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“Confusion or Understanding?” GPPC 5-15-16
Genesis 11:1-9, Acts 2:1-21

Despite your best intentions have you ever been misunderstood?
Had your actions or words misinterpreted?

Back in the early 1980s I was a high school band director and music appreciation teacher in a S.C. town of maybe 500 people. I'll just call the place “the ville.” As the saying goes, “It wasn't the end of the world, but you could see it from there.” On Main Street near the town's traffic light, there were a few stores, a doctor's office, a barber shop, the police station, and city hall. There were also two motels, the Featherbed Motel and the Chat 'n Rest Motel with its companion restaurant, the Chat 'n Chew.

My spouse (at the time) and I had a dog--part German Shepherd, part Siberian Husky named Boris after a Russian composer. Boris was a fine dog, but our landlord insisted he live outside in the yard. So we had a dog house built for him. And I took the bar from a dumbbell, drove it into the ground as a stake, and connected Boris' chain around it so he wouldn't wander from the yard. This arrangement worked well.

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It worked well until one fateful day. While I was at work, Boris had somehow slipped his chain off the dumbbell and then managed to wrap the chain around one of the water spigots on the side of the house. He'd then torn the whole spigot from the house. We came home to find a lake, about three inches deep, in the front yard. The plumber promised to have the water turned back on sometime the next day. So my spouse and I decided to spend the night in a motel. After a gourmet meal at the Chat 'n Chew we settled down at the Featherbed Motel.

The next day during music appreciation class I intercepted a note a little red-haired girl was trying to send to another student. Now some teachers back then loved to read such notes aloud to the entire class as an embarrassing punishment. But I never did that. And I was really glad I didn't share this note aloud with the class because it read simply, "I wonder what Mr. Paschal was doing at the Featherbed Motel last night."

The stories in Genesis and Acts this morning are about misunderstanding as well understanding.

The first 11 chapters of the Book of Genesis are what scholars call “the prehistory” of the Bible, a section of scripture that’s not a literal recounting of history but instead a section that teaches us truth through mythological stories. Genesis 11:1-9 may have originally been used as an explanation for why the world has so many different languages and peoples. But it can also teach us a thing or two about ourselves and about God.

The writer of Genesis says at this point the whole earth has one language. And the people head east, settle in the land of Shinar, and begin a fabulous building campaign. “Let’s make bricks,” they say. “And let’s build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let’s make a name for ourselves. Otherwise we’ll be scattered all over the earth.”

So these mortals, literally children of Adam, children of Adam whom God made from the dust, say, “Let’s take some dust. And make bricks and make an impressive tower made of us dust reaching all the way

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up to heaven. We'll make a name for ourselves and keep ourselves unified by it all." Nice try.

Yet this is the nature of our broken humanity, isn't it? Garrison Keillor says, "What's hard to live with is...the ordinary facts of life: mortality, knowing that you'll die, and frailty, knowing that when we've got it figured out we don't, and indignity, knowing that if we manage to put up a good front we still have the backstage view." (Garrison Keillor, *Leaving Home*, 156.)

So we want to make a name for ourselves and cover up our flaws, don't we? Build a reputation that precedes us, makes our lives easier and more powerful, and shields us from criticism. If only we can achieve enough we imagine we'll be remembered and we will matter. But it doesn't work. Publish a book. Eventually it will be dust. Put your name on a building or a business or a street or a school. One day it will come down.

And in the process of trying to make a name for ourselves, it's easy to become self-centered, anxious, and arrogant. We may become bullies

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who tear down anyone and anything that gets in the way of our quest for power and recognition. Instead of building unity, we create disunity. Rather than creating a common purpose, there is finally only competition and chaos.

Hitler was a great example of this. “The Third Reich will last a thousand years!” The poor people of Syria suffering under Assad and his torturers and murderers know this, don’t they? Kim Jong-un isolates and starves the North Korean people for what? Self-centered, anxious, arrogant power. Despots in every time and place specialize in this kind of thinking and behavior. Can we think of other examples?

So when the text says God finally comes down and confuses the people’s speech and scatters humanity over the earth maybe that simply describes the natural consequences of what the people have already done. When ego comes first, then a loving community is almost impossible to build.

But there’s a better way, a way that we lift up to our confirmands, a way also lifted up for each of us. In a sermon William Sloane Coffin said,

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“Our business in life is less to make something of ourselves than to find something worth doing and lose ourselves in it.” (William Sloane Coffin, “Finding Something Worth Doing,” Nov. 8, 1987.) We don’t have to make a name for ourselves, because our names are already written in heaven. Instead, our business is “to find something worth doing and lose ourselves in it.” That’s the gift offered to the confirmands and the gift offered to all of us.

So at Babel the people misunderstand. But at Pentecost something different happens.

We remember the scene. As they will always do, the faithful people of God have gathered for worship. In this case, they’ve come together for the Festival of Pentecost, a festival that originally celebrated the first harvest, but later commemorated God’s giving of the Law.

And whenever the faithful people of God gather for worship, there’s no telling what might happen, what God might do. So Luke tries to describe the indescribable—the coming of the Holy Spirit—a sound like a violent wind, tongues of fire, the Spirit-given ability to speak in other languages. It’s spectacular. It’s awesome.

But what's more amazing is that each of the diverse people gathered there is able to hear, to *understand* in his or her native language. And what do they hear? The local news? Sports scores? A tidbit of gossip? Whether the Dow is up or down? No. As it says, "in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." The people are granted the ability to hear about God's deeds of power. There is nothing more important that we might hear. Nothing. But even the church is resistant to hearing.

Duke Divinity School Professor Richard Lischer says, "A second retreat from the word is underway, this one in large, successful churches whose members would never dream that the light-shows, videos, and PowerPoint presentations that accompany the Sunday sermon represent a fundamental lack of confidence in the spoken word of God...I confess that when I visit some of the larger churches I want to flip off the switch to the PowerPoint and just talk about the Lord Jesus and our life together. One of the reasons I want to do this is that when the brain is asked to multi-task by listening and watching at the same time, it always quits

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listening.” (Richard Lischer, *The End of Words: The Language of Reconciliation in a Culture of Violence*, 24-25.)

When the people gathered at Pentecost there were no big screens or little screens to distract them, no videos, no PowerPoint, no gadgets. Just the gathered people and the word, God’s word. And the people were granted the ability to listen, to hear, to understand God’s deeds of power.

And what were and are God’s deeds of power? Well, we could write a book. But at Pentecost one of God’s deeds in particular is highlighted.

Presbyterian poet and writer Kathleen Norris talks about her time living and working with Benedictine monks in their monasteries. She contrasts small towns with Benedictine monasteries. Norris says, “I have observed that in the small town, the need to get along favors the passive aggressives, those for whom honest differences and disagreements pose such a threat that they are quickly submerged, left to fester in a complex web of resentments. This is why, when the tempests erupt in the small-town teapot, they are so violently destructive.” On the other hand, monasteries contain all sorts of eccentric people, folks who do not color

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inside the lines. Do they sometimes disagree? You bet. Do they occasionally get angry with each other? Absolutely. The difference is in attitude and purpose. The monastery's purpose is to form people into Christ and the attitude is to expect and tolerate differences and irritations, and not just to kick people out or to cut off contact with each other. One monk told Norris, "When someone in the community is driving me up the wall, we are still in church together four times a day. And that begins to make a difference. It takes the edge off." (Kathleen Norris, *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography*, 113-116.)

One deed of power evidenced in Pentecost is the gift of real as opposed to fake community. The Spirit comes and forms a genuine community in which people love each other and love the world around them, constantly making the circle wider to bring in people who are different, the stranger, the lonely, and the hurting. The Spirit comes and people do not necessarily agree about every issue, but they truly listen to each other and they forgive each other and stay in community.

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As you know, we held the 2nd Annual Spring Festival yesterday. Now a remarkable amount of old-fashioned planning went into the event—lining up food, entertainment, advertising, sound system, seating—you name it. The stage, which appears to weigh about as much as a fully loaded eighteen-wheeler, had to be moved outside and assembled. This was accomplished with serious grunts, groans, and laughter. Chairs and tables had to go outside too and the games and horseback rides all had to be set up. Once the food trucks started to arrive, we all started talking about the food as if we'd never eaten food before. The choir singing was lovely, and we were proud of our people. Kids had a ball riding and petting the horses. The Grimsley High School Drumline was awesome. There were lots of visitors, (such diversity!) and we showed them the hospitality that Guilford Park is known for.

But what really struck me and maybe it struck you too was a kind of essence, a feeling that undergirded it all. Folks working together to make some wonderful happen. Kids running, dancing, and playing. People smiling, laughing, and talking, and giving each other handshakes and

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hugs. This feeling comes barging in around here from time to time, doesn't it? Sometimes in worship. Sometimes in committee meetings. Sometimes at special events (the Mission Dinner/Dessert auction comes to mind). You never know when it might show up.

And it's hard to put a finger on it, don't you think? It could be misunderstood, I suppose. But maybe it's Pentecost again and again, the Spirit coming and breaking open our defenses, pulling us close to one another, widening the circle once more to welcome the world in. Maybe that's what it was. Maybe that's what it is. Is that how you understand it too? All praise be to God who not only creates, but who also re-creates community every day. Amen. ©Jeff Paschal