



“Gained in Translation”

Genesis 11:1-9 – The Tower of Babel

Acts 2:1-21 – Day of Pentecost

June 22, 2008

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

I don't know about you but I am constantly amazed by today's communication technology. It was not that long ago that the idea of having a phone conversation while walking down the street...or getting emails in a car...these were preposterous concepts. It's the oddest thing but it's as if there are actually words traveling through the air...Yes, any way you slice it, today's communication technology is remarkable.

Well today's sermon is about communication...but not about the technology part...instead I want to talk about Christian communication...I want to look at how Christianity is designed to break down communication barriers that divide us. Our readings speak to this issue.

These are both well known stories...the Tower of Babel story from Genesis and the Day of Pentecost from the Book of Acts. One is about how God imposed limits on human communication and the other is about how Christianity bridges these limits.

Many believe these two passages are related...with the latter story reversing the earlier punishment or curse.

The Tower of Babel story is about God's reaction to the very human desire to push the envelope of our mortal abilities...to overreach...in this case, to build a tower that will reach to "the heavens."

So God reacts to the tower saying, "Look, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so they will not understand one another's speech."

While many see a punishment by God, many also see God protecting us from ourselves by keeping us from the dangers of overreaching. Regardless, this story is practical acknowledgement of the fact that human communication is challenged, especially because we speak different languages.

The passage from Acts is about the Day of Pentecost...which is celebrated in Christianity as the day the Holy Spirit founded Christ's Church.

Here the Apostles gather in Jerusalem to celebrate one of the main Jewish feasts. First the text tells us that the Apostles "...were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them the ability."

Then the passage turns its attention to a crowd of bystanders...a crowd who we are pointedly told are of various nationalities...these bystanders are "astonished" that they are able to understand what is being said in these various languages. According to the text they ask: "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?"

It seems pretty clear why many, especially Christians, see this story as reversing the curse from the Tower of Babel story...the language barriers described in Genesis seem to be miraculously overcome by the Apostles...and as Peter points out as the text continues, it is due to Jesus' saving message.

The not so subtle implication is that by following Christ, we can break down these divisive communication barriers to reach people of all nationalities...the passage speaks to the intended universality of the faith.

And this is the message I want to lift up this morning...I see it as one of the foundational ideas of Christianity....the idea that our faith was designed to speak to all.

Christianity was arguably the first truly trans-cultural faith that the world had known. The good news that the Apostles spread transcended borders and ethnic distinctions...no small task in the tribal world they lived in.

Jesus' instructions in the Gospel of John were to *feed His sheep*...to spread His message...or, to put it more bluntly, to *evangelize*.

Christianity is a practical faith...the faith realizes that in order to spread the word to a diverse world, we have to learn to speak diverse languages...literally and figuratively.

This is a vision of an adaptable and translatable Christianity...a vision that I think is borne out not only by this Scripture...but also by Christian history.

So let's take a brief tour of Christian history...albeit given our time constraints, we'll need to do it in broad brushstrokes.

Let's start near the beginning...to spread the good news, Paul and Peter essentially divided up their world...with Paul responsible for evangelizing the gentiles and Peter the Jews...a one size fits all approach would not work.

The early Church developed along extremely diverse lines. This is best demonstrated by the fact that at one point there were over 30 Gospels in circulation...gospels that spoke to many different audiences...and while these Gospels had distinct interpretations of Jesus' life and death, they also had something in common...that Jesus was Savior.

Of course the Church did eventually narrow its interpretation of the faith to create what we now recognize as the basic tenets of Christianity. Arguably this conforming of the message was about trying to find a logical and common understanding for believers that

in its own way would help break down barriers...thus helping the early Church meet the enormous challenges of first survival and then growth.

But I think most of us would agree that there was also a downside to this narrowing of the message...that this conformity went too far...ultimately leading to some of the famous corruptions of the Medieval Church...perhaps capped off by the Crusades and the Inquisition.

But what is often forgotten is that throughout even the lowest moments for the Medieval church, there remained a vibrant and diverse missionary spirit that bubbled beneath the surface...a spirit that kept the faith moving forward despite its over-institutionalized and power hungry mentality...a spirit that fostered creative evangelizing at the grass roots level...by spreading the word in a way that locals could embrace.

Let me give you an example from 7th century Saxony...it's a document known as the Saxon Gospel...but first, a bit of background. Even though the Germanic tribe of Saxony was brutally conquered by Charlemagne and its people forced to be baptized, this did not mean that they were truly converted. So missionary monks set out to evangelize the Saxons. This Saxon Gospel shows how the traditional Gospel was adapted for this Germanic audience. Let me read you a bit...I think you'll recognize the storyline:

"The conviviality of the earls in the drinking hall was a beautiful sight, and the men on the benches had reached a very high level of bliss, they were really happy! Then the wine ran out on them; the people had no more apple wine."

Then let me pick it up a bit later. "Now it was not very long before the loveliest lady, Christ's mother, found out about it. She went and spoke...with her Son Himself, and told Him...that the hosts did not have any more wine for the guests at the wedding." Of course, this is a reworked version of the story of the Wedding at Cana. And just as in the Gospel of John, Jesus turns the water into wine...well, in this version it's apple wine.

But this is a wonderful example of adaptation to reach the intended audience...translating not only language but also the story to make it resonate.

Yes, missionaries...then and now...know that to feed the sheep, the faith has to be articulated in a way that touches the local audience.

Now let's broaden our brushstrokes a bit further...let's talk about the Reformation and the breaking up of the faith into many denominations. In this splintering into denominations, we are basically seeing this same phenomenon...the faith making itself attractive to people of different backgrounds.

Just consider the vast differences in approach between the various Protestant denominations.

Here are a few examples: Pentecostals emphasize the importance of the Holy Spirit in guiding worship. Quakers emphasize worship without what they consider interference between the believer and God...that's right, no ministers! Methodists emphasize the emotional call to conversion. And, of course, Congregationalists emphasize the democratic and covenant aspect of the faith.

Each denomination was tailored to meet the needs of a specific audience. And the Catholic faith, of course, eventually also adjusted its approach with the same goal in mind...ultimately leading to Vatican II and eliminating the requirement for the Latin Mass...literally becoming more flexible in terms of language.

Ironically, even Fundamentalism, despite its rigid approach to Biblical interpretation, must also be seen as tailored to a particular group of believers...in this case, believers who were concerned about the increasing influence of secular ideas on the tenets of Christianity.

Yes, when we consider the way the faith has reached the people, it seems clear that the power of Christianity is best unleashed when it is translatable into local flavors...yes, when it comes to the Christian faith *much is gained in translation*.

Now since we're talking about translatability of the faith, I did quick search on the internet for Bible translations. Just in English alone, I found 80 translations...including, believe it or not, one called the Postmodern Bible...my guess is that this one isn't too popular with Fundamentalists.

This adaptability of the faith is also evident when we consider the always controversial question...*what did Jesus look like?* And while I'm going to safely avoid this debate...I think you can guess whether the ancient Ethiopian drawing of Jesus that I found online looks like the typical Caucasian versions we see here in America.

Now while I think I've given some pretty good examples of the translatability of the Christian faith, I've actually missed a notable one. In my mind, it's arguably the most powerful example. Yes, this discussion can't be complete without considering African American Christianity...you may have noticed that it's been in the news a bit lately.

The story starts on the slave ships and continues on the plantations. Slave Christianity is a remarkable story...here you had what on the surface looks like an enslaved people taking on the religion of their oppressors. But, instead, they took on the faith *despite* their oppressors. They fully understood the hypocrisy of oppressors who confessed a Christian faith.

The American slaves adopted as their own, the Exodus story of the liberation of the Israelite slaves. And they received through Jesus a direct relationship with God that gave them certainty for a better life, whether in this one or in the next.

But what is less understood is how the slaves took the faith and shaped it as their own. Let me read you a quote from a book by Charles Joyner entitled *Believer I know*. "To underestimate the Africanness of African American Christianity is to rob the slaves of their heritage. But to overestimate the Africanness of African American Christianity is to rob the slaves of their creativity...The African American Christianity that developed was neither a...version of the Christianity preached by slaveholders nor a continuation of African religion disguised as Christianity."

But what I personally find most remarkable is how the faith helped the slaves deal with an anger that must have been lurking all the time. And so when we fast forward about 100 years from the end of Slavery to the 1960's and 70's, it isn't remotely surprising to me that parts of the African American Church took on a different tone.

Yes, I'm speaking about Black Liberation Theology...which was so much in the news during the primaries...and is likely to be back in the news during the general election. In this theology, we see a distinctive Christian approach that incorporated both...this justified anger...and impatience for long overdue equality.

As the name indicates, the emphasis remained on achieving freedom...but in line with the Civil Rights movement, the emphasis was on liberation in this world. And believers saw in Jesus, a God who, because He was on the side of the oppressed, identified with them...was one of them...and in this respect was, yes, a Black God. They saw a God who was determined to correct the evils of racism...for the benefit of both the oppressed and the oppressor...yes, freedom for all.

But what consistently disturbs me about the recent focus on African American worship...and especially on Black Liberation Theology...is how little effort is made to understand it. Yes even though Black Liberation Theology has become front page news, its story is being ignored...and instead there seems to be titillating focus on various personalities, egos, YouTube videos and soundbites...not to mention, political positioning by all sides.

In fact, I find it sad that throughout the entire brouhaha that unfolded during the primary season, I saw only one newspaper article that tried to analyze this theology in a level headed way.

Instead, we have mostly seen pundits trying to distill it all down to a few soundbites...and more often than not, with the goal being to discredit it...or politicians also seeking to discredit it...and some politicians even trying to avoid it altogether. The unfortunate thing is that we are missing the opportunity to enhance the genuine conversation about race that everybody says they want to have.

By failing to see Black Liberation Theology as an example of the adaptability and translatability of our wonderful faith, we are missing the opportunity to understand what drives this perspective....or to say it differently, we are not using the skills that our reading from Acts tells us we have...skills that can help us understand each other better.

Yes, like the story of the Apostles speaking in tongues, here again it's Christianity that is giving us a chance to truly communicate with each other...in this case, to see the race issue in new and constructive ways.

Now what we've seen in our brief tour of Christian history is that these various versions of the faith are actually not designed to work for all. Instead, they are designed to speak locally so the faith can speak to all.

And when you think about it, you shouldn't be remotely surprised if other versions of Christianity don't get you excited...or that you might even be uncomfortable with some...whether Black Liberation Theology, Anglicanism, Presbyterianism, Fundamentalism, Pentecostalism, Quakerism, the Methodist faith, Catholicism, the Baptist faith, Lutheranism...the list goes on and on.

But I'd argue that the *length of this list* is one of the most beautiful aspects of Christianity...the diversity of its approaches...the fact that even though we are looking

Plymouth Church of the Pilgrims
Sermon 6/22/08, Al Bunis

at different translations of the faith...we all have the same goal in mind...to hear what Jesus is saying to us.

God has given us a great gift in our faith...an ability to hear and understand our fellow citizens of God's creation.

For that I say...thank you Jesus!

Amen.

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