

**Genesis 11:1-9**  
**The Day of Pentecost (C)**  
**23 May 2010**

***“Babel Turned Backwards”***

Last Sunday’s sermon focused on John 17, our Lord’s prayer for true oneness with Him, our heavenly Father, and with one another in the unity of the Holy Spirit. We struggled with the contrast between that real unity God gives us in Christ and the disunity we experience among the many church bodies of our world. We talked about how the true unity given all believers in the Body of Christ can’t be shattered even by the many significant disagreements over doctrine and practice. At the same time, however, we also discussed how we have to deal with those issues on the basis of God’s Word, not by sweeping them under the rug or by minimizing them as only differences in opinion; that, ultimately, those kinds of solutions only lead to greater confusion and to doctrine diminished to the lowest common denominator. Humankind’s ideas about how unity is to be achieved, isn’t always the same as God’s—in fact, sometimes they can be at cross-purposes with each other—a perfect example being what happened on the plain of Shinar as recorded in this morning’s Old Testament lesson. The reading starts out by describing the state of the world at that time: “Now the whole earth had one language and the same words.”

Can you imagine that? I suppose today, with English learned and used all over the world, we might get some idea of what it might have been like. And yet, as widespread as the use of English is, you can still go less than a kilometre from our nation’s capital city and find people who won’t understand you unless you speak French.

But back then, on the plain of Shinar, everyone spoke one common language. And, as we learn from this Hebrew word translated “same words,” there also appears to have been one broad

consensus of values, purpose and mission. Clearly the people were thinking alike, planning and working together as they conceived of a building project so massive they figured it would reach into heaven.

Obviously, from our perspective, that seems silly, even ridiculous. But the impossibility of what they as a whole people set out to do underlines how far their goals and plans had diverged from those of their Creator. Although the building scheme was impressive, their ambitions were not just foolish; they were blasphemous. They imagined they could rise up and conquer heaven, calling it “Babel,” likely meaning in their ancient language, “the Gate of God.” They thought they could turn the tables on the Lord, the One who always takes the initiative to come to us. They calculated they could “make a name for themselves,” and get to heaven by their own collective smarts and muscle. And, as we see by their own words quoted here, they were prepared to build the tower as a rallying point in defiance of God’s command after the Flood to “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth” (Genesis 9:1), because they decided they didn’t like the idea of being “dispersed over the face of the whole earth.”

Because of that, the God who is love, was forced to step in with tough consequences which made sure their plan would fail. But, in turning Shinar into “Babel” (which, in Hebrew sounds like the word for “confusion”), He confused much more than their words. He set people off on conflicting paths of thinking so they would never be able to mount an effort like the tower again.

II. Yet, despite the obvious warning and lesson of what happened at Babel, don’t we still, even as a people divided in many ways, continue to try to build towers? Many of today’s attempts to rally humanity may sound noble, but when designed by people according to their own notions, they usually bear fruit that is sinfully prideful at the core. No matter how attractively they’re packaged, they can be only further self-centered attempts to breach heaven (no matter how kindly and gently they define that goal).

Take the issue of “globalization,” for example. I have nothing against free trade, *per se*. But who really is benefiting from it? Are the masses of hungry people in the poorer and developing nations? Is it any surprise that the gap between the richest and the poorest has widened over the years? Not that I’m advocating the kind of violence that has happened at G8 and G20 summits, but I do question whether this particular tower-building exercise has in view at all the glory of God or the common welfare of humankind.

Not dissimilar things are happening even in Christian circles, especially in places where poverty is rampant, but even here in very affluent North America. It’s called the Prosperity Gospel. Its central teaching is that God wants you to be healthy and wealthy. They say that, as long as your commitment to Him is strong, and you are bold enough to ask it of Him, He will give you more than you could ever imagine. My younger sister ran into one proponent at a resort in Mexico who told her that she was obviously not a true Christian because she didn’t have the kind of wealth he had.

But, is a top-of-the-tower, penthouse-view, pain-free, financially prosperous life in this world the goal of our Christian faith? Is that what Jesus meant when, as the Suffering Servant prophesied by Isaiah—the one “*well-acquainted with our grief*” (Isaiah 53:3, King James Version)—He who told His disciples that the Son of Man had no place to lay His head? Is that what He had in mind when He called on them and us to deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow Him (Matthew 8:10, 16:24)?

In one form or another efforts at Babel-building continue, but in one sense they don’t measure up to the Genesis 11 original. The quantity of energy expended and the sophistication of cleverness may be greater, but that doesn’t match the intensity of focus seen in Genesis, with people all speaking one language, with everyone thinking on the same wavelength. I don’t suppose there’s any doubt people today might continue to try to mount giant world-wide pushes for new “towers” if they could, but long ago on the plains

of Shinar the Lord determined He would not allow it to happen again.

Don't you think that may be one reason why people in our post-Babel world don't —and can't!—"get their act together," so to speak? We argue over the agenda, race to build rival towers, compete for workers, pull and tug in a thousand directions, bicker and even kill each other over how to reorder the world into what we think might be some kind of "heaven on earth."

But, try as we may, we will not be able to create heaven on earth. God's judgment is very clear in the text. He confused their languages, mixed up their plans, and scattered them "*over the face of all the earth.*" That might not seem like a very loving thing to do, but at least by stopping them, He prevented them from getting caught up in even more evil, in even grosser blasphemies. And, when His judgment has done its work in exposing the sinful shoddiness of Babel's foundation and bricks, the Gospel has a chance to build something in its place.

III. You see, the city on the plain stood as a monument to the glories of human ingenuity and effort; but the Lord raised up the city of Jerusalem as a living symbol of his promise of salvation. The people of Shinar tried to storm the gates of heaven from their tower, demanding the Lord's attention, wanting to be as exalted as gods themselves; but in the temple on Mount Zion, God descended in the cloud of His glory, coming down to offer forgiveness and life eternal; fulfilled when He came to dwell with us in human flesh so we might see "*His glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth*" (John 1:14).

Full of self-love the people of Babel built their city and tower from bricks they had fired according to plans of their own devising; while, our God, overflowing with true love, raises up the New Jerusalem we have heard about from the Book of Revelation over the last couple of weeks—His people, the Church, built up even through pain and suffering from the living stones He has fashioned

by Water and the Spirit.

Where the people of those days aimed at self-promotion with their project; God in Christ sought nothing for Himself, but was lifted up on Mount Calvary so He might draw all people to Himself and so give glory to His Father and ours.

The tower of Babel, even uncompleted, must have been a monster of a sight. The cross of Christ, only a few metres high, would hardly have attracted much attention at the time.

But what came of the two? You won't find the tower of Babel in any sightseeing guide of Iraq, where Shinar was located. You can find the archaeological site where the city of Babylon, named after Babel, was built in its place. But even though it became a world power, which eventually dragged Israel into exile for seventy years, Babylon like Babel, as Jeremiah prophesied, ended up as a "*heap of ruins, the haunt of jackals, a horror and a hissing, without inhabitant*" (51:37). In 2010 it's still a heap of ruins, despite Sadaam Hussein's attempts to rebuild it.

But the City of God? It fills the world. Its citizens, a mighty nation of believers in Christ, people drawn from every "*nation, tribe, people and language*" (Revelation 7:9).

On Pentecost the language angle stands out: the chaos of Genesis 11 is miraculously reversed so that "the mighty works of God" in Christ are heard in every language (Acts 2:5-12). At Babel the language and thought patterns degenerated into confusion when God was forced to step in and put an end to their plans.

Since Pentecost the actual languages haven't been merged into one again, but according to God's plan Pentecost is still Babel turned backwards, Babel in reverse. No matter what tongue we speak we can hear the same wonderful things of God in our own language. The message of Christ crucified and risen is for us all, for sinners of every nation, tribe and people and language.

Babel's tower is overshadowed by the cross and the open tomb. Jesus is lifted up to draw us to the Father through Him. The Spirit is poured out to lead us to Christ and to keep us in the one true faith.

Confusion about some things will likely remain while we wait for our Saviour to come down once again to usher us into the new heaven and earth. The many languages that remain serve to remind us of the human folly of Babel. But by the Holy Spirit we are united in Christ—"one Lord, one faith, one baptism" (Ephesians 4:5), called to be devoted to one teaching, gathered together around his Table to receive His risen and glorified Body and Blood for the forgiveness of our sin and folly.

As we wait for Him to return, we are called to unite behind the one mission the Lord has given us: to go and baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching everyone to treasure what He has commanded us; to "lift high the cross, the love of Christ proclaim, till all the world adore his sacred name" (*Lutheran Service Book*, 837).

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