

“Language & the Holy Spirit” by Tim Hall

The Day of Pentecost: Whitsunday – 5 June 2022

RCL: [Genesis 11:1-9](#) , [Psalm 104:25-35, 37](#) , [Acts 2:1-21](#) , [John 14:8-17, \(25-27\)](#)

On this Pentecost morning, the birthday of our church, I’m going to focus on two themes from our readings: language and the Holy Spirit.

Since the dawn of civilization, language has been both a means to bring people together and a barrier that keeps them apart. I want to explore this in the context of our readings from Genesis and Acts and look at how God played, and continues to play a part, in this unfolding story.

The placement of the Tower of Babel story in the bible is problematic. It’s one of the earliest accounts, just after the “Noah and the Flood” story, which itself is preceded by the story of Adam & Eve. After Noah and his charges survive the flood, God blesses Noah and his sons and tells them to “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth”. And that’s just what they do.

The story concludes with a presentation of Noah’s lineage, also known as the Table of Nations, which lists the descendants of Japheth, Ham, and Seth who peopled the whole near east, from Egypt to Asia Minor to Babylon throughout the fertile crescent. And here’s the problem... each genealogy ends with the words, “These are the descendants of [Japheth, Ham, or Seth], by their families, **their languages**, their lands, and their nations.”

Do you see the same problem I see? Our story opens today saying, “Now the whole earth had **one language** and the same words.” How can there be one language when we’ve just been told that the world was populated by Noah’s heirs with many lands, nations, and languages? I have a couple of thoughts on this...

First, as we know, many of the stories in the bible are not in perfect chronological order. Perhaps this was still the early days of the Noah diaspora and the people did still share the same language. Then our story of God confusing the languages and scattering the people is the impetus that leads to continued population migration. Most languages evolved from similar beginnings, so it’s not too much to believe that by the time Noah’s descendants had reached the far corners of the known earth their languages would be unintelligible one to the other.

My second thought... the phrase “one language and the same words” is speaking figuratively. What it really means is that humankind had adopted, once again, regardless of their spoken language, the underlying language of greed and wickedness and the lust for power. I like this theory better (or perhaps a

combination of the two), because it helps me better understand why God would do what He did. Remember, he promised Noah and his heirs, after the flood, that he would never again destroy every living creature. **But HE still has a few tricks up his sleeve.**

What we really see in this story is that humanity is changing. People are moving beyond a hunting and gathering existence or living the nomadic lifestyle of following the flocks. People have found the advantage of working and living together in community, the safety a city provides and the accomplishments that can be made by many people, working as a unified body, performing different important roles. Yes, they want to build a temple to the heavens, to the gate of God, as Bab-El means, just as we today enjoy coming together in our houses of God to worship.

But the problem is, **they want to make a name for themselves.** It's not about God. "It's about us!" they say. And so here on the plain of Shinar between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, the future site of Babylon, they are scattered. Can we see ourselves a bit in this story... more worried about our own plans and how others see us than about God's plans and his vision for our lives?

Fast forward about 2,000 years and we see Jesus and his disciples gathered for the Passover meal, Jesus' last supper with his friends, hours before he's to be taken away to suffering and death, and **the disciples still don't get it.** Philip wants Jesus to show him the Father and Jesus explains, yet again, that he and the Father are one and the way to the Father is through the Son. "So believe in me," he says. "And if you do, I will do whatever you ask in my name. And I will ask the Father to give you another Advocate, to be with you forever, the Spirit of Truth, the Holy Spirit who will teach you everything and remind you of the Peace I am leaving with you."

50 days later the believers, about 120 of them, are gathered together inside again. They've recently chosen Matthias to replace Judas as the twelfth disciple, but they really don't seem to be making much progress in spreading the Good News just yet. It's the Day of Pentecost, or "Shavuot" in the Jewish tradition, 50 days after Passover, a harvest festival when first fruit offerings are brought to the Temple from thousands of Jews throughout the diaspora. It had also grown to be celebrated as the day the law was given to Moses for God's people. The law... **the truth...** and all of a sudden a mighty wind begins to blow through the house where the believers are gathered and tongues of fire descend upon them. And they receive the Spirit of truth, the Holy Spirit, just as Jesus had promised.

"Wind" and "fire" are both associated with the presence of God. In Hebrew, the same word means both "wind" and "spirit," as in the creation story where the divine wind (or spirit) moves over the primordial waters (Genesis 1:2).

So also, fire is an image for the divine presence, famously in the story of Moses and the bush that burned without being consumed (Exodus 3:1-6) or in Elijah being taken up to heaven in a chariot of fire. As it was at the beginning of creation and in the history of Israel, the Spirit of God is again at work creating the new community of the church.

And now everything is changed. The believers are emboldened and can share the Gospel with the assembled masses as they speak the languages of the Parthians and Cappadocians, the Egyptians and Romans, the Cretans and Arabs, and everyone from the far corners of the world. Language, which had divided them for millennia, is now bringing them back together through the Good News of God in Christ. ***And 3,000 new Christians were baptized that day!***

But that's not all... off they went to fulfill their great commission... Philip to Ethiopia, James to Spain, Peter to Rome, Thomas to India, and many more missions to far flung places. ***They never returned.*** They were spreading the Gospel and the one language they used was given to them by the Holy Spirit of Truth. That language included words of love, friendship, devotion, forgiveness, faith, sacrifice. It is that same language we still need today in our broken world.

I have been blessed through my job-related travels and mission trips, to witness the love of Christ at work in many different countries. One of the most amazing was a visit to a little Episcopal church in Hualien, Taiwan. I discovered St. Luke's while walking the back roads from my hotel to the train station, and was so happy that I was staying through the weekend and would be able to attend the following Sunday. Well, did a few heads turn when I walked into that church on Sunday morning? But they weren't upset to have me join them. They welcomed me as one of their own.

St. Luke's was a tiny little place. It reminded me of Good Shepherd. A few families that enjoyed each other's company and enjoyed worshiping together. And although we didn't share the same spoken language (the entire service was in Mandarin), we did share the same language of our love for Jesus. It was so cool... many of the prayers and songs were strangely familiar so I was able to participate and enjoy the service. And then the fellowship afterwards... wow! They invited me back to their kitchen where we all gathered around a large table to make dumplings and soup together and sharing what has to have been my most memorable "coffee hour" anywhere in the world. We parted ways with much hand shaking, smiles, and hugs.

Let's review... the story of the Tower of Babel was an account of a terrible curse that came upon all people of the earth in response to their attempt to build an enormous tower, **as a testimony to their own greatness**. Their sin was a lust for power combined with human arrogance, and the punishment was that the people were divided into different language groups so that their power would be limited.

Division, Biblically speaking, is always a curse. But it seems that at Pentecost God, by His Spirit, began to reverse that curse.

Whereas, at Babel, human beings had banded together to build a community in which God had no place, at Pentecost God took the initiative, as Jesus had promised, of building a new community – the church – which had God the creator at its center.

Whereas the Babel community was built around a common lust for power, the new church community would disavow power and center itself instead on service and love and forgiveness.

Whereas God came down at Babel to miraculously confuse human language so that people could not understand each other or work together, at Pentecost God came down and miraculously bridged the communication gap, **in order to make true human community a possibility again!**

What we have with the birth of the church on Pentecost is the birth of a vision – **a vision of a truly inclusive community** – and we can't underestimate just how radical that vision is. For it has often been at the heart of religion – any religion – to discriminate between who is a legitimate member of the religious community and who is not – to include and to exclude.

But the Kingdom of God of which Jesus spoke, the Kingdom of Heaven here on earth, **is a feast to which everybody is invited**. And so the church of Jesus Christ that comes to birth at Pentecost is a community that welcomes everybody without grilling them first about their beliefs or their culture or their gender or their sexual orientation or even their morality.

I pray that we, and the wider church, and Christians throughout the world may continue to be emboldened to reject division and to sow acceptance and unity and love. With every breath we take, we need to remember that God blessed us with our lives, our families, our world, and the Holy Spirit, who abides in us. The peace she gives us is the same peace we must give the world. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. Go forth and communicate **in the language of God's love**, believing in the power of the Holy Spirit.

And to that we say, AMEN