



Poland Presbyterian Church

At the Green since 1802

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Day of Pentecost

Genesis 11:1-9

A sermon by Brent J. Eelman

"Future Schlock"

Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. And they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly." And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth." The LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built. 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; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, 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, and they left off building the city. Therefore it was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth; and from there the LORD scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.

Acts 2:1-13

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs--in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."

On the day of Pentecost something marvelous happened. It wasn't the flames of fire. It wasn't the glossolalia or the speaking in tongues. No. What happened was that history was reversed. The confusion emanating from the Tower of Babel was reversed. On Pentecost, people heard and

understood what they heard. Language, custom and other differences were no longer a barrier to understanding.

One of the first stories of the Old Testament is the Tower of Babel. People wanted to do a good thing. They wanted to become closer to God. It was amazing what they could do when they put their minds and bodies to it... The accomplishments of humanity were truly amazing. They built a magnificent tower. But what was the result? They were not closer to God! No, they lost the ability to understand one another. They began to speak in different languages. Their speech was confused and they no longer understood one another.

Pentecost is the reversal of that story. What happened at Babel, confusion, was reversed on the day of Pentecost. On that day, people heard and understood each other. Words once again communicated truth.

On this Pentecost day, I want to look at these two stories in terms of our own lives in 2015. I have two points: 1. Babel is real. 2. Pentecost is hope.

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Babel is real. We live in a remarkable age of communication technology. From texting to twitter, from face book to email, we have so many ways of communicating with one another. But all of our technology has not given us one of the things that we so badly desire: clarity. Our lives are filled with beeps and buzzes... with signs and symbols... with all types of words. In the midst of all this "communication," truth and clarity are often the first victim.

This became apparent to me a number of years ago, while still living in Houston, Texas. It began at about 6:30 one evening. I was at home with our daughter (who was still a teenager), when the phone rang. It was a telemarketer. These calls often come during the dinner hour and I always answer, because it might be someone who needs help. When I answered the routine began. I was trying to be polite, but the person on the other end did not get the message. Finally he asked me the question: "Who makes the decisions around your house on pest control?"

I replied by saying these decisions were made by Charles Eelman. (Charles was Charlie, our dog. He was an energetic Brittany Spaniel and he probably would like to make a few decisions about pest control). My daughter's jaw dropped as she heard me answer the question: "Could Charles come to the phone now?" "Oh no," I replied, "Charles is exercising right now." I went on. "His schedule is kind of erratic. He is hard to get a hold of." The conversation ended at that point. My daughter thought her father truly lost it, until a week later, when she answered the phone, again, during the supper hour and a different salesperson asked for the head of the household by name: "Charles Eelman." Two additional phone calls during the next week, all for Charles Eelman, confirmed our fears that we had invented a person, who made the decisions around our house. One deceptive "white lie" to get a telemarketer off the phone had mushroomed into the creation of a person on some telemarketing list. Can you see how easily we might become deceived these days? Babel exists, and we live with confusion that multiplies, grows and spreads.

I tell you this story because it illustrates the realities of our day. We are inundated with words, messages, advertisements, ideas, and phone calls. The term that I heard the other day was "Information Overload". We receive more than we can possibly process. All of this is under the guise of "improved communications". We have built a telecommunications empire so that people will be able to communicate and understand one another but what has happened? Do we communicate better? We have overloaded ourselves with words and messages. Why? Because now we use these devices to "push" communication. They literally push their messages on us. Bulk and mass mailings are a way of life. Mailing lists are bought and sold, and we in the church are part of it. Why? We spray our communications. We mail, phone, and email large groups of people, with the belief that less than 1% will respond, but with the hope that we will enlarge our market by at least that number.

What is the impact on our lives? Let me share my experience. A few years back I decided to actually see how many "communications" I was receiving. In a three day period: Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday: I received over 300 emails. Only 25 were related to work and 8 were from family and friends, and the rest were junk emails (spam) wanting to sell everything from computer equipment to prescription medications. When I arrived at work in the morning I could count on receiving at least 2 junk faxes, one being from a local restaurant, which to my knowledge no one from my former staff ate at, and the other from office companies and phone companies with their latest sale. And then, of course there was the junk mail. In three days, I put it on the scale and we had received nearly 3 pounds worth of junk mail. The writer, Alvin Toffler coined the title Future Shock, but this is future schlock. and our lives are filled with it.

The ironic and painful thing for me is that we in the church contribute to this. Our activities now compete with everything else for time and resources. So some of the schlock is ours. We publish a newsletter. We print the bulletin. We create slides. We make the flyer. We send the card. We announce it in worship. We do "robo-calls," Facebook, and texting. It is part of "getting the word out." I know we have to do these things, and we have to do them well. I encourage this and spend a great deal of time on it... and yet I sometimes question myself and struggle, wondering if I am not guilty of "word abuse". The larger question is: how do we speak God's Word of truth, love and hope with all the words that fall on people's ears? Have we become resistant to hearing and understanding?

Words hit us in all kinds of ways. We are blanketed, inundated, overwhelmed, and overloaded with messages and words. And yet if you ask what is the problem in our world today: "We need to communicate better." Babel is real. We are speaking, talking, writing, hearing, yet we don't understand. The sheer volume of our communications today is the modern tower of Babel. Words... Words... Words... but we don't hear, and we do not understand. The profusion of words, the overload of words, diminishes the importance of each and every word. The result: we do not hear each other. Words are said, again and again... but nothing is said. We don't understand each other... we live in confusion and chaos. We live in anger and misunderstanding. We argue, we fight, we hurt and we go to war, because amidst all the words and noises that fall on our ears, we understand little. So we are divided, against each other. We are divided by language, by custom and by culture. We are divided by "the information age"! Babel is real!

Pentecost is hope. Pentecost brings hope to this confusion of messages and words. The spirit of God, the Holy Spirit, is a spirit that brings understanding. The miracle of that day was witnessed by the people from the different countries who were in the city. They heard the disciples speaking. They heard the words in their own language. The event of Babel was overcome by the coming of the spirit on Pentecost. The spirit of God, the event of Pentecost is still real this day. We tend to think that it is a fantastic event, and indeed it was, but I am coming to believe that it is also an event that occurred subtly. Its mark was hearing and understanding. In our day it is freedom from verbal overload. Three brief examples:

Last week I mentioned in my sermon how I was stuck in Japan for a week.. I was done with my volunteer in mission assignment in Taiwan, and was going to stay in Japan for a couple of days and then head home. I had very little money left and so I would spend my time walking the streets of Tokyo, taking the sights. It got very lonely. The signs, the TV the radio, everything was in a different language, and I was by myself. I couldn't understand anything. On one of my walks, I heard singing coming from a small storefront. It the hymn, St. Anne. "Our God, Our Help In Ages Past." They were singing it in Japanese. I went in and sang with them, the words that I knew. And for a special moment, I felt as though the spirit of understanding had bridged the differences that separated us. Across the barriers of language, culture and race, we heard each other and understood. Pentecost is hope.

The second was a visit to the Rothko Chapel in Houston. It was not what I expected. The visuals are black canvases. There is nothing that assaults the senses and requires response. Instead it invites rest. In the quiet of the time there, without words, without visuals, without color or sound, the quiet surrounded me and a sense of clarity came in the midst of prayer. At that moment, I sensed the presence of God's spirit, but also a connection with my own spirit. It was an experience beyond words, yet a sacred moment when the Word spoke through the "sounds of silence." Pentecost is hope.

The third occurred while Karen and I were at Ghost Ranch in New Mexico. We went hiking one afternoon, and climbed a small peak in the middle of the ranch. It took a few hours to get at the top, and quite frankly, I was winded. I sat down to catch my breath and looked to the sky and experienced this amazing sense of awe. It was totally quiet... absolute silence... all I could hear was my breath entering and exiting my lungs. and then, as if on cue, a large eagle entered my scope of vision... soaring against the blue sky. Then it flapped its wings to gain height, and I could hear the air move as the wings pumped up and down. All I could think of was the Pentecost hymn:

The lone, wild bird in lofty flight is
still with you, nor leaves your sight.
And I am yours! I rest in you, Great
Spirit, come, rest in me, too.

Each secret thought is known to you,
the path I walk my whole life through;
my days, my deeds, my hopes, my fears,
my deepest joys, my silent tears.

There is a difference that we at Poland Presbyterian Church can make. A quiet difference that is powerful and for which this community hungers: sacred, quiet, space. Space and time that is free from the words, free from the schlock that inundates and chokes our lives. A place where the buzzers don't buzz, the beepers don't beep, and the speakers are silenced. A place where the words, the distracting words, are muted in deference to the Word. A place where we can experience the Pentecost of Hope, where words fall silent, enabling us to hear, with clarity the Word of our Lord. III I am getting to know and love you as a congregation. I believe you have a wonderful future. There is talent that is directed in so many ways: trips, ministries, mission teams, choirs, classes, programs, buildings, publications and worship. All are vital and all are important. The challenge for us is silence, and stillness. "Be still and know that I am God." Pentecost is the gift of hearing "that still small voice" in the midst of the earthquake, fire and storm of modern life.

"Be still and know that I am God." Those words should be written on our souls. The challenge for us is to stop uttering, writing, processing, illustrating, teaching and singing words ... for but a moment, a sacred moment. and quietly hear the Word and understand the Word. Pentecost is hope. Clarity, Understanding and hope. This is the good news. Amen.