

Plymouth Congregational Church of Fort Wayne, UCC
May 15, 2016
Pentecost

“Pentecost and Babel’s Demise”

“... Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? ...
in our own languages we hear them speaking
about God’s deeds of power.”
Acts 2:7, 11

Prelude

In our lesson this morning we heard
a partial reading of events that unfolded
“when the day of Pentecost had come”
(Acts 2:1).

Pentecost is often said to signify
the church’s birthday.
And so we celebrate
in extraordinary ways;
we pull out all the stops to
embellish our worship experience,
wanting to fully rejoice in all
the goodness and hope and newness
that birth signifies.

Recall the psalm that speaks:
**“O magnify the Lord with me,
and let us exalt God’s name together”**
(Psalm 34:3)

To “magnify” Pentecost and all that it
signifies, we bring out bold and daring
colors - nothing neutral today;
something more flamboyant is suitable:
something red, or yellow, or orange.

To “magnify” Pentecost we ramp up
the sound a level or two –
 with extra percussion,
 and the sounds of brass,
to accompany spirit-themed song/hymns
that enliven the soul,
that make the toe to tap,
 the hand to clap,
 the body to sway,
 and the mind mull and ponder
 all the import of such commemoration.

There are “**sweet expressions**” on many faces.
Some who are unfamiliar might ask:
 what’s going on here?
This isn’t Sunday normal!
Well, no, it’s not.
It’s extraordinary.
Unusual. Pentecost is designed
to “break the mold(s)” that restrain
or limit magnification of God,
and God’s reach to touch us for good.

If we aren’t overly careful and guarded,
we might find ourselves lifting our hearts
in praise, for the sweet, sweet Spirit
 in this place (*NCH*, No. 293).

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Pentecost. We really shouldn’t be
 totally surprised by the
magnification Pentecost permits.
The scripture lesson is filled with
 impressive “**special effects.**”

Like any birth we might try to describe,
you have to account for elements of

wonder and drama and amazement
language struggles to capture.

Jesus, we know, was (literally)
nowhere to be seen.

He had elevatored out of this of this world,
lifted off, in what the church refers
to as the Ascension

(at least in the Acts version of gospel);
he left scant instructions to his followers
(hang out in Jerusalem; don't leave),
with little more than a promise:
the Holy Spirit will come upon you
that you might be witnesses
to Jesus **"to the ends of the earth."**

On the day of Pentecost, we find the
Jesus band, about 120 in number,
sequestered together in one place.

Then the fireworks.

"A sound like a rush of violent wind,"
is said to have come from heaven.

Then something like fire -

"divided tongues" falls upon each and all.

Then a strange thing, a commotion;
the house church relocates to the street,
and a crowd gathers to here and see
what's going on. Twice we are told
there was amazement and astonishment.

First in consideration of the source:
"are not these Galileans speaking?"

And then, the mind numbing,
reader fearing number of people
(a panorama of worldwide Jews
from the known corners of earth are
listed, those who were of the faith
since their cradles, and those who

converted along the way),
the Parthians, Medes, Elamites,
Cretans and Arabs,
a rich mosaic spanning the globe,
who found themselves **comprehending**
what the Galileans were proclaiming.

In the scripture the question is asked:
“What does this mean?” Which is really
the question I want to pose this morning.
What significance does this Pentecostal
wonder have for us?

PENTECOST SIGNALS BABEL’S DEMISE

Pentecost, at least in part, comes to correct a
condition that afflicts the world,
reversing what has been called
the “**Babel condition**”
(noted in *The Anchor Bible*, Vol. 1, p. 562).

In the 11th chapter of Genesis, we find the story of
the great Tower of Babel. It belongs, according to
Walter Brueggemann, to the oldest theological
tradition in the book of Genesis (J source);
it speaks of a profound crisis that has come
upon the creation; something has gone awry;
“**all human language has been reduced, conscripted,**
into what Brueggemann calls a language of “**disobedience.**”

The opening chapters of Genesis
are filled with crisis -
rebellion; defiance; excessive pride;
(1)rebellion in the Garden (eating of the Tree)
(2)violence in the family; the Brothers (fratricide);
(3)the Flood (a correction of human depravity;
the “**thoughts of the human heart only evil**
continually” - such a phrase, “only evil continually”

- Genesis 6:5);

(4)in the building of the Tower, though,
there is a different twist; something more pervasive
and nuanced is being addressed; no mention is made
of “only evil continually;” what is noted is that
people want security;
people want to have a name for themselves;
and humanity is seeking to ascend - building for
themselves a temple - reaching
to the heights of heaven.

They show no evidence of knowledge of
covenant conditions of life in creation;
they evidence technical expertise, but a
banal ignorance of any limitations;
they are a threat to themselves, an affront to God,
and they do not know it.

A work-stop order is issued.
The speech of the people is corrupted.
Babel as a word gets introduced, and filters
its way into our vocabulary.

What does it mean, this babel?
Anchor bible dictionary:
in the Babylonian language (Akkadian)
Babel means the “**gate of god,**”
in the Hebrew language it means “**confused.**”
(see Vol. 1, p. 561). The same word;
two very different understandings.

Babel is a linguistic blemish in our humanity,
though our language skills elevate us in
in the grand scheme of creation, so also
our language betrays and separates;

We are as adept at concealing with language
as we are in revealing what we need to
connect with each other;

it is a source of endless frustration.

Say what you mean, mean what you say
is workplace rule No. 1. Fail that and you fall
far short of building good and trustworthy
community. If we fail in this, we mislead
with what is most defining of our lives –
for we are a people with a Word to share
and impart unto the world – the Word of
life/love.

The Tower of Babel is myth, in my estimate.
It is not an event footnoted in our past.
It illuminates our human condition.

Thomas Mann said of myth:
**“It is, it always is, however much
we may say, it was”**

(D. Napier, *Songs in the Vineyard*, p. 2).

The Tower of Babel – gateway to God,
a confused people;
it is, it always is, however much we
may say, it was.

We are never far from the Tower’s looming
shadow and its account corruption
that is confusing and life threatening.

What was it George Bernard Shaw said?
**England and America are two countries
separated by the same language.**

Which brings us back to Pentecost,
and its portrait of connectivity and
communication.
Some great divide has been surmounted.
Connections are being made like never
before. Babel is being reversed in a
language inspired by the Holy Spirit.

And the people generating the speech?
The Galileans!

The Galileans are not any polished source,
nor are they a privileged source.
They aren't included in anybody's top
ten list of trendy places to live.
Yet there they are, engaged in speech
suited for changing the world. They're
hosting a United Nations summit
celebrating gospel, illustrating Babel's demise.

Their lesson? God can use any people to channel
gospel - even Galileans! Indeed, God uses what
is weak to speak, to foil the high and so called
mighty, that they, that all, might be saved.

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THE CHURCH'S SCANDAL OF BABEL AND THE RISE OF PENTECOSTAL SPIRITUALITY

Babel - it is, it always is, however much
we may say it was.

1893 - the first Parliament of the World's Religion; part of
the Chicago World's Fair ... hailed as an event reversing
religious Babel.

Christianity - scandalized by its own internal disunity;
the proliferation of camps, denominations, that
couldn't/wouldn't work together.

Early 1900's, Azusa Street Revival, marked the beginning
of Pentecostal Spirituality, and what Havey Cox has called
"the reshaping of the Religion in the 21st century."

The inspirational leader of that revival movement was

a man by the name of William Seymoure, - Seymoure believed that the **“breaking of the color line and the exercise of spiritual gifts by women** were among the signs authenticating that a new descent of Holy Spirit was at work in his day.

For a time - the body of Christ was being reshaped. All sorts of **“barriers were broken, and dogmatic caps were blown away.”** And yet, like most all dynamce renewal movements, the energy was spent, and most traditional cultural norms rallied and reasserted themselves, dousing the fire.

A reminder.

William Seymoure,
“Pentecost means to live right in the 13th chapter of I Corinthians, which is the standard” (R. Foster, *Streams of Living Water*, p. 120).

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PENTECOST IS A GIFT THAT INSPIRES WORK

Let us not think freedom well won becomes a given.
There needs to be vigilance.

Of course, there are those critics - New York critics as a rule - who say, 'Well, Maya Angelou has a new book out and of course it's good but then she's a natural writer.' Those are the ones I want to grab by the throat and wrestle to the floor because it takes me forever to get it to sing. I work at the language. ~Maya Angelou

And our work with language is to impart gospel.
Always the Holy Spirit is pushing -
impart gospel for good, for life to thrive
with God's blessing.

Kindness is the language

**which the deaf can hear
and the blind can see.**

~ Mark Twain

CONCLUSION

Think about what stirrings
might hatch within your heart,
and within the heart of the church
that is our hope.

Be a rainbow in somebody's cloud.

Don't limit yourself or restrict yourself
in considering what good can come of God
working and speaking through you.

You can be a rainbow in somebody's cloud;
you can be a balm for somebody's sorrow;
you can be an ear to the deaf,
a hand to the helpless,
a messenger of peace bringing
relief to someone whose life is
filled with torment.

And they don't have to look like you,
think like you, sing or pray like you,
for you to be an answer to their prayer,
a light for their shadows.

Amen.

*(Sermons are typically composed in haste,
for the demands of the day are many;
so be charitable as you read; and remember:
the contents of this sermon have not been edited
and may or may not have been a part of its public presentation)*