

5/19/13 -- Pentecost Sunday

“Reverse Speech” © -- Rev. Seth Jones

Scripture Passages: Genesis 11:1-10; Acts 2:1-21

I discovered rock and roll in the 4th grade when, in an afternoon I can only describe as magical, my friend Gregg Loomis played the double album KISS Alive 2 for me. Then he put on Toys in the Attic by Aerosmith. Then Led Zeppelin. A few weeks later, he introduced me to Jimi Hendrix. In the space of a few weeks, I became completely infatuated with rock and roll, screaming electric guitars and body-shaking bass guitars. That love of music has lasted ever since that afternoon in Gregg’s living room. Music changed me. More specifically, rock and roll changed me, and I am grateful for it.

As I grew up and entered high school, my musical tastes expanded to include avante-garde rock, heavy metal and I also discovered David Bowie. I used music to soundtrack my life and I used music to mark my mood and to change it as well. I still do that, but not as deliberately as I did back in high school and college. In college, I discovered punk rock. I had a friend who had spent his senior year in high school in Madrid, Spain. He came back with Clash albums, and again, I found a new way to define my life according to music. In college, I was also a roadie for the resident college punk rock band. I spent a lot of time in basements in Minneapolis and St. Paul, most of it without earplugs in.

Imagine my horror, then, when Tipper Gore came out and talked about all the horrible lyrics in music. She wanted to ban the records with bad lyrics. She, thank God, had to settle for warning labels on record albums. One of the records she was concerned about was from my favorite band at the time, Led Zeppelin. Tipper was concerned about the influence of reverse speech on the record. If you play the record backwards, she said, there were secret messages about Satan and evil and things. Her whole project seemed profoundly misguided to me, in part because she was completely tone deaf to the behavior of teenagers.

See, when I heard Tipper Gore’s concerns, I did what all my friends did: we wrote down the album she was concerned about and went out and bought it. I can guarantee that every album she talked about surged in sales among teens. The reverse speech concern seemed the craziest of all, however. There are only 26 letters in the English alphabet. Of those, there are only 5 vowels and sometimes 6 when “y” is functioning as a vowel. English is very limited in its capacity to make sounds and it is completely dependent on vowels, but it is also very flexible and expansive, which is why the vocabulary in English is one of the largest of any language family in the history of languages, with the possible exception of ancient Greek. So if you play any sentence backwards upon being spoken, it is very likely it will sound like other words in the language. So of course, if you play a record backwards, you will hear patterns that sound like words forward. There is no intentionality there, except when it is done intentionally and that is very easy to find, like when the Beatles put “Paul is Dead” in reverse at the end of the White Album.

Language is a strange thing. When I was learning Hebrew, I was struck by the construction of words. Hebrew is very much like English in how the language constructs words. Thinking about the origins of language is sort of a rabbit hole, however. The more one considers where words come from or why languages develop the way they do, you go back and back and back into proto-languages and into hazy histories that have only the barest possibilities of having been true. A person ends up in mythologies and ancient stories that tell even more

ancient stories.

Which brings us to this most ancient story about where language comes from. A few centuries after the flood, there was still only one language throughout all the earth. “One language and the same words” is how our translation reads. The people talk amongst themselves, using these same words and they hear only themselves. The language, it seems, became an echo chamber for the people of the earth. All they heard were themselves, not God. So they became consumed with pride and the desire to be like God. They decided to build a tower, a ziggurat, which would “make a name for themselves”. Having a name for oneself means what it means today, but it also carried more weight back in those ancient days. Knowing the true name of another person or of a god gave you the power to call upon the spirit of that person or God. The people of Shinar felt they had to “make a name for themselves” so that their unity would continue, “otherwise we will be scattered across the earth.”

God sees problems with this, since it is an act which replaces God with the self, replaces God’s will with human will. God knows that his creation is a powerful and imaginative thing - he is, after all, the one who created them in the first place. So God reverses their speech and their unity. He gives them many languages and scatters them across the earth. Like Adam and Eve at the gates of Eden, Adam and Eve, in an act of selfishness and pride, now are faced with a great reversal. Their perfect home in Eden is now a forbidden place. For the people of the earth who shared one language, now a great reversal happens. They can no longer understand one another.

As I said before, language is a strange thing. I can study body language and non-verbal cues my entire life. I can say a thousand things about you and groups of people. But the fact remains that we can only know about another person or a group of people if we know what they say about themselves. All the body language in the world and non-verbal cues are useless if I can’t also have words that make clear what it is you or they need. What we say and how we say it is always of the highest importance.

God’s act at the tower of Babel, which comes from an ancient Hebrew word meaning *to confuse*, sounds like a curse, and it is, but it is also the beginning of a blessing. When everyone shares the same language, when all the same words are used, we don’t really need to listen anymore. Think about the lingo you may have developed when you worked in a particular place. Theology students develop a lingo that is unintelligible to the outside world. “But when you say ‘salvific atonement’ you are referring to the narrow view of Calvin’s substitutionary view and thereby negate a more ‘universal salvation’ more in line with Brueggemann or von Balthasar, which has Vatican 2 overtones to it”, just as an example. Computer people have a lingo that is completely insulating: “But when you tried to load your OS onto an external HD, you forgot to install an MBR so your dual-boot of Ubuntu and Win7 would work together. That is why your machine won’t start now.” I am sure your work in your past had its own lingo. Lingo creates an echo chamber which means you share one language and the same words. As a group, you really don’t need to listen to anyone. You can build towers to heaven with no interference from other people or groups who may need you to listen to them.

What we say and how we say it matters. We cannot really know what is happening if we at once do not say something and also do not listen to what is being said. The Holy Spirit, I think, does not tolerate well situations where people are speaking the same words and using the same lingo with one another. God, it appears, has a bias against insulated groups of people. It may take generations and generations; it may take years and years; it may take a few days; or it may take only moments, but God will find a way to break us out of our single language and same words so that we have to go out, scattered into the world, in order to speak and listen, so that we can learn to communicate God’s love and promise to others and also hear the possibilities of that love and

promise in others.

The disciples, after Jesus' resurrection and ascension, are very close to becoming a small group with one language and the same words. They are holed up in a room in Jerusalem, waiting. They don't know what they are waiting for. When what they are waiting for arrives, they don't know what to do. When they do it, they don't know what to say. And when they say it, they don't know what will happen. They don't need to, because the Holy Spirit depends on our not-knowing in order for us to communicate with others.

The Holy Spirit's arrival, like a great wind or like tongues of fire, changes everything. Great reversals occur when the Holy Spirit is present. Isolated people are thrown out into the crowd. Groups who use the same language are sent out into the world to speak to people with other languages. People who speak other languages begin to understand foreign languages. Those who spoke all the time listen all the time. Those who listened, like the disciples listening for something but never sure what it might be, are now called to speak about what they have heard.

In Pentecost, in the coming of the Holy Spirit, the fracturing which God brought about by scattering the people to the edges of the earth and giving them different tongues is reversed. But it is not reversed in the way you and I would do it. We would go back to the way things were. We would make the language the same for everyone. We would want to use the same words to describe what was happening to us. We would want to go back to the echo chamber.

But the Holy Spirit is a little like the teenagers I mentioned way back at the beginning. If you tell her to do one thing, or worse, don't do something, she will go out and do it, but not in the way you thought. We want to use the same language, but for the disciples, the Holy Spirit lets everyone keep the language they have. The reversal happens in their understanding. They are able to hear another language as if it were their own. Isn't this a good way to describe listening well to another person. When someone tells you, "I felt like you heard me", they mean you listened well, you understood.

On the day of Pentecost, it is like everyone's universal translator is turned on. I speak my language, but you understand it in yours. The reversal the Holy Spirit causes is not like a reversal you and I might want because we often don't want what the Holy Spirit wants. We want to stay in our upper room and develop our lingo, our personal codes that we exchange with one another. But the Holy Spirit wants us out there, talking with people who don't use our language. We want to know what happens next, what the future of the church will look like and many want it to look like it did when they were younger, or their parents told them about what it was like, back when the words were the same and everyone spoke the same language. But the Holy Spirit wants us to go out where the words are different and the languages are different and to speak in a way that asks people to listen. And then the Holy Spirit tells us to stay out there, not to develop a new language that conforms to a single way of speaking, but to listen to the other languages that are already out there. We listen, they speak. We speak, they listen. We both listen and understanding comes, each hearing one another's language in their own tongue.

For some, they will think the words you speak are from drinking too much too early in the morning. For others, they will think your words carry secret messages that are meant to undermine the youth. For still others, they will be amazed and perplexed. They will want to hear more. Some of the words heard and spoken will be scary. Some of the words heard and spoken will be transcendent. Some of the words heard and spoken will fill you with the possibility of a God who wants love and salvation for all his Creation. And in our listening and speaking, while surrounded with the heat of the Holy Spirit among us, we will call on the name of God rather than

the name of ourselves speaking into an echo chamber where we only hear ourselves.

On Pentecost Sunday, let's all of us let God reverse our speech, our words and our language so we can listen closely for the presence of the Holy Spirit among us. Let us speak to one another about what the Spirit has shown us and given us. Let us hear new languages in our own tongue. Who knows what might happen when the Spirit is moving in and through us? Amen.