

"Pentecost"
(Acts 2:1-21)
June 5, 2022

"One people, one language ... this is only their first step ... what will they come with next – they'll stop at nothing!" These were the worries of God expressed in the story of "The Tower of Babel." (Gen 11: 1-9) Is it the work of God that we shouldn't understand each other, or the opposite?

Some commentators insist that Pentecost overturns the Tower of Babel story - Babel reminds people that God scattered a united human race speaking a single language, while the Holy Spirit brings agreement and harmony between people and groups despite the fact that they spoke different languages. Do you agree?

It's hard to believe that language could play such an essential role in the unification and segregation of people, as expressed in the Babel story. Cain and Abel were siblings, belonged to the same family, and had the same mother tongue. However, speaking the same language didn't bring them to a meeting of minds. (Gen 4: 8) Language is a method of human communication that can be conveyed by speech, writing, drawing, or even gesture. Its function is still up to the ones who use it. While some use it to make truthful statements, some deceive others. It's the contents delivered that unite or segregate. So, is the building of a tower itself scary, or is the people's intention?

It's not the first time the bible described God acting against human beings. For example, God intended to destroy all human beings because they were too good. (Gen 6:1-8) This was the background of Noah's story. Even though a human being is strong, it must not be more potent than God. This was the background of Jacob's hip problem. (Gen 32: 24-30) There're many stories in the bible like that, which sounded okay from the author's perspective but not so from ours. The author

of the tower of Babel tried to explain how God diverted people from achieving their arrogantly superior goal, i.e., reaching the heavens. Confusing their language was an over-simplification, but it fits the author's presupposition that all human beings originated from common ancestors and spoke the same language. The story illustrated how God stopped human beings from overstepping their limitations. But it'll be a misunderstanding if we deduce that God wanted miscommunication between human beings or that human beings can understand each other was bad.

The Pentecost experience reveals that people having the same faith could still be different. The language they spoke was just an example of the differences. It's God's will to bridge these barriers in order to unite all human beings. Misunderstanding is, however, a universal experience. And we can find many examples in today's scripture.

"And at this sound, the crowd gathered." Some might think it's the rushing sound of a violent wind, but it's not. Instead, it's the sound of the people, the result of speaking different languages at the same time when the Holy Spirit was upon them. Why was the crowd bewildered if they spoke Greek or Aramaic? No, they were not speaking Greek or Aramaic. The Holy Spirit empowered them to speak different dialects that amazed those who came from all over the world to Jerusalem to celebrate Pentecost. They were either Jews or proselytes living far away from Israel. They were fluent in Greek, and some even spoke Aramaic. However, they didn't expect the apostles would speak the local dialects they learned when they grew up.

Some Christians nowadays get it wrong, and believe that speaking in tongues is a superior spiritual experience. Paul said, "I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you. But in the church, I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue." (1 Cor

14: 18-19) It's God's will that we communicate and serve each other. But there's no need for us to go to another extreme, to stop doing something that is only meaningful to ourselves. When I was a teacher in Hong Kong, one of the laboratory technicians introduced me to playing badminton, which requires at least two people for a game. I was so into it that I questioned how people could play any game without a partner. Once, I asked a teacher who liked to play squash alone. I asked her, "How do you manage it?" Her reply was simple. She said she spent most of her time with students and other people. She believed she could survive without them for an hour when she was alone. It was inspiring to me. There are a lot of things that I can do by myself. I could choose to be alone or to feel by myself. Just make it spiritually enriching. Do you practice any of these exercises? It could be composing poetries, painting, playing music, reading, or meditating. You can do it with others, or just by yourself.

Some might think lighting a candle, walking a labyrinth, reading the bible, and praying for others is weird, but maybe that's what spiritual exercise should look like. Peter said, "Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning." We can also face criticism with humor like him. Find the time and space to connect with nature, God, and the Spirit with no hindrance.

It had been 50 days since the Romans put Jesus on the cross. So many things happened during that period that people couldn't figure out exactly what to believe, the empty tomb, the appearance of the resurrected Jesus, Jesus' ascension, you name it. All these hinted to the believers back then, including us right now, to find the deeper meaning behind death. Is it just an endpoint of our lives? Do we see its shadow that influences our lives before they end? Jesus' resurrection redefined its implication, but we need time and patience to understand it bit by bit.

To all of us, when we think of "death," we think of funerals and cemeteries. Jesus' disciples and apostles were the same. After the sabbath they found Jesus a tomb and prepared to bury him properly with spices and perfumes. (Lk 23:50-56) People anticipated that the story of Jesus would end there. "Death" has the power like a black hole. It talks us out of our lives, especially when we are sick, weak, or old. It takes joy, enthusiasm, courage, and freedom for the future away from us.

"Fear" is one of death's forms. It murmurs to us constantly, "Be afraid and be very afraid. Do not run risks, do not rock the boat, do not take any chances, do not venture." The Spirit works, however, against it. It might sound like the rush of violent wind or a noise composed of different languages, but it brings hope and surprises. It breathes on people and transforms them.

"Fostering a sense of scarcity of resources" is another form of the power of death. "There's not enough food, water, land, and grace. The solutions are to limit, ration, and close the borders." However, the Spirit endorses the faithful to cross the borders and brings resources for sharing.

The power of death works by "greed," too. "I want more, and I need more. I don't think I have enough. I think the others are trying to get ours, and we must protect against that." The Spirit, however, creates opportunities to eliminate misunderstanding so that we know how much we can hold on to and a better understanding of our situations and others.

Final but not least, the power of death justifies violence. The Roman Empire had the cross and the beasts, and the modern society has electric chairs and nuclear weapons. Yet, no matter what they are, they serve the same function, to close off the future, to shut down the world in despair. The Spirit, however, points us to the

last days when God will do justice and mercy. Then, there'll be no more sexism, ageism, ableism, and other -ism(s).

The Holy Spirit is an ongoing gift of renewal. The Spirit birthed the Christian community in Act 2. It will accompany us as it blows us slowly away from a community suffering from fear, scarcity mindset, greed, and violence into a loving one. Amen.