

Sunday June 9th, 2019
Pentecost

PRAYER: O God, the earth is full of your creatures; in wisdom you have made us all, and you have delivered us into one another's care, asking only that we love one another as you first loved us. But we have fostered discord rather than unity; contempt rather than respect; ignorance rather than love. Communities, peoples, creatures, lands, seas-they have been set apart, or torn apart, or driven apart, by conflicting claims and thoughtless ambitions.

You know our works and our thoughts, Lord. So, do this day as you promised: Gather together all our tribes and tongues, and restore us to harmony. Reconcile us in your spirit of peace, and from month to month, and Sunday to Sunday, all people shall worship your name. Amen.

WORDS OF ASSURANCE: As God confused the language of all the earth to keep people from idolatry, so God sent Christ with the universal message of salvation: "Whoever calls on Christ's name shall be saved." Brothers and sisters, trust that name and be assured: I Jesus Christ we are forgiven!

OFFERTORY SENTENCE: The apostle Paul encourages us to act with generosity when he writes in 2 Corinthians 9:10-11 these words, "For God is the one who gives seed to the farmer and then bread to eat. In the same way, he will give you many opportunities to do good, and he will produce a great harvest of generosity in you." (NLT)

PASTORAL PRAYER: O God, how little consideration and gratitude we have shown for your omnipresence. You are everywhere in ways beyond our accounting. Your Spirit blows where it wills-turning confusion into order, condemnation into deliverance, and isolation into fellowship. We thank you for your presence and all the ways you reach out to us and bless our lives. We especially want to thank you for taking the initiative to bring us together; in creation by placing your image within us; in Christ, by manifesting your love for us; and at Pentecost, by sending your Spirit upon us. How incredibly generous you are with yourself, in sparing no effort to seek and save we who were lost and are now found.

We confess, O Loving God, that as invaluable as your presence is, we have so often in our lives have tried to hide like Adam and Eve in garden. Despite ample evidence and experience of your unrestricted love, we cower in fear. Instead of seeking your council in all matters of importance, we turn to others. Instead of taking the tongues of fire and being compelled to share the good news, we have instead spread confusion, and sought to satisfy our own personal ambitions.

It is such arrogant pride for us to believe we can manage life on our own, without going terribly astray. How can we ever hope to understand the full purpose of our community without your direction?

What unity can ever exist among such a diverse group of people without your unifying Spirit?

O God let your Spirit descend on us as it did in Jerusalem. Let it strike as a mighty wind, blowing away the chaff of pride. Let it burn as a tongue of fire consuming the selfishness within us. And let it send us forth into the world, proclaiming the new life available in Christ Jesus. Let your Spirit bring revival to this community, where the young see visions and the old dream dreams, and all are committed to becoming the body of Christ.

As your children who are joint heirs with Jesus, and privileged to all your gracious gifts; let us not betray our own people. As Jesus came to share you with Israel, help us to share Christ with Canada. Help us to see our neighbours as more than strangers and casual acquaintances.

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O God let us never forget that the Church of Jesus Christ is dependent fully upon the Spirit for its life as it was for its birth on Pentecost. It is the Spirit that grants us the faith to envision one world community unified in serving you, the motivation to love its peoples, the determination to discern their needs, and the will to serve them in the name of Christ. So, we pray not merely for an increase in the membership of the church, but more importantly for an outpouring of your Spirit upon its members. Let your Spirit come with power that compels, truth that convicts, and love that converts. Let Pentecost, cease to be a past to be remembered, and become again a present to be experienced.

BENEDICTION: Yesterday we slaved in the shadow of Babel. Today we are freed by Pentecost's fire. Let our pride divide us no longer; let the Spirit unite us forever. The peace of God I leave with you; the peace of God I give unto you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.

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Genesis 11:1-9 and Acts 2:1-21

“Cutting Through the Babel.”

There is a frustration in reading the early parts of Genesis. Until Abraham enters the scene, we are given only brief snap shots of God’s creation, and early interactions with mankind. I suspect though that the lack of detail is intentional. It is intentional, because we are meant to see the critical moments in mankind’s early days. Moments that explain why things are the way they are. Lessons from the fall, the flood, and for today, the tower. So, we need to ask ourselves what are we to learn, what is essential to us.

We are not told a whole lot about the people of this time, only that they had one language and used the same words. In other words, the same dialect. These were an undivided group of people. They were also a migratory people; people on the move. Until this point, a people without a defined land of their own. As they moved about, they came upon the “land of Shinar” translated as Babylon, although this is before the name Babylon was ever used.

This area is an open, and fertile plain, located between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. It is an area in modern Iraq. Because this is Shinar, we know that these folks were the descendants of Noah’s son Ham, called Hamites. This we learn from chapter 10. The Hamite people were a very inventive people, as archeology has confirmed many times over. They learned to harness the land, and water resources, to improve agriculture.

The improvements in agriculture meant they no longer had to be nomads, but could begin to make settlements. There was one problem however. The plain they dwelt on had no natural deposits of rocks, or stones for building, which they had found in other places they had dwelt. Therefore, they were forced to learn how to make bricks out of the ample supplies of dirt and clay. Later, some bright fellow discovered that by firing them, they could be baked to a considerable hardness.

It was also discovered in this area that like our own province of Alberta, there were large deposits of bitumen, or tar. They soon learned that this sticky substance made a great mortar for their bricks. Thus, without cement and stones, the Hamites were able to go on to build some amazing structures. The hanging gardens of Babylon, was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. The ability to build more and more complex buildings fueled their imagination.

Soon, a new type of building emerged, called a Ziggurat or a temple. Ziggurats are not really a tower per se, but rather more like a stepped pyramid, like in Central America. On the sloped sides there would have been steps where worshippers, or more likely priests, could ascend to the top for sacrifices. I should mention that many scholars believe that the ladder of Jacob’s dream was in fact a ziggurat, with God on the top.

Ziggurats were the central focus of any settlement, representing the presence of God, or gods, in the community’s midst. The Hamites, and their descendants, build many of these structures. Archeologists have found the remains of many of them throughout the region of Shinar and beyond. Thus, a great building boom was under way, as a city began to emerge. After all, as we know, human beings are very inclined to want to live together in communities.

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This is why cities are born, even our own Simcoe. Cities, then and now, are critical for economic ventures, for protection, and the development of culture. People were, and are, drawn to cities, even if only for a brief visit. They come for commerce, worship, and entertainment (the Prodigal son likely went to a city to burn through his wealth).

Remember Lot, Abraham's nephew? He was offered a choice of land, and he chose the land in which the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah were located. He chose the city. Back to Shinar, and the ancient version of the city planning office. One day, some bright, ambitious fellow, suggests that in this great city they are going to build, that it should have a center piece. Today we might call it a tourist attraction. Right in the heart of the city they suggested building a ziggurat.

Not just any ziggurat, but the tallest and biggest anyone had ever seen. The CN Tower of their day. As I mentioned, Ziggurats were religious structures. Often the carvings found around the remains of Ziggurats, are of zodiac symbols and other religious markers. This proposed monster ziggurat was to be built to reach the skies; better translated as reaching heaven. The goal was to place mankind on the same level as God.

I think that originally, the project was designed to provide better communication between mankind and God. The ziggurat represented the presence of God among the people much like the temple in Jerusalem. Building structures, particularly ziggurats, was a great accomplishment. The people took great pride in their ingenuity. However, this whole project turns on one phrase. Not only did they want a structure that reached the skies, but why else did they want to build it? This ziggurat will be... "a monument to our greatness". Whose greatness?

Not only this, but they saw this new Ziggurat as a focal point to draw the people together. It is clear from this that already there was a fear setting in that their unity was tenuous. They feared that if they scattered, they would become unknown, unhonoured, nameless or nobodies. So, therefore they said, "let us make a name for ourselves". This could be the motto for all humankind for all time. "Let's make a name for ourselves".

The motives behind building the tower were pretty clear. Actually, the motive for almost all religion is revealed here. The Hamites wanted to share glory with God. In praising God, they hoped to praise themselves. This is the inherit danger in all religion, including our own. Our buildings, our ornamentation, our worship: can be said to be offered to the glory of God, but often in the back of our minds is a pagan belief.

That belief is that I can control God. That is what most religion really is, in its most basic form; a way to manipulate God. Think about it this way. How many times have we said to ourselves, "If I say a certain prayer, attend a certain service, give a certain amount of money: maybe God will do such and such a thing for me?" Maybe, if I build a beautiful church to honour God, he will look on me with kindness.

We want God to be available to us on our terms, so let's build a tower, or dedicate a pipe organ, or whatever we choose as our cause. You see, despite what atheists continue to state, people are not turning away from God. They may leave God out of their planning for a while, but eventually they come back to him.

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Atheism, however it is sold, is just too pessimistic, too devoid of hope, and morally bankrupt: to keep most people committed to it. Honestly, mankind does not want to get rid of God, we just want to meet him on our terms. We want to control God to accomplish our agenda. And so, things creep into our faith that are really efforts to manipulate divine favour: rituals, superstitions, magical thinking, etc.

It is the tower of Babel all over again. In our story today something ironic happens. The bible says that God came down to check out the city and the tower. Some people find this troubling, the idea that God came down to earth, but he has done it before in Genesis, with Adam and Eve, Jacob and Abraham, and of course in the incarnation of Jesus. The irony of this passage is that while mankind is busy trying to get closer to God, what does God do? He comes to them.

The image is stark. Here is this tower, which its creators will think will wow God, and in God's vision it is so tiny, he has to actually come down to even see it. The passage is presented so we can see the futility of trying to impress God, or manipulate him. The Almighty, Creator of the entire universe, has to lower himself a great deal just to see this teeny tiny creation of mankind. The point is clear. The greatest creations of humankind are nothing at all to God.

The CN tower, the Great wall of China, tunnels, railroads, and cities: are nothing compared to his glory. We cannot come within the smallest fraction of his wonder. God always has to lower himself down to us; we can never raise ourselves up to him. Never! So, what was God reaction and response to this ziggurat, this great but tiny tower? God concludes that with their common language, and unity, there is nothing humankind cannot do.

That's a bit surprising isn't it? But history has shown that the imagination and ingenuity of humankind is pretty impressive. Just look at the last few decades, and see the marvels we have brought about. Humans have a great deal of potential, especially when they work together. But God does not like this direction. Why? Is it because God felt threatened by humans? Hardly. Remember that anything they make is tiny compared to him.

Is he jealous? Is God afraid that humans will eventually master everything in the universe? Some scientists believe that ultimately, we will. No, God is not jealous over our abilities, after all he gave them to us. So, why does this bother God so much so that he confuses the languages so people scatter? The answer comes from a serious flaw in our human thinking. What is the final purpose of all this human ingenuity and tower building? "To glorify ourselves, to be the center of everything, the master of the universe, to be God himself."

Humans are created beings; always have been, and always will be. We are dependent on forces we did not put in place. We are by our very nature dependent beings. The tower of Babel, and so much of our inventiveness is designed to control, manipulate, or to play God. Much of what we do is to glorify ourselves.

Are you familiar with the old story of the Sorcerer's Apprentice? In the original story, not the later movie renditions, a boy is hired by a sorcerer to be his servant. Mostly, his job consisted of hauling water from the well to the house. Like all boys he was always lamenting the tediousness of the job, and longed to find an easier way to carry the water.

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One day while the master was away, the young boy started searching through his master's magical books. He found within them magical incantations, and decided to try them out on the broom. To his amazement, the broom grew arms and started hauling water to the house. The young boy settled back, and read, while the broom carried water; bucket after bucket. After a while the boy noticed the floor was getting wet.

He discovered that the broom had filled every basin and bucket in the room, but was still hauling in water. The boy tried other incantations, but still the broom carried in water. Water began creeping higher in the house. Soon it was up to his neck, and the boy was panicking not knowing what to do. As he was nearly about to drown, he realized how unprepared he was for the work of magic, when his master returned home, said a few words and put everything right.

The story of Babel is the story of mankind thinking that because of his or her inventiveness, he or she can master all things. As we are aware however, many of our solutions end up creating bigger problems. Every attempt at a solution seems to sink us further. Thus, for our sake...not because God is afraid of people, but for our sakes, God says, "Let us go down and confuse their language." In other words, let's go down and stop this madness.

Stop these efforts that ultimately lead to annihilation, because we are not God, and we cannot handle it. So, imagine what it was like that day. You are slogging away on this great tower, and your foreman says something to you, and you do not understand him. He tried to communicate with words, and then gestures, but no one can understand, and no one can coordinate the work. As you can guess, the word Babel is a play on the Hebrew word for confusion which is "balal".

The name babel however, in his pure form means, "the gate of God". The gate of God becomes the confusion of people in the eyes of God. Ever since that day, humankind has been divided by language. Imagine coming home from the tower work to find people you have known all your life, who live next door, are beyond your comprehension. Friends and neighbours are now strangers, people to be feared, so the people scatter from one another.

The problem has persisted for centuries. Just watch them debate at the UN sometime, and see the number of people that have to have earphones so someone can translate what is being said. There is a very good movie that portrays this starring Sandra Bulloch called the "Translator". In one scene she asks a co-worker how he translated a rather unfriendly term used by one delegate. His response was a complete mistranslation, but one he hoped would maintain the peace.

Ask any linguist, and they will tell you that even with translation, people do not fully understand each other. But we keep on trying, because we still believe thousands of years after Babel, that if we can only have unity, we can solve anything. Taken with our technology, if we are unified, we can be like God. What foolishness, but also what a kindness and gift God gave us at Babel. He is seeking to keep us from destroying ourselves.

God needs to continually bring down the proud, to reveal our dependence on him. Do you remember Jesus' words in John 14:12? Very Truly, I tell you the one who believes in me will do the same works I have done, and even greater works, because I am going to be with my Father.

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You can ask for anything in my name, and I will do it, because the work of the Son bring glory to the Father.” How can we do wonderful things? Through Jesus who was always seeking to glorify God. “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me”. Where does my strength come from, my ingenuity, my opportunities? They come from God. Without God, my efforts are meaningless.

“Unless the Lord builds the house, they that labour, labour in vain.” Jesus then tell us that he will send the counsellor to us; the Holy Spirit. This is consistent with God’s action among mankind from the beginning. No matter how tiny and insignificant we are, God still comes down to dwell among us. Through his Holy Spirit he examines our monuments, though they are small in his sight. He sees the futility of it all, but he still calls us to build.

Not symbols of our glory, but to build his Kingdom. The Babel, the gate of God, is not found in a church, or a mountain top or a ziggurat, but because of the Holy Spirit we are the Babel. We are the gate of God through which people encounter the grace, and love of Christ. We need to stop worrying about making a name for ourselves, and instead make the name of God known to every heart.