

5-16-09 Lebanon Valley College Baccalaureate Service sermon –  
Beyond Babel Genesis 11:1-9, Acts 2:1-12, Psalm 67, Revelation 7:9-12

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What an awesome day this is for each of you! Parents, siblings, friends, and faculty watch proudly as each of you graduates are recognized for the level of expertise and skill you have accomplished in your chosen field of study. You have mastered a “*language*,” so to speak – whether it be chemical formulas, developmental objectives, musical notations, literary genre, Deutsche Grammatik (that was a part of my major in German), or some other specialized set of theories or therapies. You know the comradery of having worked hard to become comfortable with the vocabulary and processes of your field. And now you graduate because of this “*language*” you have begun to master, as we launch you into a world of many such languages, urging you to do something useful with what you have learned here.

So I decided to ponder with you what our Scriptures say about the many languages of our world – stretching it a bit perhaps by thinking in terms of the “*languages*” of your fields of study.

There was a time, our first text today says, when “*the whole world had one language and a common speech.*” People got along so well together that they decided to build a city, with a tower that would reach to the heavens. We usually think that the tower is the point of the story of Babel, but if you read closely, you’ll discover that the real issue in God’s eyes is *not* the tower (which God had to “*come down*” to be able to see); rather, the issue is that the people are building a city. They are not fulfilling God’s command to fill the earth and subdue it. Instead, they are building this city, so as to “*not be scattered over the face of the whole earth.*” But God wants them to be scattered, so the Lord confuses their language “*so that they will not understand each other.*” “*And they stopped building the city.*” No mention of the tower. Just the city. “*They stopped building the city.*”

In some ways that is like what is happening for some of you today. You might wish you could stay here on this campus. But as much as the faculty has enjoyed you, and as much as your parents might have liked for you to always be with them, we know that is not God’s purpose for your lives. You are to be launched out beyond this campus, to make use of the knowledge and skills you have gained.

Genesis 11 tells us that the confusion of differing languages was God's way of scattering the people over the face of the whole earth. People went apart from each other because they no longer understood each other. The *babel* had a good purpose insofar as it filled the earth with a rich diversity of many languages and cultures and peoples. However, this *babel* also caused problems as each group protected itself from others. Enmities arose from the rivalries of tribalistic zeal, poisoned by pride and prejudice, making peoples act irrationally and inhumanely towards all who were "not like them." Time and again God's prophets called people to turn from their selfish and violent ways in order to bring justice, peace, and mercy into a world filled with *babel*.

The Scripture we read from Acts chapter 2 is the New Testament answer to this Old Testament story about *babel*. Centuries later, after Jesus has lived and died and risen again, the Holy Spirit – the very presence of the living God – comes upon his disciples, and suddenly, in the midst of a gathering of people from many languages and cultures, the Spirit makes it possible for each person present to understand what the disciples are declaring about the wonders of God – and they each understand in their own native language.

Note well that God does not resolve the problems of human confusions and violence by reinstating one language for everyone. Rather, God makes use of all of the languages to move those people beyond the confusion of their *babel*. It is this mighty Act of God, which the vision of Revelation 7 declares will eventually result in an amazing Kingdom of God where *"a great multitude ... from every nation, tribe, people and language, [will stand] before the throne and in front of the Lamb ... [crying] out in a loud voice: 'Salvation belongs to our God!'"*

Oh, that this vision might call forth new ways of living together in our lifetime! The world into which we are launching you graduates is still filled with harsh *babel* sounds – confusing voices, contradicting each other, sometimes violently-militant in their convictions. My prayer is that God will help you find ways to bridge the barriers of language and culture so that you can take part in God's work – to move Creation beyond *babel*.

Based on these scripture passages, I want to challenge you to work at two tasks to help move this world beyond the confusions of *babel*. The two tasks sound simple, but they will require a new spirit in most of us. The first task is this: to share the

knowledge and skills of your particular profession in ways that will help other people understand you, each in his or her own language.

As a pastor, I spend a fair amount of time with families who are going through medical tests. They are often unnerved by the unfamiliar terminology they hear. God bless doctors who find ways to explain complex medical situations to patients and families of patients in simple, plain, forthright words. That can make all the difference in helping patients to have a calm spirit, and to be able to trust those who care for them.

The same can be said of successful consultants, teachers, and workplace mentors. Their students and clients will learn most readily when they are able to connect new knowledge with what they already know – in their own languages. That’s why Jesus told parables – simple stories about common, ordinary, everyday life experiences, and then unfolded from those everyday stories deep, spiritual understandings about grace, justice, and compassion.

How will *you* talk with people in your career? You have a choice, I say. Either you can speak your profession’s language in such a way that people are mystified and consider you a genius (or perhaps a nuisance), or you can find ways to help people understand and benefit from what you have learned in this place.

The first task for moving beyond babel’s confusions is to work at helping people understand clearly what you are trying to say.

The second task is to try to understand what others are saying to you. That sounds like common sense, but it is not an easy thing to immerse yourself in someone else’s “*language*” and try to make sense of their thoughts and emotions. Books get sold to try to help us – books like *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*. The difficulty is that the stereotypes which such books present are far too general. You simply cannot figure a person out according to what someone says that “women” or “men” or “Germans” or “mathematicians” are like. Individuals are far too unique and complex. You have to work hard to understand what makes them act the way they do. It takes lots of listening and compassion.

I am just completing a term of serving as the Moderator for my denomination. One of my most important responsibilities was to listen to interest groups, individuals, or

congregations who are deeply concerned about various issues. I expect you can guess what some of the issues have been: homosexuality – and how best to protest the church’s position or how to prevent such protests; whether other religions are valid or not; the sanctity of human life – both the unborn and the young adults on the battlefield. On these and other issues, people want to get other people to hear them and accept what they have to say, but most often, they aren’t very interested in trying understand what their opponents have to say. They are pretty well-settled on their side of the cultural divide.

I think that’s why some people found it difficult to understand why I would take part in a conversation of religious leaders with the President of Iran at the Chapel for the United Nations in New York. The saber-rattling comments by the President of Iran were well-documented by the national press. Some people would distance themselves as much as they could from anyone who talked like that. We, however, wanted to invite the President of Iran – in the context of respectful conversation – to step away from his bellicose statements. And we needed to express concern for volunteer service workers from our churches who work with poor people who happen to live under his regime. We did not make much progress, I’m afraid, but the conversations continue. We tried to speak clearly and we tried to listen well, asking God to help us bridge the chasm between our cultures and our languages.

I met a young man when I visited our churches In Nigeria, West Africa, who was also struggling to confront the Muslim-Christian babel of our generation. Jesse Shinggu was forced to go home from the university because of an on-campus riot between Muslim and Christian students. He was bitter. *“It’s time to quit turning the other cheek and trying to live in peace,”* he raged as talked with me quietly. I listened prayerfully to his agony. And he listened respectfully to my counsel to try to continue following the peacemaking way of Jesus. We were both struggling to listen for God’s voice in the midst of earnestly sharing our conflicting perspectives.

Do you know what that is like – to listen for God’s voice in the midst of differing perspectives?

That’s what Acts 2 says took place as the curse of babel was overcome – when the Holy Spirit spoke through the disciples in so many languages at once: each person heard the wonders of God declared – how God conquers the powers of sin and death through the resurrection of Jesus and sets people free to live a new life in the

power of the Holy Spirit. It is breath-taking to hear God's voice promising new hope, new life, new possibilities beyond the confusions of babel!

We Brethren heard that voice, I believe, when we gathered in Schwarzenau, Germany, this past summer. We were celebrating the 300<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the first baptisms in the Eder River that launched our Brethren movement. And as we recounted the persecutions that caused the first Brethren to flee to Holland and then to the colony of Pennsylvania, we were taken off guard by a speech by Ingo Stucke, representing the Evangelische Kirche von Westfalen, the Protestant Church for that region (Reformed), as he offered an official apology to the Brethren gathered from around the world, an official apology from his church for how their ancestors had treated our spiritual ancestors in the early 1700's. It was a new beginning for our relationship with the state church of Germany. Herr Stucke invited us to enter into dialogue together – to affirm what we hold in common and to talk together about the things on which we differ, holding each other in loving fellowship.

I wonder what bridges God will call *you* to build across the barriers of languages and cultures you will face. How will you, in the "*language*" of your profession, declare the wonders of God's redeeming grace and Life-giving power? It might be directly, in the care you give to your patients or students, helping them have a new lease on life. It might be indirectly, in the relationships you develop with your coworkers and clients, demonstrating integrity and respect, providing honest and honorable work. Or maybe you will have other opportunities – to host international guests or to connect with companies or seminars in other cultures or to work through your church for mutual understandings among the sub-cultures of our own land.

In every way you can, celebrate the many languages and perspectives which God has set in motion in this world and all the ways we can learn from each other to discover the fullness of life. Do not be afraid to share what you know. Be eager to learn from others. Bridge the barriers of language and culture to declare the wonders of God to as much of God's Creation as you can, through all the means of expression God will help you develop. And God *will* launch this fragmented creation beyond babel into the fullness of Life.