

# HEAVEN CAME DOWN

Sermon, May 15, 2016

Pentecost Sunday

Texts: Genesis 11:1-9, selections from Acts 2

I like the story about a minister from Central America who was touring the United States raising financial support for mission organizations in his home country. At one church luncheon, he was telling the guests about his country, his family, and the important work this particular church was helping to support. In speaking about his family, he said, *"I have a charming and understanding and supporting wife but, alas, we have no children."* It would have been fine had he just stopped there, but he believed an explanation was in order as to why he and his wife were childless, so he tried to explain that his wife couldn't bear children. However, English was his second language. What he actually said was, *"You see, my wife is unbearable."* Seeing the surprised looks and suppressed smiles in the audience, he attempted to clarify by saying: *"What I mean is, my wife is inconceivable."* Now hearing outright laughter in the audience, he tried again, saying, *"That is, my wife, she is impregnable!"*

Language can be a tricky means of communication, even when people are ostensibly speaking the same language! Communication problems, however, are not limited to those who speak different languages. The *Ladies Home Journal* surveyed 30,000 of their readers and asked them to rank the problems that they face in their marriages. The #1 problem was money/financial problems. But the #2 problem was poor communication. Researcher Terry Schultz wrote, *"Although many women chose their partners based upon sex appeal, research shows that if they had it to do again, they said the ability to communicate is much more important. Communication ranked higher than physical attraction, physical appearance, higher than personality, higher than financial status."* A significant part of the Pentecost miracle is that language was not a barrier; all heard the message of the disciples clearly, and they heard it in their own languages, and some three thousand people came to believe that message! Some commentators speculate as to whether this was primarily a miracle of hearing, rather than a miracle of speaking; suffice it to say for now, it seems to have been both. At Pentecost, the story of Babel is reversed. At Babel, proud humanity wanted to build a tower to reach heaven. In Pentecost, heaven came down to earth to reach us (*in the words of the previous hymn, "Heaven came down and glory filled my soul."*) And when heaven came down, when God poured out His Spirit, the confusion of languages begun at Babel was exchanged for a fusion of languages, and *"... each one heard them speaking in his own language."*

But again, language can be a tricky means of communication, even when people are ostensibly speaking the same language. Communication is a skill, a learned art, and it can be difficult to clearly say what you mean. Communication, clearly expressing what is on our minds in such a way as to be understood, does not come automatically; it needs to be worked at. And communication is further complicated because listening is also something of a skill, a learned art. Let me say that again: Listening is also a skill, a learned art; it is also something that needs to be worked at. I'm told (*unfortunately, I no longer have the specific reference citation*) the UCLA Communication Department studied people's listening skills years ago and came to this conclusion: The average person only hears about half of what is actually said. The study also went on to conclude that the average person only *understands* half of that! So now we're down to the average listener only hearing *and* comprehending about a quarter of what was actually said. The study also revealed the average listener only *believes* half of that, and then only *remembers* half of *that* later on! So, that's comes out to just about six percent ... the average (unskilled) listener hears, comprehends, believes and remembers only *six percent* of what someone says! Is it any wonder we have communication problems? Added to that is the problem that so many of us often put our tongues in drive before we get our minds in gear. And added to *that* is the reality that sometimes we often can't even agree on the meaning of our common words ... and when that happens, communication can just break down altogether into little more than meaningless babble. When *that* happens, communication ... and the community it engenders ... breaks down and comes apart. And when community breaks down, people have a tendency to scatter and separate.

We read earlier in Genesis 11: *"...and as they migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. They said to one another, 'Come let us make bricks and bake them thoroughly, let us build ourselves a city with a tower that reaches to the heaven, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth.'"* Paraphrased, these people are saying, *"Let us come together in community, let us build, let us erect a name for ourselves, then we will no longer be scattered."* Genesis 11 takes place on a plain in Shinar, or as the footnote "b" tells us, in Babylonia. The city of Babylon got its name from Babel; in the Babylonian language, the city's name means "Gateway to God." A technological innovation that helped changed the shape of history was invented at this time: the brick. Prior to this time, people used stone, or mud and straw, but their buildings could only rise a story or two at the most. But once

they learned to bake bricks in ovens, then the sky was the limit. *Technology* could take them to the heights of heaven, they thought. *Technology* would bring them together, give them unity, give them a name, make them great. Reading between the lines, they wanted something that would give them unity, purpose, mission, a sense of destiny and greatness; they wanted to make a name for themselves.

However, there is something missing from these first four verses. In these first four verses, God is never mentioned. They never ask questions like, "*What would God want us to do?*" "*How would God want us to use this technology?*" It is all about *them*, what *they* want, and *their* effort and *their* political machinations to make a great name for *themselves* and find unity and meaning and purpose and greatness ... with no acknowledgement of God, no acknowledgement of a need for God, no acknowledgement of a need for repentance before God, no acknowledgement of a need to listen to God for divine direction. And they go on to employ modern technology in this monumental quest to build a great tower, a great civilization, a great name for themselves ... without God.

In verse 5 we are told the Lord looks down, and sizes up what they are doing. What bothered God was neither the city nor the tower. Nor was God bothered by the potential of sharing heaven with humanity; it wasn't as if He were saying to the angels, "*Oh, if they succeed in building this high, well, there goes the neighborhood!*" Nor was God bothered by the use of technology and know how and community organizational skills; after all, He created humanity in His image, and He is the Creator ... human creativity and ingenuity, in and of itself, would not bother God. I think what bothered God was the *motivation* in all this, and the potential destruction that could result: people thinking that they could somehow attain greatness, that they could be great, great like God ... all on their own.

Not that it's wrong to want to be like God; in fact, the Bible does call us to be imitators of God. But they didn't want to be like God in holiness; they didn't want to be like God in purity and love and graciousness and mercy and kindness. They wanted to be like God in height, and power, and name, and all on their own effort and by their own methods and building huge towers to make a name for *themselves*, not for God's honor or glory. God understands that when human beings try to *be* God while ignoring God and His good ways, it just does not work! When we over-reach our created capacity as creatures, when we leave God out of the picture and try to be as Gods ourselves, we invariably cause great harm to ourselves and to others around us; human history has displayed this with depressing repetition. Perhaps the danger God perceived here is the very real harm human beings find themselves capable of doing to each other when they leave God out of the picture, when they seek to attain greatness on their own terms. So perhaps out of mercy God decides to spare them the trouble. Out of love, He opts to frustrate their out-sized ambitions, and we are told the Lord confused them by giving them many languages.

*(Purposely left out of the spoken sermon was the following quote attributed to Alexis de Tocqueville: "I sought for the greatness and genius of America in her commodious harbors and her ample rivers — and it was not there ... in her fertile fields and boundless forests — and it was not there ... in her rich mines and her vast world commerce — and it was not there ... in her democratic Congress and her matchless Constitution — and it was not there. Not until I went into the churches of America and heard her pulpits aflame with righteousness did I understand the secret of her genius and power. **America is great because she is good, and if America ever ceases to be good, America will cease to be great.**" I left it out because I read during the course of the week the source of this familiar quotation is now in question, as apparently no one can FIND that quote in Tocqueville's writing! It's a GREAT quote ... no pun intended ... and was cited by Presidents Eisenhower and Reagan, but the true source appears to be unknown.)<sup>1</sup>*

It's immediately after the story of Babel and confused language in Genesis 11 that the Bible begins the long story of God's redemption, the story that begins in chapter 12 with Abram who lived in the area around Babel, and ultimately leads to Jesus Christ, the *Word* made flesh. As mentioned earlier, at Babel proud humanity wanted to build a tower to reach heaven. In Jesus Christ, heaven reached down to proud humanity. God left heaven and came down in the flesh to earth to reach us. And on the Day of Pentecost described in the second chapter of Acts, we see something of a reversal of Babel. When the Word made flesh pours out His Spirit, the confusion of languages is exchanged for a fusion of languages. There is so much that can be said about this, but for now I'll just point out that the same God Who, out of mercy and compassion, scattered humanity by confounding our communication now unites us with one language, the language of faith in the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ.

Whenever people respond to the gospel of Jesus Christ preached in the power of the Holy Spirit, scattered, human beings are drawn together into community, a new community, a truly great community called the family of God ... for Jesus Christ is the real gateway to God, and we will remain restless and unsettled and scattered until at last we find our integrity, our unity and our rest in Him.

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.bartleby.com/73/829.html> and <http://www.weeklystandard.com/the-tocqueville-fraud/article/8100>