

1 Day of Pentecost (23 May) 2009

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Genesis 11.1-9; Psalm 104
Acts 2.1-21; St. John 14.8-17, 25-27

“And 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....Come let us go down and confuse their language here, 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.”

“All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, ‘What does this mean?’”

“This is the Spirit of truth...”

Day of Pentecost May, 23 2010

Pentecost proclaims the Spirit of truth—the One who births the church and gives witness to Jesus of Nazareth, the crucified and risen Lord of the universe, the embodied God-man. In a liturgical sense, Pentecost culminates the Easter Season not with a Season of Pentecost, but with a day. There is no Pentecost Season, but one eternal day—in which the Spirit bids us ask Jesus anything, and he will do it. But is this wise? Ought we who, like Philip, know little, really ask *anything*?

Luther teaches that, “*I believe ... I cannot by my own understanding or strength believe in my Lord Jesus Christ or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel....*” Any faith or understanding we possess comes as a gift of the Spirit. Therefore, it is faithful to question the things we would ask. It is faithful to doubt our uncertainties, and question our certainties.

But this is a hard truth to tell. In this ambiguous world, truth masquerades as lie. Jesus promises the “Spirit of truth,” but the truth comes shrouded in fleshy myth, enigma, and nuance. We say, “Just give us the facts!” But the facts bear subjective bias: mine and yours. Theirs and ours. What perspective is *the* perspective on “fact”? More provocatively, how can we be certain the facts are true? More subversively, what lie informs the facts? More subversively still, what if the truth is less a fact than a person, less a quantitative number, than a qualitative story? What if the truth is better told than measured?

We are skeptical of tellers and telling: “They are filled with new wine!” How long was the sermon? I didn’t get anything out of it! Did it mean anything? It’s easier to measure length than meaning. We seldom complain that a sermon bears too much meaning, though we often remark on its length. Orville Kenneth Nielsen of my former parish used to say, “Reverend, there’s no such thing as a bad short sermon.” He argued more value in less sermon. And I would ask, “Orville Kenneth—how much truth was there in that sermon?” And he might say, “Well, I suppose there was a little.” Is a long sermon less true than a short one? What is the relationship, if any, between truth and value? Between quality and quantity? Do we value smaller diamonds on engagement rings? Smaller bank accounts? Why then smaller sermons? Do fewer words tell more truth? More words less truth?

When I was a candidate to become Luther Memorial’s pastor, I was asked to take a battery of psychological tests—eight of them. It was a fascinating exercise involving two days of sitting at my desk and thinking about things like leadership style, conflict,

social preferences, and ethical choices. Most examinations involved multiple choice questions, something that drives me nuts because I'm seldom completely happy with any given set of options, and would gladly nuance nearly every answer with, "Well, that depends..." Or, "Under most circumstances I would probably choose "b," but in other situations I would likely choose "c," but it's possible to imagine an occasion when "a" would do. I felt like Babel confusion had entered my own mind. I found myself arguing with myself over whether or not "a" was preferable to "c", or whether "d" was more accurate than "b." The test I most vividly recall was a "true/false" instrument intended to analyze religious inclination: a list of conflicting statements like, "I often believe in God" followed by "Sometimes I don't believe in God." I marked all of them true, because I do believe in the Holy Trinity—but sometimes I don't. I have an inherent conflict in myself; Babel confusion operates within my own soul and I suspect it works in you as well.

But is God responsible for it? Is God behind our earthly confusions? Our separate languages? Our inability to understand our selves and one another? The First Lesson tells of God intentionally confusing human speech so that we could not understand each other, even as I do not understand myself. Placed in the first 11 chapters of mythic Genesis "prehistory," the Babel story envisions the consequence of human disobedience endangering even heaven—rebellious human beings seeking to make a name for ourselves will stop at nothing to promote ourselves.

The story's simplistic understanding of human linguistic development offends us. But that's part of the point. It means to say that our human yen to uniformity is dangerous. Left to ourselves, we would generally make everyone else conform to our way. For us, unity is a matter of power, self-will, and dominance. The story views divided confusion as a divine judgment to limit the aggressive power of uniform self-promotion. We assume uniform language a good thing. But the irony of human history is that every attempt to unify human beings sooner or later devolves into mass uniformity enforced by brute violence, abuse, and death: speak the official language, or else! Conform to the prescribed course, or else! Obey the established rule, or else!

The Pentecost story in Acts 2 does not involve uniformity of language, but *uncommon hearing* of diverse speech: "Because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each." Uncommon meaning comes through diverse languages. The Spirit of truth gives hearing and understanding without requiring linguistic uniformity. The Pentecost antidote to Babel confusion is not forced linguistic uniformity, but the gifted hearing of uncommon meaning.

The one holy catholic and apostolic church is less a lock-step uniformity of objective fact, than a diverse telling of subjective truth; the church receives and gives common meaning to the startling truth that Jesus of Nazareth, born of Mary, is the Son of God, crucified, dead, and buried for our sake; he was also raised from the dead on behalf of the whole world. He is now with the Father, and he will come again to be our judge. His Spirit moves us to say this in every language, that all might hear and understand the double truth of God's judgment and mercy in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.