

BEYOND BABEL
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There is a strange story in the eleventh chapter of the book of Genesis, in both the Jewish and Christian Scriptures. The New International Version tells it like this:

¹ Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. ² As people moved eastward they found a plain in Shinar and settled there. ³ They said to each other, “Come, let’s make bricks and bake them thoroughly.” They used brick instead of stone, [Could this be St Louis?] and tar for mortar. ⁴ Then they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves; otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth.” ⁵ But the LORD came down to see the city and the tower the people were building. ⁶ The LORD said, “If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. [God calls, or goes, up again because he says, to his retinue:] ⁷”Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other.” [Why is God upset that we are doing so well?] “So the LORD scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. That is why it was called Babel [sounds like Hebrew for confused] because there the LORD confused the language of the whole world [and] scattered them over the face of the whole earth.”

It seems to me as though the character of God in this little tale is either a frightened deity who simply wants to limit our powers or perhaps, like the trickster god Coyote, he wants to cause us trouble just to challenge us. The standard “orthodox” counter-interpretation is that the phrase “let us make a name for ourselves,” is an expression of human pride, or even hubris: challenging the name of God. Thus, the theory goes, when God said “nothing will be impossible for them,” he really meant “nothing evil will be impossible for them”. Sadly, our lack of a single language has not kept us from doing great evil and harm to one another and the biosphere. In this age of communication, of global cell networks and internet, does this story tell us we are we destined to do terrible things? I say that instead we should seek more understanding, better communication, and use our many languages to create shared dreams of a beloved global community.

The City of Babel is usually associated with the city of Babylon, because the plain of Shinar used to be within Iraq and the name of the city arose from the Babylonian words Bab-il, literally: Gate of God. However, in Hebrew the word ‘to confuse,’ as well as the Aramaic and Arabic words for ‘to mix’ or ‘to confuse,’ are very much like the name Babel. So the Jewish writers of the Bible say there was a different origin for the city’s name than its gate. Other scholars wonder, if, when the ancient Jews were wandering the desert, an encounter with the ruins of some ancient city may have also inspired this story. Either way, there is no evidence of any historical truth to this story, of our

divisions coming all at once from above. Archeological evidence indicates that the time human beings were “scattered over the earth” was long before we started building towers and cities. Also, by the time we formed cities we had already formed, millennia before, many different languages.

But the insight is true: different languages are a source of trouble; they are a symbol and a source of division, strangeness, suspicions, and hostility. Note the constant formation of parallel forms of English in minority communities throughout this country. There are people who have lived their whole lives in Saint Louis who cannot understand each other upon first meeting, until their ears have adjusted to the other’s accent. It is not because of a lack of ability, or lack of will, that people create these variant languages, but from the power and influence of separateness in culture and identity. Isolated socially from the mainstream any group of people will find patterns of speech that help them communicate with one another and forge a separate identity.

Human beings keep trying to find a single language, but it breaks down. Who here speaks Esperanto? English, in various forms, is the *lingua franca* of the world. That means it has replaced French as the language of commerce, diplomacy and science. Yet English is not singular; variations of English are forming every year. I once made friends with a man from Oaxaca, Mexico. He spoke almost no English and I no Spanish, but we were simpatico in spirit and wanted to communicate. So we blended vocabulary and found ways to talk not just about gardening, but our plans for retirement, becoming a father and watching vampire movies. I not only made a friend, but the world changed for me. He told me excitedly about Mexico’s rise and fall in the World Cup of football/soccer and I came to see a global community forming that I had not known before. We created our own language and the world changed. It is always good to know another language. I am pleased how many people know other languages in this congregation and how many of us make friends with people from other lands. Our participation in the Partner Church program is one way we reach across language barriers to create community.

Of course, in learning to communicate in other languages there are many difficulties. We fear being misunderstood or appearing a fool. For instance, in the comic strip *Pickles* a young woman comes up to an elderly woman working on a computer. “You’re new to Facebook, aren’t you mom?” She asks, and her mom replies, “Yes. I think it’s fun trying new things.” The daughter says, “I noticed that you replied to your sister’s post about her cat dying.” And the mom affirms, “Yes, poor pearl, I wanted to let her know how sorry I am for her loss.” However her daughter looks concerned, “That’s nice, but I thought putting LOL at the end was rather harsh.” “Harsh? What do you mean?” asks the mom. “You do know that LOL means laugh out loud, don’t you?” the daughter explains. Her mom protests “It doesn’t mean lots of love?” There are problems with learning a new language.

But the issue is bigger than the practical issues of learning another language. As it points out in my edition of the Interpreters Bible:

“ ‘They do not speak our language’ is a saying that implies something much more critical than difference in syntax and vocabulary; it implies a sense of alienation in thought, a gulf cut across the whole area of instinctive feelings on which men and nations need to stand on common ground... [the ground of] international cooperation which prevents epidemic diseases and promotes universal health, encourages economic development and unhindered trade, and builds up gradually the mutual confidence which is the only effective antidote to war.”

We need more than interpreters; we need a desire to understand. We need to seek true understanding, deep communication of thought and feeling. The secular vision of a unified world has come apart in recent decades. Often, in political and religious debates, I marvel that the people speaking may, both, be using English, but will not understand each other at all. At Babel they all spoke one language and accomplished great things. If we are to improve on that story we must learn to speak each other's languages. If Babel is the place where God confused our languages and scattered us, then to go beyond Babel is to understand each other across our language differences and begin working together again. That is the only way we will not be scattered over the face of the earth but part of one global community.

This is especially important for us in this church where we allow all sorts of different religious languages. I don't simply mean that some pray in Sanskrit while others use Hebrew. I mean that some use the word God, and even pray to a personal God, while others find that word a distraction from communicating what is true. For some the word dharma evokes a powerful idea, and the experience of personal transformation, while for others that word is utterly alien and meaningless. Freedom from creeds and limits on thought is merely a first stepping stone to greater understanding. We give each individual ultimate authority in our individual religious lives, but our faith is not merely for the individual, it is for the individual in community, specifically the free individual in covenantal community. How do we create religious community of many languages? There is an old Italian proverb 'to translate is to destroy.' If so, if we are to go beyond Babel, then we must learn to speak multiple religious languages as well as to interpret from one spirit language to another.

As the 20th century began Unitarians and Universalists in America used the language of Christianity uniformly. However, the language of the Christian faith has many dialects. The words "Jesus Christ" mean something different to a Unitarian than to a Catholic and something else altogether to a Pentecostal Preacher. In the late 20th century Christian words faded and many UU congregations drew on the language of secular Humanism. It was the language of commerce and science. But we found that it failed to speak to the full complexity of the human heart and mind. The language of human progress failed to evoke for many the mystery and power of the spirit. Ancient Sanskrit is powerful for Hindu chants, and Pali for Buddhist ritual, Ancient Hebrew is good for Jewish theology,

Ancient Latin for Catholic theology, Medieval Arabic may be the language of God for many millions, but no single language can evoke Truth absolute for every soul. In each relationship we must learn each other's language. We must learn to speak other languages, and to communicate beyond the Babel of our diversity.

Karen Armstrong said, in the introduction to her book, *Muhammad*, "Despite temporary alliances, it is clear that the West has largely lost the confidence of people in the Islamic world. A breakdown in communications is never the fault of one party and if the West is to regain the sympathy and respect that it once enjoyed in the Muslim world it must examine its own role in the Middle East and consider its own difficulties vis-a vis Islam". She goes on to note that there is always a minority that tries "to correct the errors of their contemporaries and rise above received opinion. It is surely this more tolerant, compassionate and courageous tradition that we should seek to encourage now."

Loving people requires more than warm feelings. Sometimes love is hard work, and peacemaking requires struggle and turmoil of a sort. The path of a peacemaker can be hard. If the separated people of the world are to cooperate we cannot go back to the days of one language. We must learn to communicate and cooperate across and beyond our differences. For if we do, the power and possibilities we will uncover will be powerful, overwhelming and beautiful; even Numinous. At least, as we saw in Antonio Sacre's story of "The Barking Mouse," Learning another language can be a tool for making the world safer and more peaceful than it was before.

Come, let us build for ourselves not a single city or tower but a beloved net of community so that we not be scattered over the face of the whole earth, but connected as one people on one earth. For this is the promise in the story: If as one people, speaking and understanding many languages, we learn to work together, then nothing we plan to do will be impossible for us!