

**Sermon: Pentecost (A) St. Peter's, Norfolk**

**Text: Genesis 11:1-9, Acts 2:1-21**

**Date: May 31, 2020**

You know, the English language is a crazy language. Our words can be so confusing. For instance, look at what we call the food we eat: there is no **“egg”** in an eggplant, nor is there any **“ham”** in a hamburger. There's neither an **“apple”** nor a **“pine”** in a pineapple. So why do we call it that?

Despite what the commercials might say, I have it on good authority that **“English”** muffins were not invented in England nor were **“French”** fries invented in France.

Other words and phrases we use can be equally confusing. You sink slowly in **“quick”** sand, boxing **“rings”** are square and a **“guinea pig”** is neither from Guinea, nor is it a pig. And why is it that writers **“write”**, but grocers don't **“groce”**, or ushers don't **“ush.”** If the plural of tooth is **“teeth”**, why isn't the plural of booth **“beeth”**? There is one goose and two **“geese”**, so why not one moose and two **“meese”**? If a vegetarian eats **“vegetables”**, does that mean a humanitarian eats humans? And why, when we want someone to duck, do we yell **“heads up”**?

I think we can all agree that there is a great deal of confusion in this world in which we live. As a whole, we don't seem to communicate well with one another. There is far too much mis-understanding everywhere we look: at home, in the workplace, in our schools, in the government, and yes.....even the Church! Sometimes it feels as though ancient Babel (found in our Old Testament reading for today) is still very much with us.

The story of Babel (found in Genesis, chapter 11) begins, **“Now the whole world had one language and a common speech.”** In other words, everyone was able to communicate with each other and there was little or no confusion. Unfortunately, the situation didn't last. The people got what they thought was a bright idea. **“Come, let us build.....a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves.”** (Genesis 11:4). In other words, **“let's make bricks and build a tower so high, so breath-taking, that everyone will be talking about it.....it will be the greatest of tourist attractions!”** And so they did.

Do you see what was really going on in their minds and in their hearts? It was false pride! It was ego on steroids. It was the height of arrogance, the desire to invade

heaven and give God a shove from the throne. It was **“to make a name”** for themselves.

And what was the end result of their egotism gone wild? Well, according to the story, God got wind of the big building project and was more than a bit concerned about it. God said: **“This is only the beginning of what they will do..let us go down and confuse their language, that they may not understand one another’s speech.”** And that is exactly what happened.

And we’re told that after that, the place...”**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.”** (Genesis 11:9)

Now, we needn’t get bogged down in the details of an ancient story. Some Biblical scholars believe it may be a parable rather than a real event. But whether you take the story literally or not, what is important is to understand its meaning; and that is- when we try to play God, we get into trouble-big trouble! When we try to usurp God’s sovereignty, disaster will soon follow. That is why we end up in a mess every time we arrogantly try to **“make a name for ourselves.”**

The pages of history are filled with the names of those whose insufferable egos eventually got the attention of God: The ancient Egyptian Pharaohs, the Roman Caesars, those who tried to conquer the world. In our own time, it’s heartless dictators. The world has seen them. You and I have seen them. They have brought terrible tragedy to the peoples of the world because of their egotistic pride and unquenchable thirst for power. Yet, the end is always the same-disaster!

I’m told there is a statue of Napoleon in Paris. The sculptor made him look so mighty, so self-assured, so proud, and so victorious. At one time, you know, Napoleon held almost all of Europe in his grasp. He led great armies and knew how to exert his power. He seemed invincible. Yet, as he strutted so full of pride because he had **“made a name for himself”**, he met his Waterloo, literally.

General Wellington of England defeated Napoleon at Waterloo. Wellington crushed him and Napoleon abdicated. The writer Victor Hugo, describing the great battle, pictures Napoleon wandering dazed and confused on the battlefield- his horse’s bridle looped over his arm. Hugo wrote that Napoleon **“vexed God.”** And Napoleon got his *“comeuppance.”*

When we get too big for our boots, when we begin to think that we are the center of the universe and that the world revolves around us, when we play God...we are asking for trouble. Confusion and disaster come to us. That is what I believe the story of the Tower of Babel is teaching us.

Well, today on this Day of Pentecost (Whitsunday) you may be wondering what an ancient tale from the Old Testament has to do with Pentecost. Well, consider this: If the story of Babel has to do with the defiance of God and the resulting confusion and judgement for such arrogance, then Pentecost is the antidote to the problem. It is the story of how the Holy Spirit came to bring unity and understanding between people. It is about peace with God and peace with each other.

In Acts 2, we read that at the time of the Jewish Feast of Pentecost, Jesus' disciples were in Jerusalem. As they gathered together in prayer, God sent His Holy Spirit upon them in a unique and special way, ***"...Like the rush of a mighty wind."*** Luke wrote, ***"A holy fire seemed to rest upon each one of them; and immediately, they received tremendous power from on high."*** Strangely, they found themselves able to communicate with people from the various nations of the world, and everyone was amazed. Foreign visitors were saying to one another: ***"...we hear them telling in our own tongues, the mighty works of God."*** (Acts 2:11) In other words, there was understanding, rather than confusion.

Luke went on to describe the fantastic results of what was happening that day. When Peter got up and preached at the event, some 3,000 people became disciples. Christians suddenly felt a tremendous ***"togetherness."*** Soon, they found themselves sharing their worldly goods together, they worshiped together in harmony, and they broke bread together in their homes. They were united with ***"glad and generous hearts."*** (Acts 2:26) There was such love! And so, is it any surprise that we are told, ***"Day by day, their numbers increased"***? **REPEAT.**

Don't we all want to be in a place where there is unity, understanding, concern and caring, and love for one another? God has created us with a deep need to live in harmony with Him, and with each other, in love and understanding. The Pentecost experience and the aftermath serve as a model of that....a model for which we, as a church, should strive. We need God's Spirit flowing through us to bring us together in faith, worship, fellowship, friendship, and service.

We are not created by God to live a solitary existence. We are not meant for total independence from others. We are created to be in community. We need community. We need to be responsible for one another and to one another.

The story of Pentecost is a story about fire- the fire of the Holy Spirit burning in human hearts, a fire that melts people together in peace and understanding. The Holy Spirit comes upon us and dwells within us to help get rid of the confusion cluttering our minds and hearts and causing divisions. The Holy Spirit brings love and understanding that enables us to live life in a community. The Holy Spirit comes to remind us that, as the Apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the Ephesians, ***“....we are members of one Body (the Church) and, as such, we are members of one another.” (Ephesians 4:25)***

To put ego in its proper place and to live in harmony with God and each other is the key to living in grace and peace. Dr. Joseph Sittler, a brilliant theologian of a generation ago, wrote, ***“I have discovered a kind of quiet serene confidence in knowing that all things do not stand or fall according to my own achievements or the correctness of every decision I make.”***

In other words, we find peace within when we get ***“self”*** off the throne and put God upon it. God’s power can come to us and fill us with immense blessings when our egos surrender to the Holy Spirit. And as the fire of the Holy Spirit melts the self-centered desire of each of us to ***“make a name for ourselves,”*** we will find ourselves drawing nearer to one another as brothers and sisters in Christ, sharing together as a loving community, and living in unity and joyful support of one another.

And when that happens, we begin to understand the words of one pagan man observing the unity in the community of the early Church. The man said, ***“See how these Christians love one another.”***

I wonder if someone observing the Church today; I wonder if someone observing St. Peter’s Episcopal Church today would make that same observation- ***“See how these Christians love one another.”*** I hope they would...I think they would.....what do you think? Amen.