

ONE LANGUAGE AND THE SAME WORDS

Sermon preached by the Rev. Douglas Clark, May 24, 2015

Pentecost, Part I – 10:00 a.m.

First Congregational Church, UCC, Haddam, CT

“In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, diversity; in all things, charity”

Genesis 11:1-9 (NRSV, *slightly adapted*)

Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. And as people migrated from the east, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. 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. 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.”

The LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built. 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. Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another’s speech.” So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. 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.

In the calendar of the Christian year, today is Pentecost Sunday, when we celebrate the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Jesus' disciples in Jerusalem, seven weeks after his resurrection on Easter Sunday. The story is told in the second chapter of the book of Acts. Here is how it begins: "All of the disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

"Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, 'Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?'" (Acts 2:4-8).

Since Pentecost this year falls during the Memorial Day weekend, we've postponed our celebration of Pentecost to next Sunday. And since the liturgical color for Pentecost is red, I would ask everyone to wear red next Sunday.

It's often the case that a story in the New Testament reflects back in some way to a story, or a teaching, or a prophecy in the Hebrew Bible. Pentecost is no different. As we will hear next Sunday, the New Testament interprets Pentecost as the fulfillment of a prophecy from the book of Joel in the Old Testament. The story of the linguistic miracle of Pentecost also reflects back to the story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis, chapter 11, which is in part about the "breakup of linguistic unity."

If you do a Google Images search for "Tower of Babel," you will see many similar images, or artistic representations, of the tower in this biblical story. One example of these images is on the cover of today's worship bulletin. It depicts a huge, many-storied structure. Historians and archaeologists have determined that in the ancient Near East prior to the time of Abraham, many cities had towers called "ziggurats," which were often seven stories high. These towers were believed to connect heaven and earth in some way, though they were certainly not as tall as the one depicted on the bulletin cover.

The focus of the story, however, is not on the tower itself, but on what the building of the tower represents in terms of human ambition and arrogance. The story imagines a time when the human population on the earth, all descended from a common ancestral couple, still has one common language "with the same words." This common language enables human beings to cooperate effectively in their common building project.

This could be a good thing. But it could also be a bad thing. As God observes, "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." Just think of what human beings have been able to do during our lifetimes, using the common language of science and technology. Vaccines have helped to eliminate—or almost eliminate—polio and smallpox. This is a good thing. Research into nuclear energy—the Manhattan project—led to the development and proliferation of nuclear weapons, which is a bad thing, since it threatens a scale of destruction unparalleled in human history.

The common language of science and technology has enabled humankind to engage in both good and evil on a massive scale. So the anxiety that God

expresses in the biblical story resonates with our own experiences of good and evil on an international, global scale. In the story, God's solution to this problem is to create a proliferation of different languages, thus leading to humankind's "confusion," our inability to communicate with one another.

The story of Pentecost, which will be the focus of our worship next Sunday, is not about the restoration of this original linguistic unity. It is rather about the overcoming of linguistic barriers to the global expansion of the Christian church. It's like the translation of the Bible into the amazing variety of world languages, so that people from any cultural or linguistic background can hear, and respond to, the story the church has to tell about Jesus.

It is true today, as it was two thousand years ago on the first Pentecost, that not only do we hear the story of Jesus in our own languages, but we also filter this story through our own cultural lenses. Even though we may speak the same language, we have different cultural filters through which we see the story.

It saddens me to realize that, for a variety of reasons, American Christians still do not have a common moral language that is grounded in the story of Jesus. It saddens me to know that American Christians are so divided over questions of sexual orientation and gender identity that we are prevented from offering a common witness against the evils of racism and violence and poverty.

I read recently of an "unusual ecumenical project" in the small Arizona town of Fountain Hills. A group of pastors has launched a sermon series attacking another pastor and congregation in their town. Somehow these pastors claim that their "coordinated sermon series against 'progressive Christianity'" will serve to "demonstrate the unity of the body of Christ."¹

Some of these pastors have accused the Fountains United Methodist Church of being an "apostate church" and their pastor, the Rev. David Felten, of being a "vicious intolerant hypocrite."² Rather than demonstrating the unity of the body of Christ, this so-called "ecumenical" project is a sad display of the disunity of the body of Christ.

Now I recognize that there are significant theological and ethical differences between conservative Christians and progressive Christians, between evangelical Christians and ecumenical Christians. I consider myself to be a progressive, ecumenical Christian. I am opposed to some of the things that are taught in some of the more fundamentalist forms of American Christianity. But would I organize, or participate in, a smear campaign against a conservative congregation or evangelical pastor in my community? Of course not.

When Jesus commands us to love one another in the discipleship community, I'm sure he realizes that we won't always like one another. In fact, we know directly from the letters of Paul, and indirectly from the Gospels, that even the earliest Christian congregations had to wrestle with conflict and division. Which is one of the reasons why Paul used the image of the "body of Christ" as his organizing metaphor for the church. A smear campaign by a group of

¹ <http://www.christianitytoday.com/gleanings/2015/may/theology-feud-progressive-christianity-fountain-hills-az.html>.

² <http://www.thefountainsumc.org/2015/05/16/campaign-against-progressive-christianity/>.

churches in the town of Fountain Hills, Arizona, that is directed toward another Christian church in that community, is in fact a wounding of the body of Christ.

I'm the first to admit that progressive, ecumenical Christians like myself are flawed human beings who don't have an exclusive claim to religious or spiritual truth. I believe that as a Christian, I am not only flawed by sin, but also redeemed by grace. But this is not a cause for boasting. It is rather cause for humility, coupled with a conviction that the cause of Jesus is the cause of reconciliation, and this should be our cause as well.

If only those Christians who are so vocal about the supposed evils of sexual orientation and gender identity could realize how much harm their language is doing to real people, perhaps they could step back from their inflammatory rhetoric. Perhaps they could ask themselves, Is this really how Jesus would want me to treat my neighbor? Perhaps those Fountain Hills pastors who are so self-righteous about their own theology should ask themselves: Is this really how Jesus would want us to treat a brother in Christ, even if we have strong agreements with that brother? Such a public display of disrespect seems unChristian to me. The "common language" of homophobia is causing harm instead of contributing to the common good.

Still, I think we human beings yearn for a common language that will enable us to find common ground in seeking peace and justice on earth and among all nations. For example, in the matter of climate change and global warming, the common language of science and technology is necessary but not sufficient, as philosophers say. We also need a common moral language that can not only inform us, but also inspire us to common action for the good all living things on earth. We need a common moral language that can both inform us and inspire us to common action on behalf of all those who are hungry or thirsty or strangers or naked or sick or in prison (Matthew 25:35-36).

As I've probably said before from this pulpit, I remain convinced that the Christian story can make a significant contribution to the human quest for a common moral language. I don't believe that you have to be religious, or Christian, to be a moral person. But I do believe that if I claim to be a Christian, if I claim to be a follower and friend of Jesus, then I have committed myself to a particular vision and version of truth, goodness, and beauty. I have committed myself to Jesus' vision of the moral life, which he has laid out most clearly in the Sermon on the Mount and the double love commandment and the parable of the Good Samaritan.

I yearn for that day when the global Christian community will speak a common moral language that is grounded in love of neighbor and care for God's creation. I yearn for that day when the global human family will speak a common moral language that is grounded in love of neighbor and care for God's creation. I yearn for that day when the violence of our cultural and ideological wars, both here at home and around the world, will come to an end. I yearn for that day when our common human project will no longer be ambition and arrogance, but