

The Sunnybrook Pulpit

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Breaking Barriers

Acts 2:1-21

When I was twenty-one years of age, I took spent six months traveling in South America. I spent Christmas Day of 1980 on a beach near Cartagena in Columbia. Now at that time I only had enough money to eat twice a day, so I was kind of skinny and I looked a little better in a bathing suit than I do now. And as I was walking down the beach to go for a swim I heard this whistle and turned around to discover that I was being pursued by this attractive young woman, in a bikini. I took a moment or two to admire the bikini. As a 21 year old straight male, I considered myself something of a connoisseur of women's swimwear, and in my expert opinion it was a very nice bikini. For a moment I thought this was turning out to be a pretty good Christmas.

And then the other shoe dropped. This was Columbia after all, and they speak Spanish in Columbia, and I don't speak much Spanish, and it turned out that this attractive young woman, this very attractive young woman, in this very nice bikini, who was very attracted to me, did not speak any English, none! nada! What seemed like such a promising start to a relationship foundered on the shoals of an insurmountable language barrier.

Our whole interaction took maybe three minutes, but I still remember it, and sigh, and lament what a profound barrier language is, an enormous barrier, not just to romantic relationships, but to any kind of relationship. How many conflicts, battles and wars might have been avoided if only people could talk things out?

Someone a long time ago asked the question: "Why are there so many different languages?" And in response they told a story that is found in the Bible, in the eleventh chapter of Genesis about the tower of Babel. The story goes that at one time, everyone spoke the same language, but they were nervous that they would get scattered all over the world, and so they decided to build a tower that would reach all the way to heaven. The tower, they believed would keep them unified. God wasn't impressed and decided that they needed to be taught a lesson in humility. So God confused their languages so that they couldn't communicate with

each other. And ever since, there have been a great variety of languages throughout the world.

Now if you read this story as history, it makes no sense. But the stories from the early chapters of Genesis are not intended to be read as history. They are, in the words of David Goa, stories that are “too true to be mere fact.” These stories are not trying to tell us what happened once, long ago, but something important about what is going on all the time, something important about the human condition. This story is about the nature of human diversity, and the place of that diversity in God’s dream for the world.

The story of the tower of Babel is probably, in part, an ancient joke that the Hebrews told about the Babylonian ziggurats, the great step pyramids that were a symbol of Babylonian dominance. At the time, the Babylonian empire was the most powerful empire in the world, and the Babylonians were pretty sure that their language, their culture, their nation were the greatest, and they were busily trying to force it on everyone else. The story is a critique of the imperial propaganda that Babylonian or Persian or Greek or Roman or British or Russian or American culture are at the centre of the universe. It warns us against a false kind of unity based on a forced uniformity, against every form of racism or prejudice which assumes that people are supposed to be the same and difference is a bad thing.

Instead, the story of the tower of Babel points us to a different form of unity, a unity based on a humble reverence before the diversity of human culture and creativity. It tells us that God has created us different and diverse. It teaches us to expect and treasure differences. It helps us to be open to the possibility that we may learn something from someone else, that just because others are different doesn't mean they are wrong.

But still, this story by itself is missing something. It points us beyond uniformity as a basis for unity, but it does not point to any new basis for unity. It talks about people being scattered, but not about them being brought back together again. And so it leaves us with a world divided and scattered and conflicted by language and culture. It leaves us vulnerable to competing truth claims, accusations of fake news, and the dangerous presumption that there is no basis for unity or living together in peace. And that is where the story of the first Pentecost comes in.

In the story of Pentecost, the Spirit of God comes upon the first disciples, who for fifty days after Jesus' resurrection have been waiting, frightened and cowed, and empowers them to preach. But these simple Galileans don't just preach in their

native Aramaic. They preach in such a bewildering array of languages that the cosmopolitan crowd is astonished. For there are Parthians, Medes, and Elamites, people from Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappodocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphilia, Egypt and the parts of Libya around Cyrene, Rome, Crete and Arabia, and they all heard the good news preached in their own language.

Like the story of the tower of Babel, the story of the first Pentecost is not an historical account. The story is, instead, a way of summarizing briefly and dramatically the early mission of the church, in which it began to overcome the barriers of language by translating the gospel into many different languages.

What this passage says happened on the day of Pentecost was what the early Christians were trying to achieve, and what they did imperfectly achieve in the early decades and centuries of the church. People from a vast array of cultural and language groups were melded together into a church. But the melding was not a melting pot; they did not lose their distinctiveness. They did not all become the same. They achieved a unity in diversity that transcended all the barriers of language and race and culture.

In this new form of unity, the scattering of Babel is not reversed, for differences are not erased. Rather they are placed in perspective. We no longer idolize our own tribe or race or cultural group because in Christ we are joined to peoples of every other race and tribe and group. Within the global church there is a bewildering array of peoples: Canadians and Indonesians, Russians and Brazilians, Chinese, Nicaraguan, Lebanese and South African, black, white, red, yellow and brown, liberal and conservative, capitalist, communist and everything in between. We have many differences, but we are all bound together in our worship of a loving God, and in that one ground of our unity we find the possibility of a unity which truly embraces the richness and diversity of the world's peoples. Diversity is not a curse to be eliminated, but a blessing to be cherished. In a world which is divided by racism and nationalism, Pentecost is a reminder that God's Spirit is a Spirit of unity, that diverse cultures and languages can all be ways through which God may be praised.

While Christian missionaries have sometimes forgotten this, the way we live out Christianity is always part of a particular culture and language, and we cannot force our culture onto other people in the name of Jesus Christ. It was for that cultural colonialism that the first of those apologies to Canada's indigenous peoples that are commemorated in these display of artifacts on the western wall of this sanctuary. Rather than trying to translate the good news of God's love into native

language and culture, our ancestors tried to assimilate First Nations people into European culture.

But this story need not only be about communication between languages and cultures, for if the Holy Spirit is a force of unity which overcomes the barriers between people it can also be about the barriers that separate neighbour from neighbour, husband from wife, parent from child, employee from employer. One of the fundamental signs of the presence of the Holy Spirit is that communication is taking place, breaking down the barriers that divide people from one another, overcoming the alienation and estrangement that divide us from one another.

A number of years ago, at one of the programs I attended at the Naramata Centre, I was privileged to be in a group in which an overweight young woman found the courage to tell the rest of us that her obesity was the result of severe physical abuse that she had suffered as a child. She had put on all that extra weight because she thought that if she was fat, the beatings would not hurt as much. As you can well imagine, this was not an easy thing for her to share. I do not know if she had ever told anyone else about it before. But it was a moment of rare honesty, vulnerability and trust, and it was for that reason, a holy moment, a moment in which the Spirit was at work, creating community, communion through communication. I have had many other such moments, moments when people have trusted me with their stories and their insights, with their hopes and fears. Those are always, for me, holy moments, moments in which I feel the presence of this same Spirit which touched the disciples on the day of Pentecost and helped them break down the barriers and heal the divisions which isolate us from each other.

This morning we celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit, and the stories make one point very clear: the spirit is unpredictable, and despite the best efforts of humans to control her, she is free. The spirit resists imperial attempts to control human diversity and breaks through the boundaries of language and culture. "The Spirit blows where it wills," and opens communication in the face of our best efforts to control it. Wherever communication breaks down, wherever there is alienation, estrangement, separation or tension, God's spirit patiently seeks out ways to break the barrier and forge new connection, new community, new relationship. Thanks be to God! Amen!