COMMUNICATION OR COMMUNION?
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In this concluding sermon of a series of four on passages from the first eleven chapters of Genesis, we find ourselves in Shinar, a region in northern Babylonia between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. In fact, the name Babylon is probably derived from what happened here, as we shall see in a moment. We have looked at the Adam and Eve story, the Cain and Abel story, and Noah and the flood story. All of those, together with today’s story of the Tower of Babel, reflect the fall of humanity from grace and the reality of sin and evil in the lives of human being -- from Adam and Eve disobeying God’s command not to eat of the tree of good and evil to Cain killing his brother Abel to the flood waters sent because of the evil in the world to selfish ambition of human beings in building a tower to the heavens in order to “make a name for ourselves” (Gen. 11:4). God sees what is happening and sends confusion among them with the result that they all end up speaking different languages and are unable to communicate with each other.

This passage is often paired with that from Acts 2, which was also read this morning, on Pentecost Sunday. You recall that in the Pentecost experience the Spirit enables the disciples to share the gospel with persons of different nationalities who speak different languages who have gathered in Jerusalem. So, while the experience is not the reverse of what happened in the Tower of Babel story, rather than being a prohibitive factor in sharing the gospel, the gospel is shared through the different
languages. The Spirit enables and equips the disciples to speak the languages of those gathered in order to convey the good news.

We live in the information age. Newspapers have almost become passe. Not only do we have access to instant news on the internet, but we, literally, have access to instant news at our fingertips on cell phones. I can follow baseball games from around the country on my phone, pitch by pitch. We have email, facebook, twitter. Whereas we used to have three or four channels, all of which were local, now we have access to cable that gives us stations across the country and even around the world.

We are often told that communication is the key to healthy relationships, whether it’s a marriage, a friendship, a professional relationship, or even in the public arena. Poor communication skills can prove to be disastrous at any level, we are told. Learning to listen is key, we hear. While clear communication is an important ingredient in all relationships, Eugene Peterson reminds us that communication does not always have a positive effect. Sometimes being clear in our message can be as disastrous as communicating poorly. When government spokespeople talk about discussions being “frank” and “a clear exchange of ideas”, that does not always mean that the conversations went swimmingly, but it does usually mean that both sides communicated clearly. Peterson has observed that “better communication often worsens international relations. We know more about each other as nations and religions than we ever have before in history, and we seem to like each other less” (E. Peterson, Living the Message, p. 10). From our own personal experience, most of us can testify to the way in which language can be used to build up or it can be used to tear down. My 7th grade English teacher reminded us, “A closed mouth gathers no feet".
One of the issues in both passages that were read today is language. In the one passage language is confused because human beings had become arrogant and, like Adam and Eve, believed they could “be like God”, building a tower that would reach into the heavens. In the other passage, though different languages were being spoken, language became the means of sharing the gospel. Language can be used for communication, but it can also be used for communion. Eugene Peterson maintains that “the gift of words is for communion”.

Language is filled with ambiguity and nuance. The older we become, the more we recognize those ambiguities and nuances. Peterson says that often words do not so much define as they deepen mystery -- “entering into the ambiguities, pushing past the safely known into the risky unknown” (Ibid., p. 11). For example, when Jesus says in the Passover meal with his disciples in the upper room, “This is my body” and “This is my blood”, does he mean that literally as some of our brothers and sisters believe, or is he using the words metaphorically to point to the mystery of Christ’s presence in the meal? Over the centuries the church has divided over such matters.

Or, when he says in the Sermon on the Mount “If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away” and “If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it would be better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell” (Matthew 5:29, 20), does he mean that literally, or might he be using language metaphorically to talk about the high standards and the cost of discipleship? In writing to the church at Corinth the apostle Paul talks about how the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life (II Cor. 3:6). The gospel is more about the Spirit than it is about legalism, as much about communion as about communication.
One of the larger issues in the church over the past 150 years is how we read Scripture. The issue is not simply whether we take everything literally or not. Nor is the issue whether or not what we mean by the Scriptures being “divinely inspired”. The issue is whether Scripture is simply a means of communication or, rather, describing the relationship between a loving, gracious, and mysterious God who came to us in Jesus Christ and humanity. Is it communication, or is it communion? Reading Scripture is hard work just as trying to follow Jesus is hard work. Those looking for simple and simplistic answers will either be disappointed or will opt for a naive and blind reading of Scripture. One of the images associated with John Calvin and Scripture is that of a spade digging into Scripture, suggesting that reading the Bible takes effort and may even be arduous, but the rewards are exciting. Calvin called Scripture the spectacles through which we see more clearly who God is (*Institutes*, I.vi.1).

It is the difference between communication and communion. It is the difference between reading or hearing something literally and looking for ambiguity or nuance or some deeper meaning that may, in the end, point to mystery instead of explanation. Indeed, one of the purposes of a sermon is not so much to explain something as it is to point to the mystery and the wonder of the gospel of God’s grace and love. In recent days I’ve been reading a book about Flannery O’Connor, that wonderful Southern writer. The author of the book observes that, for O’Connor “Sin and grace and forgiveness and love and mercy and hell and heaven are all mysteries.” He then goes on to quote O’Connor: “If they were such that we could understand them, they wouldn’t be worth understanding. A God you understood would be less than yourself.” Then the author continues: “For O’Connor, the purpose of fiction was to portray these and other
mysteries -- to embody them -- in human manners” (The Terrible Speed of Mercy, p. 136). A devout Roman Catholic with a firm grasp of human nature, O'Connor maintained that the roles and purposes of the fiction writer and the prophet overlapped, namely to depict human nature with all its flaws and faults and, at the same time, point to the mystery of the grace of God.

In building the Tower of Babel the people, arrogantly, believed that by doing so they could have all the answers, and be like God. In sending confusion among the people by creating different languages, God reminded them not only who they were and that words and language matter, but that words and language are more than communication; they are intended to create and promote communion, that is, healthy relationships among them and between them and God. As the Frenchman, Gabriel Marcel, once noted, “Life is not so much a problem to be solved as a mystery to be explored.”

When we can approach life, God, and Scripture with that in mind, we may discover more joy than we ever expected.

Thanks be to God!