

Pentecost ~ May 11, 2008 *Receiving the Holy Spirit*
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Genesis 11:1-9

Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. ²And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. ³And they said to one another, “Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly.” And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. ⁴Then 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.”

⁵The Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built. ⁶And 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. ⁷Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another’s speech.” ⁸So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. ⁹Therefore it was called Babel, because there God confused the language of all the earth; and from there God scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.

Acts 2:1-21.

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ²And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

⁵Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. ⁷Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?” ⁸And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ⁹Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” ¹²All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” ¹³But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.”

¹⁴But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, “Men and women of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. ¹⁵Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. ¹⁶No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: ¹⁷‘In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. ¹⁸Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. ¹⁹And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. ²⁰The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the great and glorious day of our God. ²¹Then everyone who calls on the name of our God shall be saved.’

Imagine with me for a moment that you are seated in Symphony Hall. It’s the season for Pops and the orchestra is tuning up before the concert begins. Each player is concentrating with all possible energy on his or her particular instrument, sharpening its pitch and resonance and bringing it to the peak of its ability to do what it is there to do.

The results for those who are listening is a cacophony of noise – hoots and squeaks and squawks and earsplitting dissonance that could almost be considered painful to the ear.

Then something wonderful happens. Keith Lockhart appears and calls the orchestra members to order. He raises his baton and there is expectant silence. As his baton goes down, each of those instruments now becomes part of a total unity. Each instrument contributes to the harmony of the whole. Unity and power and beauty transcend the individual efforts and transform dissonance to remarkable harmony and meaning.

Hold that image in your imagination as you ponder this morning's scripture lessons. On the one hand we have the story of the Tower of Babel. It is a story written to explain the confusion of tongues and the sounds among people on earth. Like the symphony orchestra tuning up before the concert, the people of Babel hoot and squeak and squawk with dissonance and disunity. The key to understanding one interpretation of this lesson is found in vs. 4 where the Israelites plan to build a city and a tall tower so that they can "make a name for themselves." It is reminiscent of the Garden of Eden when Adam and Eve choose to eat from the forbidden Tree of Knowledge, thereby exercising pride and arrogance while wanting to have knowledge so as to be like God. This is contrary to God's intentions. God desires humankind to worship God alone, to be humble as in human, humane, humility, humus, made from the earth. And so now the language of these prideful people is confused and there is no longer common understanding.

Everywhere we look in our world we find illustrations of a Babel world where people speak in different languages and are unable to understand one another. Conflict arises. The human tendency to arrogance is exacerbated. Violence is the norm.

Surely when we think of the Middle East, and particularly of Israel and Palestine, we conjure up images of Babel itself. As the Israeli government celebrates the 60th anniversary of its national birth, the Palestinians refuse to send representatives to the three day conference that Shimon Peres, Israel's president, has planned - a conference which will address some of the biggest challenges facing humankind. There is no common language and this ongoing language barrier between Israel and Palestine keeps these nations embattled with one another, leaving little room for solutions. Meanwhile the violence in Israel and in the occupied Palestinian territories continues, bringing death and hardship upon men, women, children and innocent bystanders. Houses continue to be demolished; suicide bombings are a means of retaliation; language is used to berate and words of hatred are the norm.

Is it not also true between the Hutu and the Tutsi peoples in Africa? Anyone who saw the movie *Hotel Rwanda*, which has been called an African *Schindler's List*, know all too well about the atrocity in Rwanda where in three months, a million people were brutally murdered. Tensions between the Hutu and Tutsi people led to a civil war in which Tutsi and moderate Hutus were killed by Hutu militias. To this day, tensions, violence and brutality continue in this Babel like world. Two summers ago, my husband, Jay, took a group of Boston College graduate students to Tanzania to a refugee camp in Kibondo, which is located in the northwest corner of Tanzania. There he met Nijabenda Limeck and his wife, Estella, and their 4 children who had crossed the border from neighboring Burundi to escape death for you see, Nijabenda is a Hutu and his wife, a Tutsi. Her uncle, who had raised her, threatened to murder Nijabenda and the children because they were the "enemy people." The Babel language of hatred, violence and revenge creates only dissonance and cacophony between human beings on this earth.

Is not our communication and language between us and the environment also lacking understanding? The use and abuse of natural resources makes for hoots and squeaks and squawks and earsplitting dissonance in the Babel world of nature as polar icecaps melt and species become extinct as climate patterns change and natural resources slowly become an extravagant commodity.

And as the rich grow richer and the poor grow poorer in our Babel world, there seems to be no common language to solve the problem of hunger. As grocery prices sky rocket and people begin to make choices between food and shelter, the cries of the hungry hardly reach the ears of those of us who have refrigerators filled with perishables and cupboards overflowing with non perishables.

Even within our own United Methodist denomination there seems to be too much Babel. Before our recent General Conference gathering in Fort Worth, Texas, I read about Rev. Bill Taylor who was recently forced to leave his church after refusing to condemn his gay son. A former District Superintendent in Texas, Taylor then served as pastor of the First UMC in Conroe, Texas, a church that he grew from 2400 members to 3100 members while doubling their budget from \$1 to \$2 million. In 2005, his eldest child, Dawson, shared with Bill and his wife, Roxanne, that he was gay. At first their world caved in. They prayed that God would either change Dawson into a “normal” heterosexual son or that God would change them into fully accepting their son, his sexual orientation and his life. As they read and learned more about homosexuality, the Taylors came to believe that Dawson had been born gay and had never had a choice about his sexual orientation. They also acknowledged that there are a number of issues in the bible that need to be challenged. Their ultimate conclusion was that homosexuality is not a sin. Because they supported their son’s ordination in the United Church of Christ as an openly gay pastor, Bill Taylor was asked to take a leave of absence from his pulpit in the UMC. Surely he pinned his hope on General Conference changing the denominations stance on homosexuality, at least acknowledging that we are of different minds on the matter. But instead, General Conference voted to uphold the current wording in our *Book of Discipline* that states that “the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching.” And so the denomination continues to be oppressive to those who are created in God’s image. Our language barrier defies the potential unity of God’s people.

All around us are signs that we live in a Babel world. It would seem that only God could transform peoples ability to hear one another, to respect one another, to tolerate and even celebrate differences. And that is the point of Pentecost! Pentecost is when the conductor of the orchestra, whom we recognize as the Holy Spirit, is sent to bring order out of disorder, to make harmony out of dissonance as we witness people of many languages coming together and sharing the wonderful words of God. The testimony of Acts 2 does not overturn the multiplicity of languages, but enables people who speak various languages to hear and understand one gospel for all the earth. Perhaps the miracle of Pentecost is everyone’s fresh capacity to listen, not just with the ear, but also with the heart.

God transforms a Babel world into a Pentecost world and if we look around us, we need not be hard pressed to find signs and events and people and places where God’s spirit empowers acceptance and tolerance, hope and peace. Language barriers are broken down, not because people understand different dialects and foreign languages, but because the Holy Spirit serves as a translator so that people can hear each other in their various life situations.

So it is in the Occupied Territories in Israel where members of ICAHD (The Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions) have moved from merely protesting actions of Israeli house demolitions to actually partnering with Palestinians in rebuilding bulldozed homes. The home of Salim Shawamreh is a case in point. Salim’s ancestors lived for centuries on a farm with grape vines and live trees. In 1948 Israeli soldiers drove them off their land and destroyed their village. Later in 1967 Salim’s family was driven out of their home in Jerusalem and forced to move to a UN refugee camp in the West Bank. It was there in 1995 that I first saw this camp and visited in the home of one of the Palestinian refugees. After many years of saving, Salim bought a plot of land in East Jerusalem. After building a home there without a permit, once again his home was demolished, this time in 1998. But ICAHD has been able to help Salim rebuild yet again and so today, he and his family have a home because of the Pentecost spirit of Jews and Muslims and Christians who speak the same language of the heart and work together for justice and peace..

Nijabenda Limeck and Estella and their 4 children have grown more and more desperate in the refugee camp in Kibondo. Recently, Tanzania has ordered the closing of all refugee camps in Tanzania. Thank goodness for the United Nations High Commission for Refugees and to the International Rescue Committee that is based in the United States. With the help of donor nations, both of these organizations work to resettle refugees. Recently the United States alone took in 15,000 refugees from Africa for resettlement in the United States. And in the midst of all of their distress, Nijabenda and Estella continue to be a symbol of a family that can cross language barriers where enemies become loved ones, even husband and wife. They have great faith that someday they will be able to move on and claim the fullness of life itself.

Did you notice this past week's news report about local citizens in the Plymouth, NH area who have organized themselves into a nonprofit group called Plymouth Area Renewable Energy Initiative? The *Boston Globe* covered a story about their hands-on energy raiser work as they installed solar energy systems in peoples homes. They estimate that the solar hot water systems that they have installed in 23 homes in the area has saved more than 10,000 gallons of oil. These people are listening to what the environment has to say and they are responding in a Pentecost spirit, making alternative choices to resource consumption. Solar heated water might seem like a mighty small contribution to the environmental crisis that God's world is facing, but every little bit makes a difference.

And what about the 40,000 who walked for hunger in the pouring rain last Sunday raising \$3.8 million that will benefit over 400 local agencies. Surely this annual Walk for Hunger is a sign of the Spirit of Pentecost. And for those of us who didn't raise pledges and make the 22 mile walk, there's something that we can do right here, locally, to feed the hungry and help close the gap between the "haves" and the "have nots." The Outreach Committee will bring us that Pentecost challenge in a Ministry Moment later in the service. I do believe that we all need to struggle with the saying....Live more simply that others might simply live.

Thank God that there are organizations and movements in our United Methodist denomination that are radiant with the Pentecost spirit. Our national Reconciling Ministries Network ministers not only to gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender adults, it also ministers to parents and youth and clergy and provides educational resources that promote a language of tolerance and acceptance. The Church within a Church Movement is another vehicle that was founded upon the theology of inclusion. Next fall, this Methodist based movement is planning an extraordinary, ecumenical ordination in the Methodist tradition and will ordain candidates for ministry that are currently unable to be ordained in the United Methodist denomination because of sexual orientation, gender identity or unwillingness to abide by the language of our *Book of Discipline*. Such bold and prophetic events are made possible only by the spirit of Pentecost.

Despair not! The Paraclete, the Advocate, the Comforter, the Spirit of God, which Jesus promised would be sent, arrived on Pentecost over 2,000 years ago. And that same Spirit is what makes listening to one another, despite our differences, possible. May we never tire in our efforts of seeking this Spirit, who indeed conducts not only our ministries at Holy Trinity, but all of the hope-filled conversations in this world where people listen to one another with their hearts and make music that sounds like a symphony to God. Thanks be to God for Pentecost!

Alleluia! Amen!