

Day Of Pentecost – Eric Nord

Genesis 11:1-9; Acts 2:1-21; Psalm 104:24-34, 35b; John 14:8-17, 25-27

I want to begin by praying, using the words of today's Psalm: *May my meditation be pleasing to him, for I rejoice in the LORD. Bless the LORD, O my soul. Praise the LORD!*

I'd like to try to place each of these scripture passages in its context as we work to understand them, and how they might inform each other in our understanding.

The story arc of Genesis moves from creation to the fall and exile from Eden to fratricide. Shortly thereafter, the general wickedness of human kind is described, and in the story of Noah, the flood, and the new covenant we see God "rebooting" creation. In Genesis 10, the descendants of Noah are described, and the territories in which each of them lived. Genesis 10:32 describes *the nations spread abroad on the earth* after the flood. Genesis 11:10-31, which follows today's reading, continues this narration. The story of Babel seems to be an aside, an interlude, an episode in the "spreading abroad" of the nations. It seems to be a story about "why things are the way they are"—why there are so many different languages.

The Acts reading follows the choosing of Matthias by lot to replace Judas as the twelfth apostle. It describes not just the giving of the Holy Spirit, but the first public action of the apostles, and the beginning of the church as a body that transcends ethnic and boundaries. The next passage in Acts describes Peter's sermon and the explosive growth of the church that results—Peter goes on in vss. 22-36 to preach the Gospel of God's salvation, and in vss. 37- 41 we find that about 3,000 believers were added to the group. Vss. 42-47 describe the life of this body of believers as *devoted to the apostles' teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayer*. Whatever the Holy Spirit has done in this group, it has changed these people in a way that is not trivial.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus is trying to prepare his disciples for his departure. Our reading is preceded by an exchange between Jesus and Thomas:

Jesus: *I go to prepare a place for you (pl); you (pl) know the way to the place where I am going.*

Thomas: *We do not know where you are going, how can we know the way?*

Jesus: *I am the way; and the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you (pl) know me, you (pl) will know my Father also.*

Then Philip says: *Lord, show us the Father....* Given this context, we can understand why Jesus' reply in 9-10 seems a bit exasperated!

Having established a bit of the context for these readings, I'd like to dig into them a bit more.

Why does God object to *building a city with a high tower to make a name for ourselves*? Clearly the tower did not really reach *to the heavens*, since verse 5 notes that God had to *come down* to see the city—why is God bothered here? In this account, the city seems to be motivated by

rebellion. In 9:1, God tells Noah and his sons to *Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth* (echoes of Genesis 1), but in 11:4 the people are building a city lest they be *scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth*. It seems the human vocation to *till and keep* (Ch 2) has been forgotten in the project to *build a city and make a name for ourselves*.

In fact, the human vocation from Genesis 1 and 2, to be **image bearers** of God to creation, runs in direct opposition to this. The image-bearer's goal is to **make a name for God**, but here we see a group of people intent on making a name for themselves.

From where we sit in 2019, the confusing of language does not really seem to solve this problem! As the story progresses we have many groups building cities and *making a name* for themselves by attacking other nations—by Genesis 14, we have kings warring with each other! If this was God's solution to human imperialist ambitions, we may doubt that it was effective. On the other hand, we don't know what would have happened if we didn't have a confusion of languages!

11:6 has God saying *this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them*. This sounds grandiose, but consider our context in 2019:

- humanity has turned over 50% of the habitable surface of the earth into agricultural lands
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- we have doubled the amount of nitrogen flowing from the atmosphere to the ecosystems of the world, thus fundamentally altering global nutrient cycling
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- we have altered the composition of the atmosphere such that the very climate that supports our civilization is changing.
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We may pause again to consider these words: *this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them*. Try to imagine the hubris of our leaders if there were only one nation!

Genesis 11:1 notes that *the whole earth had one language and the same words*. This may seem redundant, but we may forget the extent to which even people with one language can be divided, or at least confused, by having some different words. For example: in many parts of Africa, Americans might be very confused by the terms “zebra crossing” for a crosswalk or “robot” for a traffic light. English speakers of English are scandalized by the American use of the word “fanny,” which for them is a terribly vulgar term, while we use it quite casually for a rear end, and also as a feminine name. Or the word “rubber”—as a junior high boy in southern California, this word referred to contraceptive devices. As a freshman in high school, having just moved to India, I'm sure I blushed when a good-looking older girl in my art class leaned over and asked me if I had a rubber she could borrow. She probably wondered why—she was of course innocently referring to an eraser.

Such linguistic chaos is not confined to English. Our Honduran colleague Irma once related how an organization she had previously worked for had received a letter from a child sponsor in the

U.S. who was irate that the family of the child they were sponsoring was using the money to buy a car, because the sponsoring family couldn't afford a car. It turned out that the child had used the word "coche" in a letter to the sponsor. In the Honduran countryside "coche" means a pig, but in Mexico, where the letter was translated, it means a car! I could go on with more examples, but the point is clear – having different words for things makes communication difficult!

Turning to the reading from Acts: verse 6 says *At this sound, the crowd gathered and was bewildered*. According to one commentator <sup>1</sup>, we should read this as "their minds were blown." Yet while "their minds were blown", and verse 12 tells us, *All were amazed*, there were some "others" (verse 13) who scoffed and accused the apostles of drunkenness. Who were these "others"? It seems unlikely that those who are marveling at hearing these Galileans speaking in their own languages would sneer and accuse them of drunkenness. In verse 14, Peter addresses his remarks to *Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem*. This is probably who these "others" were. Do we have an ethnic division in the interpretation of this event, with the "Hebraic" Jews scoffing while the various "diaspora" Jews and "proselytes" wondered?

We don't know the ethnic or linguistic makeup of the 3000 that were added to the believers after Peter's proclamation of the gospel, but unless there were many of the "Hebraic" Jews, or *Men of Judea* among them, we might have to conclude that the common interpretation of this event as "undoing the curse" of Genesis 11 may be somewhat optimistic. At least in their initial response,

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<sup>1</sup> Chalmer Faw, 1993. *Acts. Believers Church Bible Commentary*. Elmer Martens and Willard Swartley, Eds. Herald Press. Scottdale, PA.

the diaspora group may have received this as a miracle from God, and wondered, while the Hebraic group seems to dismiss it outright.

Note that Peter's quote from Joel 2 is somewhat selective—he stops before Joel 3, where the judgement of the nations is described. This might make sense if we understand that he may be trying to avoid inflaming the tension between the “Hebraic” and “diaspora” groups present. The curse of not being able to understand each other is undone (at least partly) in Acts 2, even though the believers are not all speaking one language. There seems to be both a miracle of “speaking” and of “understanding” happening, because the message is getting through. The end of chapter 2 portrays the believers having *everything in common*—a strong unity based on a common understanding of Jesus as Messiah and Lord, and a common experience of the Holy Spirit, so there is both unity and division portrayed here.

Before we consider the Gospel text, we might consider for a moment the importance of language. We have often understood the confusing of languages as a curse. There is ample reason to see it that way—the misunderstanding of one another that has been caused can be a curse. But as we just saw, the Acts 2 account, which we often read as “reversing” the “curse” of Genesis 11, does not end with everyone speaking one language, and may even feature an ethnic/linguistic fault-line in how those present interpreted (at least initially) the events they experienced.

I want to suggest that the “confusing of tongues” in Genesis 11 may be seen as a blessing as well as a curse. Language and culture (the two are deeply intertwined) literally change how we understand the world around us. Our language gives us the symbols we use for thinking about the world, and this can change how we think.

Russian and Greek have two words for “blue”—one for lighter hues and one for darker hues. Researchers have shown that native speakers of these languages are more able to discriminate differences between shades of blue than people whose native language only has one term for blue. In languages with gendered nouns, speakers of languages in which an object—for example, a bridge—has masculine gender are more likely to use terms like “strong” to describe bridges, while speakers of languages in which that object (bridge) has feminine gender are more likely to use terms like “graceful” or “beautiful” to describe bridges. This is true even when they are describing bridges in a language like English, which has no gender for nouns. There are many other examples of this phenomenon—the language we use influences how we think about the world.

One of the deficiencies of English is that it has no (official) second person plural (plural form of “you”) – the fact that “y’all”, “y’uns”, and “yinz” exist are a testament to our need for one. This linguistic deficiency, coupled with our society’s preference for individuality, often causes us to read “you” as “you individually”, although we might not really acknowledge that we are doing this. Reading the Bible in Spanish has opened my eyes to how often “you” is actually plural (*ustedes*), when my cultural/linguistic preference has been to see it as singular (*usted*).

In today’s Gospel reading, the word “you” appears 24 times and is implied 2 times. Twenty-three out of twenty-six times it is plural (that is 88% for the mathematically curious). To drive home this point, and to help us (re)consider the Gospel text, I’m going to read it again, using “y’all” to indicate the second person plural:

*8 Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.” 9 Jesus said to him, “Have I been with y’all all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? 10 Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to y’all I do not speak on my own; but*

*the Father who dwells in me does his works. 11 Y'all believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if y'all do not, then y'all believe me because of the works themselves. 12 Very truly I tell y'all, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. 13 I will do whatever y'all ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. 14 If in my name y'all ask me for anything, I will do it. 15 If y'all love me, y'all will keep my commandments. 16 And I will ask the Father, and he will give y'all another Advocate, to be with y'all forever. 17 This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. Y'all know him, because he abides with y'all, and he will be in y'all. 25 I have said these things to y'all while I am still with y'all. 26 But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach y'all everything, and remind y'all of all that I have said to y'all. 27 Peace I leave with y'all; my peace I give to y'all. I do not give to y'all as the world gives. Do not let y'all's hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.*

I want to take a minute to consider how we might hear this differently. I don't know about you, but several of the things Jesus says here I would have been tempted to read as "personal promises", such as verse 16: *I will ask the Father, and he will give y'all another Advocate, to be with y'all forever.* It seems this is a promise to the group of followers, and perhaps we need to read it as applying to the gathered body of Christ, not us as individuals.

Another example in verse 13: *I will do whatever you (pl) ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son.* I'd always heard this and thought that this promise seemed out of step with the reality I experience, even though the story of the early church in Acts seems to bear this promise out. But replacing the "you" with "y'all" changes the focus here from the individual believer to the gathered community. Perhaps the unity of the gathered body in truly asking for something in the name of Jesus is, in the very asking, bringing glory to God! In fact, we might see the church in Acts 2 and 3 as embodying the fulfillment of this promise.

Similarly, the imperative of verse 15: *If y'all love me, y'all will keep my commandments.* This sounds different when we read it with second person plural, and seems to have less emphasis on personal piety and more emphasis on the community of faith.

I also want to note that this shift in understanding happened because I have access to another language! So I want to suggest that (at least in our current context) we need all our languages and cultures. There is something of value each of them can teach us. (This does not negate the reality that there are also aspects of all of them that the Gospel condemns). One of our tasks in becoming part of the "Kingdom of God" is to begin to perceive the ways we have been trapped in misunderstandings that derive from our own language and culture; particularly the aspects of our own language/culture that are judged and found wanting by the Gospel. One of the best ways to do this is to learn another language, or to build real, honest friendships across the ethnic/linguistic/cultural boundaries that divide our world.

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