

Pentecost (RCL/B): "Grace Place Vs. Babel"

Acts 2:1-21

May 19, 2024

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

A "babbling" brook sounds nice and inviting. But it's **not** so nice when someone tells us, "You're babbling!" "Babble" is a good example of onomatopoeia: words that echo the sound they describe. Gush. Whir. Whoosh. Splash. Bang. Tweet. Crash. Boom. Babble, babble, babble, babble: words that don't make sense. Kind of like the name Barbara, that comes from the Greek word for strange. The unfamiliar language of people the Greeks dubbed as barbarians sounded to them like, "Bar, bar, bar, bar." An untrained ear not "tuned" to understand that foreign language heard something ridiculous, and falsely judged it as an attempt at language that was laughable. That was a very limited perspective, informed only by ignorance.

Another Babel comes to mind this weekend: Babel with a capital B, spelled differently than a babbling brook or a babbling fool, Babel as in "the Tower of." We find the brief story in Genesis 11 (1-9). Humanity spoke 1 language and decided to "*make a name for ourselves*" (Gen. 11:4c), by building a tower so high it would approach Heaven. God wasn't so happy about that and confused that 1 language into many different tongues. Now instead of communicating, the people were merely **babbling** at each other.

On Pentecost God reversed that. Whatever the disciples preached in Galilean fell on the ears of the Greeks as Greek, on the ears of the Romans as Latin, on the ears of Egyptians as Egyptian, and on and on and on. **Many** heard the Gospel, the good news about Jesus' life, death and resurrection, intelligibly, in their own language. But not **everyone**.

*All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?"
But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine." (Acts 2:12-13)*

I think we can safely assume the people who thought the disciples were drunk heard only babbling from them. What was spoken by the disciples made sense to others, but not to the ones who sneered. They were not on “receive,” not tuned to the right channel.

Some of you are familiar with language apps that enable Smart phone users to translate a menu from French or Italian into English. The folks who sneered were not so blessed. But lack of technology wasn’t their true problem. They had an issue of the heart, not a problem with hardware or software. They had an issue involving the soul and not the intellect.

Basically, we have to be in a **grace place** to hear what God has to say on any given day. Not everyone in Jerusalem on the first Pentecost left believing that they’d participated in a miracle. Some went home stumped. “What was the big deal? Why were people acting so impressed by a bunch of drunks? I don’t get it.”

Realizing that those present had very different experiences of the same event, I was reminded of a passage from one of C.S. Lewis’ *Chronicles of Narnia*, the volume called *The Last Battle*. At the end of the story, the Dwarves, who have behaved very poorly throughout, are convinced they are imprisoned:

“...In this pitch-black, poky, smelly little hole of a stable....”

“But it isn’t dark, you poor stupid Dwarfs,” said Lucy. “Can’t you see? Look up! Look round! Can’t you see the sky and the trees and the flowers? Can’t you see *me*?”

“How in the name of all Humbug can I see what ain’t there? And how can I see you any more than you can see me in this pitch darkness?” ...

“Oh the poor things! This is dreadful,” said Lucy. Then she had an idea. She stooped and picked some wild violets. “Listen, Dwarf,” she said. Even if your eyes are wrong, perhaps your nose is all right: can you smell *that*?” She leaned across and held the fresh, damp flowers to [the Dwarf’s] ugly nose. But she had to jump back quickly in order to avoid a blow from his hard little fist.

“None of that!” he shouted. “How dare you! What do you mean by shoving a lot of filthy stable-litter in my face? There was a thistle in it too....”¹

The lion Aslan, the Christ figure in the *Chronicles of Narnia*, shows up at this point, and kind Lucy begs him to help the poor, deluded, very confused Dwarfs.

“Dearest,” said Aslan, “I will show you both what I can do, and what I cannot, do.” ...

Aslan raised his head and shook his mane. Instantly a glorious feast appeared on the Dwarfs’ knees: pies and... pigeons and trifles and ices, and each Dwarf had a goblet of good wine in his right hand. But it wasn’t much use. They began eating and drinking greedily enough, but it was clear that they couldn’t taste it properly. They thought they were eating and drinking only the sort of things you might find in a stable. One said he was trying to eat hay and another said he got a bit of an old turnip and a third said he’d found a raw cabbage leaf. And they raised golden goblets of rich red wine to their lips and said, “Ugh! Fancy drinking dirty water out of trough that a donkey’s been at! Never thought we’d come to this.” ...

“You see, said Aslan. “They will not let us help them. They have chosen cunning instead of belief. Their prison is only in their own minds, yet they are in prison; and so afraid of being taken in that they cannot be taken out...”²

But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.” It’s like a symphony was playing in Jerusalem that day, but some heard only discordant notes from untuned instruments. Or like a lark was singing and some heard only a rhino bellowing. Or like a brook was babbling and some heard only sleet slapping the sidewalk. Because: we have to be in a **grace place** to hear what God has to say on any given day.

Let’s act and speak in such a way that others get the true message God is wanting to send through us. ‘Ever heard this? “Your actions are speaking so loudly, they’re drowning out your words!” In other words, “Your behavior isn’t mirroring your message.” Bottom line: it doesn’t work to preach love and practice hate.

Let’s pray we’re in a grace place, open to the message God is sending **to** us today. Let’s also pray and work to be wise communicators of the messages God is sending **through** us today to others. I’m thinking of a couple instances from home. I’m doing the

dishes in the kitchen and I hear something garbled coming from Pastor Mark in the dining room. “You know I can’t hear you when the water’s running!” I say. On good days, I then pause my clean-up, turn off the water, and listen to him repeat whatever it was he said. Or I’m trying to communicate something to him, from the kitchen to the TV room, even further away than the dining room. I can then expect to hear, “Excuse me??” or “What??” If I’m lazy I’ll just shout louder, never a terribly efficient or polite response. If I’m wise I’ll walk to whatever room Pastor Mark is in, and speak to him, face to face. Much better! More courteous and more effective.

Louder isn’t always better. It isn’t **often** better. Just like it doesn’t help to **shout** at someone who doesn’t speak our language, yammering on about our faith isn’t helpful either. The Holy Spirit is a skilled interpreter. When we simply share from the heart, and the other person is in a grace place, the Spirit can translate what we’re saying into language the other person understands, like on the first Pentecost.

A few weeks ago I heard about a study that shows people with an unaddressed hearing loss are at greater risk of developing dementia. If “I can’t hear you!” then I’m cut off from the reality around me and I begin to live in a very small world that fails to stimulate my mind, body and spirit. “Use it or lose it.” God’s Word isn’t babble. Holy Spirit, please be our divine hearing us and help us tune in. Put us in a grace place to hear what You’re saying to us, and let us transmit faithfully what You would have us say to others.

Amen

¹C.S. Lewis, *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Last Battle* (HarperTrophy, 1984), pp. 181-182.

²Ibid, pp. 183-186.

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham

