

Tongues of Fire

Em nome do Pai e do Filho e do Espírito Santo. Amen. Caridos no Senhor, hoje, a gente celebra o Dia de Pentecostes, em que veio o Espírito Santo à igreja infantil. ... Como? Qual é a problema? Vocês não me entendem? Don't you understand me? No, probably not. And certainly if I were to go on speaking this way, it's doubtful that you would understand a word I'm saying. (And some of you are probably thinking, "Yes, and how is that different than any other Sunday?" Fair enough. But hopefully you found the Portuguese just a bit more difficult to comprehend than normal.) In any case, what I said was, "In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Beloved in the Lord, today we celebrate the Day of Pentecost, on which the Holy Spirit came to the infant Church." And hopefully the point is clear. If I don't speak in a language you can understand, I can go on preaching the Word of God to you all day, telling of the wonderful things God has accomplished for you in Christ your Savior; but it will sound to you like a lot of meaningless noise. No, for me to communicate the truths of the Gospel, I need to use a language that actually speaks to your heart.

And that, as it turns out, is a bigger problem than you might imagine; because the truth is that even though we all speak English, we really *don't* understand each other when we speak it. This, more than anything, is what's being revealed in this morning's Old Testament lesson. It happens during a time in human history when everyone spoke the same tongue. In fact, not only were they using a common language, they were even saying the same thing: "*Let's build a city and a tower that will make our name great. Let's achieve something that will bring us glory for ages to come.*" Or, in short, "*Let's build a monument **to us.***" They wanted to achieve lasting honor and a measure of immortality on their own. They wanted to do it with nothing but their wits and the work of their hands. And today, over five thousand years later, we're still saying the same thing and thinking the same thought. We're all out to build a name for ourselves. True, these days the sounds of the words are different, and they're spoken in many different tongues; but we are all still speaking the same language of "self glorification".

But instead of uniting us, the language of self glorification actually pushes us apart. Because in order to achieve recognition and honor, in order to be *remembered*, you have to do whatever it is you do better than the next guy. It was certainly true for those who migrated east and decided to build themselves a city on the plain of Shinar. They were out to show their superiority over those folks who had stayed in the west in their mud huts and pathetic little villages. The purpose of their city was to put the others to shame. And what was true for them on a community level was true for them as individuals as well, I'm sure. I expect that there were competitions for glory among those who were working on the Tower of Babel: "Why everyone knows Ahab lays bricks the fastest; but Omar lays them straighter. And then there's old Abdul, who's not very fast or neat; but he's been at it so long that he's laid more brick than anyone else, ... and so on, until everyone has some claim of their own to immortal fame. Everyone earns a name for himself by his or her accomplishment, whatever it might be, in the building of the tower that reaches toward heaven.

And things aren't any different today. In many ways we are all still speaking the language of self glorification and attempting to make a name for ourselves by building our own towers of Babel. We do it individually in our personal lives, collectively in our families, our communities, and our churches; and even on a larger scale by states and nations. And I want you to understand that I'm not talking about the legitimate satisfaction that comes from doing a

job well, or the good-natured spirit of competition that we can enjoy in sports and games. No, I'm talking about the loveless glee that comes from doing something or just being better than the next guy because ... well, because *I am better than he is*. This is the language we all speak.

And the funny thing about the language of self glorification is that even though we all speak it, it only causes confusion because we can't agree on what it means. You see, the most important words in this whole language are "*me, myself, and I*". They are the subject of almost all the nouns, and the object of just about every verb. They are the over-riding first consideration in all thought. And that's what creates the confusion. You see, no matter who uses the most important words in this language, one thing's for certain, you mean somebody else when you say them than I do when I use them. And therein lies the conflict and the confusion. And that's why today, even though the world has many different languages and dialects, no matter who's talking, even if I don't understand a single word you say, I can be sure that you're talking about building your tower, not mine.

So instead of helping us cooperate and get along together, what we find is that our common language is ultimately destructive to harmony and stable relationships because everyone is focused on themselves, struggling to build their own tower the highest. And because we find that building ourselves up is a lot of hard work, we often resort to the easier and faster tactic of having the highest tower by knocking down everyone else's – maybe even using some of their bricks, either to throw at them or to build our own walls higher. This works great because our ability to destroy what others do always outstrips our ability to build for ourselves. Just for example: a reputation that took a lifetime to build can be destroyed completely with a couple well aimed accusations – true or not; it doesn't make any difference. And this, I suspect more than anything, is the reason God chose to intervene at Babel and slow the progress. What he slowed was not so much the rate of *construction* but rather the rate of *destruction*. He foresaw that nothing they planned to do would be impossible to them – and he recognized the danger in that. And today we can see why. With our modern technology we can do many wonderful things; but every effort to build Utopia, the perfect community on earth, has failed. We can't build anything that lasts in that regard. Ah, but when it comes to destroying things, *that's* where we really excel. Why now we can vaporize civilizations with blasts hotter than the surface of the sun, create poisons so deadly that a small drop could kill every person in this county, and genetically engineer diseases more lethal than the black plague. You know, if the Lord hadn't slowed our "progress" at Babel by confusing the languages of the builders, we might have had these capabilities thousands of years ago. And if that had happened, I don't suppose we'd be here to talk about it.

My point is that our common language, the language of self glorification, is the dialect of self destruction. It's the language of dark minds and cold, loveless hearts. And it goes all the way back to when our first parents tried to make a name for themselves by reaching toward heaven to become like God. They ended up tasting bitter death. From that time onward humanity has continued to attempt reaching higher; but every attempt to achieve lasting glory and immortality has failed miserably. And since reaching toward heaven is so difficult, we've responded by trying to knock God down. The ancients did it by recasting him in the form of humans or various animals. And we do it today by ignoring him or pretending that he doesn't exist. Either way, the result is the same. It's given us lives that are a Babel of confusion, "*full of sound and fury and signifying nothing*". And throughout history, as God has tried to reestablish communication and give real meaning to our lives, we garbled his message and we killed the messengers.

Why? Because they weren't speaking our common tongue. Instead, they were speaking God's divine language of calling us to repent – repent of sins that people didn't want to admit or confess. They were speaking of mankind's unworthiness to stand before the Lord with any claim to merit. Why, they even said that the wonderful towers of glory we build in our lives – the achievements of which we are so proud – are less than nothing in the eyes of God. And people didn't like hearing it. They refused to listen. They plugged their ears and kept on believing in their own imagined goodness. And the result is that they never really heard or understood the rest of God's message: about his grace and forgiveness, about his plan to send a Savior – his own Son – to take away our sin. Nor did they get the part about how the Lord's Christ, through his suffering, death, and resurrection, would teach us again to speak God's divine language – his language of love for others, of attaining glory through humility, sacrifice, and service, and of attaining eternal life through dying to self. They didn't hear it; or if they did, it was so much nonsense to them. And so when God sent his Son into this world with the same message, they didn't get it; and they killed him too. And don't imagine for a moment that if you had lived then you would have done things any differently.

That's because the Scriptures inform us that sinful mind is hostile to God and everything he says. Our minds are closed to him. They are darkened with respect to spiritual matters, so that we cannot understand the words he speaks. It's an entirely different language. And this is why we confess in the Catechism, "I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him". Just as we could not save ourselves from sin, but needed salvation to be achieved for us by the death of God's Son on the cross, so also we could not understand, believe in, and therefore benefit from Christ's work of salvation apart from the work of the Holy Spirit.

And this is why what happened at Pentecost is so vitally important to us, for then the Lord sent his Holy Spirit to work on his people's hearts and minds from the inside. That's what we heard about in today's reading from Acts. And follow what happens here: at first all they hear is the sound of a mighty rushing wind. It's just noise. Ah, but then, as the Spirit comes upon each one a little flame appears above his or her head – flames that the Scriptures specifically call *tongues of fire*.

Why, of course: tongues. It's because they're being given the ability to understand God's language. That's what the flames show first: it's their light in the darkness. It shows that the Spirit is allowing them to see the truths of God that they couldn't understand before. That's the first idea communicated by the tongues of flame – spiritual illumination – the ability to understand God's Word.

But fire does more than shed light; it also purifies and refines. It burns away what doesn't belong. And that too is going on. Those with the Spirit are able to clearly see their sins in light of God's holy law, which leads them to repent, confess, and trust in the forgiveness won for them by Jesus. This is how our purification takes place. This is how we are cleansed of sin by the Spirit's work as he rests upon us and gives us faith in Christ.

And fire does still more. It also throws heat – heat that doesn't burn or hurt those upon whom the Spirit rests; but that instead enables them to share the warmth of God's love with others. It melts our hard, cold hearts and allows us to befriend and serve others – to love them as Christ has loved us.

And finally we see that the tongues of fire show that those who have the Spirit are enabled to communicate the wonders of what God did to save sinners in Jesus Christ in a way

that can be understood by others. This is apparent in that the disciples begin to speak in foreign languages – in the mother tongues of those who came running together to find out what the commotion was all about. At first these people too just heard noise. That’s what attracted them. But as they listen, they are astonished to discover that those with the Spirit are empowered to speak directly to their hearts. That’s because the Spirit was working through the Words the apostles spoke to bring these others also into the light of God and the true understanding of Christ.

And again, this is why Pentecost is so important to us in the Church of Jesus Christ. No, we don’t see hovering about our heads little flames of fire; but the same Holy Spirit that came to and rested upon the first believers in Jesus also comes to and rests upon us as we gather in Jesus’ name and hear his Word. And the Spirit continues to give us the benefits shown by the tongues of fire; namely spiritual illumination and understanding of God’s Word, purification from sin and faith in Christ, love for others, and the ability to communicate the truths of God’s Word in a way that can be understood.

And so, one way to understand what we’re to be about as we live and grow in Christian faith and life is to continue to learn Jesus Christ as a second language. We need to learn to use tongues of fire we have been given. It doesn’t come to us naturally. By nature, we all want to speak the comfortable, well known language of our birth – the language of self glorification. We need to change that.

Earlier I spoke to you in Portuguese. I had to learn it before I went to live and work in Brazil. It was a lot of hard work. And even then, once I was there, I found that it was a tremendous amount of work to carry on a conversation. That’s because I did all my thinking in English. So, when someone said something to me, I had to first hear what they said, figure out what they meant in English, think of a response in English, and then translate what I wanted to say into their language. It was exhausting. And sometimes I just had to tune them out. But then it happened, oh, I don’t know, after I’d been there a year or so. I was carrying on a rather complicated conversation with a coworker, and suddenly it dawned on me that I wasn’t translating anymore. I was actually thinking in Portuguese. My brain understood what was being said and I was responding without using English.

That’s the point we want to get to with the tongues of fire we have been given – when we no longer have to scratch our heads over God’s Word trying to figure out what a certain passage means because we’re so familiar with God’s way of speaking that we just know it; when repentance over our sins and trust in Christ is as natural as breathing; when love for others springs forth from our lives without having to think about it – it just happens – and we naturally think of what’s best for others before thinking of ourselves; and when we can speak freely, openly, boldly, and clearly of what Jesus Christ has done for us at all times and in all circumstances. How does that happen? How do we get to that point? Through total immersion. The way to learn a language is to put yourself in a place where you have to use it all the time.

So let’s do that. Let’s immerse ourselves in God’s Word and his way of speaking. Let’s surround ourselves by his truth, so that his Holy Spirit can continue to teach us to use the tongues of fire he’s given us and make us proficient. Then, through his work on us, our lives will become monuments not to ourselves, but to Jesus who saved us. In his holy name, and for his glory. Amen

Soli Deo Gloria!