

From Babel to Pentecost

Genesis 11: 1-9; Acts 2: 1-21

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E-mails, FAXES, text messages, instant messaging (IMing) . . . pagers, cell phones, computers, PDAs that allow us to zap messages to colleagues across the table at a meeting.

Communication is urgently important to us. We want it fast . . . we want it immediate . . . we want it efficient . . . we want it at our fingertips . . . we want it now.

With all the technology available—and I don't know the half of it—it would seem that human beings have mastered the art of communication. We can send and receive information faster than ever before—it's phenomenal.

It has been said by some that we live in an age where there are no walls because of the ease of communication. Young people today think nothing of studying abroad in France, visiting an Internet café and having instant messaging capability with a friend studying abroad in Brazil. It would seem that we have mastered communication.

Yet, we don't have to look further than our own families in many cases to see that human beings still struggle to communicate—to really communicate—despite the vast amount of communication technology at our fingertips.

There are the not-so-serious breakdowns in communication that merely annoy or frustrate or anger us. Despite the vast usage of cell phones, pagers, voice mails, you name up, we still end up going to the wrong place to meet up for dinner, or both parents end up at the ball practice at the wrong field, or we get confused about what time we said we'd do the hand-off with the kids to make it to a meeting.

We get numerous sports magazines at our house. I try to read a little bit in the magazines so that I might be somewhat conversant about the interests of my boys. I'm frequently proud that I've remembered some hockey player's name only to be told: "Mom, he plays basketball." There's that "communication thing . . . again."

I especially like the last page of *Sports Illustrated*. Rick Reilly writes a satirical piece for each magazine called "The Life of Reilly." I believe I shared this account with my Sunday School class sometime back. Reilly

talks about a father and son (I'm never sure if he's really talking about himself—my kids would know that)—for some reason, which I can't remember, they find themselves sitting in a beautiful outdoor setting. The son asks “Dad, why are we here?” Dad, seeing an opportunity for “communication” and relationship building with his son waxes poetic about the meaning of life. He goes on for quite a long time. After a while his son looks at him and says: “Dad, I was really just wondering why we're sitting here when we told Mom we'd pick her up an hour ago.”

Communication breakdowns are not always humorous, though. For often when communication breaks down, relationships break down. Probably all of us here today have someone or have had someone in our life from whom we are estranged or with whom we have significant relational tensions due to a series of communication breakdowns. We know the pain, the anger, the confusion and the brokenness.

Martin Luther King Jr. once said: “Men hate each other because they fear each other because they don't know each other. They don't know each other because they can't communicate with each other because they are separated from each other.”

The story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis gives us some insights to **communication breakdowns**. The story of the **Day of Pentecost** gives us an amazing glimpse of **communication breakthroughs**.

In Genesis we read of a people who are trying to **make a name for themselves** by building a city and a tower with its top in the heavens. They all had the same language and presumably could converse together to decide who would go to the Home Depot for more supplies and who would make the coffee and donut runs. A people of one language, they seemingly had no barriers to communication—no barriers to doing anything . . . or so they thought.

God caused the communication breakdown that occurred at Pentecost, the story says. God sees that the people are trying to “make a name for themselves.”

Some have said that in this culture people “built temple towers whose summit was believed to be the gateway to heaven, the realm of the gods.” In a way it seems unusual that God would get so upset about such an enterprise. But this building project and the attitudes behind it represented human pride, the human quest for control of our own lives (now and for eternity) and independence from God. This building project was about human power. It was about humans trying to make a name for themselves instead of receiving the “name” God had already given them. It was about idolatry.

Do any of these things sound familiar when you think of the serious, heart-breaking communication breakdowns you have had or are having in your life? Pride, control, power, making a name for yourself. While I don't believe God causes our communication breakdowns today, I believe God allows the natural consequences of pride, control, power, attempts to make a name for ourselves at the expense of others and idolatry to do what they will inevitably do in our relationships. As at Babel, the consequences are chaos, confusion and division in our relationships. We human beings are scattered. We are disconnected from our brothers and sisters close to home and far away not because we speak different languages or have technical problems with our vast communication networks but because of pride, control, power and attempts to make a name for ourselves.

I told you last week of my friend who had been estranged from her brother for about 10 years. Their communication breakdown did not occur because of some failure in technology. They could have communicated with each other in a matter of seconds through e-mail or phone contact or text messaging or whatever. They didn't communicate because of pride, control, power, and "worship" of things and money, which had been divided unfairly at the death of one of their parents (namely idolatry).

On this day of Pentecost we also read of a **communication breakthrough** for God's people, which has changed the course of human history. On this day we see a reversal of what happened at the Tower of Babel. Christ's disciples have witnessed his death, they have encountered him after his resurrection and they have seen him ascend into heaven. They have waited as he commanded them to wait for the coming Holy Spirit.

And oh how the Holy Spirit came upon them. People speaking different languages understood each other—they heard each other speaking of "God's deeds of power." For those who were open the most amazing communication breakthrough of all times occurred—without modern technology.

Instead of pride, there was humility among those who waited for the Holy Spirit. Instead of control, there was surrender, waiting, praying among Christ's followers. Instead of reliance on human power, the disciples (after all they had seen and experienced) were now ready to rely on and receive God's power. The results were far different from Babel where chaos, confusion and division reigned. At Pentecost, God gave clarity, understanding, unity and amazing power to those who would receive the Holy Spirit. At Pentecost the disciples were not trying to make a name for themselves; rather they called upon the name of Jesus—the one who is the name above all names. At Pentecost the disciples were not trying to make a

name for themselves because they had already been given a name—children of God.

Have you ever experienced a communication breakthrough with someone else? What did it take? Humility? Forgiveness? Surrender of your need for control? Giving up at least some of our need for power? Reliance on God's power? Remembering your name and the other person's name as "child of God"? Release of attempts to make a name for yourself? Letting go of idolatry—the worship of things or money? Even today, these seem to be the avenues for communication breakthroughs in our relationships.

In the children's movie "The Quest for Camelot," there is a two-headed dragon. The heads of the dragon are always bickering, fighting, competing and complaining. Both feel rotten, because they cannot fly and they can't breathe fire. It takes both of them cooperating with their two heads to make their single body fly and breathe fire.

Each one blames the other for the problems. Each one longs to make a name for himself apart from the other. Pride, control and power characterize their relationship. There is no healthy communication between them.

But one day they are faced with a challenge. The young woman Kayley has been captured and needs help. Their friend Garrett says to the two headed dragon: The reason you can't fly or breathe fire is because you can't agree—you've had a communication breakdown because of pride, control and power plays.

Out of love for Kayley, the two dragon heads set aside their individual pride, control and power. They forget about making a name for themselves. They surrender to love. And when they do, they fly, they breathe fire and in an act of love save Kayley and free Camelot.

When the Holy Spirit came upon the followers of Jesus at Pentecost they were empowered to work together in love for all people. The Spirit breathed fire into a fledgling group of disciples and made of them a church which would change the world. Many have been ignited by that fire and have served in love to change the world. When the disciples called upon the name of Jesus, when the disciples came to a place of humility, surrender and reliance upon God's power, when the disciples embraced the name they had been given—children of God—they received the Spirit. And with that the Spirit gave understanding instead of confusion; clarity instead of chaos; unity instead of division. The church breathed the fire of God's love and power. The church soared to new heights of service and love.

Could it happen to us, too? Could it happen in our broken relationships? Can our communication breakdowns be healed by the power of the Holy Spirit when we relinquish control, surrender power and confess our pride? Can the church of Jesus Christ, in like manner, be ignited by the flames of the Holy Spirit and soar to new heights of love and service when we also relinquish control, surrender power, confess our pride, call upon the name of Jesus and remember that we and those we are called to love are children of God? I believe so. May it be so with us.