line to talk to me at the door of the church at the end of the liturgy. He steadied himself on his cane, looked up at me and said, "*Words are awfully imperfect tools for what we are trying to do with them ...*" And then after a perfectly timed pause he said, "*But I think they're the tools we have...*"

I realized in that moment that, where the Scriptures were concerned, Herb was a lot more than a scholar. He relished the intellectual opportunities presented by the text, but he also recognized that the most important work of translation takes place in the human heart and in our commitments and use of our gifts and relationships—what we make of the mystery we call God, love, hate, justice, hope and salvation. In this regard, we don't have to have gone to Harvard, as Herb did, to deeply explore the meaning of the text. We are all, in fact, called to be translators of the Gospel and to do our best with what God has given us to render a life that is faithful and to continue to strive to do so.

How is your translation coming along?