Pentecost C 2025 Genesis 11:1-9 & Acts 2:1-21

In 1944, a Swiss clergyman who had spent the war years hiding refugees from the Nazis turned his farm in Eastern France into a monastery dedicated to peace and reconciliation. Taizé is an ecumenical community, so it is not limited to any one denomination, and it has grown into an international community; each year, over 100,000 pilgrims, mostly young people, from all over Europe and the world, now participate in their programs of study, service, and prayer. Taizé worship uses short songs that are sung over and over in meditation, which makes them easy for visitors to learn. Our hymnals include several songs from the Taizé community. We use English translations, but at Taizé, they often sing in Latin, because nobody speaks Latin as a first language anymore, so everyone equally shares the experience of singing, in a foreign tongue, these sacred songs—*sacred* literally meaning that which is *set apart.* Two hours to the east of Taizé, in Geneva, Switzerland, you'll find the headquarters of the World Council of Churches, another international ecumenical organization; for their daily worship, everyone is invited to pray the Lord's Prayer, aloud, together, in their own native language, so that each service ends with a cacophony of prayer which is both unified and diverse. Those are two creative approaches to meaningful multicultural worship; notice that I did *not* frame that diversity as a barrier to be overcome or a problem to be solved.

How did human beings end up speaking so many different languages? Even our ancient ancestors must have been curious about that, since Genesis, the shared mythology of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, gives us a story to answer that question. The world's population, whom the Lord had commanded to multiply and fill all the earth, ran out of steam as they were migrating, and decided to stay put, all together, and build for themselves one city, and make for themselves a name by constructing a tower that reached all the way to heaven. They did not *want* to be scattered across the whole earth, even though that was the command that God had originally given to humanity. Instead they tried to get themselves to the heavens, to where they understood God to be, by building themselves a really, really tall tower. The Lord could have just let physics take its course but rather interrupts their misguided human endeavor and confuses their language so that they give up on their tower-building project and resume their God-given mission of spreading out to populate all the earth.

Fast forward a few thousand years and the book of Acts tells us that God's intervention worked: the pilgrims gathered in Jerusalem come from all over the known world, speaking a variety of foreign languages, to celebrate Pentecost, the Jewish festival that commemorates God giving Moses the Law. By then humans had learned to be bilingual or trilingual or however many -lingual they needed to be to communicate with their neighbors, but Jesus' Galilean

disciples did not know all those different languages themselves. The Holy Spirit gifts them with the ability to speak and be understood in every language under heaven. Having heard the apostles witness to God's deeds of power, those Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and all the others were able to take the gospel message back to their home nations, so the church was no longer confined to one place or one small group of people but encompassed the whole world.

When we read these two stories together, what we *don't* want to do is see Genesis as a problem that Acts solved—as if the many languages created at the Tower of Babel were returned to one language at Pentecost. That's not what happens; the pilgrims in Jerusalem don't start speaking one common language; the one message goes out in all languages, so that the church incorporates all people and all cultures across the whole earth. The problem at Babel was *not* that everyone started speaking different languages—that was God's solution; the problem at Babel was that the people put all their faith in their own ability and their own uniformity. They did not want to go out into the world as God had commanded; they wanted to stay in the same place, to remain like-minded, to speak and act and build only for themselves. They thought by doing that they could get themselves to where God was; but as we'll talk about next week when we celebrate Holy Trinity, our triune God is, by definition, inherently diverse. God creates diversity among the people at Babel and sends them out so that God's image is reflected in all the world—as God intended from the beginning. Pentecost doesn't erase that diversity, it shows God's presence within that diversity; all nations, all languages, all people are included in the powerful works of God.

The stories of Babel and Pentecost should have taught us that God doesn't want us banding together to make a name for ourselves; God doesn't want us to cut ourselves off from the rest of the world, to be concerned only with our own security or piety or achievement. Yet the church has too often forgotten, or to be honest, ignored, those lessons, mistaking our mission as getting people out there to come in here and to become like us—like when Christian missionaries taught indigenous people that salvation required dressing, speaking, and acting like Westerners. That's the opposite of what happened at Babel or Pentecost. God didn't let the people stay in one place, with one perspective, one language, one self-centered goal. God didn't let the apostles remain alone, locked in their house, removed from everyone else. When the Spirit showed up, the good news exploded outward; with a rush of wind, all heaven broke loose to send the message of God's love out to the whole world—not to reduce all that variety to one language, one culture, one nation, or one insular point of view.

This Pentecost, may the Spirit light a fire in us so that we are inspired and empowered to go out, beyond ourselves, to wherever and whomever God calls us to go.