

Scattered and Gathered

Genesis 11:1-9

Do you know how many languages are spoken here in Iowa? According to Iowa State Extension, 185 languages are spoken by K-12 students in Iowa. 41 different languages are spoken by K-12 students here in Story County. Here in Ames, students from 115 countries study at Iowa State and speak a variety of languages. That can create challenges in communicating, in doing everyday life. When you don't speak the language of those around you, and/or they don't speak yours, challenges happen.

More than the fact that we can't communicate because of language is the fact that we misunderstand each other even if we're speaking the same language. A quote attributed to George Bernard Shaw says that America and Britain are two countries divided by a common language.

Even when we speak the same language, we don't always communicate as well as we'd like, as well as we need to. In premarital counseling, I work with couples on assertiveness and active listening, so they can improve their communication with each other. Sin breaks communication. It breaks relationships. It breaks connections. Sin scatters.

In the story of the Tower of Babel, we see sin seeming to act in a connecting way. The people all speak the same language. They're all working together for the same goal. Isn't that what we want?

The problem is in the goal. The people are not coming together to do what God has called them to do. Instead, they're coming together to make themselves like God. They're making a name for themselves, a monument that reaches towards the sky that shows the glory of

humanity. They're not scattering over the earth to be fruitful and multiply like they were commanded to do. They're building a tower to rise above the floodwaters that they worry could come again. They're seeking what they think is good, not what God has said is good. Pride and arrogance lead to trouble. God's judgment is rejected which leads to separation between God and humanity.

And so, God confuses their speech. He makes it so they cannot understand each other. The Hebrew verb for "cause confusion" (balal) sounds a lot like the Hebrew noun for Babel. So we might say that God "Babeled their babble." Even more, there is an inside joke in Hebrew. God says, "Let us go down and confuse [גבלה] their speech" (Gen. 11:7). As Jewish scholar Nahum Sarna points out, the Hebrew consonants in this form of the verb for confuse, n-b-l, is a disarrangement of the first three consonants in the word for brick, l-b-n. Because God n-b-l, they could no longer use their l-b-n. We might say that God destroyed the building blocks of their speech.

All of a sudden, where once there was one language, now there were dozens—if not hundreds. None of the builders could understand each other anymore. Now they had different words for "brick," "hammer," "plank," and "measure." Nothing made sense. Their audacity prompted God to confound their speech and scatter them all over the earth. It's a colossal manmade failure.

The tower of Babel—perhaps more than any other Old Testament story—unveils the burning desire in our hearts: we want to usurp that which God is graciously willing to give. We long to attain as an accomplishment that which the Father wants to bestow as a gift. We sweat

and bleed in our efforts to build a tower while God stands before us with a free cross in his outstretched hands.

But that's not the end of the story. The next chapter, Genesis 12, is when Abraham is introduced. Instead of humanity making a name for themselves, God chooses to make a name for someone who can't make a name for himself. He heads west, back towards Eden, back towards God's promises. God had scattered people and confused their languages, but was already beginning to gather them back together.

The builders of Babel failed when they tried to construct a tower that reached up to heaven. Their own works couldn't save them. So just as God once came down to confuse their language, so also, he would come down again someday in the person of Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, the Son of God Incarnate.

God confused our words but sent his Word to live among us and teach us God's ways and show us God's love and, ultimately, die for our sins. With hammer and nails, the tools used for building, we killed the Son of God, who shed his blood to save us from our sins—and ourselves. Above him on the cross was a sign written in three different languages so all could understand, that He was the king.

But the scattering and confusion of Babel remained. That's all reversed on Pentecost. People who couldn't understand each other are miraculously able to. Communication and connection happens across cultures and languages. What Babel fractured, Pentecost made whole. What Babel scattered, Pentecost gathered. Through the power of the Spirit, humanity can communicate and connect across all divides. Because proclaiming the work of Christ is the primary work of the Holy Spirit,

through which He gathers people from all nations into one Church.

The Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost brought people of all nations into the one body of the one Head, Christ. Christ joins and unites all into one faith through the Gospel, even though the different languages remain, and he tears down the wall of separation.

Our Father will not allow us to make a name for ourselves. Names are His to give. And give them He does; in grace and mercy. He names us His beloved children. He etches the name "Christian" into the bricks of our soul. The cross is the only tower we need. In it we are united with Christ and His Spirit. We live rent-free, mortgage-free, for our habitation has been paid for in crimson currency.

Today on Pentecost, we recall the miracle of God pouring out his Spirit on the Church. On that first Pentecost, they spoke in tongues—foreign languages they never studied and learned. All the foreigners in Jerusalem heard in their own language "the mighty works of God" (Acts 2:11). Pentecost is the opposite of the Tower of Babel. Instead of dispersing people, now Jesus gathers his Church. Gathered together, united not by a common language or a common goal against God, but our common humanity before God.

The work of Pentecost continues, though not as dramatic a way as happened then. There are over 7000 languages spoken in the world, and only about 750 of them have a full Bible. People like Tiffany Smith and the Grulkes work to help bring the message of the Good News of Jesus to people in their own language, in ways that they can understand. More than that, they gather together people from those language and culture groups so that the word will be used, be understood, and be used to gather people from all nations and languages.

We see that here, as well. People from all over the world come to study at Iowa State. Although they can learn English through their schooling, they still need help with conversational English, navigating a strange culture, finding community in a strange land. Through English classes and conversation partners, through quilting and meals, we share God's love with those who need to hear it. And while technology may make it easier to communicate, it doesn't always work. It still takes effort and love.

Confusion and scattering were the result of sin. Understanding and gathering is the result of the Holy Spirit's work, pointing us to Jesus. Even when we misunderstand each other, there is forgiveness. There is peace. There is hope. Not in our work, but in God's. Thanks be to God for that.

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