

## The Good News from the Tower of Babel

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March 30, 2008

**Scripture:** Acts 2: 1 – 11 – When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven, there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages.

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, "How is it that we hear, each of us in our own native language, - in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power?"

**From the first book of the Bible, a much earlier story - Genesis 11: 1 – 9 –**

Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. And as they migrated from the east they settled upon a plain in the land of Shi-nar. 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."

God came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built. And God said, "Look, they are one people and they all have 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. So 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 and the tower. Therefore, it was called Babel, because God confused the language of all the earth.

**Sermon:** The Tower of Babel is one strange bible story, so primitive as to seem almost childish. I don't think Larry, Andy or I have ever actually preached a sermon on it. It is like the kind of stories you find in native religions, that try to explain why clouds drift by or why the tides ebb and flow. You can imagine ancient nomadic tribes sitting around a campfire at night, having encountered other tribes who spoke in ways they could not understand, and wondering just how this happened. And then one of the aged sages tells this story of a time long ago when everyone spoke the same language and built this tower, to make a name for themselves, and to make themselves powerful and invulnerable. Back then, when people thought they lived in a three-tiered universe, with earth below, a dome of sky above them, and heaven about that dome of sky, they could imagine building that tower high enough to reach heaven itself.

God notices their tower, and the way the story tells it, God is afraid that these people with one language will get too full of themselves and think they can do anything. God confuses their language, so they can't work together like this anymore. The city is known as Babel, a derivative of the Hebrew word *baa-lal*, which means to

confuse. If you say *balal, balal, balal* a bunch of times, it sounds just like people carrying on in confusing languages. Go ahead, let's try it. Everybody say *balal, balal, balal*.

So if you were sitting around that campfire listening to the elders tell this story, you might nod, thinking that makes sense. On the other hand, if you were a young firebrand listening to the elders and watching your parents nodding along, you might think, "That's crazy. Maybe this is how languages actually started, but I doubt it, and if this was God's idea, wouldn't it be better if we could just understand each other and get along?"

And you would have a point – and that point would be a major theme throughout the growth and development of your faith. Running counter to the intention of God in the story of Tower of Babel has been the search for unity and common understanding in many religious traditions, including Judaism and Christianity.

Our denomination, the United Church of Christ, was born out of this quest. Before the UCC was formed, there were four different, separate denominations: the Congregational Church, the Christian Church, the German Evangelical Church and the German Reformed Church. The Congregationalists matched up with the Christians to form the Congregational Christian Church. The Evangelical Church merged with the Reformed Church to become the Evangelical and Reformed Church. Fifty-one years ago the Congregational Christian and the Evangelical Churches merged, not because they were the same, but because they were different. They thought that if they could join together, perhaps other denominations might also become part of a movement to heal the fractured Protestant Churches.

Take out your black hymnal, open it to the cover page and you'll see the motto of the United Church of Christ, long before our "*God is Still Speaking*" identity. You need good eyes for this, so if you picked up reading glasses from the basket in the vestibule, put them on. It's inside the circle surrounding the cross on the cover page or on the spine of the binding. What does it say? "*That they may all be one.*" Those words are a phrase from the gospel of John 17:21, as Jesus sends out his disciples to take his message to the world, and prays that "they may all be one."

So, in our faith and in our own denomination, there is a major quest for common understanding and unity. Yet it is also precisely this quest for unity that has, historically, gotten the church, and often nations as well, into trouble, for with unity also comes the temptation of domination and its prideful companion of making a name for oneself.

Back in our early days of ministry, when Larry and I involved in several small groups that explored new ways of worship and being a church, there was a lot of talk about how the early Christian Church did things. The assumption was that there was one true pure early church where the bread of communion was shared hand to hand and the words of Jesus were understood without all the filters of different gospels and centuries of theological haggling. We thought that there was, in that early church, a unified band of believers who knew how to love each other, how to feed and care for the poor, and how to share the pure message of Jesus.

Now, thanks to the discovery of the Gnostic gospels as well as all other manner of lost manuscripts, we know that the Judaism, from which Christianity spring, was

filled with different schools of thought. We now know that the very beginning there were different beliefs and different practices in the variety of communities that were first called the Jesus Movement or the Way.

Christianity did not become a unified religious movement until 376 CE, when the Roman Emperor Constantine was converted to Christianity and made it the official state religion of Rome. Constantine, as Emperors tend to do, wanted to consolidate the power and the beliefs of this new state religion, so he convened the council of Nicaea to come up with one clear, official doctrine of Christian faith.

Thus the Holy Roman Empire was born with the one true universal, which is the meaning of the word catholic, church. Two things followed. First, even though the official Roman church did its best to stomp the diverse strands of Christian belief, there were always counter movements within Christianity. Some, like the entire Celtic Christian movement in the western Europe and the British Isles under the leadership of Pelagius, were branded as heretics by Mediterranean church. Eastern orthodox Christianity in Greece and Coptic Christianity in Africa kept their own identities. Second, as soon as the Holy Roman Church became unified, it definitely began to build its towers into a dominant force, persecuting any Christian dissenters within its reach, persecuting Jews, persecuting Muslims. Think Inquisition.

Eventually, the Protestant Reformation reignited the counter melodies of diversity within Christianity. This cycle from unity to domination, to dissent and renewal, to unity which then often led back to another form of domination, has continued through the centuries. The Congregational Church, first known as Separatists, broke off from the Church of England, which had broken off from Rome, and those Separatists were then persecuted and driven underground. When they came to America as Pilgrims, they built their own theocracy as soon as possible and began persecuting people who were different whom they labeled as witches.

So maybe God's idea of keeping that first tower from being built wasn't so bad, after all. Rabbi Justus Baird thinks the story helps us to understand the importance of different faiths around the world and the different voices that speak from those faiths. He says that the truth in this story is not that God walks around pulling bricks out of bad towers and changing our language. The truth in the story is that *"when humans all work together as one with the same language, the same culture or the same religion, trying to make a name for themselves, bad things can happen."*

Rather than asking "Why can't we all just believe the same things and get along?" perhaps we should be looking at what bad things might happen if we all did all speak and believe the same way. Baird reminds us to look at nature. Habitats function best when they are diverse without being dominated by a single species. Think Kudzu. Think of a world with only one tree. Think of a world with one dominating nation, or a nation with one single party, or single religion. That's when we human beings seem to become our worst selves.

If we can speak of God in the language of Babel, we may understand that God's intention in creation is to have diversity, to have a system of checks and balances so that we are different from each other, in terms of language, faith, and customs. If we really understand that there are other people in and from other lands, with wonderful

gifts, interesting ideas and enlightening beliefs, then we may not be as likely to confuse our own country, our own ethnic group, our own language and our own gifts as being solely or particularly blessed by God. If we can speak of something like God's will, then it just may be that God's will is for multiple faiths to survive, because no single faith can ever capture the whole essence of God.

Now, just in case you think I'm getting too close to lifting the United Church of Gainesville up to the top of the tower that reaches to heaven, let me assure you that there is a message in this story for us as well. We, who proclaim our welcome to those of differing understanding and theological opinion, are very comfortable with that when it includes us. But just beneath the surface is a constant and inevitable tension that arises as we try to live out that important line of our Compact. We ministers hear the echoes of that tension on a regular basis. After the worship service, after the sermon, someone often says to me, *"So where was Jesus in that service? And why haven't you been preaching on the Bible lately?"* And then, a little bit later, someone says, *"You know, I think we're getting a little too hooked on Jesus and Christianity. Do we really need to celebrate Advent and Lent every year? Shouldn't you be preaching about other things?"*

If I had the time (which is tough when you are shaking hands on the way out of church), I would like to say that the tension in this diversity is exactly what draws us to our Compact. Our own Judeo-Christian hand on one side and our universal faith hand on the other side are like two ends of those stretch bands you use for isometric exercises. In order to work, the stretch band has to be kept in tension. The harder you pull, the stronger you get, and that band almost hums. If you let it go and let one hand take over, you've got nothing but a useless dangling piece of elastic, an ignored hand, and a dominant arm that will eventually get flabby and complacent.

Within our denomination, thank goodness, there are very different churches. So don't be too dismayed when you visit another UCC church and it's not exactly like this one. I think it is wonderful that the United Church of Christ contains us as well as pristine white-steepled New England Congregational churches and also embraces the Afro Centric Trinity United Church of Christ of the now-retired Rev. Jeremiah Wright. And a side note - if you are interested - go to Google to the You Tube site that carries the complete sermons of Rev. Wright instead of the seven-second sound bites that portray him so poorly. You'll definitely find a very different style of preaching, a prophetic style that is common in African American Churches. There is judgment in prophetic sermons, and you may not always be comfortable listening to it, but for me, it is a prophetic voice that it is good for me to hear.

The other story I read this morning is the anti-tower of Babel story of Pentecost, the place where people of different languages heard the testimony of faith being told in their own tongues. Notice that all the different languages were not abolished in that moment and that all the people from different lands didn't gather together and speak Esperanza. Pentecost is an affirmation of a common vision that could be understood in different languages and different cultures, and that too is the yearning of God. Both the yearnings for unity and the yearnings for diversity are good melodies, and together,

when they are understood as partners rather than enemies, they create a magnificent symphony.

So on this Sunday, which is known in the liturgical year as the Second Sunday of Easter, after the brass ensembles have packed up their instruments, after the candles and the Taize blocks have been taken down, and half the people that showed up last week have opted to stay home today, let us remember this other call of the holy, that every Sunday isn't Easter, that every faith isn't Christian, that every church isn't UCG, and that every nation isn't America, and that's a good thing.

If we are to truly be part of the healing of this world, we need tools to understand the richness of the different tongues in which people speak of God. While God certainly calls us to find our common humanity with one another and calls us to learn how to love one another, one lesson of the Tower of Babel is that our differences are holy, are also part of our common humanity, and that we may learn God's love through learning to love our differences as well.

### **Prayer –**

Creator God, You who summoned forth the light at the beginning of creation, You who embody Holy Light, a light that is for all people, even to the ends of the earth, we call upon Your spirit now to fill us with that light.

We pray for ears to listen to voices other than our own. We pray for eyes to see the common threads among us as human beings, as people of faith, and to cherish the richness of the multiple textures in the fabric of creation.

In a world filled with division and fear, it is not easy to walk the path of love and acceptance. Strengthen us on that path; give us patience with one another and the willingness to bear the uncertainty of times when there are no easy answers and the wisdom to learn and to grow.

And we pray for a renewed vision of creation, that we may be deeply connected to the river of life that flows within each of us, and within all people, that we may listen to your song – in its harmony and in its diversity – in the melodies and the counter-melodies of our lives and of our faith. Amen.