

Betsey Moe  
Sermon 10.4.09  
“Understanding Babble”

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 the Lord confused the language of all the earth; and from there the Lord scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.

Acts 2:1-13

1 When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. 2 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. 3 Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. 4 All 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.”

The book – I remember it well – was called, *Churros y Chocolate*. It was my very first Spanish textbook. A dedicated band kid, I had not been able to fit Spanish into my schedule until my junior year of high school. By that time, this ordinary girl from Clarkston was ready. The tickle of a foreign language on my tongue, the possibility that someday I might find myself in a far-away land carrying on a conversation with a Pablo or a Consuelo, ordering churros with confidence, well, it was enough to make that class one of my favorite hours of the day. Because of my enthusiasm, I had no trouble acing the class. If I had read the Tower of Babel story then, I would have laughed in the face of it. What could possibly be so bad about having to learn another person’s language?

Feeling like a Spanish pro, I signed up for Whitworth's Central America Study Tour when I was a college sophomore. I have to say that using the language in Central America was a bit more complex than using it in Spanish class; do you know that people in Honduras don't actually eat churros?

The surprise of the trip was that I ended up learning a language *in addition* to Spanish: pantomime. I distinctly remember acting out the phrase "intestinal disturbance" for a Honduran doctor with a silly grin on his face. It was then when God's scattering and confusion of languages at Babel started to seem like serious punishment.

The story of the Tower of Babel paints a picture of alienation. Here's a group of people who had wanted so badly to accomplish something together – to build something significant and be remembered for it. Yet, because they had wanted to preserve their community life independent from God, God "scattered them abroad over the face of the earth." What happened at Babel was, in many ways, an extension of the same sad story that started in the first chapters of Genesis. Adam and Eve asserting their independence and ending up alienated from one another, covering themselves and feeling shame. Cain asserting *his* independence by killing his own brother and ending up alienated and alone, a wanderer on the earth. Babel is a picture of this same alienation exploding into a worldwide phenomenon. People would now speak in distinct languages and form distinct cultures and think in distinct paradigms, unable to communicate in any meaningful way.

It's a heavy story for World Communion Sunday – a Sunday that is supposed to be one of the biggest feel-good Sundays of the year. On World Communion Sunday, we're supposed to celebrate our unity with our Christian brothers and sisters here in our city and in our country and around the world, kind of like one big group hug. When I close my eyes and attach an image to World Communion Sunday, I picture at this very moment African women in an open-air Baptist church clapping their hands and moving down the center aisle to receive the bread, while the men drum and the children dance. I picture Nicaraguan boys and girls inside a bright white Catholic church, all crammed into the front pew watching their priest speak a blessing over the host. And we here this morning are somehow connected to them....But are we? As I hear the story of Babel, my image fizzles, the separateness and alienation feel all too real.

The Babel story describes the worldwide Church, where there are Christians in places like Zimbabwe and Palestine and Myanmar struggling to survive while Christians here are oblivious to their political stress. The Babel story describes the Church in the United States, where thousands of self-proclaimed denominations have formed because they disagree with the doctrinal positions or the leadership styles or the musical preferences of the church next door. The Babel story describes the Presbyterian Church, where, in recent years, debates over ordination and sexuality have sounded like people talking at each other in entirely different languages. The Babel story describes my neighborhood, where each family leads its own private existence with its own language of life and faith undisclosed to and unquestioned by the others. In so many ways, it is as if humanity is stuck in this state of post-Babel punishment, never to be reconciled again.

The reality of this alienation makes World Communion Sunday feel cheap, inauthentic, like we're going through the motions, pretending that all is well, that God's people are united, when we know that is not the case. So, what do we do?

For a moment, I want to take you back to Honduras, the foreign land where I didn't see a single churro. When I signed up for the trip, I thought it would be a fun way to "use my Spanish." When I got there, I started to learn how little Spanish I knew. My textbook knowledge of the language was a start, but it was only that. Finally learning Spanish required a deep humility, not some kind of played-up confidence, as if to convince the Hondurans I was one of them. Learning a language required that I admit often that I didn't understand, that I needed help. It required time and patience and a willingness to be *in* the culture – to sit through my host family's Catholic church where they mumbled the liturgy at breakneck speeds, to ride with the children in the back of their pickup over bumpy dirt roads, to share breakfast every morning with them: Corn Flakes with warm goat's milk, flies swirling around our spoons. Learning a language required not just that I learned words, but that I got to know people and a culture. I think others who have immersed themselves in a foreign culture would agree with me: learning a language is difficult – but deeply rewarding. Even though I passed through periods of loneliness and isolation – alienation – there was understanding and connection on the other side.

Maybe, when God diversified the people at Babel, God was creating an environment for deeper community. Maybe, diversity was God's gift that would help humans look beyond themselves and their own experience. After Babel, unity would not be possible unless people were willing to learn another's language. Unity would only come when people fully entered into the foreign experience of "the other," into the experience of people different from themselves. What if God's scattering at Babel was not punishment at all, but an act of grace? What if God's scattering at Babel was the beginning of redemption?

When you look at the rest of scripture, it does seem as though the scattering at Babel marked the beginnings of a new community, with God leading the way into the foreign experience of "the other." Just after Babel, in Genesis 12, we see God entering into a covenant relationship with Abraham and Sarah and staying true to that covenant through the ups and downs of Israel's history. Fast forward to the time of Jesus Christ, and we see God coming to earth to learn the language of humanity. God in Christ fully immersed himself into the human language of grief and hunger and temptation and affection and betrayal, and then, the language of death. In this act, Jesus took into his own self the alienation felt at Babel and said, "No more. No more does alienation have the last word." The redemption that God set in motion at Babel was fulfilled Jesus Christ. Because of what Christ has done, a new community is possible. A community made of people who speak different languages and think in different paradigms yet at the same time can hear and understand and value each other.

This radical redemption of differences is what the Pentecost story expresses best. According to this story from Acts, after Jesus had died and risen and appeared a few times, the disciples and other new believers were gathered together in one place. As they were gathered, the Holy Spirit came in power, and they began to speak languages that were not their own. There was a large Jewish crowd there, made up of people from all over the place, and they heard about God's deeds of power (presumably about Jesus) in their own native languages. At this Pentecost

gathering, God gave the disciples the ability to speak *in languages that were not their own*, and so made them partners with God in the work of redemption.

You know something? The Pentecost story is *our* story; God gives *us* the ability to speak in languages not our own, to step outside of our comfort zones and into the foreign experience of the “other.” I have come to believe that when we do this, we are a part of World Communion. World Communion is more than a temporary feel-good image of Africans and Nicaraguans and Spokaneites taking communion all at the same time; World Communion is the reality God is creating whenever a person dares to enter the experience of the other. By the Spirit’s power, we enact World Communion when we invite neighbors we don’t know for dinner. We enact World Communion when we participate in things like the Urban Plunge and hear stories from homeless men and women. We enact World Communion when, with humility and patience, we listen to someone with whom we disagree and continue in that relationship. The World Communion that God set in motion at Babel and empowered at Pentecost pushes us not simply to dream about community, but step out into it. It can be difficult work, but it is deeply rewarding.

Travelling to Central America was one of the best things I did in college; I would recommend that kind of trip to anyone. But I do not believe that we have to travel to foreign lands to understand what World Communion is all about. It begins here and now.