When I was young man, in college and just thinking about seminary, one of my models and mentors was Rev. Eliud Ortega, pastor of Westminster Presbyterian in Santa Fe. He was not tall, but was imposing – barrel-chested, and with a voice like God only deeper. I remember verbatim a resolution he introduced (in English) at a meeting of Santa Fe Presbytery. I don’t recall whether or not it passed, but it went like this: “Ideally, all the peoples of earth would speak all the languages, and one could use the language appropriate for its task. Therefore, if you wanted to formulate a theological hypothesis, you would speak in German. If you wanted to order a fine wine, you would speak in French. If you wanted to speak the language of love to a beautiful woman, you would speak in Italian. If you wanted to call the dog, you would speak in English. But if you wanted to talk to God, you would speak in Spanish.”

It is Pentecost Sunday, sometimes called “the birthday of the church,” where we mark God’s gift of the Holy Spirit poured into the church. In trying to describe (one supposes) what is indescribable, Luke (the author of Acts) tells it as a multi-media experience – rushing wind, tongues of fire over the disciples’ heads, and the different languages which were understood by everyone around them. Luke’s readers would have looked back into their own scriptures, the Old Testament to us, to make sense of all this. They would have heard the wind as the “ru’ah” of God, the breath that moved over the waters in Genesis to create everything (Look out! Here it comes again!). They may have heard the tongues of fire as a reminder of the burning bush encountered by Moses, or the pillar of fire that led them on the Exodus to the Promised Land. Certainly they would have heard communicating in different languages as a reversal of what happened at the Tower of Babel!

We read today the familiar text from Genesis 11, an “origin story”, myth from pre-history, which served to describe why there are so many languages and why people were scattered around the earth. “It was called Babel because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth,” and from that we get our English word “babble,” and we probably get fairy tales like Jack and the Beanstalk as well. There is something in us that knows we have limits, even as we reach too far like Jack or the tower–builders, just have to have that apple, like Eve and Adam, or fly too close to the sun like Icarus. But there is more here than a simple cautionary tale, or the book of Acts wouldn’t bring it back up in the account of Pentecost.

The Genesis notion that “the people had one language” is not anthropology, but a description of the unity of humankind that should have been or should have been enough for them. “Let us make a name for ourselves,” they said, and build this tower to heaven. This assault on heaven did not intimidate God, but the story is told as a criticism of human presumption. But that wasn’t all: “Let us make a name for ourselves” to intimidate whoever or whatever is out there, “lest we be scattered abroad on the face of the earth.” So not folly, but fear was the true motivation for tower building.

God’s response was to confuse their language so that they did not understand one another. Notice that. It was not that they no longer understood other languages; it was that they did not understand those who were speaking the same language. We could say the problem was not in the speaking, but in the hearing. Perhaps they lost even the capacity to listen.
If you had been told this story since childhood and were in one of the churches to which Luke’s gospel was carried, and you heard this, you would have heard it as a stunning reversal of the Tower of Babel. Note again, this is not the “speaking in tongues” described in some of Paul’s letters, glossolalia. Here in Acts 2 are real words begin spoken in real languages spoken by listeners there in Jerusalem from all over the region, and everyone heard and understood, and that it the point. For a moment, humankind was de-Babeled, made one again.

The sin of Babel was not so much wanting to storm heaven. I kind of want to do that myself. The poet Robert Browning wrote, “A man’s reach should exceed his grasp, or what’s a heaven for?” The idea of striving to get beyond certainty, and into wonder, has value. Why settle for what we know already?

No, the sin of Babel was in wanting to be great, and being driven by fear enough to attempt it, combined with an arrogance of power where they thought they could. That is, of course, where both politics and economics always end up by themselves, unconstrained by ethics. Years ago, theologian Reinhold Neibuhru wrote, The will-to-power is inevitably involved in the vicious circle of accentuating the insecurity which it intends to eliminate… It seeks a security beyond the limits of human finiteness…is in short and instrument of pride, which Christianity regards as sin in its quintessential form. And indeed, the story of Babel has, in Christian history, been twisted around backwards to sometimes mean its opposite; it was used to justify segregation, used to bless the taking advantage of others culture, used to justify war.

What it is really about is our alienation, our fall from grace. In the tale, they not only could not reach heaven, they couldn’t understand even each other, couldn’t hear. Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann goes so far as to say, “Not listening is related to death in a relationship. To fail to listen means to declare the other party null and void. A society that suffers failed speech, as in this text, not only cannot build towers, it cannot believe promises, cannot trust God, cannot be human.”

I would go Brueggemann one step further and say that is where our society is today. Our public discourse, our political speech, has fallen way below the capacity to hear one another, much less understand. We are bombarded with words, words, words from too many people talking, words which have been carefully crafted by spin-doctors to elicit a particular response. The words are rarely intended to have meaning or conduct debate, but rather to label and control. It is sad to see letters to the paper or posts on AL.com from people enraged about (fill in the blank here with the slogan of the week), as if it were their own language, their own thoughts, not realizing they are enraged over a manufactured issue that does not exist in real-time. We hear a lot of words, in public speech, but do we ever really know the heart of the speaker? And as a consequence we are even more divided one from another – not just in our opinions (what matters that?) but in our hearts, our affections.

And what happens in our country, in our culture. Here in Alabama we have the most repressive immigration laws in the country, laws that go beyond necessary and seek to be pickily punitive to the one who is not like us. The people said, “Let us build a great fence from ocean to ocean,” and call it Babel. We who are Christian who know the Pentecost story should at least be anxious about cultural attempts to say that here only one language will be
spoken. Some of your Presbyterian brothers and sisters, even some pastors, were as children beaten in Presbyterian schools in Texas, for speaking Spanish. Yes, that was a generation of two ago, but let’s not forget it happened. Some of your Christian brothers and sisters who are Navajo (that means, more “American” than anyone in the room), as school children were stripped of their native jewelry, had braids cut from their heads, their moccasins taken from their feet, until they looked “Anglo” enough to be permitted an education. We ought to be anxious about cultural efforts to say we must all look, think, say, believe the same thing. That is not the way we will find unity. Since 1782, included on the Seal of the United States, our national motto is *E Pluribus Unum* – “out of many, one.” We will find unity when our differences are not devalued, but heard, listened to, bridged by God’s love for us that binds.

It is never just about us. William Visser t’Hooft, first Secretary General of the World Council of Churches, wrote in an introduction to a book about Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Christ did not bear the sins of Christians; he bore the sins of the world. The church, therefore, must live and suffer in the world, with the world and for the world.”

Today, in this congregation on Pentecost, we ordain and install officers, and thank those who have finished their term, aware that we are but one church. This local church participates in the work of the whole church of Jesus Christ around the world, and the whole church is represented in us in this place and time. When we break bread and share the cup we do it with the whole church, and are bound together in the one body that is Christ.

These scriptures we examine today are stories of community, and God at the center of it. The emphasis is on the hearing, not the speech. None of our politics, none of our social processes, none of our religion, is about any single one of us alone. The point of both Babel and Pentecost is that we are in this life together, we have to be. And in the beginning the church tried to design itself that way, holding all things in common, even daily living.

Every time we do this action that all Christians share, in the cup and the bread, it is a sign of the Kingdom coming, where divisions will be no more, where our alienation from one another, and even from God, is not permanent. We are reminded that on Pentecost the Holy Spirit showed up to everyone indiscriminately, no matter race, class, gender, or origin, and at least in that moment everyone there heard one another as God hears us. May we pray for, work for, and experience increasingly frequent occasions when even for a moment we are drawn beyond ourselves and into life together, when for a moment we hear one another and love one another as God loves us, when for a moment we can see the Kingdom coming. Christ, himself our peace, is bringing it to pass.

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