

“Of cures...and ailments”:
A Sermon Preached at Knox United Church (Parksville, B.C.)
on May 23rd 2010 (Pentecost Sunday)
by Foster Freed

Genesis 11: 1-9

I have long been struck by an insight received courtesy of a remarkable book from the pen of a remarkable 20th century Russian Orthodox theologian: a man by the name of Vladimir Lossky. Lossky, in his book, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, describes the work of Christ in a dramatically different way from just about any other treatment of the work of Christ I have ever encountered. Lossky argues that Christ’s work might best be regarded as paving the way for the coming of the Holy Spirit. In other words: without the gift of Jesus Christ: his life and death, his healing and his teaching, his resurrection and his ascension...without the gift of the living Christ, the pouring out of the Spirit could not have taken place. And so, whereas typical accounts of Christ’s work tend to make the Good Friday/Easter story the very centre of Christian faith, Lossky treats it almost as a prelude—a prologue—to the heart of the drama, which is God’s pouring out of the Spirit at Pentecost. Pentecost, according to that shaping of the Christian story, becomes the true climax of everything that has gone before it. Pentecost, according to that way of framing our story, becomes the genuine heart of the thing. And yes, Pentecost—regarded in that way—becomes the real key with which to understand the work of restoration and healing that God has undertaken. Which raises the obvious.

If Pentecost is the answer...what’s the question? If Pentecost is the treatment...what’s the disease? If Pentecost is the cure...what’s the ailment?

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In light of this morning’s reading...a reading that goes a long way toward defining our disease....in light of the story of the Tower of Babel, it’s tempting to suggest that humanity’s disease is linguistic and cultural disunity: our division into countless, mutually non-comprehending, languages, cultures, tribes and nations. That preliminary diagnosis makes good sense. At Babel diverse tongues sow confusion; at Pentecost, God puts those diverse tongues to good use: enlisting the various languages not as a means for *dividing* human beings one against the other, but as a means for the unifying proclamation of the Gospel. And so it is natural to assume that since linguistic confusion begins at Babel, that the healing of said confusion at Pentecost is a key step in the healing of humanity. And that, no doubt, is true, *as far as it goes*. But it doesn’t go far enough.

According to the Babel story (and yes, it is just a story but a meaning-filled story all the same!), from the perspective of Babel it is God who decides to plant seeds of confusion through the creation of a variety of different languages,

different tongues. Not by way of punishment, but by way of slowing us down lest we do real damage! Taken at face value, our countless tongues are not so much the cause but merely a symptom of what ails us. But then what is the underlying ailment?

Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves." Let's be big shots. Let's do things our way. Let's be really impressive and utterly autonomous, and show the world what we human beings are really and truly made of! That's the spirit of Babel...a spirit that knows no linguistic boundaries...a spirit of stubborn independence that is no stranger to *any* of the earth's languages, a spirit well-known in each and every one of earth's cultures.

And, I hasten to add: there are some fairly unappetizing ways in which to read the Babel story: ways that make God look like a big bully! Our forebears were getting too big for their britches and God chose to put them in their place. They were giving themselves airs, and they needed to be knocked down a peg or two: so God did them the honour of providing both the pegs and the knock. Sort of the way children were once raised: mind your manners, don't talk back to your betters, and don't—under any circumstances—even think about getting uppity. Such a reading of the Babel tale is certainly in line with the prevailing culture of the ancient Near East, a culture in which human beings were regarded as nothing more than servants—make that slaves—of the gods: here on earth to do the gods bidding without so much as a how-do-you-do. Can you blame such creatures from indulging in a wee bit of rebellion? *Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves."* A name...a name...and maybe even, a place to lay their head, after a day of hard labour in the service of the gods! That's one way...one way to read the story of Babel. As the story of a long-overdue rebellion!

Then again...the story of Babel, like every other Biblical story...needs to be read in context. When placed in the context of other things the Bible has to say about humanity, that way of reading Babel starts to lose its persuasiveness. *Then God said: "Let us make humankind in **our** image, according to our likeness."* Does that sound like a god who creates human beings for nothing more than menial servitude? *When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established/ what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?/Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honour?* Does that sound like the sentiments of a poet inspired by a god who holds humanity in contempt? *"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."* Are those the words of a Christ—an anointed One—who has come merely to put us in our place? *Beloved: we are God's children now; what we will eventually be has not yet been revealed!* Do those words hint at a god who delights in the abasement of, the humiliation of, the human creature?

Well: I suppose—with a cynical shake of our corporate head—we could simply chalk this up as yet one more example of the Bible hopelessly contradicting itself. In that we would be wrong. From the Biblical perspective, the problem posed at Babel isn't the excessively lofty dreams of those who sought to build that tower, it's that their dreams left no room in them for the divine, left no space within them for God, and *God's* dream for humanity. "*Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves.*" Notice the pronouns. Let *us* build *ourselves* a city...and let *us* make a name for *ourselves*. Strains of Anka and Sinatra in the background! I did it...I did it *my* way!

I am reminded...reminded of a famous and much beloved 19th century poem: *Invictus* by the English poet William Earnest Henley. A poem that has been a source of inspiration to countless souls including, as we have been reminded courtesy of a recent film, the soul of Nelson Mandela as he languished in a South African prison. It is not hard to understand why *Invictus* has been of such great comfort to those facing times of trial.

*In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.*

To think of the great Nelson Mandela clinging to those words during his imprisonment, much as a man at sea clings to a life-raft, that is a powerful and, yes, inspiring image. None of that changes the fact, however, that the final words of the poem involve a demonstrably false boast.

*I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.*

And I need to tell you: I am no more the master of my fate than I am the master of Wuthering Heights. I am no more the Captain of my soul than I am the Captain of the H.M.S. Pinafore.

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Is it possible...is it possible...that the original—and the most persistent—of human foibles is the stubborn belief that I can get there (wherever “there” might be!) on my own steam and on my own timetable. And while, quite frankly, the word “fear” has too many negative connotations for me to be completely at home with the Biblical formulation, namely that *fear of the Lord* is the beginning of wisdom, I have no doubt but that “remembrance of the Lord”...

...*remembrance, simple remembrance* of God and of God's tender mercies, is the true beginning of wisdom. Not master of my fate! Not captain of my soul! But a creature...fashioned in love and yes, destined for great

things...destined for adventures in the Spirit far more wonderfully outlandish than any I would have dared to cook up for myself, even under the spell of the cockamamie belief that I am “master of my fate”! In the Pentecostal splendour...in the Pentecostal splendour of God’s power and God’s love, I am grounded in a sacred energy far surpassing any I could conjure up for myself. And I am invited to enter into a deep participation (that’s a lovely word, participation...not lonely individualism but deep participation)...in the life and light and love of the One who alone deserves to be regarded as the Captain of my soul.

Isn’t that what brings us to this table, this table where we feast upon a bounty not of our own design? Oh, yes, it is human hands that turn flour and water and yeast into bread; but is it not God who provides the grain? Yes, it is human energy and human creativity that turn grapes into the juice of the vine; but would those grapes—apart from the bounty of God’s fertile earth—be available for this joyful feast? I think not! And the Good News is simply this:

The God who feeds us at this table...with gifts of bread and juice...gifts of hospitality and hope...the God who feeds us at this table, is the One who at Pentecost calls us to great and glorious adventure, an adventure we will now have the privilege of re-imagining over the coming months, as we celebrate the lengthiest church season of them all. Not a season for celebrating ourselves (God forbid!), and yet a season for celebrating what we ourselves can become—what we ourselves can become, what **human beings**, flesh and blood, can achieve—when filled with the power of God’s majestic Spirit. Not obsessively seeking to make a name for ourselves; simply embracing the name we already bear. A name of deepest honour! A name of unsurpassed dignity! A name bestowed in love!

In Christ’s name...in Christ’s name, may we remember and never forget the gifts of God. In Christ’s name may we take time for the Spirit, make room for the Spirit: that our very lives—even yours, even mine—that our very lives might shine with the goodness of the One who has not only fashioned us *in* love...but has fashioned us *for* the living out of love. This day! Every day!

May it be so! Amen!!!

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