

Day of Pentecost: June 4, 2017
“Sticks and Stones vs. Words”

Grace, mercy and peace be unto you from God, our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Language is a beautiful thing. It is a tool, a gift given by God, which just like any other tool can be used properly or improperly. In the right hands with the right purpose, language is absolutely stunning. Sadly, it can also be used as a vehicle to voice some of the worst in our human nature, and can be quite an ugly monstrosity. Ask anyone who has ever been bullied, and they will more than likely tell you sticks and stones don't seem so bad. There is a very intimate quality to language. We spend much time speaking and training our children on which words are good, which are bad, which are helpful, and this begins from the time children are in the womb. There are certain words that carry much importance in our homes, certain words we don't want our kids to hear, and certain words we teach them to use every single day.

This experience helps to reinforce our knowledge that language, the ability to speak, as given by God, is more than just a technical facility, more than just a procedural capability, more than just a biological mechanism. Human beings with the ability to use language as a means of communication, distinguishes mankind from all other creatures. It gives us the ability to express ourselves as a personality. God Himself created man and endowed him with speech, which carried the result of God becoming a listening Creator. Of course, there is a qualitative difference that remains between God and man. God created man in His image and along with it came the reality of being responsible. God and man together in a communication for the good of all creation.

Truth be told, the whole story of Scripture is the very story of language. ***“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”***¹ The Word spoke all things into existence. The whole of the cosmos, begins when God speaks.² As God finishes His work of creation, He employs man with the gift of speech and man first uses this gift in service to God; and the first record of man using language is to name every living creature.³

¹ John 1:1

² Genesis 1:3

³ Genesis 2:19

This ability of language in man is used for many things. Not only does Adam use language to convey God's Word to His wife, but language is quickly used for deception in Genesis 3. Man used this gift of God, and rather than being responsible, he became irresponsible. By misuse of this Divine gift, the image of God, in man, was now corrupted and all of creation was affected. When God first spoke to man, He stressed man's sense of responsibility, but after the Fall, Adam is stressed in irresponsibility.

As we get to our text in Genesis 11, we see it is still a story all about language. People continued to use God's great gift of words in tragic ways. God had directed them to spread over the whole earth. But they had other plans, "***And they said to one another, 'Come, let us brick bricks, and fire fires.' And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. Then they said, '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 dispersed over the face of the whole earth.'***"⁴

There was nothing wrong with wanting to build a tower. There is nothing wrong with wanting to develop and cultivate a city or community. The problem lies in the why they wanted to build. They wanted to make a name for themselves and not be scattered. They wanted it to be done for their own glory through their own designs and ideas. These men and women at Babel clearly violated God's command to fill the earth and to call upon His name.⁵

One only has to listen to the news for a few moments to see the great power of language even today. I don't mean to sound like President Trump, but many news outlets are no longer concerned with reporting events in unbiased fashion, and instead many twist, paint and handpick only certain interviewees, as to shape perception of people or events in very specific ways; this happens on all sides of the political aisle. And it is not just in the world of politics. How much damage is done in schools or workplaces because of gossip? One well-placed rumor can start an uncontrollable damaging fire. How many hide behind social media platforms, and use the internet to spread hate and incite violence?

Likewise, how much power and comfort come from a parent after an embarrassing moment in school? How important are the words of comfort spoken to a brokenhearted child? How vital are the words spoken to a 3 year old after he spills his milk on the floor?

⁴ Genesis 11:3-4; my translation

⁵ Cf. Genesis 1:28; 4:26; 9:1

It is in moments like these that we truly see the fallacy, the error, the delusion behind, “Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me.”

God knew the potential power behind the human language. And in verse 6 He cautions us. “See what man will do. With a common language centered upon man, they will devise all sorts of ways to glorify themselves. They will seek to serve and satiate themselves. They will take My Name in vain. They will use My Name for deception, cursing, swearing, and they will call upon their own names in times of trouble. Instead of Me, they will praise one another and, thanksgiving will only be directed to them.”

Brothers and sisters in Christ, how wonderful that we have been set right with God. Language was so important to God that He sent the Word Himself, to become flesh, to be born, suffer and die for our redemption. With His most powerful and Holy Word, He gave His life to buy us back. That tool was wielded perfectly and for the very purpose of defeating sin, death, hell and Satan himself, for the very purpose of securing for you an eternal redemption. ***“Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.”***⁶

In beautiful language, God enjoins His Name to water and cleanses us in Holy Baptism. In that dear forgiving flood, how fantastic for us that we have been saved through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior!⁷ Through this loving and gracious act our sins are washed away.⁸ We are rescued from the dominion of darkness and brought in the Kingdom of the Son.⁹ In Him we have redemption. ***“In Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.”***¹⁰ ***“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation.”***¹¹ As we were reminded a few weeks ago, ***“My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out***

⁶ Ephesians 5:25–27

⁷ Titus 3:5-8

⁸ Acts 22:16

⁹ Colossians 1:13-14

¹⁰ Galatians 3:26–27

¹¹ 2 Corinthians 5:17

of my hand.”¹²

The builders of Babel thought they were clever in their use of language. The text literally says, “Let us brick bricks.” That is to say, “We are not going to have just bricks, but brick bricks. Where other bricks last 5 years, ours will last 10. Our bricks will be so great that this tower will be truly something.” Babel really wanted to make a name for themselves, and to do so, they set their words against God’s.

This pride and arrogance shown by man always gets God’s attention, and thus the Lord came down to see the city and the tower. There is an astonishing statement that is filled with irony. They wanted to build a tower that would reach the heavens; and yet, it was so small that God had to leave the heights of heaven and come all the way down to inspect this tiny structure of man. Of course, God is everywhere and could see it. This is written for our instruction to not puff ourselves up, but rather, ***“Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.”***¹³

Mankind at Babel were not boastful in the Lord, and see what their punishment was. God came down and confused their language. Man talks a big game, but God’s Word always has the final answer. To confuse the languages might not seem like much of a punishment, but consider the extreme hardships that result. Common language is a very strong bond among humans and is one of the single-most important tools in harmony among men. How many divisions are created maintained when people don’t speak the same language? How many borders are maintained when people even talk past each other? How many misunderstandings occur between humans, brothers and sisters in the human race, simply based on language, words, and definitions of words? It is clear that as a result of this division of languages, hearts are disunited, customs are changed, temperaments are distorted, and endeavors are altered.

What a great blessing the Feast of Pentecost truly is! What an outstanding miracle, and thanks be to God, that Babel was not the last time God’s language came to earth. As Hebrews wonderfully summarizes, ***“At many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son.”***¹⁴

Through this Word forgiveness is proclaimed and restoration is given. And, ***“As the rain***

¹² John 10:27–29

¹³ 1 Corinthians 1:31

¹⁴ Hebrews 1:1–2

and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.”¹⁵

So through His Holy Scriptures, God’s Word is proclaimed. Through His Holy Churches, His people gather to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest; to be filled with God’s language. Through God’s holy people, His language, His very words are proclaimed in the highways and byways as His children bear witness to the reality and purpose of Jesus’ death and resurrection to the ends of the earth.

While humans use language for good purposes and bad purposes. While every Christian, Pastors included, can use words properly and improperly, and while we may not always sense the depth of the importance of the words we speak, God knows. He knows and He uses His Words for only one purpose: our eternal good. The Lord babbled Babel, He confused the city of confusion, but through the Gospel man is united. Even though different languages remain, Christ joins and unites all into one faith through the Gospel. God uses human language as a vehicle to deliver His grace, His Son, His victory over sin and death for us! We pray,

“Send us Thy Spirit, teach us truth;
 Thou Son, O set us free
 From fancied wisdom, self-sought ways,
 To make us one in Thee.

Then shall our song united rise
 To Thine eternal throne,
 Where with the Father evermore
 And Spirit Thou art one.”¹⁶ Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

¹⁵ Isaiah 55:10–11

¹⁶ LSB 569 In Adam We Have All Been One: stanzas 5-6