

Pentecost: The Ability to 'Hear'

Genesis 11:1-9 Acts 2:1-21 Rev. Todd B. Freeman
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In the great Old Testament narrative of the Tower of Babel, we read, “Now the whole earth had one language and the same words... And they said to one another, ‘Come, let us make bricks...’ ...Then they said, ‘Come, let us build...’ ...And the Lord said, ‘...Come, let us go down, and confuse their language...so that they will not understand one another’s speech.’ So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of the earth, and they left off building the city” (Gen. 11:1-9).

Like most of the Book of Genesis, this is what is called an “origin” story. While other stories in Genesis seek to answer questions like: Why are we here? Why do we do that which is not pleasing in the sight of God? and Where did our people come from?, **the Tower of Babel story was most likely written to try and explain why there is diversity in the human family – why people look and speak differently from one another.** And like other “origin” stories I do not think this particular text was ever meant by the author to be interpreted as a literal historical event.

This fascinating narrative begins with the monotony of a single language in one location. It ends in a babble of multiple languages all over the earth. In essence, God transformed their uniformity into multiplicity – their sameness into diversity.

A careful reading of this ancient text reveals that God, our Creator, delights in differentiation and variety in God’s vast creation. So when God brings to an end the building of the Tower of Babel, we are to discern that this action expresses God’s opposition to all the towers of cultural, social, religious or political conformity and sameness that men and women try to construct today.

The Babel narrative protests against every human effort to achieve a sense of unity through uniformity – of either forcing or expecting all people to be the same. There are many fundamentalists, both conservative and liberal, who would do well to learn this.

Let’s now switch gears and look at today’s text from the New Testament. When Luke wrote his account in the book of Acts of the gift of the Holy Spirit at **Pentecost** it seems that he had the narrative of the Tower of Babel in mind, and that he wanted his readers to recall it as well. There are lots of linkages between the two narratives. In both, people have gathered together “*in one place*” (Acts 2:1). In both, divine intervention “*from heaven*” transforms the circumstances of those who have gathered (Acts 2:2). And, of course, **the main similarity between the two narratives is that they both focus on language and stress the issue of being able to hear and understand.** I am among those who think that these two stories are meant to be read together - like bookends. They are two separate but related depictions.

Just as the account of the fall from grace in the Garden of Eden seeks to explain the origin of pain, toil, and death, so the Babel narrative seeks to explain why people are not able to understand each other. In a round about way, the story is revealing that

our human predicament is that is *not* the way God intended human life to be. For as revealed in Luke's Pentecost narrative God intervenes so that people *will* understand one another (which is an entirely different issue than uniformity).

We learn that the presence of the Holy Spirit brings a miracle of listening – the ability to truly hear what others are saying! From verse 6 we read, “Each one heard them speaking in the native language...” From verse 8, “And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?” And from verse 11, “In our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.”

The miracle of Pentecost, the gift of the Spirit, creates “a fresh capacity to listen,” as theologian Walter Brueggemann observes in his book entitled, *Genesis*. He contends that **the Holy Spirit creates a capacity to hear and then respond to persons who are different than ourselves.**

Now let me digress for just a moment. I must admit that I’m a big fan of the recent movie *Avatar*, by James Cameron. There is one particular line that reoccurs throughout the movie that received a lot of attention. Indigenous people of the planet Pandora are called the Na’vi. When the Na’vi meet, they greet each other with the phrase, “**I see you.**” This is much more, however, than a simple greeting of “hello.” It is much deeper than literally seeing someone in the visual sense.

However, “I see you,” which is so effectively used by James Cameron in his *Avatar* movie, is not a new concept. Instead, it has very deep roots. Deep religious roots and deep cultural roots – especially in Africa.

To look at another person and say, “I see you” is to **look beneath the surface** and acknowledge the inner being and personhood of the one being greeted. “I see you,” is the ability to look inside and understand those who are different from ourselves. Perhaps most importantly, it means **recognizing our connectedness**. The phrase, therefore, takes on both emotional and spiritual dimensions.

It is my belief that the Pentecost miracle of being able to “hear” one another carries the same meaning as being able to “see” one another. Perhaps one of the primary purposes of this Pentecost story, then, is to indicate that **it is the Holy Spirit, God’s presence within us, that allows us to truly “hear” and understand and connect with others, especially with those who are different from ourselves.**

In watching *Avatar*, we are forced to face our all-too-pervasive inability to understand how those we perceive as “other,” as “aliens,” as inhuman, are just as “human” as ourselves. Thousands of years earlier, the story of Pentecost caused people to face much the same issue.

So this begs the question: **Who are the people who are different from you**, from us, whether it be religiously, theologically, politically, culturally, or socially? Are you and I, are we, truly “hearing” them?

All this is a good reminder of the crucial importance of providing a safe space here at College Hill for others to share their stories and lives with us – a hospitable place, a place of sanctuary in which, by the grace of God’s Spirit, we are able “hear” one another.

That was one of the blessings we experienced at this year’s All-church retreat when, in a literal way, using translators, our English and Spanish speaking folks were able to share some of their life journey with one another. The result, whenever this happens, is the **building of a truer sense of community and connectedness** through the ability to actually hear, listen to, and therefore understand one another.

German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, imprisoned and finally killed by the Nazis, wrote in his book *Life Together*, that there is a common “kind of listening with half an ear that presumes already to know what the other has to say... an impatient, inattentive listening, that despises the [other] and is only waiting for a chance to speak and thus get rid of the other person.” We all know of examples in our own lives when we, or others, are stricken with that dreaded disease known as “selective listening.”

At Pentecost, however, we celebrate the gift of God’s Spirit that creates in us a fresh capacity to listen – and not just to the words others are speaking, but rather deep into the heart and mind of the person who is speaking those words. In the Spirit the loud certainty of our own convictions need not keep us from really hearing and considering the ideas and perspectives of other persons.

Preacher Steven MacArthur summarizes the Pentecost story this way, “In the Spirit we are brought out of the locked-door mentality of natural self-centeredness into lives of genuine encounter with diverse persons, just as the first fearful disciples were driven from an upper room with locked doors into Jerusalem streets teeming with visitors from all over the world.”

Like those disciples, we too are sent forth from these sanctuary walls each Sunday out into our world, a world teeming with people different from ourselves in many ways.

So as we celebrate our unity in Christ, let us also remember to always celebrate our diversity. We can accomplish that through the Spirit-given gift and ability to hear and see, and therefore connect with and understand one another!

Amen.

Resource:
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