

“Learning the Stranger’s Language”
Presbyterian Church in Sudbury
Genesis 11:1-9; Acts 2:1-21; John 14:25-27

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The building of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11 is the last story of what biblical scholars call the “pre-history” of the Hebrew Scriptures. Preceded by the accounts of Creation, the Garden of Eden, Cain and Abel, and Noah’s Ark, the Tower of Babel joins the others to set the scene Abraham and Sarah to be called by God in Genesis 12. These stories seek to answer ageless human questions. How did this world come to be? What is good and what is evil? Why is there sin? How is it that some people are settlers and some wanderers? Why do the good die young? And in this morning’s story, how did different languages emerge? These are not questions isolated to Judaism or Christianity, and there are parallel stories in other ancient Near Eastern religions, but the uniqueness of the answers in Scripture is the presence of a God desiring to be in relationship with humanity.

As we hear the story of the Tower of Babel, a play on our word “babble,” meaning confused speech, listen for the reasons the people give for building the tower.
[read Genesis 11:1-9]

People all in one place, with all one language, fearing being scattered and figuring out a way to avoid it. The tower of Babel begins to be built, and God decides not only to scatter, but to make it so the people speak different languages, thwarting the ability to understand the other.

Luke’s Pentecost account in Acts 2 is also a story of different languages being spoken, and just to be clear, we are not talking about speaking in tongues, but actual languages. In Acts 1, the number of believers is said to be 120 men and women, not bad for a church in its early days and weeks. As we read in our Call to Worship, the Spirit, without distinction of seniority or gender, alights upon all 120 of them, and enabled each one to speak in different languages.

Some have read Pentecost as undoing Babel, completing a circle from a single language, to different languages, and back to one. It would make a neat conclusion, but that is not what happened; again, the believers spoke in other languages. The singleness is not of language, but of understanding, though as we will now hear, there are skeptics among those who have come to see what the commotion of wind and speech was all about. The doubters conclude the spirit filling the believers is not Holy Spirit, but the spirit of new wine, or white lightning, as one translation puts it. [Cotton Patch version.]

Pentecost was one of three major feasts that brought people to Jerusalem. It was a thanksgiving festival, celebrating both the first fruits of the harvest, and the gift of the law of God, which defined the Hebrew people and their covenant with God. With our Christian Pentecost, we celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit, which defines us as a people following Jesus Christ. We hear our Pentecost story in Acts 2:5-21.

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ²And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

⁵Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. ⁷Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?" ⁸And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ⁹Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." ¹²All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" ¹³But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."

¹⁴But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. ¹⁵Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning.

Okay, I always feel I need to pause here. I think, "Really, Peter? You're saying because it is nine in the morning, accusations of drunkenness cannot be true?" That seems like a weak argument, but then Peter couples the Pentecost event with the prophecy of Joel, and the dreamers and visionaries emerge from God's spiritual gift. Once again, the spirit does not distinguish by class or race or gender. Peter continues.

¹⁶No [they are not drunk, for] this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: ¹⁷'In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. ¹⁸Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. ¹⁹And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. ²⁰The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day. ²¹Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

Almost twenty years ago, we were bouncing along in the back of a pickup truck on dirt roads in the rain forest of Gabon, Africa. We were visiting our son during his service in the Peace Corps. He and our daughter were up front with the driver. I cannot recall if the cargo on that trip was chickens or monkeys, but there were two men sharing the truck bed with us. We communicated by gestures and smiles until I recognized they were speaking French. Being more than a quarter century since my last French class, I was not close to fluent, but seeking to engage in their language, I said something. They looked surprised, but smiled, acknowledged, and we then struggled to see if we could understand my pieced together words and phrases. Soon they resumed their own conversation, but I noticed they had switched from speaking French to Mitchogo, their native language. I was closed out.

Language can be both a powerful tool of and formidable barrier to communication; the difference often depends on whether there is a common, shared language, or a translator to bridge the gap. Sometimes, people long for a common language, as had those who began to build the Tower of Babel. In this country, I sense we hold a bit of a prideful belief the rest of the world should speak ours – English.

In the Tower of Babel story, I can imagine God sitting around with the heavenly court, perhaps enjoying the hummingbirds migrating north for the spring. Then word comes that something is going on in the plain of Shinar. “Oh, my,” says God, “what are the creatures up to now?” Perhaps there is relief it is not another Cain and Abel murder case, but God puts the creation watching on hold and goes down to check things out. After seeing the tower being built, God could only imagine what could be next on the humans’ agenda, calls the heavenly court together and says, *“Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another’s speech.”* And then the people were scattered abroad over the face of all the earth.

On the surface, it seems the people’s pride in building and their ingenuity were a threat to God, and thus the scattering of people and language was a punishment for trying to be godlike. Yet, particularly since Pentecost did not restore a single language, might the Tower of Babel story be about God’s intention rather than God’s punishment? Could it be that the very human desire to speak a common language, to live together with those you know, to feel secure with people who share our values – could it be this very human desire was never God’s very divine intention? Could it be the story of the Tower of Babel is more than an explanation of different languages, but a revelation of God’s desire for human diversity? For me, this fits better with what happened at the first Pentecost, and the Babel-Pentecost connection seems particularly appropriate today.

Recently, I read about a group of people who organized themselves, and bought land in Texas to establish a town named Paulville. While neither involved nor supportive of the project, the town was named after Ron Paul, former congressman, and the intent was to establish a town only for those who shared libertarian principles. One might chuckle at such news, but over the past several years, writers have noticed how our culture is more and more attracted to what the Pew Research Center calls “ideological silos” of all points on the political or cultural spectrum. It seems people are more and more prone to isolate their friendships, their contacts, their news sources, their neighborhoods, and even their church relationships to those who share their values, their politics, their culture, their class, their language, their theology. This is sometimes justified as a need to find support and sustenance for our views, but it may also signal a Tower of Babel desire for sameness and security, and a fear of diversity. It might also signal a need for us to be alert to modern moments of Pentecost.

When the 120 believers all began speaking in different languages, there were not just the accusations of drunkenness, but also expressions of surprise. The crowd noted that the believers were Galileans – common folk, workers, middle class. In other words, those speaking have neither the academic credentials to speak a foreign language, nor the seminary training to dare speak of God’s mighty deeds. Yet, again, most had a response of surprise not rejection. I wonder if the believers were just as surprised.

At the end of the day of Pentecost, I can imagine the believers all came back together, and asked each other, “Can anyone explain what that was all about?” They had not woken up that morning and said, this would be a good day for us to learn a foreign language and tell God’s good news. It just happened.

Again, what was revealed at Pentecost was not a single language but a common understanding. The Spirit had enabled the believers to tell the Gospel good news so everyone could hear and understand. If there is a common language, it is the language of the Spirit. Spirit language is not learned from a textbook. It is received as a gift – if we dare accept the gift.

In John 14, a text we have heard for several weeks since Easter, Jesus speaks of the Spirit that will come, using the Greek word, *paraclete*, which has legal implications and is translated as advocate: “*I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.*”

The Spirit teaches and reminds of Jesus. It is not something we can learn on our own. The spirit becomes our tutor. We need tutoring to learn Spirit language, which is also the language of Christ.

I had to reread Will Willimon words when he wrote of Jesus begin the stranger whose language we are to learn. I first thought he meant learning the language of the stranger meant the language of other people, or simply reaching them on their terms, but it is clear he states, “Christians would be forced by baptism to learn the language of the stranger, Christ, making them strangers to the world...” [Willimon, William, *Journal for Preachers – Pentecost 2016*, p. 4]

While the thought seemed odd, for we love to sing “What a Friend We Have in Jesus,” I find something intriguing and creative, and both challenging and frightening in allowing myself to regard Jesus as a stranger for me. It means before I can assume Christ is a stranger others need to come to know, I need to first recognize how I keep Christ as a stranger to myself, thus inhibiting my ability to speak his language.

A part of it is certainly my own Tower of Babel desires for a common language, or homogenous values, and temptations and tendencies to seek the easy path of sameness, or in the words of West Side Story, to “stick to your own kind.” Recognizing such sameness is not God’s intention for the world, or what we find in Jesus’ teachings, I can invite in the tutor, the Spirit, to teach me the language of the stranger, Christ. In so doing, I am willing to also be a stranger in the world.

There is a bit of danger with this gift of the language of the stranger, the language tutored by the Holy Spirit. As Will Willimon also writes, “The Holy Spirit does not enable us to say more than Christ; the Spirit enables us to speak of Christ, leading us to say things we would not venture on our own.” [ibid., p. 5] Leading us to say things we would not venture on our own – that’s where things can become scary, because it means saying more than Jesus is love. It means we take on the language and ways of the world that conflict with the words and ways of Christ.

With humility, let us tutor with the Spirit to learn the language of the stranger, Christ. With trust, let us be willing to be blown by the Spirit where the Spirit wills – out of comfortable, safe settings; perhaps into the back of pickup trucks or into the Paulvilles of our land. Then with faith, let us have the courage to allow the Spirit to speak through us those words we would never venture on our own.