

ST STEPHEN'S EASTDELTA UNITED CHURCH
May 23rd, 2010, Pentecost

The Reverend Doug Graves

BABEL, BABEL, BABEL!

Readings - Genesis 11:1-9 and Acts 2:1-11.

Dr. Luther Smith, a professor of theology at Emory University in Atlanta, and a friend through L'Arche, told those of us who gathered in France this past winter about a wedding anniversary that he and his wife celebrated in Budapest some years ago.

It was not planned; it just happened that their anniversary fell at the end of a tour they were leading, a tour that culminated in the capital of Hungary, a city "lovely in the way of aging dowagers" he said ... "lots of wrinkles, but good bone structure". Their host was the Rev. Berti Tamas, the Director of Ecumenical Relations for the Reformed Church in Hungary.

When Rev Tami heard that it was the Smith's anniversary, he made reservations for dinner at what he cautiously advertised as "*the best restaurant in Budapest - probably.*" They arrived to discoverer that the restaurant employed a Gypsy band, a genuine Gypsy band - violin, accordion and a mysterious instrument something like a mandolin.

The ever-gracious host, Berti Tami wanted to make an occasion of this anniversary dinner, so he motioned the band over. None of them spoke a word of English; it was not clear that they spoke much Hungarian either. Berti asked Luther and his wife if they had a special song.

Luther and his wife Marion always find this question embarrassing. Because although they do have a song, but it's not a very cool song. But Luther said to Berti anyway, "*Our song is 'You Are My Sunshine.'*"

He translated this into Hungarian for the accordion player, who then translated into Romany, the Gypsy language. All three musicians suddenly adopted quizzical looks. They figured that we had stumped the band with an old American cowboy favourite.

There was a lot of talk in Romany, there was a little experimentation with a bar or two or this or that tune, and finally they burst forth in an eruption of smiles and much nodding of heads.

Berti looked at Luther and his wife and said, "*I think they got it!*" The accordion player nodded in the direction of the couple, counted the beat, and the three of them launched into a bouncing Gypsy rendition of "*Strangers in the Night.*" Something got lost in the translation.

That night Luther and Marion Smith were the very descendants of the tower of Babel in Budapest. Their language, as it says in the story Tom just read from Genesis, was confused.

On the day of Pentecost I usually focus on the theme that the Children's story focussed on – Pentecost as the birthday of the church – Pentecost as the discovery of power for the Mission of the Church. But this year, as I read the suggested lessons – especially the Genesis reading, I decided that I would focus on the other great Pentecost theme – Pentecost as the discovery of the ability God's grace to communicate across great barriers – Pentecost as the day when everyone heard the Good News clearly in spite of their many different languages- Pentecost as the reversal, if you will, of the confusion of languages that we heard about in the Tower of Babel Story.

(1)The tale of the tower of Babel is familiar enough. It's the age after Noah's great flood and a new generation, still speaking the same language, decides to build a great city with a tower at its center so that they might, in those famous words, "*make a name for ourselves.*"

God recognizes the conceit and potential for mischief in such mortal hubris and decides that it would slow them down a bit if they didn't speak the same language, which was easy enough for the creator of Words to take care of. Ever since, we've been talking "babble," or is it "Babel?"

There are several levels at which the story can be understood.

At the first level, the simplest level, the story of the tower of Babel is what anthropologists call an "*etiology.*" That is to say, it's a tale meant to explain how something came to be.

In this case, the tower of Babel explains how it came to be that there were so many different languages in the world.

At a second, slightly deeper and political level, the story is a Hebrew critique, a totally negative critique, of the vain aspirations of the proud city of Babylon with its famous tiered pyramid or "*ziggurat.*" "*Babel*" does mean "*Babylon*" of course.

Perhaps the story is even a swipe at proud cities in general, building their ziggurats and skyscrapers, reaching for the heavens in a stupidly literal way.

But the tower of Babel is more than that. It is not just a folk tale to explain the variety of human language. It is not just a slam at the haughtiness of big cities.

It is also a tale about what human pride always does to human communication.

Of course you have a communication problem when one person at the meeting speaks only Dutch, and the second speaks mostly French, and the third only Mandarin. But the ironic truth is you can have major communications problems even when everybody speaks the same language.

In the story of the Tower of Babel, it's the pride of the builders that leads to the cacophony of non-communication, the pride that proclaims in verse 4, "*come, let us make a name for ourselves...*"

(2) Not a lot has changed over the eons. It's still that same desire "*to make a name for myself*" that confuses communication. So many conversations just go on and on, everybody ostensibly speaking the same language; the room dripping with words, a rattling of syllables, the air humid with the verbiage, and raining with vowels

Yet for all the talk, talk, talk, so often precious little truth is spoken, and precious little truth is heard.

"Babble, babble, babble," either way you spell it.

Example... a wife says to her husband, "*You just don't understand.*" And the tragedy is that he doesn't.

Example... a father and son get the words out to each other, but hidden behind the barriers of fears and expectation, few of their words are ever really heard.

Example... Political liberals and conservatives speak their particular and peculiar vocabularies – and talk right past each other.

It's still that need to "*make a name for myself,*" my human need to be thought well of, this press to impress that sours communication between human beings and is forever turning talk into babble.

It happens in two ways.

It happens first in how we listen, and it happens second in how we speak.

When I listen, if my real agenda is less to hear you and more "*to make a name for myself,*" I am not actually going to hear much of what you have to say. If my real focus is not you and your thoughts, but if my mind is actually hovering around my ideas, focusing on my eagerness to "*make a name for myself,*" I just won't much hear you.

To hear, really hear another person, you need to listen with anticipation; you need to listen with the expectation that you actually might hear something important.

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggeman writes in his commentary on the Book of Genesis: "*The capacity to listen in ways which transform depends on our readiness to be impacted, and a willingness to have newness come into one's life.*"

At a meeting the other day, a colleague was recalling the way a former United Church Missionary, the late Katherine Hockin, used to act at church meetings. *"She didn't say a whole lot at meetings,"* this person recalled, *"but she listened very intently. And when Katherine spoke, she would say just few words, but those few words would cut through it all and bring people together, even in the most difficult meetings."*

This kind of listening is the precise opposite of what my brother-in-law, a very good listener by the way, talks about when he jokes, *"That's enough talk about me. Now let's talk about what you think about me."*

(3)Secondly, when I speak, my speaking becomes babble if I am mostly *"trying to make a name for myself."*

If I really want to communicate the whole truth to you, if I want to steer the talk deep, I have to push beyond my desire *"to make a name for myself"* and speak in a way that makes me vulnerable; I have to speak words that actually share something of myself. If my conversational agenda is simply to look smart, I'll never be able to speak the whole truth. If I guard myself too closely and reveal to you only that part of the truth that makes me look good, I'll never communicate with you in any way that will lead us deeper into the truth itself or deeper into a relationship with some meat on its bones.

I came across a cartoon in a church magazine some years ago that pictured a committee meeting. A woman, clearly the board secretary, is reading the minutes of their last meeting to the group gathered around the table. The caption read as follows, *"The meeting was adjourned at 9:30 and everyone went to the parking lot and said what they really thought."*

I'm sure most of us have had experiences like that over the years. It seems to go with the territory of church committees.

Sometimes we guard our words wisely out of kindness, not wanting to say something that might hurt. But more often we guard our words out of fear and pride. We are afraid to say that we don't understand; we're afraid to say we hurt; we're afraid to speak the truth when we need support.

The church, more than any other place, should be the place where we listen to others actually expecting to hear something. That's one of the key messages of the Pentecost Story.

And the church, more than any other, should be a place where we are free to speak the whole truth about ourselves, not just the part that looks good. That's one of the key invitations of the Gospel.

This kind of communication can happen anyplace where trust is deep, of course. But this place, more than any other, should be a place where the truth is lovingly and patiently heard. This place, more than any other, should be a hotbed of deep truth freely revealed.

In order for this to happen, the church simply has to be a place where nobody is out to "*make a name for themselves.*" Otherwise it's just "babble, babble, babble."

Or is it "Babel, Babel, Babel?"

Thanks be to God. Amen