

Pentecost Year C: 8 / 9 June 2019
St. James' Episcopal Church, Clinton NY
The Reverend Gary Cyr

“We must go forth into the world rejoicing in the power of the Spirit and thus risk genuine spiritual transformation. We too must learn the language of our communities, for God is speaking.”

Genesis 11: 1-9

Acts 2: 1-21

John 14: 8-17

Psalm 104: 25-35, 37

The protestant work ethic, also known as the Puritan work ethic and often attributed to John Calvin, is predicated upon three principles: hard work, discipline, and thrift (or frugality). Basically, the premise suggests that if you put your mind to it, work diligently and manage your costs and expenditures, you will be rewarded. Or as Calvin might postulate, if you followed the mantra faithfully, you would then be one of the elect made visible through observation of your way of life. Faith and the work ethic working hand-in-hand. This protestant / puritan work ethic has permeated the very fabric of Western culture so much so that it underscores the ethos of the American Dream – however you personally define the American Dream.

For many, making a name for yourself is the epitome of said Dream, which our North American culture emphasizes relentlessly. The impetus for being self-sufficient aligns well with the idea of being self-employed. If so, then entrepreneurship in starting your own business might be seen as the pinnacle of said work ethic. Or getting published if you are a writer, or charting in the top ten if you are a recording artist, or your name in lights if you are in theater or cinema. If that were not enough, there are numerous rewards of merit in prizes that acknowledge achievement – Emmys, Oscars, Grammys, etcetera. The sporting world is also another arena where one can make a “name” for themselves. And lest we forget, there is also social media – Snapchat, Facebook, Instagram, Tweeter, not to mention YouTube – just to name a few, where how many likes you receive is understood as validation. As such, I find myself

looking at the people of Babel with much intrigue as they seem to resemble our culture in so many ways. After all, they, too, only wanted to make a name for themselves. But that was not God's desire.

This gathering of people survived what must have been a hostile environment. They had managed to congregate in numbers, develop a shared language, as well as a system of conduct such that civilization emerged in the midst of wilderness. Maybe I can push that just a little to suggest this narrative symbolically epitomizes the shift from nomadic hunter-gather to agrarian settlement. Whatever the intention of the author, the people of Babel simply wanted to celebrate their achievements. They wanted to memorialize what had been years in the making and do so with a crowning monument. Maybe they simply wanted a pat on the back and set about erecting an edifice to celebrate all they had accomplished in fostering their civilization. This edifice would reach to the high heavens where the gods lived and demonstrate that they too were like the gods. But if we focus on that point and that point alone – true as it may be – we miss the larger picture.

God's desire was not that they focus inwardly, but outwardly; that the people of Babel not focus on themselves and their achievements, but on the world the surrounded them. This inward / outward focus forms the heart of the Pentecost narrative as well. There is a real correlation between Babel and Pentecost where the prescription for living into God's desire is expressed.

There is a school of thought in theological circles where Pentecost is understood as the antithesis to Babel. The disciples, filled with the Spirit, go forth from their enclosure proclaiming the Good News of Jesus in everyone's language, thus rendering the dispersal of Babel, where no one understood one another, mute. However, that observation overlooks the similarity between the two stories.

The disciples had fearfully gathered together in the wake of Jesus' death. They had experienced the resurrection and ascension and were at a loss for how to move forward. They gathered together for there is safety in numbers, after all. Just ask the good people of Babel. Did they have any intention of leaving that room? Of going forth, taking a risk that their own lives would be forever changed, or possibly be forfeited under Roman rule and the scrutiny of

the Jewish Temple authorities? Fear, it seemed, ruled their heart. Until, that is, the Spirit filled their heart and nudged them, nay, pushed them out the door. They, too, like the people of Babel, were not meant to be isolated from the world around them. They, too, were not meant to keep their focus inward. They, too, were meant to go out into the world. The 21st century Church is not that different from those early disciples, nor is it vastly different from the good people of Babel.

Too often has the modern church focused too keenly on what has been rather than on what can be. Too often, the modern church focuses on its past unwittingly becoming a museum of artifacts, a reliquary of ritual and tradition rather than a house of prayer. When we only look inward and celebrate past (or even present) achievement, we silence the Spirit in our midst. The Spirit that God so graciously gifted the world, the Spirit actively at work in our midst, is silenced. Or, more honestly, we mute its voice. We consciously avoid listening to the Spirit's message, a message that fosters doing what God desires. We are deaf to that assurance.

Barbara Brown Taylor, in her new book Holy Envy offers a different take on the story of Babel. When language becomes a barrier, we have to find new ways of getting to know one another. Here, we North Americans demonstrate our laziness, because we believe our English, which dominates much of the world's interactions, is sufficient and others ought to learn it. However, when I lived in Canada for four years, many Canadians knew two languages. When I travel to the Netherlands last year, many folk there spoke two or three languages (English, often not being one of them – Dutch, German, French, yes – English not so much). When we don't share a common language, we need to find ways to communicate. When we don't share a common language, we need to find ways to know one another and build relationship. That is the valuable lesson Babel teaches, at least that is what Barbara Brown Taylor argues, and I agree with her. The 21st century church needs to learn to communicate with others who no longer speak a shared language, especially a shared church language. Heck, there are church people who do not speak religious language. We can no longer rest on our past achievements; no longer can we remain focused inwardly; no longer can we remain deaf to the Spirit's presence and prompting. If we, as a church, as a parish, remain insular and isolate ourselves from our communities, projecting *our* own wants and expectations onto them, we falter in our witness to

God's desire as embodied in Jesus' life and message. *We falter* when we fail to learn the community's language through which relationship is fostered. We, as a parish, must learn the language of our communities if we are to understand one another's needs.

The Advocate, the Holy Spirit of the Living God, filled the hearts of those fear-filled disciples so-much-so that they went forth speaking the language of those they were sent to. That same Spirit is speaking to our church, our parish, nudging us outwards into the community knowing that we speak different languages, pushing us to find ways to communicate in spite of that barrier. It was a risk for those early disciples to cast aside fear and embrace the unknown. It was a challenge for the people of Babel to learn to know each other when the familiar no longer existed. It is a challenge for us to let go of the past in order to embrace an uncertain and unknown future. Yes, it is a risk. But the Advocate is with us if we dare to believe, if we dare to trust. The name we ought to be making for ourselves is not based on any work ethic. It is predicated upon the gift of the Spirit and a willingness on our part to listen intently to what God is saying through words we may not yet understand. We must go forth into the world rejoicing in the power of the Spirit and thus risk genuine spiritual transformation. We too must learn the language of our communities, for God is speaking.