

Sermon Preached
By Doug King
May 30, 2004
Pentecost
Genesis 11:1-9, Acts 2:1-11

Our calendar has thrown us a curveball this Sunday. Liturgically today is Pentecost, the arrival of the Holy Spirit and the birth of the Church, a high holy day in our year. But our secular calendar and the extra seating available around us, tells us that it is also Memorial Day weekend. So if I can only find a way to explicate the implications of the creation of the church and throw in some barbecuing tips we will be all set. First for you barbecue buffs, I would suggest a dry rub for your steaks of chili powder, garlic, cumin, a hint of sugar, and Worcestershire sauce.

Now let's talk about the church side of the equation. As I was looking at the assigned texts for this Sunday I was struck by the initial incongruity of the texts from Genesis and Acts. The account of the Tower of Babel in Genesis is all about scattering as the tower comes tumbling down and the people are divided by different languages. While the story of Pentecost in the book of Acts brings the people together from across the world to hear the word of God each in their own tongue. So why does God scatter in one time and gather in another? Wouldn't it just be easier to keep the people together at the Tower of Babel in the first place and avoid the thousands of years of division and confusion? It all appears rather arbitrary.

But a closer reading of the text washes away any notion of God's actions being arbitrary. God does not bring down the Tower of Babel because towers are bad or because working together is bad. God brings the tower down because of the motivations behind the building of the tower. Listen to the reason for the building, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth."

The people are building the tower out of fear. They are placing brick upon brick reaching higher and higher into the sky in an effort to preserve and protect themselves.

Somehow they believe that if the tower is tall enough they will be immune to the disintegrating effects of this life. You know I am right there with them. We all just want to protect who we are and what we have. Worried about crime, we buy houses in gated communities and install expensive burglar alarms. Worried about disease, we pump our bodies full of vitamins and supplements. Worried about financial security, we invest every penny we can in complex portfolios. Worried about terrorism we wiretap as many phones as possible here at home and send our troops overseas in an effort to stamp out trouble before trouble comes again to us.

Every day we are building towers, believing that if we raise them up high enough we can protect ourselves from the danger and disintegration of this world. And the difficult and unflinching reality of it all is there is not a tower tall enough to protect us from the danger and disintegration of the world. We are frail and we are mortal and we are unfortunately destined to taste broken-ness in one form or another. We really have no choice in the matter.

The choice we do have is how we respond to this painful reality. This is where the story of Pentecost informs us. We need to remember in the midst of the speaking in tongues hoopla what got the disciples to this place. Pentecost occurs only after they have watched their friend, and mentor, and whom they learn to be their God, die upon a cross. Pentecost occurs only after they realize that they must carry on with their lives while the Christ has ascended to heaven leaving them behind. Pentecost occurs only after they decide not to give into their fears and thus band together to be faithful in the midst of the inevitable challenges of this life. Pentecost occurs only after the disciples commit to loving and serving a God that does not promise them any semblance of guarantees for easy glory filled lives.

Pentecost, the birth of the church, is about the arrival of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit makes no promises to remove all danger and disintegration from this world. The Spirit promises to love us deeply, and bring us together, and journey with us whatever

may come. The Spirit promises to experience the sufferings of this world beside us. The Spirit promises that God will guide us through it all to a place of healing and wholeness.

So what does this mean for our lives? Is there any good news to be found before we are welcomed into God's eternal arms? I believe the place to start answering that question is by being very intentional about understanding the motivations behind the ways in which we choose to live. If we believe that our actions, whatever they may be, can guarantee certain outcomes our arrogance is deceiving us. We do not, we cannot stand alone, impervious and untouchable. There is no 401K big enough, no diet healthy enough, no army big enough to grant us immortality. If our lives are all about tower building, we can find ourselves pointlessly chasing after what cannot be reached like some gerbil on a treadmill.

But if we recognize with humility our vulnerability and dependence, oddly enough we can find a great freedom. We can discover a freedom that welcomes into our lives the need for God and a space for God in our hearts. It is this space that the Holy Spirit is anxiously seeking to fill within us that we may face the dangers and disintegration of this world not with denial but with a trust that we never need be alone through any part of it all.

On this Memorial Day weekend when we honor and remember those that have fallen in battle and those who continue to fall in battle, these thoughts are poignant. Life is far too fragile. And there is no way to control the world or even the small corner of the world, which are our individual lives. But on this day of Pentecost let us stand together and be thankful that we have been called to share this journey with each other. Let us listen for the voice of the Spirit speaking to each of us in a language which is quite our own. Let us remember the Son who sent the Spirit, Jesus the Christ, the one who joined in every challenge of our mortality, and the one who is leading us to immortality, not by means of tall towers but by loving us through all that life brings and beyond. Amen.