

Pentecost Sunday

May 15, 2016

Genesis 11:1-9

"Let Us Make Ourselves a City," God says, No.

Rev. George Ferch

Dear Friends in Christ,

I had a Tower of Babel experience recently. During a tornado warning, our neighbor's parents visiting from India were with me in my basement. I see them and wave to them but now was my chance to ask, "How was your trip here? Are you enjoying your visit? They looked at me, looked at their daughter, and she said, "Oh, everything is fine."

Not being able to communicate because of different languages was not a big deal in this case. It can be a big deal when it leads to misunderstanding, animosity, and even violence. Suspicion because of the lack of communication and cultural difference can go so far as to cause wars.

Where was the variety of languages and cultures born? Who is its father? What changes did this confusion of languages bring about? It all happened on the Plain of Shinar in present day Iran some years following the end of the universal Flood.

The LORD God thwarted humanity's wicked intent to declare independence from him and his will. God mixed up their language and dispersed Noah's descendants across the globe. They said, "**Let Us Make Ourselves a City, God Says, No.**" We see prideful builders turning from God. We see God turn to sinners in judgment and mercy.

On the Old Testament festival of Pentecost, fifty days after the final real Passover, God sent the promised Holy Spirit to his church. This once in a lifetime outpouring of the Spirit enabled the disciples without previous knowledge and suddenly to speak in different languages. The disciples declared to the nations living in Jerusalem "the wonders of God." In a sense, the Pentecost miracle was a reversal of the Tower of Babel miracle. Moses' words and St. Luke's words show us how this is most certainly true.

Most of you are familiar with the historical facts of God's interfering with the foolishness Noah's descendants cooked up. They planned and began to carry out the building of a permanent ziggurat to their own glory. The Flood had drowned many sinners, unbelievers, but it did not drown the sin that lives in all human hearts. Sin reared its ugly head again.

Noah gave glory to God's name, the LORD, at the end of the Flood. Noah's children desired glory for their name. God commanded Noah's descendants "be fruitful and fill the earth." Their will was to build a city "so that we can make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth."

How quickly pride can rise like brick walls as a barrier to honoring God and obeying his will. Pride seeks to make a name for myself rather than keeping God's name holy and living a godly life according to it. Pride seeks my way by selfishness rather than loving God by loving my neighbor. Pride leads us as it led the people on the Plain of Shinar to calculated and deliberate rebellion against God. Pride seeks independence from God. Pride fools me with the lie that with plenty of material goods, security from my enemies, and a position of power and authority all by my own abilities then who cares about God's name and his commands.

We see prideful builders turning from God. These "sons of Adam" were following in their father's footsteps. Upon reflection in this mirror of the law, we see the sin of pride in our hearts. We recognize pride manifesting itself as we plan and build our own little ziggurats of independent thinking and doing. God's judgment comes down against sin and we desperately need his mercy. We see God turn to sinners in judgment and mercy.

When the people began to build, they had, literally, "one lip" and one vocabulary. They spoke one language. This enabled them to work together against the LORD God and for their glory. Because the LORD loved the inhabitants of Babel, he did not allow them to continue in their pride; in their own destructive path toward independence.

The LORD God's judgment took place in the form of confusing their language into many languages, some which perhaps no longer exist, and some that have developed over the millennia into today's languages. Here is the connection to Pentecost. As God divided language as judgment, he used language as the vehicle of his mercy to share the good news of Jesus Christ, the world's Savior. The disciples at Pentecost spoke about those wonders of God in many languages. We continue that practice in 2016.

The LORD gives us a look into his nature as three-in-one with the plural pronoun, "us." "Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other." Different languages cause a lack of understanding. Lack of understanding causes confusion. Confusion causes misunderstanding. Misunderstanding causes animosity, and animosity, violence. Language barriers are barriers to unity.

What language unites? It is the language of the gospel of Christ. No matter what human lip or tongue or vocabulary the gospel uses, the Holy Spirit uses it to work his power to create faith. Peter's sermon added about three thousand believers on Pentecost. St. Luke does not tell us if or how many others came to faith through the other disciples' friendship evangelism.

What will end the disharmony and division among people today of the earth? It is a common faith in Jesus Christ that will move their hearts to love. This love replaces pride and suspicion and animosity.

God's judgment came on Babel. He confused their language whatever it was. Their building stopped. God spread the people throughout the globe, doing to them when they had refused to do in obedience to his will.

God's mercy now takes the message of forgiveness of sins and salvation around the globe using language. One statistic states the Bible is available in over 2,000 different languages. One challenge in our missionaries' work is learning the language of the people God calls them to serve. I suspect many of them would like to see a new Pentecost miracle as they struggle in this difficult task. We thank God for them and their families who are willing to learn the old fashioned way.

The Festival of Pentecost is about people sharing the gospel and hearing the gospel in their own words. The Holy Spirit works in the Word of Christ to grow the church and to hold us safe in our hour of need, especially in the hour of our deaths.

Thank God with me today for the young people who graduated from Martin Luther College yesterday who soon will begin ministry. And for the graduates of our Seminary who, God willing, will receive their assignments and graduate this week. They will be our voice in more than one language; the voice of the LORD God's judgment, and his mercy in Jesus Christ. Amen.

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