

Hearing a Different Language
Genesis 11:1–9; Acts 2:1–21
Sunday, June 8, 2025 (Pentecost)

Let us pray: Lord, may your Spirit move among *us* as it did on Pentecost, helping us to understand not just your Word, but also *each other*, in Christ. Amen.

I'm going to say something that's going to make me sound very old: Have you heard the way that kids talk these days? Those of you who are around teenagers a lot might have heard this. It's this whole new language based heavily on Internet and gaming culture, and it's called *brain rot*, probably because when you hear people talking like this, you can feel your brain rotting away. I can't really describe it. You just have to *hear* it. So I am going to tell you the story of Pentecost in brain rot:

So the squad is straight loitering in some upstairs room. Just chillin'. Vibes: meh. Mood: anxious. Then outta nowhere – BOOM – sky goes full Michael Bay, and there's this giga-wind sound, like God just hit "Start Storm" on the weather mod but forgot to toggle off the building collision. Everyone's wigs = SNATCHED.

Then, no cap, flaming head DLC activated. Tongues of fire just plop onto people like divine flaming Pokémon evolutions. Suddenly, everyone's spittin' fluent Duolingo in 4K. We're talking Ultra HD Multilingual Mode.

Meanwhile, outside? A bunch of randos are like, "Bruh, check out the skibidi Ohio gang. These fools are crashin' out. They've gone straight goblin mode fr rn. Why are they yappin' all these languages? It's totally sus. Are they drunk?"

Then Peter goes Sigma, full Main Character Mode, and he's like, "On God, fam, it's 9 a.m. We're not sauced. This is that prophecy patch update from Joel. God said, 'I'm gonna yeet my Spirit on all ya'll. Sons, daughters, boomers, zoomers. You get a prophecy. You get a vision. Everybody gets holy downloads.'"

Then Peter full sends it and hits them with the Jesus TED Talk, "Jesus? That guy you clowned and crucified? Plot twist – he beat death. He's back in God-mode, sending the Spirit like a divine airstrike."

The crowd is *cooked*. Like, existential-crisis level. "Bro, what do we even do?"

Peter drops the gospel mix tape: "Easy. Smash the repent button. Get baptized. Boom. Holy Spirit content unlocked."

And like 3,000 people said, “Say less, bro.” They hit Ctrl+Repent, get dunked, and join the squad. Everyone starts sharing food, selling their junk, Stannin’ JC, and vibing together like the ultimate holy co-op server. God adds new users daily. No bugs. Just blessings.

If you did not understand anything that I just said, that’s okay. It’s like hearing a foreign language. We have actually seen papers from our kids’ schools, like the instructions for a research paper, and at the very top the teacher writes, “NO BRAIN ROT.” Because kids are turning in papers written like that. And the immediate response that a lot of people have when they hear kids talking like that is usually, “That is so stupid.”

That is how we respond a lot of times when we encounter something we don’t understand or agree with or like. I read something once where the author said, “When we encounter someone we don’t agree with, our initial tendency is to write them off as stupid.” *They think or act that way because they just don’t get it; they aren’t educated or informed enough. That person is conservative? It must be because they aren’t educated enough. That person is liberal? They just don’t get it. If they would just educate themselves, they would think differently.* And I hear that so many times in so many different ways; the go-to response to someone we disagree with is that they are just not as smart as us.

I read an article recently by Jonathan Haidt called, “Why the Past 10 Years of American Life Have Been Uniquely Stupid.” It talks about how the Internet – social media in particular – has changed the way that we spread and consume information, and it has damaged our ability to think critically. But the reason I was interested in this article is because he compares this problem to the story of Babel that we heard earlier. He says, “The story of Babel is the best metaphor I have found for what happened to America in the 2010s, and for the fractured country we now inhabit. Something went terribly wrong, very suddenly. We are disoriented, unable to

“speak the same language or recognize the same truth. We are cut off from one another and from the past.”

“It’s been clear for a while now,” Haidt says, “that red America and blue America are becoming like two different countries claiming the same territory, with two different versions of the Constitution, economics, and American history. But Babel is not a story about tribalism; it’s a story about the fragmentation of everything. It’s about the shattering of all that had seemed solid, the scattering of people who had been a community. It’s a metaphor for what is happening not only between red and blue, but within the left and within the right, as well as within universities, companies, professional associations, museums, and even families.”¹

I agree with him that that’s where we are in our country and our world right now. But his whole article is based on a *negative* understanding of what happened at Babel. And I think there’s a *different* way we can understand Babel that can help us to approach one another differently.

Before Babel the whole world spoke the same language; they lived together and could work together. But at Babel, God introduced *difference*. *Not* as a *punishment* for the pride and arrogance of the people, but because that is how God created the world to be. God created us different *on purpose*.

At the very beginning of creation in Genesis, God does not just create light, but rather separates light from darkness, creating day and night. God does not just create a world made entirely of dry land, but rather creates dry land and bodies of water. On the third day of creation, when God creates vegetation, there are “fruit trees of every kind...plants yielding seed of every kind, and

¹ <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2022/05/social-media-democracy-trust-babel/629369/>

trees of every kind.” Rather than a single season, God creates multiple different seasons. God does not create a single kind of living creature, but rather multiple kinds of birds, fish, cattle, and creeping things, making “wild animals of the earth of every kind.” Finally, God creates human beings in God’s own image, both male and female; not just *one kind* but *different*. And all of this difference is proclaimed by God to be *good*.

Even after the flood, when creation starts over again, God does not create uniformity but diversity. God commands Noah and his descendants to be fruitful and multiply and to spread out over the face of the earth. From Noah and his family, God brings about all the ethnicities and cultures of the world. Out of *one*, God brings about *many*. And all of this difference and diversity is brought about by the blessing of God. It’s not just that difference happens and then God blesses it. It’s that God’s blessings *leads* to difference.

At the beginning of the Babel story, the people say, “Let us build a tower that reaches the heavens and make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the whole face of the earth.” But isn’t that what God just told them to do? Be fruitful and multiply and spread out over the face of the earth? So it says that God confuses their language so that they do not understand each other. They can’t work together anymore, so they leave off building the city and scatter across the whole face of the earth. Exactly what the people were afraid of in the first place, but exactly what God had told them to *do* in the first place.

So often, we hear the story of Babel as God *punishing* the people for their pride and arrogance; that the people wanted to become like God, so God punishes them by confusing their language. Understood this way, difference is not a result of the *blessing* of God. Rather, it is the *punishment* of God. Difference and diversity are not *good*, they are *bad*. Differences become

dangerous. They become the source of confusion and conflict and chaos. This leads us to be suspicious and afraid of those who are different. It can cause us to stereotype and demonize those who are different. All of these different languages and cultures become a *problem* that we must *overcome*, rather than the blessed design and intention of God.

And when we understand *Babel* this way, it affects how we understand *Pentecost* and the mission of the church. Pentecost becomes a *reversal* of Babel; correcting what went wrong at Babel. At Babel, *one* language was turned into *many* languages, while on Pentecost, we say, those *many* languages revert back to one *common* language. Pentecost becomes a story of the Holy Spirit *eliminating* differences between people. So then the church's mission is to eliminate differences, rather than to engage them and affirm them. It's not about *unity* in the midst of our differences. It's about *uniformity*, making us all the same – believe the same, act the same, speak the same.

But here's the thing. Nowhere does the story of Babel say anything about pride or arrogance or disobedience or rebellion against God on the part of the people. Nowhere does it say anything about God *punishing* them. Right before the story of Babel, God tells Noah and his descendants to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. But at Babel, we see that the people are all together in one place. God wants them to spread out across the face of the earth, but they are staying in one place. They are trying to do what *all* people do – establish a culture; form a cultural identity. It says they are trying to “make a name for themselves.” That isn't necessarily *pride* or *rebellion* against God. It simply reflects the natural human desire to create a distinct culture in which we can find identity and belonging and safety.

We understand the story of Babel to be about pride and arrogance, not because of what *scripture actually says*, but because of what we think it *implies*. We are reading that into it, but that's not what it actually says. The people are trying to create one common culture, and that is not in keeping with the diversity that God intends for creation. When God sees the people building this city with a single language and a single culture, God comes down to *diversify* language and diversify culture and introduce *difference*. God did not want the people to be all the same. God wanted the people to be different – *of every kind*.

The Babel story teaches us that *difference* is the way that God wanted the world to be. It teaches that difference is normal. It counters the 'us versus them' way of thinking about difference and the fear of difference that is present in so much of our political rhetoric. It counters stereotyping others as "less than" or dangerous just because they're different. It teaches us that *difference* is *good*, and that it is God's desire and intention for creation.

And just so we don't think that this is a brand new interpretation of this story, coming out of a modern day time and culture that values diversity, John Calvin said the same thing in the 1500s. Writing about the story of Babel, Calvin said, "Men had already been spread abroad; and this ought not to be regarded as a punishment, seeing it rather flowed from the benediction and grace of God."² *Our differences flow from the blessing and grace of God. God created us different, and God wants us to be different.*

The story of Pentecost, then, is not a *reversal* of what happened at Babel, rather it is a *continuation* of it that *builds* on the diversity of Babel in a positive way. On Pentecost the many languages that find their origin at Babel do not revert back to one common language, but rather,

² Bernhard Anderson, *From Creation to New Creation*, pg. 177.

the Holy Spirit makes it possible for a diverse group of people to understand one another in the midst of a plurality of languages. The apostles are given the ability to speak in the native language of each person there. This diverse group of people – people from all over the world and all kinds of different cultures – is able to hear a group of Galileans speaking in their own native languages.

The Holy Spirit does not *eliminate* the differences between the people by making them all the same, rather the Spirit engages and affirms their differences by allowing those differences to remain. They don't all start speaking the *same* language. They all start speaking *each other's* languages. Just as God *introduced* all the world's languages at Babel, so the Holy Spirit taught the first Christians to *speak* them all at Pentecost. Whereas in the Babel story, God creates *diversity* by bringing about many languages and cultures, at Pentecost God works to bring about *understanding* between those diverse languages and cultures. This is not a move *away* from diversity, but rather an expression of God's desire for unity and understanding in the midst of diversity and difference.

So the very first thing that the Holy Spirit empowers the newly formed church to do is to *understand each other* in the midst of differences. The *mission* of the church, then, is not to *eliminate* differences between people and make them all the same. The mission of the church is to meet people where they are, allowing our differences to remain, so that we can understand each other and live life together in the midst of them. *That* is what God wants us to do. God does not want us to have conservative churches and liberal churches or churches where everyone looks the same and thinks the same. God wants us to try to understand each other so that we can live together as one church, even with our differences.

We are not all the same. We do not all agree. And that is *okay*. Our differences are not something that we should *fear* or seek to *eliminate*. It is how God *created* us, and it is how God *called us together*. Because what is more beautiful and meaningful – when two people who are very *similar* come together and say, “You are my brother, my sister, and I love you?” Or when two people who are *very different* come together and say, “You are my brother. You are my sister. And I love you?”

So if we had to sum all of this up, in a nutshell, the stories of Babel and Pentecost teach us that God wants us to be different, and God wants us to find a way to live life together and love one another in the midst of our differences. And the good news is that with the help of the Holy Spirit, we *can*. The Holy Spirit is God’s living presence with us today. The Holy Spirit connects us to God, to Jesus Christ and his saving death and resurrection. The Holy Spirit makes it possible for us to hear and understand God in prayer and scripture; the Spirit illuminates our hearts and our minds. And the Holy Spirit connects us to *each other*, helps us hear and understand *each other* amidst differing languages and cultures and worldviews and beliefs.

I am *so tired* of seeing people *hate* and *hurt* and *kill* one another because they *look* different or *sound* different or *believe* different. That is *not* what God wants of us. Not a single one of you is exactly the same as me. We all look different and sound different and have different political beliefs or different understandings of scripture and faith, what it means to be faithful to God. Whether those differences are big or small, we are all different. And yet in my 12 years here, I have learned something from *every single one of you* that has helped me to grow and made me a better pastor and person. The Holy Spirit has opened my heart and mind to you and made it possible for me to understand you in the midst of our differences.

So when *you* inevitably encounter someone who looks or speaks or acts or believes differently than you do, don't just write them off as uninformed or ignorant or stupid or wrong. They're not *stupid*, they're just *different*. Listen to them. Try to understand them. Because God might be speaking to you *through them*, teaching you something that will help you grow into the person God created and calls you to be. Amen.