

Speaking God's Language  
Genesis 11:1-12  
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George Bernard Shaw once said the England and America are two countries separated by a common language. But you don't have to go across the pond to be misunderstood by someone who speaks the same language as you. I led a mission trip several years ago from Chicago to Hazard, Ky., to work on their church. One of the other adults on the trip, an Irishman named Sean, was our construction leader, and he and I made a run to Lowe's to get some drywall mud. When Sean asked in his lilting Irish accent how thick the mud should be mixed, the Lowe's employee said, "Well, just mix it like your biscuits." Sean smiled and said, "Excuse me?" The guy said, "You know, like your biscuits." Sean looked at me and said, "Can you translate for me?" and I said, "Like peanut butter," and he said, "Oh..."

We are often separated by a common language. Do you say Coke or pop or a soda? Is it a sub or a hero or a hoagie? Is it carmel or caramel? More seriously, does Black America and White America speak differently? Does Liberal America and Conservative America use the same words to mean different things? Do Christians across the country, supposedly united as the body of Christ, have wildly different vocabularies? We are a nation divided by many things, including a common language.

Language plays a prominent part in the Bible to describe how humans relate to God and each other. You may remember the story in Acts about the day of Pentecost, when Jews from all over the world gathered in Jerusalem for a festival. The Spirit of God descends like tongues of fire on the disciples, who start speaking the word of God. These Jews, who all spoke different languages, heard those words spoken to them in their native language. Despite their linguistic differences, God connects them together. But God not only uses language in the Bible to unite people; God also uses it to divide them.

For many years now I've had a fascination with mountains. I was blessed to spend some time at basecamp of Denali a few years ago and it was life-changing. And this evening, I fly out to Denver for a few days of hiking with my uncle and cousins, which will include climbing up Medicine Bow Peak, which is about 12,000 feet. That sounded like a great idea last summer when we planned this trip. To be safe, my uncle is bringing supplemental oxygen. I'm bringing supplemental BBQ sauce. There's something magical, almost transcendent, about being up high, because you feel that much closer to God.

That is part of what motivated the builders of the tower of Babel to do what they did and what got them in trouble. This story takes place shortly after Noah, when God got fed up with disobeying, greedy, power-hungry humans and decided to wipe the earth clean and start fresh. Noah and his family obeyed the command to be fruitful and multiply, filling the earth with offspring who would have all shared a common language. But there's one major problem: all the people were still disobeying, greedy, power-hungry humans. The flood didn't wash away their sinfulness, and it was only a matter of time before they exhibited the same destructive behaviors as before.

After the people settled in Shinar, they looked around at their neighbors and saw that all of them had big towers that reached high into the sky. And in their desperate desire to keep up with the Jonesites, they decided they needed one, too. So the property committee hired an architect and conducted a capital campaign to pay for the bricks and the tar, and they began

building a city with a tower that reached to the heavens. Why? Because, scripture tells us, they wanted to make a name for themselves. There's something powerful about ascending, about being up high, about towering over others. They wanted other nations to look at them and say, "Oooh, those must be the Israelites, the ones who built that really cool tower!" Why is that a problem? Because when you're so focused on making a name for yourself, there's not much room left for God.

The tower they were building was a ziggurat, which was a common structure for pagan religions. The ziggurat itself wasn't the temple; the temple would be built right next door. On the outside of the ziggurat was a stairway that led all the way to the top, where there would be a room with a small bed. The belief was that the local god would dwell in that little room at the top and would descend the stairway when folks were worshipping in the temple next door. Time for worship, ring the bells, down comes the god, "Blessings, blessings, blessings," worship is over, the god climbs back to its little room.

Do you see why the Israelite God wasn't too keen on the building of this tower? You can't put our God in a box, not even at the top of a mighty tower. If the people could build a tower like this, they would think nothing was impossible. So, God intervened. God took away the one common bond they had, the one thing essential to their sense of community: their common language. It's hard enough to build something together if you DO speak the same language! Imagine all the finger-wagging and hand-gesturing and general chaos that would ensue if you don't speak the same language. So, the place was called "Babel," which means "confused." No one spoke the same language, so they scattered.

Fast-forward several thousand years to Jerusalem, the day of Pentecost. God descends, not using the steps of a ziggurat, but using tongues of flame borne of the Holy Spirit. It's appropriate that it was tongues, because when they are touched the disciples start to speak. But they're not babbling. No, they begin to proclaim the Good News and the Holy Spirit translates it into the different languages of all the listeners. You see? This is the tower of Babel reversed. It's the bookend to the scattering. It's the reunification of God's people through language.

Now, fast forward again to the present day. The church has grown, the word of God has spread around the globe, the Bible has been translated into hundreds of languages, the Spirit is still hard at work amongst believers. So why are we still babbling? Christians can't communicate WITH EACH OTHER, much less people different than us. Even though we share a common spiritual language, we still have difficulty communicating in a way that honors God and the God image inside each other. Christians fight so much I have to wonder, "Are we speaking the same language?" How do we know when our words are God's words? How can we make sure we honor the spirit of Pentecost when we talk to each other?

I believe one of the problems is we are focusing on our differences instead of what we have in common. We take a passage from the Bible and twist it and turn it until it fits our belief about a certain theological or social issue, and then we say, "See? I'm correct. It says so right there in the Bible!" And yet, the language God speaks in scripture is not the language of right and wrong, of in and out, of who's worthy or not worthy to preach or speak in church. Instead, God speaks the language of love, of grace, of connection, and that transcends any human language.

I was powerfully reminded of this on our mission trip to Costa Rica last week. We were building a kitchen on a house that was down a hillside, so we had to use wheelbarrows to carry to the concrete mix about halfway down the hill, then use buckets to carry it the rest of the way. It was really hard work! Or so the youth told me, I was waiting in the air-conditioned van. No, I

was out there working, and while I was a neighbor came up to me. This man, who spoke no English, started talking to me in his native language. No comprendo, señor. So, he patted me on the back, and said a few more Spanish words, which included “trabajo difícil.” I knew that meant “hard work,” so I said, “Si,” then repeated a phrase I had learned early in the trip which had gotten me out of a lot of responsibilities: “Yo soy viejo,” which means, “I am old.” He said, “Cuanto años?” How many years? I said, “Cincuenta y dos,” which means 39. OK, it means 52. He stood a bit straighter, pointed to his chest and said, “Cincuenta y seis.” Fifty-six. “Cuatro años,” he said. Four years older. So, I pointed to his beard and said, “Mas gris!” More grey! He smacked me the shoulder and laughed.

Just that moment, Andrea Nielsen came down the hill. He pointed at her and said, “Cuanto años?” He obviously wasn’t familiar with the very American tradition of not asking a woman her age. I asked Andrea and she said, “56.” By the way, I have her permission to share that information. I looked at him and said, “Cincuenta y seis también!” He laughed, pointed to her face and chuckled and said, “No gris!” Then Andrea pointed to the top of her head and said, “Oh yes there is!” And the three of us laughed our heads off. From that point on, every time I saw the man, I pointed to his beard said, “Mas gris!”

There was so much that separated the three of us. Different languages, different skin colors, different incomes, different countries. There’s no earthly way we should have been able to understand each other, much less share a moment of real human connection like we did. But we weren’t focused on our differences. We were focused on our shared humanity, the desire to connect with each other through laughter and shared humanity. It was our own Pentecost, as the Spirit connected us together.

There is so much that seeks to divide us in this world. We have tried to make a name for ourselves, and our souls have been scattered. If we look hard enough, we can find a difference in everyone, and that has led us to defining ourselves by who we’re not. As God people, we are divided. But I believe the process of coming back together starts with the church. We do it every Sunday when we gather here, in person or virtually, to listen to the language of God, which includes words like “grace” and “welcome” and “blessing.” And then, we are called to go and speak those words into a selfish, scattered world. We can say to one another words of healing and hope like, “I’m sorry” and “You’re forgiven” and “How can I help?” And when we do, we speak the language of God that transcends all human differences and binds us together as God’s children. I wonder how this world would be different if people stopped trying to speak for God and instead trying to speak the language God has given us. We have the words. We have the call. Why are we still babbling? What are we missing? “Ayudanos, Dios.” Help us, God.