BABEL AND BIBLE

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My text this morning is from the prophet Joel, in the Book of Acts: "Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy."

My context is Wellesley College, circa September 4, 1976, when 600 new students, or more, buzzed in, like so many honey bees descending on a new hive.

I.

By September 5 and 6, somehow, the word had got around. Half or more of our new students showed up at those student-to-student orientation meetings focusing on good study skills. Three hundred students, who scarcely had time to unpack their trunks, size up their roommates, and lose their mealtickets -- three hundred new students found their way to the sessions on study skills.

Many motives may have prompted those 300 individuals to seek out those sessions: simple prudence, profound anxiety, or whatever. I don't want to deal with the question of motives. You know that, surely, better than I.

But I do think that this is a good time and a good place to raise some larger questions, which have a tendency to get swept aside for some of us in the rush to get things in order for the beginning of the new academic year. The question of why people want to develop good study skills -- as I guess all of us want to do -- really only makes sense in a context of questions about purpose.

Why are you here at Wellesley? Why am I here? What do we want to do with our lives, this year and beyond? What kind of world would we like to live in if we could?

The point, then, is not that wanting to develop good study skills is somehow peculiar, or anything like that. The point is the simple truth, which I'm sure you'll agree with, that as life consists in more than possessions, so it consists in more than study skills. But what is this "more?"

It's to this "more," to this larger and deeper matrix of our experience, that I want to address myself this morning, in light of our text. This brings me to my theme, Babel and Bible.

II

According to the narrative in the Book of Acts, "Devout Jews from every nation under heaven" were witnesses, in some measure, of the events of Pentecost. As they stood there, amazed and perplexed, by the words of power they heard the followers of Jesus speaking in their own languages, they asked: what does this mean?

Behind this question lay a millenium or more of Hebraic tradition, more than a thousand years of guarding the traditions of Israel, yet being open to the God of Israel doing new things. So these devout Jews neither accepted everything they saw that first Pentecost, without question, nor did they immediately turn away in disgust or disbelief. Their tradition had taught them both to be cautious and to be venturesome. For: maybe God was doing a new thing, fufilling the ancient promises God had made to Israel, in a new way. Maybe.

One way of summarizing the questions that must have been in their minds as they encountered the compelling yet troublesome behavior of the followers of Jesus is to think in terms of Babel and the Bible.

Were these ecstatic Pentecost events so much Babel? As some of the onlookers said right away, as a matter of fact: those followers of the crucified Jesus were surely drunk with new wine. Their behavior appeared quite strange, even deranged perhaps.

On the other hand, were these ecstatic Pentecost events, the tongues of fire and all the rest, representative of the hopes of the Bible? Were they signs, somehow, of new deeds and new revelations by the God of Israel, who had promised to make a new covenant with all flesh? This is what the writer of Acts, St. Luke, surely believed.

So this morning I want to suggest two points of reference, as all of us are already beginning to get ourselves embroiled in the busi-ness of class schedules, reading lists, departmental budgets, lecture preparations, committee meetings and scores of other academic details.

What does all this mean? The first point of reference is the noise of the Babel. The second point of reference is the voice of the Bible.

III

The noise of Babel can refer in a parochial sense to any religious community. There surely has been a lot of Babel in the history of the Church, for example. So some of those first century Jews who witnessed the Pentecost events were definitely not wrong, in principle, in wondering whether this Jesus movement was not merely so much Babel.

Jesus himself had said, did he not, that "Not everyone who says ... 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven ..."(Mt. 7:21)

But Babel as we read about it in Genesis is a universal image. It doesn't refer just to religious communities, but to all manifestations of human life. Babel is the universal story, according to Genesis, of human diversity without community. Babel is the account of what happens to the human orchestra when there's no score, when there's no composer, no music, no director, just individuals doing their own thing, on their own instruments. Babel is the story of noise -- the story of universal human dissonance, yes, even violence.

As I was paging through the Sunday Times not too long ago, my eye caught an ad in the business section. In big black letters it said: "Devote the rest of your life to you." Why not?

"You can't get rich today pushing paper for someone else," the ad explained. "Why give somebody else your life?," it asked. "Devote it to you. Your family. To the things you want while you're still young enough to enjoy them."

Devote the rest of your life to you. That's the noise of Babel. "Come let us make a name for ourselves," said the people as they gathered the building blocks for the Tower of Babel. We're not told how they decorated their bricks and mortar. I suppose the people could have used ivory. I suppose they could have built themselves an ivory tower. I suppose some fanatical critic of academia might want to suggest that the Tower of Babel was the first university. But that would be fanatical. After all, the story is a universal story; it's not out to get academics, in particular; any more than it's out to get members of religious communities, in particular.

"Come let us make a name for ourselves," the people said, "Come, let us devote the rest of our lives to us."

Is that what you want to do? Is that why you're here at Wellesley, to devote the rest of your life to you? Is that the kind of world you want to live in, where all the members of the human orchestra are out to make a name for themselves, without any composer, any score, any director? Probably not. That's not what you're here for. But it's something to ponder.

In the meantime, recall that the noise of Babel covers a multitude of sins. If the main point of your life is to devote the rest of your life to you, why not trample on the poor along the way? Why not just forget about the hungry around the planet, and glut your body with still more protein?

Closer to the classroom, if your only goal in life is the making of a name for yourself or otherwise to devote the rest of your life to you, why not cheat on your take-home hourly? Why not foul up somebody else's lab experiment so you'll be higher on the curve and have a better chance of getting into med school? Why not?

Listen to the dissonance of Babel. See the violence of Babel--toward the poor, toward friends, even toward yourself. Some people, I guess, do get so wrapped up in devoting the rest of their lives to them that they punish their bodies with inordinate demands for work, allowing themselves perhaps momentary spasms of emotional relief. Some people, likewise, do get so wrapped up in the enterprise of making a name for themselves that they punish their souls incredibly with loneliness and depression, as they seek to keep ahead of the pack, to be number one, as Vince Lombardi and Richard Nixon used to urge us to do.

So: gain the world, perhaps, and lose yourself. That's the dissonance, that's the violence of Babel.

IV

The second point of reference I want to suggest to you this morning, is the voice of the Bible.

I hasten to state that I don't believe the Bible gives us any instant answers. Sometimes when you carry the Bible around day after day the only thing you get is a tired arm. Indeed, to change the image, beware of those people who try to market the Bible; as if it were some kind of TV dinner that you could just pop into your oven and have it take away all your hunger.

If the culinary image is apt at all, the Bible's much more of a gourmet dinner. You have to think about it. You have to struggle with it -- at least I do. I mean; however much I may think of myself as Julia Childs when I cook my gourmet meals, I almost always overcook something or forget to put in the salt, or something like that. Still, sometimes it can turn out beautiful! That's the possibility that I want to commend to you now.

And I propose to do that by taking a huge interpretive risk, I'm going to try to shortcut through a whole maze of questions, and summarize the whole Bible in one word. Are you ready? From a New Testament perspective, the word has to be <u>love</u>. So faith, hope, love abide," says St. Paul, "these three; but the greatest of these is love." (I Corinthians 13:13)

So the tradition of the Church has consistently identified the Holy Spirit, poured out on all the faithful, beginning at Pentecost, with love. So when you read that "God is love," you also can read according to the tradition, that the Spirit of God is the power of love. The voice of the Bible, then, in this capsule way of putting it, utters one word: love.

V

Then the question is, of course, -- what is this thing called love? And here I propose to charge ahead and tackle this question, too. To begin with, let me suggest that love is a beautiful high, more beautiful -- because it's more transforming and more enduring -- than any other high you can possibly imagine.

Two young children were recently heard discussing their mother's iminent return after a ten day absence, as they waited at the airport. "Mommy will love to see us," said the five year old. "And we'll love to see her," said the six year old.

Then they embardked on a lengthy discussion of how much they'd love their mother when they saw her. "I'll love her 200,200 ,200,200 million high," said the one. "I'll love her 200,200 ,200 ,200 billion high," said the other.

Neither seemed to be bothered by the fact that they hadn't agreed on a quantitative unit. I mean, if love is 200, 200, 200, billion high, 200,200 ,200,200 billion of what?

But they soon tired of the numbers game. After a short pause, the five year old said: "I love her as high as beautiful." The six year old said: "I love her as high as love -- and beyond."

So I invite you, this morning, to be a child for a moment and think of this beautiful high called love.

You'll notice the difference from Babel right away. Life doesn't consist in devoting the rest of your life to you; life consists in devoting the rest of your life to others. That's the beautiful high of love. The dissonance of life becomes a symphony of self-giving.

Last year a group of common folk in New York city joined together and took the name of the Green Guerillas. After renting a plot of ground from the City for a dollar, the Green Guerillas and some 100 neighbors from the community cleared the lot of 900 carts of rubble, including the ruins of an old building. Meanwhile, friends trucked in soil and fertilizer. By the end of summer, Spanish children had grown sugar cane next to the Chinese community's bambo shoots. The Black Muslims had hoed and planted next to the Alcoholic rehab group. There was even a sizeable plot which everyone worked and the food was free for anyone who needed it.

That was surely a little Pentecost. That surely was an outpouring of the Spirit of love. Diversity surely, but sustained and supported by a loving community. Indidvidual identity, surely, but not devoting the rest of its life to itself or seeking to make a name for itself. Rather: serving one another and making provision, as well, for others in need.

This, I believe, is what the voice of the Bible calls us to, in a world dominated so often by the noise of Babel: we're called to the beautiful high of love for one another and for all flesh. We're called, as it were, to be Love Guerillas in a hungry world.

God is ready. God is ready to pour out the Spirit of Love on every one of us, however small, however insignificant, however nameless we may perceive ourselves as being. The day is at hand: "Your sons and your daughters shall prophecy," says the prophet Joel.

VI

In conclusion, I want to try to apply what I've said thus far to the whole question of wanting to develop good study skills and to some related issues that that concern symbolizes.

Note immediately that the Bible is not anti-intellectual. "Finally," says St. Paul, "...whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things." (Phil. 4:8).

God creates us with minds, according to the Bible. We're meant to think, to quest for the truth, and to develop the discipline to do it. The voice of the Bible doesn't call us to be ignorant, but to know. And to know you have to think and to think you have to learn and to learn you have to struggle. And that means probably that you need study skills of one kind or another.

But all this isn't an end in itself. All this, accordingto the Bible, is subordinate to the greater good of building a loving community. Although truth may be the highest value of the academy, those who hear and respond to the voice of the Bible will always seek the truth and do the truth in love. As the letter to the Ephesians suggests, we are called to "speak the truth in love." (Eph. 4:15)

So, from a biblical perspective, those who work on developing good study skills should do so, not so they can devote the rest their life to themselves, but so they can more fully enjoy and more fully serve the community of love that God has promised for all flesh.

VII

Then let me mention Bible study. Some of you, I suspect, are fed up, right to your necks, with people who have told you to study the Bible all your lives. Others find Bible study quite congenial. Still others may never have really thought of applying their study skills to the Bible.

But Bible study, done in the right way, in a community of caring, open-minded people, can be precisely that practical extra that most of us need to keep ourselves from being totally overcome by the pressures of class schedules, exams, papers, lectures, committee meetings, and so on. Bible study, in the context of a loving community, might be just the thing you need to keep your bearings, to keep the larger and deeper questions of your life in view, to hear again and again, in many wondrous ways, the voice of the Bible calling you and all of us to love God and our neighbors as ourselves.

Another version of the same practical strategy is to find a worshipping community, such as the one which I think we have going for us here, Sunday after Sunday, where the voice of the Bible is lifted up and celebrated. A radical idea: Bring your study skills to Church! Bring your mind with you to Church! Don't somehow feel that you have to check these at the door as you come in. Your mind is welcome, so we may better understand the Word of God together.

VIII

But whatever practical strategy you may wish to settle on this year, I commend to you now the voice of the Bible and the power of God's Spirit, who is love. I invite you to taste the beautiful highs of love. I invite you, in a word, not just to develop the skills you need to study, but to allow God to fill you with the Spirit, who is love.

I invite you to become a Love Guerilla in the midst of this academic city.