

“Failure to Communicate”

In the name of him who has poured out upon us his Holy Spirit, dear friends in Christ: I am hardly a technophobe. I really do appreciate most of the conveniences of our modern world; but one thing I just haven't gotten into is the cell phone. Sure, I understand that it's a wonderful thing to be able to communicate wherever and whenever you want; the trouble I've seen however, is that rather than aiding in communication, sometimes the use of a cell phone leads to *miscommunication*. Recently there's been a series of commercials on TV that relate the kinds of problems that can arise from what they term a *dropped call*, that is, when you're talking with someone and suddenly the connection is broken but you don't know it – and then the resulting silence is misinterpreted to mean something other than the truth. Of course, for the ads they pick situations that are pretty funny; but you realize that it could cause problems that are really serious. But what I get all the time are calls from people who are on the road. They'll call me with a question or something; but all I'm hearing is every third or fourth syllable of what they're saying. It's like this: “Oh, hi Pastor. This is so and so. Say, I was wondering ... dit ...emer ...ton ...able ... blip ... Is that okay with you?” Can I hear an “amen” if that has ever happened to you? I'm never sure how to respond. I've found that most people only call the pastor to confirm what they already think is right, so it's always tempting to simply end the frustration of trying to understand by saying, “Yeah, sure. Sounds good to me”; but I know if I do that sooner or later I'll regret it. This, incidentally, is why I haven't got my wife a cell phone. No telling what I'd find myself agreeing to. In any case, this is a big part of why I haven't joined and do not intend to join the ranks of you who carry cell phones. I believe in clarity and precision when it comes to conversation; and at least thus far with respect to cell phones I think, in the immortal words of the warden in *Cool Hand Luke*, that “what we've got here is a failure to communicate”.

And the reason I mention all of this is that it reminds me of the biblical record of God's many failed attempts to communicate with mankind. Oh, the problem isn't on his end; not by a long shot. His message is always loud, clear, and consistent. No, it's on our end that we run into difficulties, be they from various forms of static and distortion, lack of attention – we're simply not listening, or that we just hang up on him altogether. In fact, the first eleven chapters of Genesis give us a fairly thorough overview of the history of God attempting to engage man in meaningful conversation, and how things just keep going from bad to worse. It starts already in chapter two with the Lord delivering one simple message: Don't eat the fruit of this particular tree. How hard is that to understand? But by chapter three they've managed to get it wrong. Well then, turn to chapter four and we find that it's Cain who misunderstands the Lord's instructions regarding sacrificial worship. Cain wants to do it his way. The Lord is not pleased. He tells Cain so. But Cain, instead of listening to what God says, gets jealous of his brother who got it right. The Lord knows what Cain is thinking and tells him not to go there. Cain doesn't listen. He murders his brother. The Lord comes to Cain and asks, “Where's Abel, your brother?” Cain says, “What makes you think I know?” The Lord says, “I can hear his blood crying from the ground – it's talking about you. Why can't you hear it?” When Cain admits his crime, the Lord treats him with mercy. Though he forces him out to be a homeless vagabond, he also puts a mark on Cain that warns everyone that might seek to kill him for revenge that he is under divine protection.

Unfortunately, somehow that message gets garbled in transmission through the generations because next we read about how one of Cain's descendants, a guy named Lamech (who just happens to be the world's first polygamist) gloats over the fact that he murdered someone – he's proud of it. And then he boasts how God's grace to Cain has effectively given him a license to kill indiscriminately—clearly not at all what God meant. By the time we get to chapter six, the Lord's message is really confused because everyone's killing everybody. God looks down and sees a world awash in chaos and violence (and incidentally, the Hebrew word for violence there is “hamas”, the same as a certain Palestinian terrorist organization – it seems that some things never change). Anyway, with the situation completely out of control, the Lord finds one guy who's still listening and instructs him to build a big boat. Apparently, he doesn't give him the dimensions by cell phone, because Noah manages to get it right. He and his family survive the great flood – but then, just a couple generations later, things have again deteriorated to pretty much where they were before the flood.

And that brings us to the story we heard this morning about the Tower of Babel. There we see God's message of salvation turned around one hundred eighty degrees. No one understands him. Instead of looking to the Lord to reach down in mercy and save those who trust in him (as the Lord had said), we see men imagining themselves able to build a stairway to heaven by creating a man-made mountain of bricks and tar. This they enthusiastically admit they are doing for the glory of their own names rather than for the glory of God – and yet they have the audacity to name the place "Babel" which means "The gateway of the gods". "We can reach up and open the door of heaven", is what they're thinking. The tower – really more of a step pyramid sort of thing – is an attempt to take heaven by force. It's a monument to the human dream of attaining eternal glory by the works of our hands—which is a total confusion of the simple message of the Lord who said that he himself would send a Savior. And because their thinking is so confused, and they are so far from understanding him, the Lord decides to complete the job and confuse their languages. He makes them unable to understand each other. He does this to illustrate outwardly their inner spiritual condition. By this sign he's saying, "I'm talking; but no one is getting it. We've got a failure to communicate."

Well, fast forward a few thousand years, and we see the confusion of languages the Lord caused at Babel being undone during the festival of Pentecost in Jerusalem. But in order for us to understand fully what's going on there, it's necessary to know what Pentecost was all about. You see, Pentecost, which means fifty, was a Jewish celebration that commemorated the giving of the Law of God to Moses on Mount Sinai. Why "fifty"? Because that's how many days it was after their deliverance from slavery in Egypt that the Lord met with his people at Sinai. You remember: first rescued from bondage by the death of the firstborn and the blood of the lambs – that's Passover – then passing through the Red Sea, and then finally arrival at the mountain to hear the Word of God – fifty days later. Not coincidentally it was on this same mountain that the Lord first spoke to Moses from a burning bush. Moses saw a fire, which though burning hot and fierce, remarkably did not consume its host. And from the fire in the bush, the Lord commissioned Moses to go rescue his people and lead them back here where he would speak to them. And so what I'd have you see that Mount Sinai is the exact opposite of the Tower of Babel. There at Babel, on a man-made mountain, people were putting words in God's mouth, so to speak. They were making up their own rules and saying that they were God's. Now at Sinai – a mountain made by God – the Lord himself was saying how it is really done: "I send my deliverer to you. He will work the mighty miracles of salvation that bring glory to my name. And then, after I save you, you come here and listen to me. I will speak to you personally and have it written down so that you can understand me."

And that's exactly what happened. The Lord saved his people and had Moses lead them back to Sinai – the "anti-tower of Babel", so to speak. And the Lord came down on the mountain with tremendous amounts of fire and smoke. There were earthquakes and flashes of lightning. And as the mountain trembled and shook, the Lord spoke to his people loud and clear – there was no mistaking what he said; but that led to a different problem that none of the people had foreseen. I'm certain the Lord saw it coming. But when the Lord began to speak, specifically to speak the Ten Commandments, the people were terrified. They begged Moses to get the Lord to stop. "His words are killing us", they cried. "If he keeps talking, we'll all die!"

So there was still a failure to communicate. Why? Well, it wasn't because the Lord was speaking a different language, nor was it because he couldn't be heard or understood. The problem was that they were understanding him only too well. And when a sinner stands in the presence of the holy God while he is speaking his perfect Law there is only one thing that can happen: the sinner is destroyed. That's what the Law does to sinners when it is properly understood: it kills them. And that's the lesson the people were supposed to learn at Sinai – that even though they were rescued from bondage in Egypt, they still needed to deal with their sin problem in order to come into the presence of the living God. And what they were supposed to gather from it all was that just as the Lord had done all the work to save them from Egypt, so also, he would do all the work to save them from sin. They were supposed to understand that every aspect of salvation, physical, moral, spiritual – you name it – it's always a gift of God's grace and mercy and never, never the result of human effort.

But I'll bet you know how it turned out: the people still failed to understand. Because they couldn't survive hearing the Lord speak in person, they sent Moses to be the go-between. "You go up there, listen to what he says, and then come back and tell us." And in this they were right: they understood that they needed a mediator, someone who could stand between them and the Lord (how very Christological!). Unfortunately,

when Moses came back down with the Law, they looked it over and said, "Great. We can handle this." You see, when Moses relayed it, it wasn't nearly as frightening and condemning as when God said it – but that's because God sees directly into the heart, and Moses can't. So, what happened then was the people began to deceive themselves. They took the Laws that Moses brought them and began to build towers to heaven, this time not of physical brick and asphalt, but rather spiritual towers of their own imagined good works. They fooled themselves into thinking they were keeping God's Law – at least well enough to be saved. And this is the perpetual problem of the fallen human spirit. It is filled with sin and pride and always wants to imagine that it can earn the right to heaven on its own. Like at Babel, we all want to seek the glory of our own names. And on account of this, it's like our spirits and God's are talking a different language.

This is why, as we've seen in the past few weeks, the disciples of Jesus always had so much trouble understanding him. It's why the Pharisees back then (as well as the ones around today) *still* do not understand him. In a spiritual sense we are not speaking the same language. The only way to break the impasse, it would seem, would be for each one of us to have our own internal, spiritual translator so that when God spoke, we could shut off the distracting chatter from our own sinful spirits and truly hear and understand what the Lord is saying.

And that, finally, brings us to the New Testament Pentecost that we heard about this morning. Here we see the ultimate version of anti-tower of Babel. Now God has chosen a different mountain, not Sinai; but Zion in Jerusalem. And from here he has sent a new Deliverer to rescue his people – not by the blood of lambs and the death of Egypt's firstborn; but by the blood of the Lamb of God and the death of God's Firstborn. This is the same Deliverer who ascends the mountain not to talk with God in our place and relay his Law to us, but rather to go to the cross to die in our place by taking on himself the Law's judgments against us. Only later, after his resurrection, does he ascend on high to be our mediator before God's throne.

And from there he sends to his people – fifty days after their deliverance – his divine Spirit to be their internal translator so that they can understand what the Lord is saying to them through his Word. We see this manifest in the little tongues of fire that appear on the heads of the faithful. The fact that they appear as *tongues* suggests divine speaking. They show that God is talking. And that they are of *fire* indicates spiritual illumination and understanding. Ah! Now we get it. But more than that, the picture is that each person is now a burning bush. The fire of God's Spirit rests upon them without burning them – because by faith in Christ, the Law of God cannot condemn or harm them anymore. Jesus endured the fiery wrath of God for them so that now they can stand in God's presence without fear and without being condemned. The fire serves another purpose: to cleanse and purify. The idea is one of ongoing sanctification. As time goes on and as they continue to hear God's Word, there is more sin and misunderstanding removed and greater faith in Christ and holiness of life attained. And finally, with each faithful person being a burning bush, as it were, we now have many voices declaring the same message of God: the Gospel of Jesus Christ – which in turn brings clarity and understanding to many, many others who are speaking many other languages.

This is the same Spirit of God that we received in Baptism and who now rests upon us. And you know that he is at work in your life every time the Lord breaks through the obstacles to communication that exist within us on account of our sin. Every time you recognize your guilt, feel the need to confess it, and see your absolute need for Jesus Christ as your Savior – that's the work of the Spirit. Every time you have one of those "aha!" moments" when reading the Scripture or listening to a Bible teacher – that's the work of the Spirit. Every time you are moved to pray, to speak to God in response to his invitation to come with your requests – that's the work of the Spirit within you. And every time you are compelled to share the good news of Jesus – that's not you speaking; it's God speaking through you by his Spirit.

This is why we celebrate Pentecost. It means the end of the failure to communicate. My prayer for you (as well as for myself) is that every day may be another Pentecost – a day that brings us still more of God's Holy Spirit and truth. May the Lord grant it to us for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!