



VILLAGE
CHURCH
Presbyterian (USA)

They All Spoke the Same Language (Sure they did)

SCRIPTURE:
Genesis 11,
Acts 2:1-13

May 28, 2023 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

The Tower of Babel is a strange story, which is a theme for these Genesis tales. These stories may not be literal, but they do name certain realities of being human. Like the importance of seeing another human as bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh. Like the awareness that we seldom do that which we believe is wrong; no, we first justify why what we do is good. And the importance of choosing who we will be in the face of life's disappointments. So, what truth lies in this old story of the tower?

It says they all had one language and the same words and that made God nervous. So, God confuses human's speech. Why? It seems that having the same language would aid communication. If we all spoke the same language, then mutual understanding—even unity—would be enhanced, wouldn't it? Why is God so concerned about the human family speaking one language? If I understand it, I think it has something to do with right-sizing us in the presence of God. Stay with me.

Along with this story of the tower, we read what happened on Pentecost. There were Parthians, Medes, Elamites, residents of Mesopotamia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Cretans and Arabs. Languages from all over the known world were there that day. It was chaotic. Given that no one spoke the same language, God had to find a way for us to understand one another. It took a miracle. It seems what God did at Pentecost is an antidote to what God did at Babel. It's all about language. It would be easier if everyone spoke the same language.

My father did a pulpit exchange. He went to Scotland and preached for a congregation there for a summer, and David, the preacher from that Scottish church, came and lived in my dad's home here in the States. Since my dad and I lived in the same town at the time, he told David, if you have any trouble with

the house, just call Tom. He probably won't be any help, but call him anyway. Well, he did.

"Tom, it's David." "Yes, David. How are you?" "Fine. But I can't find your father's torch. I'm looking for the torch." "I'm sorry. You are looking for what?" "The torch," he said. "Do you know where he keeps it?" "Well, David, Dad hasn't used a torch for some time now." I began to wonder if my father's fire insurance was up to date. "Why do you need a torch?" "Tom, the lights aren't on."

"Look in the drawer next to the washing machine. You will find a flashlight. That might help." "What's a flashlight?" he said. Oh... a torch must be a flashlight.

It would be so much easier if we all used the same language and had the same words. Otherwise, things are confusing. Why did God cause all this confusion—a confusion God has to repair at Pentecost?

First: the Tower of Babel identifies the seductive temptation to assume that what is a norm for me is a universal norm. When we surround ourselves with people who use all the same words, think the same things, view the world the same way... there is comfort. That's not a bad thing. But it's tempting to assume that our view is universal—at least for reasonable people. And the temptation when we meet folks who don't share our world view is to assume their difference is deficient.

You know what this is like. As a little kid you go to a friend's house. Your buddy invites you over for the day. But at lunch time, things get confusing because your mom cuts the grilled-cheese sandwich in triangles but your friend's mom cuts it in half, and all of a sudden you are eating with Parthians, Medes and Elamites. Confusing.

You go to college and while you can't begin the day without making the bed and putting everything in its place, your roommate has a more fluid organizational plan. You are living with Cretans. Confusing.

You get married and discover that your beloved has to have blinking lights on the Christmas tree, when everyone knows constant white lights are what Jesus prefers. And you don't know if you have married one from Pamphylia, but you know she's not from around here.

When we surround ourselves with those who talk our talk, it's easy to assume that what is a norm for me is the universal norm. But that makes our worldview, and therefore our faith, too small. God doesn't want our worldview to be small. So, God confused speech, so we would have to encounter a different way of telling the truth.

A second spiritual lesson in this tower story is the danger of inappropriate pride that can be associated with the way I see the world. Fred Craddock said he was on an airplane flying into Oklahoma City. Seated next to him was a young couple. He asked them, "Where are you traveling from?" "We were on vacation in Europe." "Europe? What countries were your favorites?" She said, "Oh, they were all so beautiful, but my favorite was the Alps. The Alps took my breath away. So beautiful. I could have stayed there forever." The plane began its descent. As the plane dipped down toward the Oklahoma City airport, she pulled out a camera, pressed it against the window, and started clicking. Fred said, "Pardon me, you've been in the Alps and you're taking pictures of Oklahoma?" She looked at him and said, "Of course, this is home."¹

Love of home is a good thing. Cherishing the way of life that home has taught us reveals a posture of gratitude. But sometimes that gratitude can devolve into arrogance. Arrogance about our ways is not a good thing.

I told you before that I traveled to Nicaragua in the 1980s. I stayed with a family there with two boys, Marco and José. My Spanish was limited. By limited, I mean I knew: gracias, adios, and taco. So, unless I was in a situation when I needed to say, "Thanks for the taco, I gotta go," I was out of luck. But Marco and José were patient guys. We sat together for hours communicating. We used gestures and a few words and drew in the dirt. They were generous and patient.

I didn't realize how generous until I was returning home. We landed in Houston. The first thing I wanted was McDonalds. (I've changed a bit since then.) After two weeks of rice and beans for every meal I wanted a Big Mac. I found a McDonalds in the airport. As it turns out, the man in front of me in line was Latino. His English language skills were lacking. He tried to order but it was slow. The man behind the counter said to him, "I'm sorry, there's a line. Come back when you can speak English." Then he said to me, "How can I help you?" I said, "I'm not hungry anymore." If I understand this text, it points to the spiritual temptation of arrogance; the assumption that the ways of home are the ways of God.

But there is a third and maybe more important spiritual lesson here. And that is the consequence of not simply being unable to understand one another, but of choosing not to understand one another. The text says they all spoke the same language and I think: Sure they did. How did that happen? Everyone uses the same words, tells the same story, speaks the same truth? Really? The only way for everyone to speak the same language is if some languages are not being heard. The only way for everyone to use the same words is for some voices to be silenced. This is the ultimate concern of the text.

The effort to silence voices is as old as Genesis and as current as today's news. According to PEN America,² over the last year, more than half the states in our nation have passed legislation to ban books from school curriculum or libraries. Again, according to PEN America, there are identifiable targets. The effort is to remove the voices of people of color and the LGBTQ+ community. Books that address life among these neighbors, or are authored by these neighbors, are finding themselves targets for book banning. Many of the books being banned I do not know, but some I have read and I am baffled as to why we would not want our children to know what life is like for folks who may speak a different language or use different words than we use in my house. Perhaps these legislators will want to ban the book of Genesis as well, because as I understand it, the effort to construct a truth from my story only, construct a truth

1 Fred B. Craddock, *Craddock Stories* (2001) p. 85.

2 PEN America, a 501(c)(3) organization founded in 1922, works to ensure that people everywhere have the freedom to create literature, to convey information and ideas, to express their views, and to access the views, ideas, and literatures of others; pen.org.

from my experience only, to construct a truth from my words only, is exactly what God was trying to stop at Babel. To silence the voices of our neighbors is not loving; it is not holy.

At Babel, God confused language—but at Pentecost, God bridged differences. At Pentecost, God sought to bring unity in the midst of confusion. But this is the key: God did not do this by eliminating differences. God did not give everyone the same language. No, God gave us the capacity to speak and listen amidst the difference. The bridge was created by paying attention to those of other languages.

This is a critical spiritual practice. Because when we surround ourselves with voices that are just like ours, the temptation is to assume we have God fig-

ured out. We know what there is to know about God.

That is a dangerous place to be. That is why God confuses the language so that we can be reminded that there are others who have a different experience, others who have a different narrative, others who speak truth with a different voice. And rather than silencing that truth, we should be curious because it just may be the way God is teaching us about the ways of God.

When I depend on my own words, my own truth, my own experience alone, it is inevitable that my understanding of God will be too small. We need to be right-sized and reminded that God, and therefore truth, is always bigger than we think. The diversity of human speech is a reminder of this truth.