

FIRST LESSON: Genesis 11:1-9
SECOND LESSON: Acts 2:1-21
June 5, 2022
PENTECOST COMMUNION

“Getting the Word Out”
Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

At the end of the school year teachers will be giving out report cards along with comments. Elementary school students get a lot of comments. By high school they’ve given up. But understanding exactly WHAT the teacher is trying to say is important. There are different ways to use words. So I thought today to provide a helpful synopsis.

If the teacher says, “Your son has a remarkable ability in gathering needed information from his classmates,” he has been caught cheating multiple times.

If the teacher says, “Your daughter exhibits a relaxed attitude toward school and is not intimidated by expectations,” she is the laziest student in the school.

If the teacher says, “Your son has a fantastic imagination. He has an unmatched capacity for blending fact with fiction,” he lies constantly.

If the teacher says, “Your daughter’s exuberant verbosity is amazing,” she never shuts up.

If the teacher says, “Unlike some students who hide their emotions, your son is very expressive and open,” he whines all day.

But beware especially of this one: “I firmly believe that your child’s intellectual and emotional progress would be enhanced through a year’s repetition of their learning environment.” Yeah, it’s third grade again.

The story of the Tower of Babel is about words gone wrong. It’s about a total communication breakdown, not just teachers using clever euphemisms. But it is also what we might call “an origin story.” The question is posed—If everyone spoke the same language once, how come there are all these different languages now?

Well kids, it’s like this: Once upon a time everyone did speak the same language, but human pride messed it up. You see these huge pyramid like towers called ziggurats that the Babylonians build? We Jews build with stone, but the Babylonians and other foreign peoples use baked brick and build these strange structures. Modern people are going to say they are as high as a 16 story building. We’re just hanging out here during the Babylonian captivity with all these large visual aids standing around, so I’m just going to say they

are big. Really BIG. Anyway, way back in time when everyone still spoke the same language these people decided to build one right into the heavens. They wanted to make a name for themselves so they wouldn't be scattered. But God was not impressed. God didn't hurt them, and didn't hurt the city, but God scattered the languages so they couldn't work together, and the project was abandoned. That's why it's called Babel. Babel literally means "gate of God" and is related to Babylon, the capital city of Babylonia, but we have changed the meaning of the word. Now it means to babble and talk nonsense. Which is a really good dig at our captors, now isn't it?

All right, don't panic. Am I telling you in a roundabout way using this made-up conversation that this is a made up story? **Yes I am.** There was no tower of Babel. People speak different languages because language develops differently when groups are separated for thousands of years. But it is possible that there is some historicity to the story. There could have been a city that tried to build a tower into the heavens, and the project was never finished. The important thing about this story, however, is the principle found in it. Arrogant pride in human achievement without reference to God is dangerous. And we have a lot of that today. People are very proud of their technology. They are less aware of where some of it might lead.

If communication was cut off in the mythical Babel, it was restored in the historical event that took place at Pentecost. The story of Pentecost is one in which people speaking a wide variety of languages heard the gospel in their own language. Instead of one language, God spoke in a myriad of languages through the disciples. Parthia, Media and Elam are all regions of modern day Iran. Mesopotamia is Iraq and eastern Syria. Judea goes from the West Bank of Israel west to the Mediterranean. Cappadocia, Pontus, Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia are all regions of modern day Turkey. Egypt is all of Northeast Africa on the Mediterranean. Libya is west of Egypt on the Mediterranean and Cyrene is a small part of Libya. Rome is Rome. Crete is still the island of Crete and Arabs come from Saudi Arabia. What happened on Pentecost did not erase these differences. It embraced them. God is not limited to any one language or culture.

The earliest disciples were gathered together in Jerusalem during the Feast of Pentecost because Jesus had told them to do so. I used to think that Pentecost was 50 days after Passover, which it sometimes is, but strictly speaking it is 50 days after the first fruits, or first harvest. Pentecost is a festival of thanksgiving for the wheat harvest. It also came to be a celebration of the giving of the Law to Moses on Mount Sinai. Symbolically Pentecost is a powerful choice. It became the first great harvest of souls and a celebration of the Spirit who helps us live as we ought.

When the disciples were gathered together in the morning after a night of prayer, the traditional way to celebrate Pentecost, a sound like the blowing of a violent wind filled the house. There wasn't a violent wind. It just sounded like one. And what appeared to be tongues of fire settled on each one of them and they began to speak in other languages. This is not the same thing as the speaking in tongues in charismatic churches. As far as we know this was a

unique event in which the disciples spoke in known languages that they didn't know, languages that were then heard by people from those nations. The Holy Spirit transformed each person into a messenger of God's grace and praise.

Those outside were confused when they heard a bunch of Galileans, traditionally understood to be very unsophisticated country people, speaking this multitude of languages. "How can this possibly be?" they wondered. And so Peter answered them, preaching an anointed sermon in response, and thousands came to faith.

While superficially it may look like a reversal of what happened at Babel, this gift was only temporary. What is permanent, however, is the Spirit's promise to give us the words we need when we need them. In Luke's gospel we are very specifically promised that we will be given the words to say when being persecuted by authorities. But the Spirit will give us the right words in all circumstances of life if we ask. We don't need to be afraid. We can ask the Holy Spirit to give us the right words. And sometimes the Spirit may even tell us to say nothing and just listen. Speaking for God is good. Shutting up for God is also good. But whatever is required, the same Spirit that came at Pentecost is here today. Amen.

Genesis 11:1-9

11 Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. 2 As people moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there.

3 They said to each other, "Come, let's make bricks and bake them thoroughly." They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar. 4 Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves; otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth."

5 But the Lord came down to see the city and the tower the people were building. 6 The Lord said, "If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. 7 Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other."

8 So the Lord scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. 9 That is why it was called Babel—because there the Lord confused the language of the whole world. From there the Lord scattered them over the face of the whole earth.

Acts 2:1-21

2 When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. 2 Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. 3 They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. 4 All of

them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

5 Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. 6 When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken. 7 Utterly amazed, they asked: “Aren’t all these who are speaking Galileans? 8 Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language? 9 Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, 10 Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome¹¹ (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!” 12 Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, “What does this mean?”