

Sermon Text for May 23, 2021

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

“The story of the tower of Babel and Pentecost”

When you have been a pastor preaching in a church every Sunday for more than 25 years you come to a point where you realize that you have preached almost every story in the Bible at least once. But as I put together this sermon series there are a number of Sundays that are scheduled that I said to myself, this is going to be fun, I’ve never preached on this Scripture before.

But I have found that you also get to a point where you are preaching some Scriptures that you have looked at dozens of times before. Today is such a day. But this year as we have slogged our way through, I find that I am getting a different perspective on these Scriptures and the lessons I am learning could even be contradictory from those that I learned when I first preached on these Scriptures. For example on Mother’s Day when we looked at Deborah I discovered a new way to look at it where Deborah was God’s representation to the point where Barak wanted her in front as any of us would want God in front of us as we tackle something difficult. Don’t be my co-pilot, I need you to be my pilot Lord.

In the past when we have looked at Pentecost I have always emphasized the speaking part and how that was first jumbled and then it was corrected on the day of Pentecost. But today I find that it is less about speaking and more about hearing and understanding and how the barriers that are set up to prevent us from understanding, or hearing in a way to provide insight, need to be broken down. Pentecost has been described as the reversal of the tower of Babel. But today we will see that at the root of the problem, a lesson we would do well to take with us, is not the mixed up languages, not the speaking, but the inability to hear and understand what is being said, even if it is said clearly.

We live in a time of deep, deep polarization. As 21st century people we have a problem hearing each other. We are divided by racial lines, we are divided by political lines, we are divided by cultural lines, we are divided by financial lines. And those on the opposites sides think they are speaking clearly, but the other side simply cannot hear them. If you find yourself where you have an impossible time speaking with some members of your family or old friends because of stances that they are taking, maybe the problem isn’t what they are saying, but rather your inability to hear and respond in a loving, Christian way. If you have ever said we just can’t

have even a conversation, the problem is not in the speaking, but in the hearing. Let's look at our Scripture for today and see how to bring these polarized fields together.

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At age 59 my dad was the director of human rights for the National Council of Church, he worked out of the Godbox on 475 Riverside Drive in New York City. He was diagnosed at that age with Alzheimers, we first began noticing something in church where he had a hard time following the hymns as one line led to the other, hymns he had sung for decades first as a pastor but always as a follower of Jesus. His Alzheimers manifested itself in confusion. You could speak very clearly to him, say things that made sense, but his inability to process very clear messages and statements made him confused. That confusion then led to anger. He was the most peaceful of people that you could have ever met, but over time with his Alzheimers, that anger led to violence.

The problem was not how we were speaking to him, the problem was in the listening, and then ultimately, in the understanding. When we look at our first story for today, the Tower of Babel, we ultimately find that the problem is not in the speaking, but in the understanding. Let's look at how it begins, it describes this idyllic scene where the whole earth had everything in common including a single language. It reminds me of those verses in Acts where we read that they had everything in common, they shared all things including having one mind, one understanding, one way of looking at the world and how it operates, that way, in Acts at least, was the kingdom way. Jesus was the priority and that helped to scramble whatever priorities we might have and subject them to the kingdom way.

There was a unity among the people of the earth and they started to recognize that and they wanted to build on that for the sake of making a name for themselves. In Acts their goal was to build a kingdom structured upon the principles of Jesus Christ. Here in Babel they displaced their love for God and replaced it with a love for themselves. Whenever Jesus has been displaced the church has lost its way. When Jesus is not the way then the Christian loses his way and his soul. When America becomes first, then the heresy that results flies in the face of the commandment that tells us that we shall have no god beside Jesus.

But where were we? 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.

Now in some settings, just so you don't think it is all on the hearer, 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. This text envisions people who practice openness based on trust and integrity based on knowing the true language of the faithful speaker.

We move from the inability to understand and hear to confusion to violence which continues to wrack that same land. But then we turn to the reversal of this which we find in Acts on the day of Pentecost. Let's turn to Acts. We know the story well, the tongues of fire fall upon the people as a gift. It is a gift directly from God and that gift is the Holy Spirit which provides understanding and unity as a result of that understanding. If you look at verses 8 and 11 the people are amazed because they are able to understand. They were never able to understand these common fishermen before, but now that the gift of God has fallen upon them they are able to hear, and what they hear is, look at vs. 11, God's deeds of power.

On the day of Pentecost God took his people and forced us to look away from our desires, our wants, our polarization, and made us hear and understand that it is not about us and what we want and what we require from a worshipping community, but rather how can we do that and have a heart for that which God requires, to hear and understand. Once that step is taken, this gift of hearing and understanding, then the way is made clear to ask the question in 2:37. Now when they heard this, they were able to hear it, they asked: What should we do? The reversal creates that question and puts us in a position where we are able to hear the answer.

The answer comes in vs.38 where Peter states: read – The gift is eternal life, but there is also the gift of the Holy Spirit which allows us to hear and understand and work together for the common goal and the common purpose. It eliminates the polarization and focuses us on the Jesus.

You've been in a setting where you feel like you are saying things clearly but just aren't getting through and then you do something that you think is of no consequence and it clicks and the person says: now you're speaking my language, or now you're talking. It isn't a reflection of you saying something different, it is a reflection of them being able to understand it and that some barrier has fallen that allows them to hear it in a way that you meant for them to hear it.

We tend to have an easier time hearing when we agree with someone. When we find ourselves in a place where we can't even have a conversation with someone that used to love, or

thought we loved, or still love but they have left the planet, it is probably because we don't agree with them. Disagreement should not be a barrier to hearing and understanding. It should actually be a motivation to hear even better so that you can at least understand why they believe what they believe, even if you disagree.

What barriers have we created over this time that have been able to quench the Spirit? Because on Pentecost the Spirit came as a fire, in order to consume us so that we would be filled with it and not be able to shake it, even if we tried. Our responsibility this Pentecost, as we start to come out of this pandemic, we are still in it, but we are starting to come out of it, is to make sure that we look for ways to remain focused on the kingdom of God, not a kingdom that any of us might be trying to create which has us at its center. But rather how do we create a kingdom here at FPC that has God and our neighbor at its center. Amen.