

Babel No More

Genesis 11:1-9; Acts 2:1-21

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First Presbyterian
Church of Portland, Indiana on Pentecost Sunday, May 15, 2016]

I

Once upon a time,
 in the dim and distant past,
 a little Jewish child asked,
 "Mommy, Daddy, why do people from different countries talk funny?"

The answer came in the form of a story from the even dimmer and more distant
 past—
 the story of the Tower of Babel from Genesis 11.

Human beings, in their pride, decided they would make a name for themselves and
 build a city and a tower that would serve as a gateway to heaven.

God came down to see what was going on, and decided she could not allow such
 prideful presumption on the part of her human creatures.

So God caused the speech of the workers to be confused.

And the result was that they fell to bickering amongst themselves,
 they scattered over all the face of the earth,
 and they never did finish the tower.

And that is why, to this day, Germans do not understand French,
 Italians do not understand Chinese,
 Greeks do not understand Norwegian,
 and nobody understands teenagers.

II

To this day, we have problems communicating with one another.

In international relations, translations often fail to convey proper meanings.

Multinational corporations learn this the hard way.

An advertising executive who was responsible for the Pepsi Cola account came up with a great slogan—perhaps you recall it:

"Come alive. You're in the Pepsi generation."

But when Pepsi tried to market their beverages in China using the same slogan, in Chinese the meaning came out as,

"Pepsi brings your ancestors back from the dead."

Communication is difficult, even when people speak the same language.

Back in the day before email and online reservations, there was an older lady who was planning a vacation and wrote a letter to a particular campground to inquire about its facilities. She could not bring herself to write the word "toilet" so she settled on the letters "BC", which to her meant "bathroom commode."

The manager of the campground was stumped by the letter and could not figure out what she meant by the letters "BC." He showed the letter to some of the other campers, who couldn't make sense of it either. Finally one person suggested she must be referring to the Baptist Church. The campground manager agreed and wrote back as follows:

"Dear Madam: Thank you for your inquiry. I take pleasure in informing you that a BC is located two miles north of our campground, and seats about 250 people. My wife and I go there quite regularly, but as we grow older, it seems to be more of an effort, particularly during cold spells. If you visit our campground, perhaps we can go with you the first time, sit with you, and introduce you to the other folks. Ours is a friendly community. Sincerely yours."

The same word can mean different things to different people.

One person talks about "justice" and means that everyone should have fair and equal opportunity for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness—

no one should expect a free ride at the expense of society...
 each one should pull his or her own weight—that is just.

But another person thinks justice means that life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness should be understood to guarantee a home and a job and medical care for all,
 regardless of any other consideration,
 and that we all should bear the burden of making sure no one falls through the cracks.

Same word, “justice,” but two vastly different understandings of what it means.

Unfortunately, the problem is just as bad in the church.

There are communication gaps all over the place—
 gaps between denominations,
 gaps between the pulpit and the pew,
 gaps between young and old,
 rich and poor,
 liberal and conservative.

If anyone wonders why, in almost 2000 years, the Christian church has not won the world for Jesus Christ, the answer may be that we have not communicated the Good News of the Gospel with much effectiveness at all.

Think about it: for centuries, the language of the church was one which no one except scholars and clergy read or spoke: Latin.

That was a problem that the Reformation attempted to correct.

In our Presbyterian *Book of Confessions* is a declaration from Switzerland over 400 years ago, the Second Helvetic Confession, part of which reads:

“Let all strange tongues keep silence in gatherings of worship, and let all things be set forth in a common language which is understood by the people gathered in that place.”

If only it were so simple.

As some wag once observed, England and America are two countries separated by a common language.

This is also often true of the Christian church.

For example, we say that the Bible is the Word of God—
most Christians would agree on that.

But one Christian hears that and pictures God dictating every word that appears on the printed page without error of any kind...

while another Christian understands it to mean that God mysteriously inspired the writers of scripture to communicate God's truth to us through fallible human words.

Same phrase—the Word of God—but two vastly different meanings.

The Tower of Babel continues to impede the witness of the Gospel.

III

The good news is that there came a day when the divisions of Babel were no more.

Today we celebrate Pentecost,
the coming of the Holy Spirit by fire,
wind,
and word.

Pentecost—from the Greek *pentekostos*, meaning “fiftieth”—
was a Jewish festival that celebrated two things:
the spring harvest and the revelation of the law on Mt. Sinai,
fifty days after the parting of the Red Sea.

In Acts 2, Luke tells how fifty days after Jesus' resurrection, the Holy Spirit descended upon 120 of his followers who were gathered in Jerusalem.

The Holy Spirit empowered the disciples to testify to God's great deeds,

emboldened Peter to preach the first Christian sermon to a great crowd of Jewish skeptics,
and drew in 3000 converts in a single day.

For Christians, Pentecost marks the birthday of the church.

By any stretch of the imagination, it is a fabulous story filled with riveting details.

Tongues of fire...
rushing winds...
accusations of drunkenness...
mass baptisms....

It is easy to get lost in the spectacle.

But the one detail that stops me in my tracks every year is this one, verse 4:

“All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.”

As Christians we place great stock in language—in *words*.

Like our Jewish and Muslim brothers and sisters,
we are People of the Book.

We love the creation stories of Genesis in which God births the very cosmos into existence by speaking:

“And God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light.”

“In the beginning was the Word,” we read in John’s dazzling theological poem about the incarnate Christ.

On Sunday mornings we offer our worship to the Triune God in the languages of...
liturgy and scripture,
music and prayer.

Every Sunday we have a form of oration that only the church has—
 a sermon, made up of what?... words!
 (in my case, about 2500 of them in the printed manuscript).

In short, we believe in the power of words.

Words make worlds...and unmake them, too.

If this is true, then what does the miracle at Pentecost signify?

Have we really understood the significance of what the Spirit did—
 what the Spirit insisted on—
 at that inaugural moment of the Christian church?

IV

After all, there is nothing easy about substituting one language for another.

One of the great deficiencies of education in the United States is the failure of most of us to become fluent in another language.

A popular stereotype of Americans traveling abroad is the person who is at a loss when it comes to coping with any language other than English.

Children in other countries begin learning other languages as young as six years of age, and over twenty countries of Europe require students to learn two foreign languages.

But in America, there is no national requirement for students to learn a foreign language in school—
 it is up to each state and each individual school district.

Most American school children do not even begin studying a language until middle school or high school—
 long after our greatest capacity to learn languages has begun to diminish.

Languages are difficult and challenging,
 intricate and messy.

They carry the full weight of their respective cultures,
 histories,
 psychologies,
 and spiritualities.

To attempt to learn a language is to make oneself a learner,
 a servant,
 a supplicant.

To speak across barriers of race...
 ethnicity...
 gender...
 religion...
 culture...
 or politics...
 is to challenge stereotypes and to risk ridicule.

It is a brave and disorienting act.

And that is what the Holy Spirit required of Christ's frightened, disoriented
 disciples on the Day of Pentecost.

Essentially: *Stop huddling in what you deem to be a place of safety.*

Throw open the windows and the doors.

*Feel the wind of my Spirit pushing you out of a false sense of safety and
 security.*

*Pour yourselves out into the streets you've come to fear...
 and do not be afraid to speak the message I give you.*

Silence is no longer possible.

*The wind of God is blowing...
 the fire of God is burning...*

*the words of God are bubbling up...
and they must come out of your mouths.*

Babel no more like your ancestors who tried to build a city and a tower so
as to take the place of God.

The Pentecost story calls for both surrender and humility...**on both sides.**

Those who spoke had to brave languages far beyond their comfort zones.

They had to risk vulnerability in the face of diversity as well as indifference.

And they had to do so with no guarantee that their words would be welcomed.

They had to trust that no matter how awkward, inadequate, or ridiculous they felt,
the words bubbling up inside of them—

new words,

strange words,

frightening words—

were nevertheless *essential words*—

words precisely ordained for that time and that place.

V

Meanwhile, the crowds who listened to those words had to take risks as well.

They had to suspend disbelief,
drop their cherished defenses,
and opt for wonder instead of contempt.

They had to widen their circles and welcome strangers with foreign accents into
their midst.

Not all of them were able to manage it.

Some scoffed because they couldn't bear to have their neat and tidy categories of
belonging and exclusion explode in their faces.

Instead, like their ancestors at Babel,
 they scattered at the first sign of difference,
 or retreated into their well-worn narratives of denial:

*“Nothing new is happening here...
 This isn’t God...
 These are babbling idiots who have had too much to drink.”*

But even in that atmosphere of suspicion and cynicism,
 some people spoke
 and some listened,
 and into those astonishing interactions,
 God breathed the breath of new life.

Barriers of race, class, and culture fell away.

Hearts that previously were indifferent
 or, even worse, cynical,
 were filled with the Spirit’s warmth, light and love.

And Peter, who just fifty-three days earlier denied even knowing the Lord,
 now rose and preached with such authority and conviction,
 that 3000 souls were ready to march right into the waters of baptism.

VI

My friends, this is the miracle of Pentecost,
 but it goes so far beyond tongues of fire
 and the ability to speak in unknown languages.

Indeed, throughout the rest of Acts, the apostles engage in proclamation and mission that goes out to people of all nations,
 that accommodates different diets and different cultural practices,
 not demanding that converts come to them and adopt
 their beliefs,
 their practices,
 their lifestyles,
 but rather bringing the good news of Jesus to everyone—*right where they are!*

Language is certainly about being understood and understanding.

It's about learning and communication.

But it is also about so much more.

It's about seeing another person as a unique and precious child of God,
not as a communication obstacle to be overcome.

The call of the Gospel is to speak God's word of love in as many languages as possible,

in as many ways as possible,
with as much passion as there are stars in the sky.

The miracle of Pentecost is that the Holy Spirit comes and speaks to us in our *native* language—

the language of our dreams—
and emboldens us to dream new dreams and see new visions
of what God is calling us to be and do.

For something happens when we speak each other's languages.

We experience the limits of our own words and our own perspectives,
and we develop a "holy curiosity."

We discover that God's "great deeds" that Peter spoke of are far too nuanced for a single tongue or a single fluency.

This is why the Pentecost story is so compelling—
and why the church must retell it year after year.

We live in a world in which words have become toxic,
where the languages of our most cherished "isms" threaten to divide and
destroy us.

The troubles of our day are global, civilizational, and potentially catastrophic.

If we do not learn the art of speaking across the barriers and boundaries that separate us,

we will burn ourselves to ash just as surely as those neighborhoods of Ft. McMurray, Alberta, Canada were destroyed by wildfire.

For we Americans, especially in this election season,

when candidates across the political spectrum have descended into cynicism, nihilism, and childish name-calling,

the temptation to retreat into our individual political enclaves is especially strong.

Why bother to understand—

much less to speak—

the languages of those with whom we disagree?

Why not sneer, like some did on the Day of Pentecost?

Isn't sneering easier?

Isn't it more fun?

Perhaps...but it is no small thing that the Holy Spirit loosened the tongues of the disciples in order to break down barriers on the day the church was born.

From Day One, in the face of diversity and indifference,

God's people were called to linger,

to listen,

and to speak.

Because here's the thing:

No matter how passionately I might disagree with your opinions and beliefs, I cannot disagree with your experience.

Once I have learned to hear and speak your story in the words that matter most to you, then I have a stake in who you are and the potential of what your life can be.

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