BABEL AND PENTECOST

--a sermon preached by
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"Now the whole earth had one language and few words. And as men migrated from the east.... they said to one another, 'Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.'"(Genesis 11:1-4)

"And they were amazed and wondered saying, 'Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language? ...we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God.'"(Acts 2:7-11)

Babel and Pentecost. The two are similar in some respects. Both have to do with the unity of mankind. Both have to do with many languages. Both refer to a widespread human confusion. Yet they are as different as a sidewalk grey and a brilliant red.

Originally the legend of the tower at Babel surely had something to do with the observable phenomenon of many languages in the world. This is how the story may have arisen. But in its present setting it's much more telling than that. You will recall that it comes after the story of the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden. In a sense it is a commentary on that sequence of events.

We get all sentimental about the story of Adam and Eve. And neither our religious-education literature nor our religious art encourages us to feel otherwise. You are probably aware of the conversation between Adam and Even as they stood outside the Garden. Adam said to Eve, "Well, dear, I guess we live in a time of transition." ...That's the pedestrian level which our general understanding of that story has reached. We have domesticated Adam and Eve. We have let their story become a cute little tale of a man and a woman way back then.

Actually, as you know, the name Adam means "man," and the name "Eve" means "mother of the living." So the writer of the story is suggesting, quite clearly, that the story of Adam and Eve is your story and my story. More than that, he was fully aware of the agony and the disruption which were in his world. He was undoubtedly a realist of the first order. He knew that the sons of men can easily kill their brothers. The wars of our century would have been no surprise to him. Nor would he have been seriously startled by South African tyranny or Harlem slums. Beginning with the Adam and Eve story, then, he writes about the <u>brother-killing family of man</u>. He wants to say that the name of <u>Cain</u> is no less universal than that of the parents.

And the world of Cain, as the writer depicts it, is a world of <u>uniformity</u>. The earth has one language and few words. You might say that the earth is a large tribe with a drab face. Kings kill their brothers. Underlings of kings do the same. At the bottom of the social scale, the serf is likely to turn against his brother, too, when he has occasion. Nor should the priesthood be excluded, for it also

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is involved in the viciousness of human infighting. We see, therefore, a vast grey uniformity of fratricide.

Presupposing this realistic kind of picture, the writer then goes on to rework the legend of the tower at Babel. He suggests that the uniformity of Cain's world has a particular result. It leads to a frantic kind of anxiety. Men look around and see themselves falling short of their humanity, the writer seems to be saying, and they therefore look compulsively for a way to hold their life together. Hence the whole race enters into a building project. "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens," men say. And what is the rationale for this great program? Men want to make a name for themselves. They want to be somebody important in the greater scheme of things. Disintegrating into a grey uniformity, they want to stand out. They don't want to lose themselves altogether. Let us make a name for ourselves.

Is this our story too? Living with the story of Cain, do we also look for a way out by building a name for ourselves? Simply to raise the question is already to begin to answer it. It was the Mayor of Detroit, as I recall, who said that our generation may be known as the generation which advanced to the moon while standing kneww-deep in garbage.

It's not news to observe that we are spending billions for rockets, and peanuts for poor people. It's not news, but it's true. Listen to an average day of speeches in the U. S. Congress, and you may very easily sum it up this way: "Come let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth."

Nor is it comforting to hear Marshall McLuhan telling us that we are already living in one vast tribal culture, thanks to modern technology. McLuhan's whole argument, it seems, is that we live in an age of one language and few words. And as we know from the case of Nazi Germany, sometimes tribalism can go mad in its quest to build a name for itself.

Perhaps we should mention our Churches here, too. The major Protestant denominations in this country are presently engaged in sweeping discussions called the Consultation on Christian Unity. This may sound like heresy, but I wonder what the motivation here actually is. In a time when Christianity is clearly on the defensive, I wonder how much of our ecumenical spirit is informed by the spirit of Babel. How much are we saying, "Come let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the earth"?

A certain Protestant congregation recently invited a Roman Catholic Bishop to speak on Christian Unity. That congregation was quite pleased with itself, for it made the papers. Yet, according to reports I've received, it did not seem displeased when the news broke that a large company in that area -- where a number of its members worked -- had backed out on its promise to integrate its white collar workers. That kind of situation ought to give us pause in our enthusiasm for ecumenism. We don't want to be known as the generation which advanced to the heights of ecumenism while standing knee-deep in the garbage of injustice.

I might add that our situation generally is even more serious than that envisioned by the writer of the Babel legend. For, the result of our striving to make a name for ourselves might well be not the mere scattering of people everywhere. It might be, as we well know, the destruction of people everywhere. Not just the grey evils of individual or national fratricide, but even more the black death of universal thermonuclear homicide.

That's the story of Babel, or at least part of it. And much of it, I guess, is our story too. Uncomfortably our story.

So we come to the saga of Pentecost. This is the saga of a new beginning for all of us. This new beginning means, in the first place, that the source of our life is no longer ourselves and our name, but God and his name. Thus the message of the first Pentecost was the proclamation of the "mighty works of God."

In a poem that schoolboys sometimes have to read, Tennyson once told about a flower plucked from the soil. He muses, --

> I hold you here, root and all, in my hand,
> Little flower -- but if I could understand
> What you are, root and all, and all in all,
> I should know what God and man is.

Pentecost offers the kind of understanding Tennyson apparently was seeking. You might say that the men experiencing the event of Pentecost were flowers planted anew in the Garden of God. They put down roots into the Ground from which they originally came. Once again, God became the source of their lives. The first disciples found their unity and their life, then, not in human uniformity, but by being planted again in the Ground of God's Spirit, the creative Spirit who is with the primeval waters of this universe.(cf. Gen. 1:2)

This, in turn, left them open to accept and to affirm the reality of human diversity. With Pentecost, they didn't all speak the same language. They spoke their own language, yet it was understood by all. Pertinent here, , , the philosopher Max Scheler has made some interesting remarks concerning the variagated leaves of the jungle plants in the Amazon region. He writes, "The rich variety of forms in the leafy parts of plants suggests.... that the principle at the unknown roots of life may act in accordance with fanciful play, regulated by an aesthetic order." Taking a cue from this we might say that human life, when it is right, when it is nourished by God's Spirit, has a great variety of colors. The diversity of God's Garden is beautiful to behold. There is one Spirit, but many gifts. (cf. Ephesians 4:4-11)

Yet Pentecost means more than this. The Spirit of God not only vindicates human diversity, it also reestablishes the bonds of human unity broken through mankind's fratricide and mankind's frantic quest for its own name. For those nourished by the Spirit, therefore, fratricide comes to an end. And love of brother takes its place. For, the Spirit is the vitality of God's love surging through the soil in which we have our roots.

Here, then, the observation of Max Scheler has to be supplemented

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by the imagry of a John Bunyon. "Christians," Bunyon writes, "are like the several flowers in the garden, that have upon each of them the dew of heaven, which, being shaken by the wind, they let fall their dew at each other's roots, whereby they are jointly nourished, and become nourishers of each other."

So in the same chapter where we read about the one Spirit and the many gifts, we also read: "Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God.... Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, with all malice, and be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you." (Ephesians 4:30-32) This is a big order for each of us. Building bonds of love with our neighbors. Striking down bitterness and malice. Working to overcome the vast drabness of human fratricide -- with the concentrated brightness of Divine Love.

I take it that all this means, then, that we should not look askance at either political or ecclesiastical diversity as such, but that we should use such diversity in service of the Divine Love, -- which is the Spirit welling up into our hearts. In a word, blossom to your heart's content. Grow your own colors. But at the same time use that diversity to nourish your brother, and allow him to nourish your. That is the new beginning God gives to you and to me, and to men everywhere, on the Day of Pentecost.