



Sermon for Pentecost Sunday
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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

A man checked into a hotel. There was a computer in his room so he decided to send an email to his wife. He accidentally typed the wrong email address and sent the email to a widow who had just returned from her husband's funeral.

The email read: "Hello honey, this is your loving husband. I know you are surprised to hear from me, they have computers here and we are allowed to send emails to loved ones. I've just been checked in. It's fairly nice here but it is extremely hot! I've made all the arrangements for your arrival tomorrow, can't wait to see you!"

Miscommunication: it can be annoying, or infuriating, and even sometimes tragic, but it happens all too frequently. We say one thing and the other person hears something else. Or, the other person says one thing and we hear something else. The people at the tower of Babel, in our story today from Genesis, certainly know a thing or two about miscommunication. The story tells us that the many different languages of the world have their origin in God's plan to slow down humanity's technological advancement by creating miscommunication. The result is miscommunication so profound that humanity is scattered around the world. We really can't live together in community unless we are able to communicate effectively.

We might want to pause to consider what to make of this particular story in Genesis. It's a well known fact that multiple human languages existed long before humans built the first cities in the ancient near east and we also know that humanity was scattered across the earth in many different tribes long before brick-making was invented. So, this Genesis story is not good history or anthropology or linguistics. What is it?

It's important to know, if you don't already, that the Bible contains many different forms of literature. There's a lot of poetry, for example, and there are a large number of letters. There's a unique form of literature that we're discussing in our adult forums this month called "apocalypse." And, yes, there is history – there are

sections of the Bible that relate history in a straightforward way that has to be taken seriously when studying ancient history.

But the story of Babel is not history. In fact, nothing in the first 11 chapters of Genesis is history. The literary form of the first 11 chapters of Genesis is mythology. And what is mythology? In the context of religion and religious texts like the Bible, myths are stories that take place in the remote and unknown past, involve the actions of a God or gods, and explain something about the world as it existed in the time when the myth was created.

So, in this case, the tower of Babel is a story that takes place in the remote past – so long ago that we don't even know how long ago it was. It involves God's action, in this case God's action to create many languages and scatter humanity in order to slow our technological advancement. And what it explains is something that existed at the time it was written (which was probably about 2,500 years ago) and something that actually still exists today: the fact that human beings have trouble communicating because we all speak different languages.

What's interesting about the best mythology – whether it's Greek, Native American, or Biblical – is that the best mythology communicates some truth about God and humanity even though the story itself may be impossible. And that is certainly the case with the story of Babel. The fact that we human beings have trouble communicating because we speak different languages really has slowed our development of technology over the millennia because it makes it much more difficult to share ideas and work together. And one of the reasons – not the only reason, but one reason – that human technology has advanced so rapidly in the last century is that we have improved our communication. Much of the world has standardized on using English to share scientific and technological information, our ability to rapidly translate between languages has improved, and the telephone and internet have dramatically closed the gap between scattered groups working in various places around the world.

In a sense the confusion and miscommunication described in the story of Babel is being undone. This undoing of Babel, the reversal of all that miscommunication, is an underlying theme in our story today from Acts. The story from Acts is the story of the first Christian Pentecost so, of course, we read it today on the Feast of Pentecost.

I call it the first “Christian” Pentecost because, of course, Pentecost was an ancient festival of Judaism before Christians adopted it. In Judaism it celebrates several different aspects of the history of the Jewish people – among the events it commemorates, for example, is the giving of the Law of Moses at Mt. Sinai after the Exodus. Pentecost comes 50 days after the Jewish Passover which means that it also comes 50 days after the Christian Passover – or, as we more commonly call it “Easter” or the “Paschal Feast.” For us as Christians Pentecost marks the end of the 50-day season of Easter, commemorates the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on humanity, and marks the birth of the Church.

Part of what happens in the Pentecost story in Acts is that the language barrier between people collapses. There is no miscommunication because the curse of Babel is undone by the Holy Spirit and people from scattered places all over the world are able to hear and understand each other. Our story in Acts is not mythology – the author of Acts is recounting something that was not in the remote past for him, it was in the very recent past. And rather than trying to explain something true in his own time by reference to God’s actions in the mythic past he is trying to help us understand the story of something that happened just a few decades before he wrote it.

That still doesn’t make Acts straightforward to history. History would be telling the story in an objective way, bringing to bear multiple viewpoints and perspectives. For it to be history we’d have to know more, for example, about the people who accused the apostles of being drunk. Who were they? Why did they think that? And so on. The story of the first Pentecost isn’t myth and it isn’t history – I would call it “testimony.” It’s a written record of what the earliest Christians experienced and what they thought their experiences were telling us about God.

So, on this Feast Day of Pentecost, what do the Biblical mythology of Israel and the testimony of the ancient Church tell us about God? One thing they tell us, that I think is very important, is that God’s intention for humanity is that we all live together in community without our language, national identity, or tribal origin preventing us from being able to get along. If we put together the Genesis mythology with the Acts testimony the word from God seems to be something like this: God created us to live in peaceful community. When we try to create that community by our own plans and efforts it doesn’t work very well. But when we open our lives to allow Christ share the Holy Spirit with us, and when we walk in step with the Holy Spirit, then the possibilities for community and relationship are endless.

Since today marks the anniversary of Christianity's beginning that is an important message for us to hear. As important as our work together is – as important as our worship, and times of fellowship, and outreach projects are – what really brings us together and makes us one community in Christ is the gracious and loving work of the Holy Spirit.

May we walk in step with the Holy Spirit and live together here at All Saints in the kind of community that God created us to experience.

Amen.