

## “THE LANGUAGE OF GRACE”

by Rev. Victor Kim

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

(05-23-21) Pentecost

I once watched a movie called Babel, perhaps some of you may have as well. It's a complicated movie in which there are four different storylines that are connected in ways not always obvious to the viewer. Most of the confusion stems from the fact that the different storylines are played out in different languages and in the theatrical release, no translation or subtitles were provided. The movie depicts 4 stories that take place in Morocco, the U.S., Mexico and Japan. Because most of the movie isn't in English, the viewer needs to guess how these storylines are related. My experience of watching the movies was often frustrating and confusion. It seemed incoherent in many places and I wasn't sure how what I was watching at one moment had any reference to the rest of the movie. **Much of this incoherence is rooted in our inability to understand what the characters are saying, since most of the movie is not in English. In fact I only know what I know about the movie, even having watched it, because I read a plot outline on the internet.** It seems that the lack of translation or subtitles in the movie is meant to convey for the moviegoer something of the confusion and chaos that the characters in the various storylines face **when failures to communicate cause unnecessary suffering and even tragedy. No wonder the movie makers decided to use Babel as the title.**

As we know the word babel comes from a Bible story, from the passage which Young Tae read earlier from Genesis. The story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11 tells us that early in human history all people spoke one language. The people came together and decided to build a tower which would reach into the heavens, to make a name for themselves. Seeing their desire to glorify themselves, God caused the people to speak different languages, thereby confusing the people and scattering them over the face of the earth. The origin of the word babel is Akkadian, an ancient Mesopotamian language, and means **'gateway to god'** but it sounds similar to the Hebrew word ***babhel***, which means to confuse, hence our present use of babel to indicate confusion or lack of clarity.

Speaking of diversity of languages, in 1951, the linguist Richard Pittman identified 46 different languages in his mimeographed list which he called his ***Ethnologue***. In February of 2021, the 24<sup>th</sup> edition of ***Ethnologue*** was published, listing a total of 7,139 living languages worldwide. Many of these languages are spoken by less than 50 people and are in danger of extinction. According to the United Bible Societies, as of last year, there are now over 3,324 languages in which at least one book of the Bible has been published, far short of the 7,139 languages of the ***Ethnologue***, but enough to include the primary means of communication of over 90% of the world's population. The good news is that the word is getting out!

Today is Pentecost Sunday on which we mark the coming of the promised Holy Spirit upon the disciples gathered in Jerusalem. As the text from Acts tells us, when the Holy Spirit descended upon the disciples, they were able to speak in other languages. When the disciples went out onto the streets of the city, those around them were bewildered, for each person heard the disciples speaking in his or her native language. Some concluded that the disciples must have been drunk. But Peter addressed the people and explained what had happened. He told the people that what had happened to the disciples had been prophesized through the prophet Joel, ***that in the last days, God will pour out his Spirit upon his people, that sons and daughters will prophesize, young men shall see visions and old men dream dreams, and everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.***

I've sometimes wondered what this language was that the disciples spoke when they were filled with the Holy Spirit. Was it truly different languages, such as we who speak English might suddenly speak Mandarin or Arabic, or was it something more like speaking in tongues, which the Spirit allowed the others around the disciples to understand as being in their native language? Luke, the author of the book of Acts, lists at least 15 different language groups in our text this morning. What they exactly heard, whether in their language or in tongues but made understandable by the Spirit, is not the real question. The point of Pentecost is ***not*** about the diversity of languages and how the Spirit may or may not cause us to speak in different languages other than our own, ***Pentecost is truly about unity, the unity that allows people from every nation under heaven to understand the one true gospel made known in Jesus Christ, the risen Son of God.***

Why did the Holy Spirit come at Pentecost? Was it to show off some neat linguistic trick? I ***hardly*** think God would be so trivial. ***The Holy Spirit comes upon the disciples at Pentecost because the church is to be about spreading the good news to all the people of all the nations under heaven. There may be many nations, but only one goal, to speak to them about the truth of Jesus Christ, that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. Pentecost is about unity in our proclamation.***

And that, my friends, is a critical message for us today. Like the movie Babel, there are so many situations in our world in which we find ourselves mired in conflict, confusion, suffering and tragedy. ***So much of that comes from a failure to communicate as God intends us, from a failure to be united. How true has that been even for the church!*** Think about what divides us in the church and I think we will find that its pretty much the same as our society as a whole. ***What divides us is the desire for power, the need to be more right than someone else.*** What was the Tower of Babel all about? It was about power, to declare a name for humanity as opposed to God. When Genesis 11 says that the people gathered there said "let us make a name for ourselves," ***whose name were they then trying to override?*** For the builders of the tower, it's about power, to be in control themselves rather than to be under God's control. ***It is to make God's name subservient to our name.***

Sometimes what divides the church is all about who's in control. Which faction or which denomination controls the Christian agenda? Recently, we've been witness to increasing polarization in just about every facet of our society, including the role of faith communities including Christian ones. ***It seems to me that the argument isn't about whether or not faith communities and religious groups ought to have influence, political or otherwise, but rather, in what direction that influence should be.***

If we as the church are looking for guidance as to what that direction should be, then we cannot look anywhere else but to the King and head of the church, to our Lord Jesus Christ. ***And when we do what we find is a startling contrast to the Tower of Babel story.*** Whereas the people who were building the tower sought to make a name for themselves, to glorify themselves, ***Jesus' story, the story of his life, is about glorifying God.*** If Pentecost is about the church being united under the Lordship of Jesus Christ, ***then we must understand that the primary thrust of Jesus' life is grace.*** It was an act of God's grace, God's loving, merciful, forgiving, reconciling grace, which sent Jesus to us. It was an act of grace which took Jesus to the cross so that those whom God loves might find reconciliation with God through him. ***It is the grace of Jesus Christ that unites the church of Jesus Christ in every nation under heaven. It is the grace of Jesus Christ which allows everyone, in any place at any time, who calls on the name of the Lord to be saved.***

***The two stories from our scripture readings this morning, the story of the Tower of Babel and the story of Pentecost, are two bookends, one story depicting how human striving for power and control led to the scattering of humanity through disunity and confusion while the other story is a story of unity and clarity, how the language of grace and love of God in Jesus Christ brings scattered people together.***

***My friends, this Pentecost more clearly than ever before, it is clear that the language of the church needs to be the language of grace. It is so evidentially true that we as the church of our Lord Jesus Christ in every nation under heaven, are at our best, when we act with grace.*** We are at our God given best when we think with grace, speak with grace, serve with grace, live with grace. It is when the church, the people of God, act with grace in response to situations like the pandemic, when those who profess to follow Jesus, act in ways that protect the most vulnerable in our midst, even at the cost of some of our freedoms, rather than demand what we believe are our rights, regardless of what our presumed rights may cost others, it's when the people of God share their resources with those who have less or none, when we respond with prayer and support in situations of conflict or catastrophe, ***that we are at our best.***

The commission of the church, first given to the disciples, is still given to us today. On this Pentecost Sunday we are to speak and prophecy about the Lordship of Jesus Christ. ***But if we are to be united in our calling, we must be able to speak the language of grace.***

People all over the world, and in our local neighbourhoods, and who knows, even some of us watching today, ***are looking for grace filled communities, gracious communities, churches, full of people who speak the language of grace.***

People searching for meaning, for connection, for purpose, maybe even for a church home, aren't looking for churches who declare that they are more right than the church down the street, that they are more pure in their doctrine or theology. ***What those who hunger for the good news are looking for is a place and a community which practices the grace lived out by Jesus Christ the Son of God.***

On this Pentecost Sunday, the church in every nation under heaven, the church in Canada, the Presbyterian Church in Canada and Richmond Presbyterian Church, must become more and more familiar with the language of grace. ***It is what unites the church, it is what allows us to be at our best.***

***My friends the goal of Babel is so very different from the goal of the cross. Being in control is so very different from being a servant.*** The tower that vainly strives for temporary glory is so very different from the cross ***that humbly overcomes with an eternal love and forgiveness.*** ***"Deep with God, Wide with the World,"*** that's our motto and it's so appropriate. I have seen how this community, this church, lives out the grace God has entrusted to us. I see it in our mission and outreach, in our fellowship and friendship, in our worship. I know how that grace is lived out in the individual lives of many in our community. We know that we can respond with legalism, with asserting our rights and expectations, we know that we can insist on our way, but we also know that sometimes, more often than not, the language of grace is what gets the desired results, grace is what unites us, what brings us together.

We need to be evermore familiar with the language of grace. The language of the church must be the language of grace. The gift of Pentecost is the gift of unity in Christ. May God's people be united in the language that Jesus embodied, the language of servant hood, compassion, mercy, forgiveness and love, the language of grace. ***No language speaks better of our unity than the language of grace. May we continue to learn it well and speak it fluently.***

Thanks be to God, Amen!