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

LINGUISTICALLY GIFTED

Today we celebrate Pentecost Sunday--a day we refer to as the birthday of the Christian church. It is a day we commemorate the gift of the Holy Spirit, which came upon the first followers 50 days after the resurrection. We might imagine the confusion that relatively small band of Jesus' followers felt in the days following the resurrection and Jesus' ascension into heaven. What were they supposed to do now? Jesus had told them to wait in Jerusalem until they had been clothed with power from on high. But what did that mean?

Well, Pentecost is that moment when God's power, the Holy Spirit, came upon the followers of Jesus and it empowered this small band of followers to find the courage to come out from hiding and proclaim openly about God's love made known in Jesus Christ. And because of their proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ, many more people became followers of Jesus. And so we refer to Pentecost as the birthday of the Christian church.

The story of Pentecost, that moment when the Spirit descended upon Jesus' followers, was filled with wild and distinctive characteristics. A mighty wind rushed through the house. Then tongues of fire hovered above each of the followers. And then we are told that the followers were given the gifts of language. They began to speak in other languages.

Over the course of my life, I've had to study a number of different languages and none of them came easily. I've always envied people who had the gift for languages and secretly wished that there were some magic pill that would enable us to learn a new language over night. Knowing another language draws us into greater unity with other people because it removes a

barrier to communication. And not only does knowing another language enable us to communicate, but through language we gain access to a different culture and new traditions.

On the day of Pentecost, we see how the gift of language united people. Faithful Jewish people from all different countries had gathered together in Jerusalem to celebrate the spring harvest festival of Pentecost. These people were all Jewish but they were from different countries and spoke different languages. But when the Holy Spirit came upon the followers of Jesus, they were suddenly able to speak other languages, languages they hadn't known. And the crowds witnessing this experience could understand them, could hear them speaking their own language. It was a unifying moment of different peoples, different nationalities made possible by God's Spirit. The beginning of the Christian church rested upon the unifying gift of the Spirit.

And don't we all want to promote unity? Unity among peoples is a good thing, right? Right?

The story we read today from the Hebrew scriptures, from the Book of Genesis, is about the building of the Tower of Babel. The basic gist of the story is that way back, after the time of Noah and the great flood, there was one unifying language for all the peoples of the earth. And the people decided to build for themselves a great tower in order to as, the story says, "to make a name for ourselves, otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth." They did not want to be scattered. They wanted to be united. But, according the story, God sees what they are doing, decides to confuse their language so that they cannot understand one another's speech. And the God does indeed scatter the people across the earth, a people now divided by different languages.

There are a variety of interpretations of this story. Some see the Tower of Babel as an ancient way of explaining how people came to speak different languages. Some see the story as

a lesson about divine-human boundaries--that humanity was trying to overstep its boundaries and become too much like God. Many scholars also regard the story of Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit upon Jesus' followers, as a reversal of the Tower of Babel story. After all, in the Tower of Babel, God uses language to divide peoples, but on the day of Pentecost, God now uses language as a way to unite peoples. And unity is a good thing, right?

Sometimes. Sometimes unity is a good thing. And sometimes unity is not a good thing. Another way of understanding the Tower of Babel story is to look at the people's motivation for building their tower. The people built their tower because they did not want to be spread abroad. They wanted to stay in their own safe place of homogeneity. A homogenous community is a community where there people are the same. In contrast, a heterogeneous community includes the presence of diversity. The tower in this story represents a self-serving unity. It was an attempt to establish a cultural oneness that resisted diversity. It was a mentality that said, "let's stick with our own kind." And thus, it is a type of unity rooted in fear, a type of unity that adopts a "fortress mentality." We see in this story humanity's attempt to construct a self-made unity that sought to survive on its own resources and wits without any reliance upon the unity that grows from the will of God.

You see, there are two kinds of unity. There is the unity that involves sticking to one's own kind, a unity that insists on conformity. This kind of unity is rooted in fear. We see this kind of unity in hate groups and political extremists. We've seen it in neighborhoods that resist the arrival of peoples of other races or ethnicities, we've seen it in historical and contemporary national policies that have resisted immigration and operated out of a fortress mentality. And we've even seen it in the life of the Christian church, a kind of unity rooted in conformity that can lead to social oppression of others. There is this kind of unity, a Tower of Babel unity, that

desires to cling to our own kind because it feels safer and more comfortable. Let's just stick with those who speak our own language, as it were, people who are like us.

And then there is the kind of unity that grows from seeking God's purposes of love, acceptance, respect, compassion. This kind of unity is indeed messier. It involves inclusion of those who are different from ourselves. And that means we have to learn other languages--not just the spoken word but the language that grows from the heart which involves new ideas, new attitudes, new customs, new ways. We have to cross barriers to enter other people's worlds and let them enter ours.

Those first followers of Jesus who received the gift of the Holy Spirit had no idea at that moment just how much messier things would become for them as a result of the Spirit's gifts. The Spirit had gifted them with the ability to transcend the barrier of language and communication, but soon, soon they would be challenged to transcend other far more difficult barriers. When God told them to accept Gentiles into their midst, those people they had regarded as completely outside their circles of acceptance, they shook their heads and said, "I don't think we're hearing you right. You must be speaking a different language, God!" And God said, "I have taught you this new language." And so the early church accepted the Gentiles. Then they were challenged to accept women in the life and leaders of the early church. After the apostle Paul converted, they had to accept a man who had once persecuted the followers of Jesus. And each time they were challenged to remember the new language they had received on that Pentecost day.

At the very core of Pentecost is the language of inclusion. That's what lies at the very origins of the Christian church: inclusion. The earthly languages that those first followers of Jesus were miraculously able to speak on Pentecost were really just symbolic of the language of

inclusive love that the Spirit gave them. You see, language is more than just speaking words. It is about being seen and being heard. Do we see and do we hear other people? Are we caring about their situation? A person is not just an obstacle to be overcome or managed. The language of the Spirit guided the followers of Jesus to learn the language of love.

The Buffalo Gay Pride Parade took place last Sunday. On the front page of Monday's paper there was a photo of employees of M & T Bank carrying a banner in the parade. In the article, M & T bank officials spoke about their support of gay, lesbian, and transgendered peoples. Inside the paper there was also a photo of HSBC bank employees marching in the parade. And in reading this story I was suddenly ashamed. UPC should have been there, proclaiming a language of love. What does it say that the banks and corporations are more willing to proclaim a message of support than are the churches? I don't know if there were other churches there in the parade--I can only hope so. But what I hope is that next year UPC will be there. Because the Spirit has gifted us, you and me and all of us together, the Spirit has gifted us with a very special language: the language of love.

We live in very divisive times. People are polarized on just about every issue you can imagine. And there is a tendency to join with those ancient people from Genesis in trying to build for ourselves a Tower of Babel--to cling to our own kind, with those who think like us, look like us, believe like us, come from the same background as us. There is the temptation to build towers or walls or fortresses whether literally or metaphorically in our hearts and minds, to seek unity with those who conform to us and our perspectives.

But we are linguistically gifted. The Spirit has blessed us with a new language to speak and to live.