

GETTING BEYOND BABEL
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Pentecost Sunday
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

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The Old Testament lesson for today is known as “The Tower of Babel,” which represents a discovery by our Great Ancestors about the human condition. They weren’t scientists or journalists. So they conveyed their findings in the memorable language of a folktale.

*All humankind gathered in one place to build a city and a tower. The LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built. And the LORD said, “Look, they are one people with one language. This is only the beginning of what they will do. Let us confuse their language, so they will not understand one another.” So the LORD scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. Therefore the place was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth. **Genesis 11:1-9***

And now this from the New Testament lesson for Pentecost Sunday.

*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, as the Spirit gave them ability. **Acts 2:1-21***

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Last Sunday I told you about the heresy charges filed against me last fall. One minister—one out of a hundred or so ministers in our Presbytery—happened to read my essay published last June in the *Good News Paper* entitled, “Question Authority.” In that essay that minister detected heresy and claimed that I had publicly repudiated Christianity, including nine of its orthodox doctrines.

As required by the Presbyterian Book of Order when a formal complaint is filed, the Stated Clerk appointed an Investigative Committee of five to review the charges with my accuser and me separately. Eventually we were to meet face to face. But things didn’t get that far.

The committee soon found the charges without merit and declined to advance them to a public trial phase, which would have returned us to the era of the Spanish Inquisition. As Monty Python put it: *No one expects a Spanish Inquisition.*

Seriously, however, this well-tested Presbyterian method of dealing confidentially with accusations of one sort or another proved to be fair and effective. And for that I and we can be grateful. In fact, I discovered there are far more in our Presbytery standing for us than against us. But not all, obviously.

This past Tuesday, I attended the quarterly meeting of the Shenandoah Presbytery in Front Royal. Two hundred ministers and ruling elder commissioners were present including my accuser. Before the meeting started, the chair of the Investigative Committee came up to me and asked how I was doing. Just fine, I said. In fact, I’m going in now to sit with my accuser. And I meant it.

She raised her eyebrows and said, Really?! You’re a better person than I am.

And that stopped me in my tracks. I am not a better person.

So on second thought I didn't sit with my accuser. I didn't think it fair or kind to put him on the spot in public as though I were a bigger and better person. That's what's called "body language" and it too can be unkind, even rude.

So instead I sent him a letter the next day. I addressed him by name and then said:

I had thought you and I would have had a chance to meet under the formal auspices of the Investigative Committee. I was looking forward to learning more about your charges based on my essay.

I consider you a colleague in ministry. So I'd like to see more clearly what you see that I'm missing or perverting. I do not want to harm or undermine the Church we both love and serve.

I respect your knowledge and wisdom and consider you a friend. Your charges against me have not lessened my affection for you. I would have contacted you sooner, but I didn't want to undermine the committee process.

Can we talk?

I've pondered my own question all week. For that, as it turns out, is a good question for all of us. *Can we talk?* And more importantly, *can we listen?* And that question brings us back to the first lesson.

Once upon a time when all people spoke one language, they assembled on the plains of Babylon. There they built a soaring tower. The gods took notice and rushed to earth to thwart the human project. The gods confused their language so one group could no longer understand the other. And so humankind scattered over the face of the earth into tribes and nations.

Then comes one of the saddest lines in the Bible: *so they left off building the city.* They just quit. They gave up. It was too hard. No one understood the other anymore.

We don't need the Bible to tell us how fractured the human family is or how hard it is to understand those different from us. We can see for ourselves the spirit of divisiveness, fear and loathing within the human heart. And it's ugly.

Can we talk? Apparently, not so easily.

Just listen to the babble, babble, babble. Is anyone listening with an understanding ear?

Republicans and Democrats may use the same words but they each have their own language. Is anyone listening to the other? Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and secular humanists have their own language. The West and East speak different languages. Religion and science have their own language. Men and women, rich and poor, white and black may use the same words, but they each speak a different language. Is anyone listening?

Conservative Christians have their own language. Progressives like us have a language, too.

Can we talk? Can we learn to speak the language of love? Can we learn to listen?

The story of the Tower of Babel depicts a universal human condition—we are all gripped by a spirit of fear, suspicion, judgment, and divisiveness.

But Pentecost tells another story. It, too, is a story of a human discovery. We can learn to speak the language of love.

Yes, there may be a spirit of fear and divisiveness within the human heart. But there's something else as well. It is the Spirit of peace, forgiveness, courage and inclusion. And in that spirit we can keep working to build the City of God, the Beloved Community in our own small world.