

Sermon Text for July 19, 2015

by

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Acts 2:1-13, Genesis 11:1-9

“Speaking God’s language”

VBS was such a special week. We had more kids this year than we have had over the last 5 years. The theme was Jesus is our guide and the kids learned songs to emphasize how Jesus is to be their guide. One little girl this week was going around her house singing Jesus is our guy. Which also works, but language is a tricky thing, isn't it? It is so important for just about every aspect of our lives. Perche' quando parliamo una lingua diversa, anche se diciamo delle cose bellissime, non hanno importanza perche' nessuno capisce. Sull'altro lato potresti anche dire delle sciocchezze, e nessuno ti chiede perche'. Come adesso, nessuno capisce quello che dico, e c'e' un'aria di imbarazza, le persone si guardano per accertare se sono loro stessi, o se tutti stanno attraversando la stessa esperienza. Non preoccuparvi, non parelero' piu' in una lingua straniera, e' solo per dare un piccolo esempio di come potrebbe essere con la torre di babele.

Harry Potter can speak to snakes and didn't even know it.

We find ourselves today in our journey through Genesis at the Tower of Babel. Babel means confusion and here it leads to awkwardness while in Scripture it leads to broken relationships and disorientation and ultimately to a spirit of distrust. Our current reality in which we live reflects that we have a common language that we understand, but our philosophical approaches are so drastically different that it can feel like we are repeating Genesis 11 all over again.

We have two Scriptures today, Babel vs. Pentecost and we find in these Scriptures God's reverse action that produces opposite results. So today we will ask the question if we find ourselves closer to Babel where our focus and our desire is to make a name for ourselves or are we more in a time of Pentecost where our focus is on proclaiming God's deeds of amazing power. Let's read.

READ

We have looked at Genesis 11 here at First Presbyterian 2 times before today making it the most common Scripture next to Jonah. It is one of my favorites in Scripture, but it is also one that most are familiar with. It is a favorite Sunday School lesson that I was told gives us the

reason why there are so many different languages in the world. The fact that there are so many different languages was never a problem that needed to be solved for me as a child. I was comfortable around other languages and it wasn't strange for me.

So today we find ourselves in Genesis after creation, after the flood, and the people of God, Noah's family have moved east and find themselves in a plain called Shinar which is just south of Baghdad in Iraq, in a place historically called Babylon. In all of Scripture Shinar has been attributed with negative things. Nothing good comes out of Shinar: Genesis 14 the King of Shinar invades the Dead Sea area and Abraham gives chase. Isaiah 11:1 the exiles would be delivered from Shinar where they were being held captive. In Daniel 1:2 the vessels of God were taken to Shinar by Nebuchadnezzar. In Zechariah 5:11 we find that the vessel of wickedness will be taken to a home built for it in Shinar. So when Shinar is mentioned in Scripture then you know nothing good is going to come from it, and we don't leave disappointed today.

We find all of the people together with only one language and all the same words. In vs. 4 we find them come up with a plan because they had a common fear. Let's build a city, and a tower, let's make a name for ourselves because what we didn't want to happen is: that we would be scattered abroad upon the face of the earth.

The purpose of the tower and the city is unity. Nothing wrong with unity, right? Jesus even prays for his disciples that they would be one. The primary focus and goal of those on the plain in Shinar is that now that they are one, they will remain one and just stay right where they are. It is unity that will allow them also eventually to make a name for themselves.

But let's go back a bit and remember what God told Noah in chapter 9:1 where we read: "God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth." This is not a negotiated agreement, God commands Noah and his sons to fill the earth. God's desire is that all of humanity be able to be blessed which is why he doesn't even want us to rest on our laurel's or plant our tent pegs permanently in our church, but always look outward beyond these walls.

God's command in Genesis is not for unity as our primary goal, but rather that all would be blessed which requires a scattering and an outward look. But that's not what we find here in Genesis. The people wanted only to be unified and wanted to establish a name for themselves and put down roots. These verses are the pitting of the resolve of humankind which is in conflict

with the resolve of God. The desires of people versus the desire of God. Of course God is going to win that battle every time, we know that, but when we find ourselves in that same position we think this one time our will shall be done.

The desire for unity sounds such like a good cause. But human unity without the vision of God's will is like to be ordered in oppressive conformity. There has to be the unity that God wills and the scattering that God desires and envisions.

Then we get to the verses in Scripture which reflect the exact opposite to what we find at the Tower of Babel. This reflects a real unity which is marked by God's blessing. People from all over the world with really difficult Greek names gather in one place. There is not one language but many, we do not have similar words, but very different words from people all over the world. While in Babel the goal was to make a name for ourselves, here we find the goal is to be able to proclaim as vs. 11 states: "God's deeds of power."

There is unity in this group in Acts even if that is not the goal. The unity comes in them being able to hear that each person around them is proclaiming the same message, philosophically they were on the same page. When our goal is unity for our sake then God will not be a part of it. When our goal is God's work then we will be unified without even trying to be.

In Babel, if you look at vs. 7 God says "they will not understand one another's speech." In the Hebrew the term understand can also mean hear. The root of the problem is that the people did not listen to each other and so gave up on the city and were scattered. The problem is actually listening to the other person, which made Pentecost what it was. The people in vs. 8 states "we hear, each of us, in our own native tongue."

The capacity to listen in ways which transforms depends upon trust in the speaker. Failed speech is linked to the disappearance of trust. At Babel each person was trying to make a name for themselves. At Pentecost each was proclaiming God's mighty power. A society or a church which suffers failed speech as in Babel not only cannot build towers, it cannot believe promises, cannot trust God, cannot be a community. But thanks be to God that is not who we are. You shared in front of everyone how God remembered you, we have shared God's amazing power to each other.

This text envisions people who practice openness based on trust and integrity based on knowing the true language of the faithful speaker. So where are we today? There seem to be a

confusion of languages at times where those on the right and the left are talking at each other but don't hear one another.

Of course everyone wants all of our citizens to have health care, it's not that the right wants poor people to die off. It is the process, how to bring that about which differs. Everyone wants people to work hard and earn a living. It's not that the left wants to create a society of those who have no incentive to work. It is the process and the way to bring that about which differs.

We all want the kingdom of God to be established here on earth by God using us, as imperfect vessels. But how to build that differs from church to church, denomination to denomination, even from person to person.

The difference today is that Pentecost has already happened and the vision God gives us is unity as together we proclaim the mighty acts of God. We have to watch ourselves to be sure that we don't go back to Babel to make a name for ourselves as Presbyterians, non denoms, republicans or democrats, God want to use us but our languages are confused, how we talk to each other is compromised because we don't trust, we don't give the benefit of the doubt, we don't try someone else's way first to see if it is the will of God.

Speaking God's language and hearing God's language in others has to be our goal. As a result of VBS a couple of people in our congregation have come up with the idea of a kid's club. I didn't think of it, it wasn't my idea so if we wanted our name to be proclaimed, if that was my goal, then there is no way that I could promote it or encourage it. But this is of God and this is how God moves. Not so any of us can get credit, or have their ego stroked, but rather so that we can build a community where each individual decreases so that Jesus' Gospel is increased.

Let us continue to work together as we have been able to up to now as God's amazing deeds of power be our goal. Amen.