

Pentecost (C)
May 23, 2010
Texts: Genesis 11:1-9
Acts 2:1-21

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I remember the first time I *really* read our Old Testament story about the tower of Babel. I was surprised, even shocked, by the strangeness of the story. The people wanted to build a city with a tower reaching high into the sky. God responds like they've done something terribly wrong. As punishment, God confuses their language and scatters them far and wide. And I thought, "What's wrong with building a city and a tower"?! It wasn't until a few years later, after I'd begun to learn Hebrew, that I read the story again, and heard it in a whole new way. The name of the city in Hebrew is "Babel." In our story the name is transliterated as "Babel" so that we can hear the Hebrew pun, playing off the name of the city while describing the babbling nonsense of the people whose speech has been confused. But everywhere else where this name is used, it is translated as "Babylon."

That's what's wrong with the people building a city and a tower! They're building Babylon! Remember what the Babylonian empire did to the Jewish people—destroying their land, burning their temple, plundering their cities, imprisoning their king, and taking the people away to languish in exile. That was why the Jewish people came to see Babylon as a symbol of everything bad. That's why, in the story, God acts in judgment against the tower-builders, confusing their language and scattering them across the earth. They're building the ultimate monument to human greed and cruelty and arrogance.

The Biblical writers use this story to paint a picture of the sad and desperate state of the human family. The truth is we are all brothers and sisters. We belong to each other. We were made to live together in the love of God. But instead we are divided and suspicious of each other. Every branch of the human tree is isolated, cut off, alone to itself. And you know what happens to branches that are cut off from the trunk of the tree. They wither and die.

In this way, the Bible picture the human family deep need, setting the stage for the grand, beautiful, mysterious work of God through the generations, through the centuries. It begins with Abraham and Sarah, with a promise given to them. It continues with Moses leading God's people out of slavery in Egypt, to live as God's free people in the Promised Land. It continues with King David, uniting the scattered people of Israel, to live and worship God together in a land of their own. It leads finally to Jesus, who fulfills all of God's promises, of God coming to live among us, drawing the human family together again, making us one in the love of God.

And that brings us to today, to this festival day of Pentecost, celebrating how God's Spirit moved through the followers of Jesus long ago, and how the Spirit continues still to energize and guide us for the sake of God's outreaching love

for the world. When the Holy Spirit made it possible for those first followers of Jesus to speak and be understood in every language, it's like curse of Babel was being undone, so that in Christ, the human family can experience a new kind of unity, overcoming the divisions of the past and living together in God's healing love. I think it's interesting the story doesn't picture the work God's Spirit as eliminating the differences, flattening them out like some kind of divine steamroller, so that everyone communicates with the same language. Instead, the Spirit creates the capacity for understanding across the differences. The differences still exist, but the Spirit of God makes a connection.

And the Spirit of God is still at work. In Christ, we have been drawn into God's great work of love, to live our whole lives as part of what God is up to— healing, renewing and reconciling the whole human family. And if I could play with the image of different languages, maybe we could think of it this way. The life of faith has many different languages. There is a wide variety of ways in which faith expresses itself. Some of us most naturally express our faith through giving service to neighbors in need. Some of us most naturally express our faith through building up community that is loving and caring. And the Spirit of God is present in both the "language" of service and the "language" of community. Some of us express our faith quietly, in prayer and contemplation. Some of us express our faith with hospitality for the stranger, making a safe and welcoming place for anyone who is new. And some of us express our faith through sharing generously from whatever we have. And the Spirit of God is at work in the "languages" of contemplation and hospitality and generosity. And in every language, every way in which faith expresses itself, the Spirit of God is helping us to give witness to powerful love of God, the deep goodness of God, the profound mercy of God, who is saving this world through Jesus Christ.

One happy part of our worship today is getting to celebrate the rite of Confirmation for David Manicke. 13 years ago David was baptized and made part of the family of God, a member of the community of Jesus. Over the past two years he has been participating in our Confirmation class, learning about the Bible, learning the basics of the Christian faith. I can testify that he is ready, now, to enter into a more mature role in the life of the church. It's not just that he's gone through the class and fulfilled the requirements. Let me share with you something that David did earlier this year. For the 40 days of Lent he gave up meat, eating as a vegetarian as a Lenten discipline. It was his idea of a way to explore one of the practices that Christians have used through the generations to simplify their lives, to be able to attend to what is really important—growing more deeply in our life with God. If you will, he was trying out one of the ways in which faith expresses itself, one of the languages of faith.

Maybe David's confirmation can remind us of something important about the work of God's Spirit. It's so much bigger than we can imagine. The story of Pentecost pictures for us how the Spirit is reaching across every divide, every kind of difference, to create connections and overcome divisions. And God's Spirit is still at work through us, through the witness we give to God's saving love by our service and hospitality and generosity and community. And God's work is bigger still, reaching through the generations—from those first followers of Jesus, through the centuries to us, now to David, and on into the future—until every divide has been crossed and every rift healed and every division made whole. Thanks and praise be to God, who is saving the world through Jesus Christ. Amen