

Pentecost
Revised Common Lectionary, Year C

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Episcopal Church of Our Saviour
Mill Valley, California

Hubris, Babel, and the Spirit
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So the Anglican Communion was in the news again this week.

You probably heard, and I won't belabor the details today. Suffice it to say there was a great deal made over who was invited and who wasn't to the great conference of Anglican bishops at Lambeth for the every-ten-year gathering. Honestly, *Monty Python* couldn't write it any better.

So continuing on the more flippant side, it reminded me of situations in high school where there was great consideration given to who was popular enough to invite to certain parties. Some of us never were invited, at least to *those* parties. Probably because we were considered too nerdy, too serious, or not properly dressed, not out for the right sports, or not associated with the right circles. But viewed from this angle, the Anglican Communion right now looks pretty silly, doesn't it? There are more serious ramifications, as you can well imagine, but Lambeth is still 14 months away. So there will be much more to mull in the coming weeks, at least for our bishops, no doubt.

I also want to talk today about another sort of silly image that came to mind as I was both considering the story of Babel from Genesis today and considering the decisions getting made this week about who's in and who's out.

Both stories remind me a bit like one of those Hanna-Barbara cartoons I grew up with. You probably know the ones I mean – those made for television quick-off-the-easel cartoons before the advent of computer animation. Where a character's body remained absolutely static – still as the background – and you could almost see the animator quickly scratching each frame for the eyes moving on the face. . .or the mouth opening and closing – maybe almost (but not quite) in time with the audio. Yes, one of those – I think the one I'm thinking of was *He Man*, which had a whole host of accompanying toys from Mattel, as I remember. In the almost every episode of this cartoon, there was a wonderful line in it that encapsulates just about everything going on both in Babel and in the greater Church this week:

“I HAVE THE POWER!”

Long before Genesis was written, Bedouins were sitting around fires under the night sky telling stories like the one about the tower of Babel. It might have almost the quality of a simple children's tale to our educated Western ears, but it remains just as profound for us as for an ancient people living off the land and relying on oral tradition.

The story Tower of Babel at its root is about human hubris. The desire to be in control. To be powerful. Probably for the nomadic people who once told this story, Babel was a shining example of the cities that were known for controlling lands far beyond their borders, marginalizing the wandering stock-herders, and raising up armies dangerous to everybody.

We have our own towers of Babel today, of course. Some are more obvious than others. I was struck yesterday while driving over the Bay Bridge, coming from a diocesan meeting, by the new edifice in the South of Market part of San Francisco. A great condominium complex soaring as high as seismic considerations dare allow. A colleague riding with me asked rather wistfully, who would want to be at the top of it when then next earthquake hits? In all honesty, it was a question tinged slightly with bitterness that neither of us could dream of affording such a view!

But towers of Babel are also found in all the ways we lord it over each other. Whether it's our constant insistence on having it our way militarily or economically, or doctrinally in the Church. Or, to be blunt, who gets invited and who doesn't to the parties with the power-brokers.

Beyond its etiological purpose – to explain, perhaps to small children long ago, why there are so many languages in the world as well as the name for the great city on the plain – the ending of the story of the Tower of Babel serves as a reminder to us of how God responds to human hubris. God confounds it. When we raise our arms and declare like our great simian ancestors and even our contemporary cousins in the animal world, “I have the power!” God responds, “Oh, yeah? We'll see about that.”

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Juxtaposed against the ancient story of confused languages at the Tower of Babel is the story of Pentecost, the arrival of the Holy Spirit, and the beginning of the Church. Not necessarily the imperial Church, or the Curia, or the building, or the self-styled guardians of doctrine. But the true Church. The Church that holds the Gospel at center, where God comes first and is at work amongst us, made in God's image. Where the breath of new life blows and God's people are moved to share great gifts for transforming hearts and healing Creation.

The divine irony is that the multiple languages that so confounded the people in the story of the Tower of Babel become the primary instrument through which the Gospel is first shared at Pentecost. The same divine intervention that upsets the applecart of human arrogance is the same intervention that brings healing, hope, and a new community.

Today we celebrate this new community of the Spirit still breaking into our lives 2,000 years later. It is not always found in the institutional church. In fact we should count ourselves fortunate when it is. In fact, the new community is everywhere, and knows few boundaries. It is wherever the Spirit is allowed to move. Wherever God's creatures are freed from the bondage of lusting after power and control, wherever we have stopped playing God, and where we are freed from both being oppressor and oppressed. It is where the breathing is easier and suffering is relieved.

This is our primary vocation, our call as Christians – first and foremost – not to preserving the institutional church, but in creating space for the Spirit. Of looking foolhardy at times just like the first disciples at times because we don't always play by the rules of power and control. And daring to confound, in league with God, the places where life is being crushed under the weight of the towers of human arrogance. To laugh at the silliness of the lust after power, and to be freed from the diabolical designs in which we too often indulge.

And we will know this new community of the Spirit when we see it by the fruit it produces. We are even offered a list by our spiritual ancestor, Paul, in his Letter to the Galatians. It's one of my personal favorites: "The fruit of the Spirit," he writes, "is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control."

It is with this fruit that the Spirit is conquering our indulgence in power and our self-made devices and designs. It is through this fruit that we engage with the Spirit in conquering the despair and fear that so dominates the world.

Love over hatred. Joy over despair. Peace over all forms of violence. Patience over our insatiable desire to have everything we want. Kindness over cold-heartedness. Faithfulness that insists on new life in relationship. Gentleness over our mean-spirited ways. And self-control. Well, I could quibble a bit with Paul here. After all, the first disciples who speak in tongues in today's reading from Acts are accused of being drunk! But perhaps he means self-control of an unusual kind: self-control that gives us the freedom from having to control and dominate others.

Still working on these virtues? Good. Me, too. Better yet, God is still working on them inside each of us. That is where the Spirit has touched us and is transforming us. It is where the new community, what Jesus referred to as the "kingdom of God" begins in each of us. And beyond us it is where the true Church is taking root and burrowing deep down into the rich soil of life with God.

These fruits of the Spirit are our standards against all the darkness of our lives in the world. They are where God in Christ shines forth most brightly and where life is allowed to flourish. And, so, as we begin looking forward as a Church, regardless of what goes on in the Anglican Communion, or what new towers are built to edify human prowess, I urge you to always keep watch for, cultivate, and nurture the new community wherever you find it. Here at Church of Our Saviour. Out there in the workplace. At home with family and friends. And simply in your own heart, where the still, small, voice and true power of the Spirit wrestles to breathe free – that you may be freed to become utterly reliant on the One who created you, that we all may be free to be the gifted creatures of God that we were made to be, reflections of the Divine Wonder.