

“Babel and Pentecost”

a sermon by

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Charlotte, North Carolina

May 27, 2007

Text: “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 the earth” (Genesis 11:9).

Several weeks ago I spent a week at Princeton Seminary as part of a continuing education event. Each year our seminar invites a number of scholars to visit with us and to share aspects of their research with us. This year one of the speakers who met with us was Robert D. Putnam of Harvard University, who was at Princeton University during a Sabbatical leave. Robert Putnam is a student of American culture, particularly trying to understand American communities today. Several years ago, he wrote a remarkable book entitled *Bowling Alone*. The title of the book is taken from a recent sociological phenomenon. More and more Americans are bowling alone. Now, traditionally, bowling has always been a group activity. Traditionally, most people who bowl do so in leagues. Today, as Putnam notes, more and more people come to bowling alleys alone.

But Putnam’s work is not just about bowling. His research shows that we are becoming increasingly disconnected—from family, from friends, from neighbors and from our communities. This is certainly true in the church. Putnam’s research on the church today shows that, whereas traditionally many people looked to the church to provide community, today people are withdrawing from group activities. They are bowling alone.

I.

There are two Scriptures that form the basis of the sermon this morning. The first is taken from Genesis, chapter 11. It is the story of the building of the Tower of Babel. The narrative is part of a larger framework, Genesis chapters 1-11, which forms the prelude of the history of salvation. These early chapters of the Bible explain the universal nature of our faith. They speak of Creation (Genesis 1 and 2), the stories of the Fall (Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel) (Genesis 2-4), the great flood (Genesis 6-9), and this story of the building of the great tower of Babel.

The second story is taken from the New Testament. It is the account of Pentecost that is found in Acts, chapter 2. On the day of Pentecost, the disciples received a remarkable outpouring of the Spirit of God. There were tongues of fire. Moreover, each person heard the speech of the disciples in his own tongue. Peter explained to them that the gift of the spirit was prophesied in the Old Testament book of Joel.

These two stories (the tower of Babel and Pentecost) are related in a very intimate way. The story of the Gifts of Tongues at Pentecost is the reverse of the story of the Tower of Babel. One is the story of human pride; the other is a witness to the wonderful works of God.

II.

The story of the Tower of Babel is a story of human pride. It points back to a time when the earth had one language. As people came to the plain of Shinar (Babylon), they determined to create a great tower. They made bricks, burned them thoroughly, and were determined to build a city and to build a tower to the heavens. But their plan was thwarted when God confused their language and scattered them across the face of the earth.

Now, pride is an insidious thing. It is the result of our trying to be God. In the case of these ancient people, they wanted to take the place of God. They wanted to make a name for themselves. Reinhold Niebuhr saw human sinfulness primarily as pride. For Niebuhr, humans are anxious because they know they are finite. So we try to deal with our finiteness by pretending to be more than we are. Wealth, power, and knowledge are just some of the ways that we seek to insulate ourselves from our finiteness. For Niebuhr, pride is always the temptation to see ourselves as good when we are evil. We see the evil in others but not in ourselves. The choices in life, Niebuhr noted, were seldom between good and evil but more often between the lesser of two evils.

As a pastor serving a church in Detroit during the time of the Great Depression, Niebuhr wrestled with the question of how a person makes moral choices. On one occasion, he was teaching a class to a group of young boys. The subject of the class was the “Sermon on the Mount” and Niebuhr was holding before them the words of Jesus that we are called to turn the other cheek. One of the boys in the class raised an important ethical question. This young boy, who was about twelve years old, was helping his widowed mother and family by selling newspapers on the street corner. Each day, said the boy, the boys would fight among themselves over who would get the best street corner to sell papers. The young boy wanted to know whether he should turn the other cheek, thereby depriving his family of necessary food or should he assert himself over the other boys by grabbing the best spot he could get.

That incident had a profound impact on Niebuhr’s thought. He finally concluded that human life seldom offers us simple moral dilemmas between good and evil, but often we must choose between the lesser of two evils. Divorce is an illustration of this, as is the issue of abortion. Niebuhr saw this illustrated in the life of Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln did not want the Civil War. However, he saw that war was sometimes the lesser of two evil. However, when the war was over, Lincoln was the first to reach out to a defeated south. In his Second Inaugural Address, Lincoln articulated this when he called “for malice toward none and charity for all.”

III.

If the story of the Tower of Babel is the story of the futility of human pride, then the story of God's pouring out of the Spirit at Pentecost is a powerful testimony to God's grace. As Presbyterians, we have often not emphasized the work of the Holy Spirit. We are quick to speak of God as Creator and Father, of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, but we are often not as comfortable speaking about the third person of the trinity. And yet, the Holy Spirit does some important and irreplaceable things for us.

First of all, it convicts us of our sin. If we are open to the spirit of God, we are made painfully aware not of the sin that dwells in other people but also the sin that dwells in us.

Shortly after the events of September 11, 2001, there appeared in the *New Yorker Magazine* an article by John Seabrook entitled "The Tower Builder." The story related some of the discussion that took place about the collapse of the World Trade Center in the attacks of that day. A number of structural engineers had been interviewed concerning the construction of the World Trade Center, when it was built in the 1970's. Almost all of the engineers agreed that the building had been built in the best possible way and that the engineers involved in the building had tried to anticipate what would happen if a plane hit one of the buildings. However, none of them could have imagined the impact of planes the size of the 757 and 767 planes that would one day be built. The article went on to relate an event that took place in November of 2001. The structural designer of the World Trade Center was attending a conference in St. Louis. During the question and answer period a questioner asked this engineer if he had any regrets about the design of the building. When asked this question, the chief structural engineer broke down and wept, saying, that he wished that somehow they had made the buildings stronger. If only, he said, the buildings could have lasted another hour.

To me, it was refreshing to hear a person express that kind of contrition. No excuses, no long apologies explaining why he had not done everything he could have. He just said that he wished the buildings had been stronger.

One of the things that God's spirit does in our lives is to give us the power to admit that we are sinners. We make mistakes. "All have sinned" writes Paul to the Romans, "and come short of the glory of God."

There is another thing that God's Spirit does for us. It unites us with what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. In the Reformed or Presbyterian faith we have always viewed the Holy Spirit as God's personal and powerful presence in the world, calling forth faith and uniting us with God's saving work in Jesus Christ. One of the things that Pentecost Sunday does for us is to remind us that as a church, we have to wait on God's spirit. We cannot save ourselves. We cannot build the church. Everything that we do is done with the knowledge that it is God's Spirit that empowers us. We pray in the Spirit. We work for the good of the church in the Spirit. But it is the Spirit of God that works in us and we cannot control or manipulate that spirit.

One of the finest books on prayer is a short book written by Harry Emerson Fosdick entitled *The Meaning of Prayer*. It came out of a critical period in Fosdick's life when he was a Seminary student at Union Theological Seminary in New York. Fosdick was always subject to

periods of great depression. One night, in the midst of one of these black periods, he took a razor blade and slashed his wrists. For six months he was hospitalized. During that time he was terribly frightened. He finally came to the realization that either there was the power of God who could help him or else he knew he was lost. That experience taught him the meaning of prayer.

And that is the work of God's Spirit.

There is another thing that God's Spirit does for us. It transforms our lives. Or to use a more formal word, it points us to a life of Sanctification. Now, none of us wants to be "holy." That is not a very appealing word to any of us. But, if we are honest, I think most of us would say that we would like to find more meaning in our lives, more confidence, more peace, more assurance that our lives really do matter.

That is what the Spirit of God does for us. It unites us with Christ, elicits faith from our hearts, makes us alive to the voice of God, and allows us to live more closely to the image of God in Jesus Christ.

Someone once observed that part of the Christian life is a great compulsion. Something has taken hold on us. We are not our own but we belong to something greater than ourselves.

Now, I think compulsion is a part of every person's life. There are some things that have a great power over us. So Paul said, "I must see Rome." Why must he? No one made him take that risky venture that finally cost him his life. No one made David Livingstone leave his home in Scotland to be a missionary in Africa.

No, there is something else at work in our lives that takes hold of us and drives us to be more than we ever thought we could be.

Surely, there is nothing more needed in our society today than people who have caught a vision of what the church can be, who understand that God is calling us to make a witness for Christ in the midst of a city that desperately needs it.

And that is what the Spirit of God is calling us to do. And so on this Pentecost Sunday, we pray the words of the hymn:

"Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me;

Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me.

Melt me, mold me, fill me, use me.

Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me."

Amen!