

Babel and Pentecost

First Congregational United Church of Christ

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Pentecost Sunday

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

I've heard the following riddle several times during the course of overseas trips. "What do you call someone who speaks three languages?" The answer: "trilingual." "What do you call someone who speaks two languages?" The answer: "bilingual." "And someone who speaks one language?" "An American." Ouch. But the answer to the riddle is probably more accurate than we'd like to admit. Many of us Americans just assume that the rest of the world should learn English, or that if we speak our English loudly and slowly enough somehow miraculously a non-English speaker will understand us.

Language is a pretty big deal.

Linguists tell us that we think in words, and that our words reflect our culture. So words, in a way, are shaped by the way we think but they also shape the way we think. When we study the Bible, one of the things we do is look at the meanings of certain crucial words in Hebrew or Greek. We do that because our understanding of the Bible is actually limited by the commonly understood meanings of English words that don't correspond exactly with the words they are meant to translate. So, for example, we translate the Hebrew word *shalom* as "peace;" but *shalom* means more than peace, or the absence of conflict: it means "peace," and "order," and "wholeness," and "acceptance of God's will, and "good-bye" and "hello" all

wrapped into one. It's both a concept and a blessing. Our own language limits us because we don't have one single word that includes all these meanings.

Our Old Testament and New Testament lessons for this Pentecost Sunday have a lot to do with language. Today's Genesis passage is one of the most ancient parts of the Bible; it's a story that most likely goes back to the time when the forerunners of the Hebrews were living in present-day Iraq. The tower of Babel is believed by many scholars to be a reference to ancient Mesopotamian *ziggurats*, impressive monuments devoted to the gods of Sumer. In Genesis we read that "the whole earth had one language and the same words." These people who shared that one language decided to build a tower whose top would be in the heavens. They wanted to make a name for themselves; they wanted to be famous. But God decided to frustrate these plans. "Look," God said, "they are one people and they all have one language. This is only the beginning of what they will do." So God confused their language so that they couldn't understand each other, and they scattered all over the face of the earth with their different languages. Since they couldn't understand each other, they also had to abandon their ambitious building project.

At first glance, this may strike us as a curious story. After all, wouldn't it be a good thing if we all spoke the same language? Isn't the unity of the human race something that we should long for? Think of all the mischief that linguistic diversity has caused. In places as diverse as the Netherlands and the Balkans, in southern Asia and in Africa, and even just to our north in Canada, language hasn't brought people together; it has been a source of social discord or even outright conflict. And in this country we have our own English-only movement that resists the use of Spanish. Can't we all just get along? Why can't they all just speak English? Why do people insist on being different?

I want to suggest that if we look deeper into this story, if we look for its eternal truths, we'll discover that the story of the Tower of Babel isn't so much about language itself as it is about the way we put language to use. This is a story about human presumption and about human arrogance. It's a story about sin.

The Tower, first of all, represented more than an ambitious architectural project; it was an effort literally to lift human beings to the level of God. The builders wanted their tower to reach into the heavens. They even gave it a name, "Babel," which means "The Gate of God." As people have tried to do throughout the ages, these Babel people wanted to replace God with their own presumed knowledge and expertise. They assumed, as many of us do, that the more human beings master the mysteries of God's creation, the greater the extent of human knowledge, the less we actually need God. In our presumption, we try to replace God with the things we ourselves have made, the things we ourselves have learned. There's an old-fashioned word for this kind of presumption: idolatry. Our own knowledge and technology become the contemporary version of the Golden Calf.

And look at the consequences of such idolatry and presumption. We've learned how to create weapons of mass destruction while we still haven't learned the first thing about building community. We can travel faster than ever before and we can communicate with people on the other side of the world instantaneously, but never in human history have we seemed so far apart, so alienated from one another with those yawning gaps between religions, nationalities, and people of different economic classes. We've learned the technology of togetherness, but we haven't come close to discovering our common humanity. We've learned how to produce things that fuel our economy, that promise to fill the emptiness in our lives, but we've only succeeded in filling our landfills with discarded junk. We're still

spiritually empty. We haven't penetrated the heavens with our towers of pride and greed; we've discovered in their hollowness how hollow we are.

The builders of Babel were arrogant. They wanted to monopolize language. They wanted us all to be alike. Their arrogance led them to believe that their language should be the only language, their version of reality the only version of reality. They didn't realize that the profusion of languages could be a blessing, opening new possibilities for talking about God, for talking about the meaning of life. My studies and my experiences have led me to be a student and admirer of the faith of our partners in the tradition of Abraham, the Muslims and the Jews. But when it comes to talking about the language of God, I have learned to cherish our own Christian tradition all the more. Muslims believe that the Qur'an, which they consider to be God's revelation to humanity through Muhammad, can never be translated from its original Arabic. It can only be interpreted in languages other than Arabic. God speaks Arabic, and if you want to be privy to God's revelation, you have to learn Arabic. Orthodox Jews similarly believe that the Bible ultimately can only be understood in Hebrew; everything else is a poor substitute.

The Pentecost story, which is the heart of our New Testament reading for the day, is the Christian counterpart to Babel. It isn't the reversal of Babel, which represented the dispersal of people and languages; Pentecost is the fulfillment of the potential blessing of Babel. Pentecost is about unity, the kind of unity that can only come from God, the kind of unity that the Holy Spirit gives, the kind of unity that can only come out of diversity.

Rather than suggesting that God communicates in a single authoritative language, Pentecost reminds us that God isn't limited by our different languages, it reminds us that God, through the Holy Spirit, communicates with each of us in our own language. The Holy Spirit comes to us where we are. In promising the coming of

the Holy Spirit, Jesus described the Spirit as our advocate, someone who can speak for us—for each of us. So the Spirit isn't an Arabic-only, or Hebrew-only, or an English-only advocate; the Holy Spirit is multi-lingual. All of those who were present at the Pentecost event heard what the apostles had to say in their own language. And those, as we heard in the reading, were a lot of different languages.

We don't talk enough about the Holy Spirit, but at least on this day of Pentecost we should. In our particular tradition of Christianity, as mainline Protestants, whether we come from the rather stern German Evangelical and Reformed Church as I did, or from the austere New England Congregationalism of the founders of this church, or from decent and in order Presbyterianism, or from methodical Methodism, or stern and stoic Lutherans, or whether we come from some other tradition and are restrained and taciturn just because we're Northwoods types, I would guess that most of us tend to be a little leery of the Holy Spirit. There's something uncontrolled and chaotic about the Holy Spirit, something rowdy and boisterous. We're not alone in our reticence. Today's scripture reminds us that those who heard those Spirit-filled disciples on Pentecost thought that they were under the influence of spirits, not the Spirit.

And there's also the problem of the older language we used to use in the church when we talked about the third member of the Trinity as "the Holy Ghost." There's something literally spooky about the Holy Ghost. Maybe we think of Caspar the friendly ghost, a floating semi-transparent sheet with eye, nose and mouth holes, who has a squeaky voice. The Spirit isn't a ghost—the Spirit is wind, and breath and fire.

Pentecost is a good time for us to take another look at the Holy Spirit, to see the coming of the Holy Spirit as the Christian fulfillment of Babel. Out of the anarchy of Babel, and in the light of Jesus Christ, the Spirit gives us a new kind of unity,

not the unity of enforced uniformity where everybody has to speak the same language, but the unity of a spirit who glories in the array of difference that is a part of being human. If Jesus is the word made flesh, then think of the Holy Spirit as the translator of that word to each of us. Think of the Holy Spirit as the one who helps us to learn from, understand and appreciate each other in our God-given diversity. The Holy Spirit is the one who transforms our encounters with others in love to our encounter with Jesus. The Holy Spirit translates the Word made flesh.

Our Pentecost account in Acts tells us that tongues of fire appeared on the heads of the spirit-filled apostles. Those crackling tongues of fire were flashes of insight, the kind of insight that comes to us when we see in each other the light of Christ, when the Word made flesh is translated for us into our own language. I'm sure that you've had such encounters, but maybe didn't see them as interventions of the spirit. I've had some amazing ones, overseas, yes, but also as a pastor. I've sat by the bed of a dying person and had a life translated to me in a way that has incomparably enriched my own life just as that person enriched the lives of others. The Spirit was there. I've seen people quietly do amazing things for other people, going way beyond the polite bounds of neighborliness to loving sacrifice. The Spirit was there. I've heard from the mouths of our children the most astonishing wisdom. The Spirit was there.

I worked for many years with overseas missionaries. One of the things we required of the missionaries was that they learn the language of those with whom they were going to live and work. If we are faithful members of the church of Jesus Christ, we're all missionaries. Even if we don't literally learn other languages—although I do wish that we Americans weren't so mono-lingual—we can spiritually learn the language of others. When we truly open ourselves to others, to their pain and to their dignity, the Word is made flesh, and the Spirit is there to translate that Word into language that we can understand. The Spirit can make us multilingual.

So, on Pentecost, on this day when we remember and when we try to recapture in our imagination the birth of Christ's church, let's commit ourselves to learning a new language, the language of unity in Christ. For the disciples, it was a heady and exhilarating experience; they were almost drunk with enthusiasm. It was an experience that inspired them, that changed them, that sent them forth to transform the world. May it be so for us. Amen.