

## God's Way

### Day of Pentecost

Genesis 11:1-9

<sup>1</sup> Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. <sup>2</sup> And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. <sup>3</sup> And they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly." And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. <sup>4</sup> Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth." <sup>5</sup> The LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built. <sup>6</sup> And the LORD said, "Look, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. <sup>7</sup> Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another's speech." <sup>8</sup> So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. <sup>9</sup> Therefore it was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth; and from there the LORD scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.

If this story appeared anywhere other than the Bible, and if the names of the teams involved were almost anything other than "the whole earth," on the one hand, and "the LORD," on the other, we would recognize it immediately. It is a rumble, a showdown, a battle between two teams on an only apparently level playing field "in the land of Shinar." "Come, let us build ourselves a city!" shouts one team. "Come, let us go down, and confuse their language!" counters the other. The huddles break. The lines form. And the game is on. Only this is worse than David vs. Goliath. One team kneels; the other runs off in confusion. The contest is over before it starts. What kind of story is this, and what does it have to say about God and us? What does it say about God's ways and our ways?

In Genesis, the story is that people were multiplying at a great rate. They were a fine and wonderful people, but they were also a scared people. They

were afraid of being scattered to the farthest reaches of the known world. So they decided to build a huge city, a fortress for themselves and for their God.

God saw that they were one people and had only one language. God was concerned about the possibility of the people not learning anything new, since they already seemed to be a nice homogeneous community. God was concerned about the hubris of the people speaking for God. So God decided to add diversity to the mix. God made it so people did not understand one another. The people stopped building that great city, and they scattered themselves over the earth. Their diversity made it either impossible or highly unlikely that they would work together again.

Ever since, Babel, our way, has come to represent individualism. The nature of capitalism comes from Babel, our way. Each individual has the right to make a profit. All individuals have the right to better themselves.

Our Babel, our way, component is our First-Worldness, our materialism, our economic and military domination. Our Babel, our way, component is everything that built up the Berlin wall, the Israel/Palestine wall, the U.S./Mexico wall, the disputes between Pakistan and India, the former rifts in Ireland and Northern Ireland, the plethora of denominations that seek unity only by throwing others out. Our Babel, our way, component is the fact that most Americans can only speak one language and we expect others to learn ours.

We are addicted to Babel, our way. We grew up believing that Babel is the God of true spirituality. Rugged individualism is the stuff of Babel. Individual thought is the stuff of Babel.

Babel is not all bad. From our Babel component we get cultural diversity. We get to push ourselves outside of our own understandings. We get humor and most things that are fun in this world.

But Babel is also what makes injustice thrive. Babel is what makes a distinction between rich and poor. Babel is what makes people think they can own other people. Babel is what makes people think they can condemn other people. Babel is what makes enemies. Babel is what makes wars to happen. Babel is often lived out in individual and corporate sin, because we tend not to look to God, but to ourselves for the ultimate answers. And what we end up with is confusion. None of us speak the same language anymore. We all have a Babel component.

Today is Pentecost, the birthday of the Church. Pentecost is a snapshot of the opposite of our way of doing things, the opposite of Babel. The Holy Spirit comes to everyone—the intellectual and the unsophisticated, the committed and the apathetic, the fundamentalist and the pagan, the man and the woman and those in between—and for an instant, we all speak the same language.

Right after Pentecost, the early church changed the way they did things. They got rid of their class distinctions. They held all of their money together and gave it out as people needed it. The *kairos* of God came and they saw the

world in a different way. The Spirit moved among them and they no longer saw each other as people to be suspicious of, but as fellow children of God. They had a new freedom, and chance to be a different kind of community. They did not have to go back to Babel.

It did not last. Babel was too familiar. A few short chapters later in the book of Acts, members of the early church fought against each other as some said that it was better for the new foreign converts to be circumcised and stick to the tired old dietary laws of the Jewish culture.

The people on the *Titanic*, the rich and the poor, all knew the experience that changed their lives. It was an equal-opportunity iceberg. The economic and ethnic diversity on the ship for an instant was eradicated by the fact that they all experienced the iceberg and their oceanic cruise was to come to an end. After a moment of Pentecost, God's way, they reverted to familiar Babel, our way, by making distinctions, rich vs. poor, women vs. men, and so on.

In the early church, there was much confusion as to who was to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. Paul, talking about the different gifts that we have, says that some have received the gift of tongues, some the gift of prophecy, still others the gift of teaching, and others the gift of evangelism (1 Cor. 12:8-10). They revisited Babel by trying to declare which gift of the Spirit was the best one.

We are children of Pentecost and children of Babel. We long for the ideal of Pentecost, but we revisit the comfort and predictability of Babel.

We come from very different walks of life. We are different ages, races, genders, and affectional orientations. We have achieved different educational levels. Different life experiences shape us. Sometimes, when we talk to each other, it is like we are talking in different languages. We live in Babel. We work in Babel. We breathe Babel. We are the children of Babel.

We like the familiar and avoid the different. Yes, maybe we like Mexican and Italian food, but how many of us have friends who are from other cultures? Yes, we may like the fashion and the workmanship, but how many people from other cultures do we invite home or to dinner. We all have a Babel component. Recognizing that is one of the best ways we can truly celebrate the unity in diversity that is the feast of Pentecost; celebrating that God is calling us from every culture to be the Church of Jesus Christ.

When we experience *kairos* events—often in response to a crisis—we are of one mind. We all speak the same language. And for a while, we do what redemptive communities normally do, as we help people in their healing. These Pentecost experiences don't always last. They don't last because we have a strong Babel component that causes us to confuse our language and get everything mixed up. Our Babel component, however, also causes us to ask the right questions, to wonder if everyone is really being heard. Our Babel component makes Pentecost meaningful. **Douglas M. Donley**

Let me tell you about two recent experiences of Babel and Pentecost. You know Leroy and I went on vacation at the end of April. We did not get to know our table mates because they did not have dinner with us after the first

night. We didn't know if they changed their meal time, they didn't like the table or servers, or they wanted to eat at the buffet. We decided it was their loss! However we met Ten and Cheng. Cheng is a retired pastor and Ten is his wife. We met on the second day of our vacation at worship and they explained they were Korean-Americans. We never missed an opportunity to greet each other and share the Peace of God. We gave Ten a "faith" bracelet. They demonstrated to us God's way. We divide, God brings us together as Children of God. Last weekend on the flight to Lynchburg, VA Leroy and I met Jeremiah, a young man from New Hampshire who was traveling to visit a sibling and their family. He explained that he liked to travel and enjoyed good food. His father was an emigrant from Guatemala who does construction work. His mom did not have a public job, but home-schooled her 8 children. Jeremiah now works for a pharmaceutical company that will pay for his college education. He wanted to know all about the women's retreat we were going to attend and said it was important for people to model love rather than always preaching about love. I experienced in our conversation God's way, not our way.

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