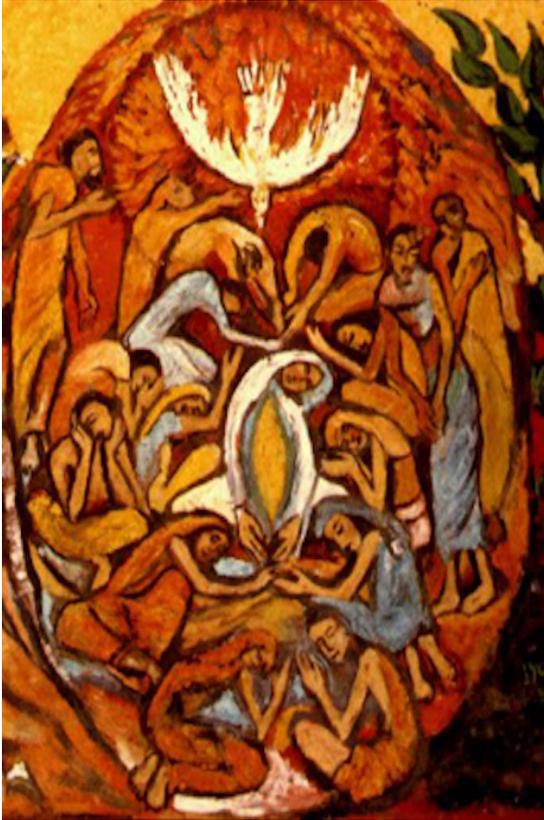


ST. JOHN'S AT DIOCESAN CENTER
IGLESIA EPISCOPAL DE SAN JUAN

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BABEL TRANSFORMED

The Rev. Andrew F. Kline

Text of a Sermon preached on Pentecost Sunday

May 23, 2021

ACTS 2:1-21 | PSALM 104:25-35, 37

ROMANS 8:22-27 | JOHN 15:26-27; 16:4B-15

We humans are divided creatures. A fruitful way to look at us is to take apart our brains. We have discovered that there is a right hemisphere and a left hemisphere that are responsible for very different functions.

The right side of the brain has most connections to the limbic system, part hidden in the middle of our heads that is responsible for memory and emotion. When I open the Bible and start reading it with my confirmation classes, our bright and inquisitive middle schoolers, I try to get them to see where the stories come from. The first eleven chapters are stories that tell us about where our stories come from, they predate history. They are pure memory and emotion, they show order coming out of chaos, and some of the deepest sources of the chaos, the pain, the trauma.

We often call them origin stories. They speak most directly to our emotional center. They explain, but they do not explain. They are the stories handed down to us from generation to generation, they are apart of our collective memory. Why our great great grandfather left his village. Why he came to this country. Why he farmed, or raised sheep.

Or take those first stories of the Bible, why even though God created the world, saved the world from our evil human desires and his own disappointment with us by getting us through a flood and gifting us a rainbow, there is finally, this memory of a time when we all spoke one language. But, it seems, we didn't have many words.

It is easy to miss. The story of the tower of Babel starts out this way. The people moved east to the plain of Shinar. They knew how to bake bricks. They spoke one language, but they didn't have many words. So there was not much conversation. Someone, shall we say, had a half baked idea, and with survival in mind, said let's build a tower to the sky because that will make it impossible for God and man to push us around, that will make us untouchable and famous. It appears, of course, that God had another idea.

Scripture says "God confused their languages and scattered us across the face of the earth." But can we say more about the source of that confusion?

We humans are divided creatures. A fruitful way to look at us is to take apart our brains. We have discovered that there is a right hemisphere and a left hemisphere that are responsible for very different functions.

For most of us, language, is generated on the left side of the brain, which has most connections to the neocortex, and is responsible for

logic, motor functions and our ability to focus on what is right in front of us. Take away our left hemisphere – and yes we can survive – but we find we can't form a sentence, and our attention is all over the place, not able to settle on an object. But, it turns out, we can swear, cuss like a sailor.

Now, take away the opposite side, right side of our brain, we find we can carry on a conversation just fine, we can focus, but that we get fixated on things, we can't see anything more than three feet in front of us. And we can't access our emotions. Without access to the right hemisphere of our brain, it seems we can't even say damn or hell when someone drops a rock on our toe. To swear is to speak an emotional language, one more like music, more directly connected to our limbic system, the part of us that evolved to size up a situation emotionally, to in an instant, scan the whole room and decide whether to freeze, to flee, or to fight.

The usual explanation is that we have a divided brain because it these two specializations, these two attitudes, have kept us alive. On the one hand, we understand each other in detail, step by step, by command and control. Thinking slowly, deliberately, reasoning with one another. On the other, we grasp the world in an instant, thinking fast, taking in the whole picture, giving priority to our emotions.

Obviously, these two separate sources of information do not always agree. There are so many ways we can misunderstand each other. There are so many ways we cannot even come close to speaking each other's language. And there are so many parts of us that need to, that cry out, to be understood. We need words, often new words, to name each reality.

Language is at the center of the miracle of being human, not just left brain language, but right brain language. No two languages are alike. There is no substitute for a thousand words in a thousand languages. Certain things cannot be translated. Certain things only come into being in specific languages. We will always need more words to proclaim the wonders of God and the world he created.

Are there new truths, deeper truths, that come from integrating how we think, both fast and slow, emotionally and rationally, of celebrating diversity that suddenly reveals a greater unity?

How would you, O wise ones, who in the beginning knew how to bake bricks, and now can split atoms and splice DNA, bring unity out of all this chaos and division?

It seems we need a miracle of understanding, a miracle that unites all the different kinds of languages in our world.

Of all the things that can be said about the miracle that occurred on the day of Pentecost, I would like to lift up the fact that the Risen and Ascended Christ brought believers together, and threw a little block party. By the sound of a breaking wind, and the appearance of tongues of fire, God awakened both sides of our brains, God made himself understood to both sides of their brains, and directed us to get us all on the same page.

Simply put, our mission as Christians begins by reversing in our hearts the curse of fake unity, of superficial understanding. The surprise of Pentecost is the promise that we can understand each other, that we don't need to pretend we can control history, to worry that diversity and difference is a threat, or insist that God be put in a box and tamed by the rules of religion.

No, on the day of Pentecost, the disciples seemed drunk, with the power of God's healing and reconciling and forgiving love. From that day forward, the disciples, and we, may understand one another as we allow ourselves to be moved and directed and integrated by the Holy Spirit.

Today hear these words of Jesus as literal instruction for the next step in your spiritual journey. We, who swear so easily, can we use all sides of the brain that God gave us. Can we receive something new, and look for something new in each other. Jesus showed us sympathy, empathy at the moment of greatest revelation.

"I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you."

Happy Pentecost!