

PENTECOST

Genesis 11:1-9
Acts 2:1-21

Faith Community
May 31, 2009

Introduction

Some outrageous things happened with the original bailout money that was given to the banks months ago. You may recall that the Secretary of the Treasury and the head of the Federal Reserve said that money must be rushed to the banks immediately, and so Congress gave them billions of dollars. Later we found out the huge amounts of that money was squandered. Some of the very people who caused the collapse of the banks were given multi-million dollar bonuses.

The one I heard about that grated me the most was the CEO who took some of the bail out money to redecorate his office – to the tune of \$1.5 million! We can conceive of spending \$1.5 million on a huge home, but can you even imagine how you would spend a million and half on an office? Hundreds of thousands of people are losing their jobs, partly because of what this company has done, and this CEO was spending \$1.5 million to redecorate his office. Who does he think he is? So many executives acted like they were some kind of gods.

I read an on-line article by a professor of ethics who has taught at some of the most highly respected graduate schools of business. His article was about how we need to get back to the basics of ethics - like the 10 commandments.

He suggested that the best place to start might be to post a large banner over the front door of the Columbia School of Business that says, “You Shall Not Steal.” At the back door hang another banner that says, “You Shall Not Bear False Witness.” Most Americans were outraged at what went on because these executives seem to be so greedy. To many of us it was the height of arrogance.

I

The Old Testament scripture we read today was the story of the Tower of Babel. You remember how it goes; the entire world spoke one language so that everybody understood everyone else. People migrated to Shinar and settled there. Things were going well for them. They became very good at making bricks and mortar, so they decided to build a whole city.

But then they wanted more. They would not only build a city, but they would make a name for themselves – they would build it with a tower that would reach to heaven. Talk about earning your way to heaven, these people wanted to build a stairway right to God’s front door. So they began work on this enormous ziggurat, where each level was a little bit smaller than the one below it.

God looked down and saw their arrogance – they wanted to be like God. It was then that God gave them all different languages. Suddenly they couldn’t understand what their neighbor was saying. The worker couldn’t understand his boss. The manager couldn’t tell what the planner was asking him to do. Co-workers couldn’t understand each other. So the building of this tower to heaven came to a screeching halt.

II

These Old Testament people were so arrogant that they thought they could build a tower to God. They would make a name for themselves. Everybody would be talking about them and what they had accomplished. Their pride made them think of themselves as gods.

God brought all this to an end – God gave them all different languages. Now they couldn't communicate with each other. The mission they had set for themselves ended because they couldn't understand each other. People who had once been very effective were now totally ineffective. They were so confused because of their different languages that they separated and went to different parts of the world. People who had been close weren't close any longer because they couldn't talk to each other. People who had been friends separated and moved away.

III

I know, you are asking yourself, “OK, but what does this have to do with Pentecost?” You were asking yourself that weren't you?

This is relevant because the Tower of Babel is the anti-Pentecost. What happened at Pentecost is just the opposite of what happened at Babel. The one is the polar opposite of the other.

IV

At Pentecost people had gathered from all over the known world. Acts is careful to list the names of all the places: Parthians, Medes, Elamites, residents of Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Pamphylia, Egypt, Libya, and Rome. These people from all over gathered together in one place, but they couldn't understand each other because they spoke different languages.

Suddenly there was a sound like the rushing of a violent wind. Then small flames like fire flickered above each person's head. The Holy Spirit came among them. All of a sudden these people from all over the world began to hear each other speaking in their own language. Instead of being confused by each other's language, all the people could hear the others speaking in their own native tongue.

The people were amazed. What caused this wonderful event? Then Peter stood up and told them how the Holy Spirit of God was being poured out on all people. He said that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. This is the birth of the Christian church.

V

Do you see how this is the opposite of the Tower of Babel? At Babel everyone spoke the same language, but suddenly their language was changed so they couldn't understand each other. At Pentecost people spoke different languages but then suddenly they could understand each other.

At Babel the people were confused; at Pentecost everything was made clear.

Babel was based on arrogance; Pentecost is based on humility.

At Babel the people were separated; at Pentecost the people were brought together.

At Babel their mission ended because of God; at Pentecost their mission began because of God.

At Babel the people were made ineffective; at Pentecost they were made effective.

Conclusion

The account of Pentecost tells us that the church is given to us so that we will be drawn together and work effectively for Christ's cause. Jesus wants us to communicate clearly with each other so that we can build up his church. The Holy Spirit helps us understand and work together.

We are not just the Presbyterian Church; we aren't just a church in Michigan; we aren't just a church in the United States; we are part of Christ's church all around the world. There's a reason why representatives from so many lands were there at Pentecost to witness the power of the Holy Spirit.

We are meant to work together, to cooperate with each other, so that we will strengthen the witness of Christ in the world. Pentecost is about reaching across boundaries, about working together as churches and denominations, and about sharing Christ's mission. Pentecost means that we take down barriers.

There is no place here for arrogance. How can we be proud when we understand that it is God's Son who is working through us?

All of this tells us that our model as Christ's church is Pentecost, not Babel. We are to understand each other and work together so that we can be effective in the work that Christ has given us. When we do that we are able to spread the good news that everyone can call on the name of the Lord and receive the gifts of God's love.

Amen