

**2018-06-03 SPEAKING THE SAME LANGUAGE Genesis
11:1-9 Acts 2:1-21 Fellowship Church**

“They just don’t speak the same language!”

That statement could be a summary of the world’s problems and a description of so many human situations.

It could describe -

A marriage in which the couple cannot get along.

A brief explanation of the tension between a parent and a child.

The reason the generations cannot get along.

Conflicts between races and ethnic groups.

Disagreements arising in the workplace.

Tensions that divide neighborhoods and communities.

Conflicts between nations all over the world.

The tensions that divide our own nation.

Divisions in the church that threaten its stability and mission.

It can even be true when we do not mean it literally.

We may both speak English and still not “speak the same language”.

Two groups can share the same tongue and still not “speak the same language”.

People can all sit down in the Assembly of the United Nations listening to simultaneous translations of what is being said on the floor – what someone called a modern technological version of what happened on Pentecost – and still not be able to agree on what is before the body.

This inability to “speak the same language” can lead to despair.

Many years ago I was listening to talk radio one afternoon as I drove from one visit to another.

On this Monday afternoon the talk show host was suffering an attack of the blues or was in a fit of depression.

Finally, he expressed the opinion that “the human race is doomed; we will soon be extinct; another life form will take our place, and we will soon be gone and forgotten.” He said that this was “in the stars”, “decided by fate”, and would “inevitably come to pass”.

We have been a badly divided world since before the tower of Babel.

We are a badly divided people who do not “have it all together”. Someone once suggested that in any group of eight or more people there are enough differences, disagreements, and conflicts to start World War III.

In such a divided world there are many forces at work trying to bring nations together, to get people talking to each other, and to try to help people “get it together” as persons.

Sometimes fear forces us to look for ways to bring people together.

As soon as things seemed to quiet down in Ireland and the Balkans it all seemed to come apart in Israel, the Middle East, and Africa.

And then 9-11 came to show that the threat of terror and destruction could even come to this country that had been for so long isolated from direct involvement in the conflicts of the world.

The fear of what AIDS could do to threaten the stability of Africa has led even the profit-oriented drug companies to reduce the prices for some drugs.

And that crisis has recently been duplicated in west Africa with the threat posed by the ebola virus.

As we left one millennium and entered another there was widespread fear that some epidemic, a rogue nation with a nuclear weapon, or the destruction of the environment would let loose forces that would further divide us.

All these fears are driving us to learn to “speak the same language”.

At other times, a shared problem calls people together to try to solve the problem before it overtakes us.

The problem of global warming has gathered many people to search for a way to live on the planet without destroying it.

Racism and ethnic conflicts are problems that call out for help from all the world, not just those most directly hurt by the problems.

The threat of new diseases or the reemergence of old ones drive us to work for cures and vaccines to deal with these threats.

Now terrorism has reared its ugly head and threatens to become the great problem of our time.

No one person or group can deal with these problems; it takes all of us to work on them.

To live and work together in a problem-ridden world we have to learn to “speak the same language”.

Sometimes a group or a cause can bring us together.

Every week (day) we get letters appealing to us to save a threatened species, help some suffering group, cure some disease, or save some part of the environment.

I have been appealed to on behalf of the wilderness, the Everglades, the seashore, and the rain forests.

I have been asked to help protect the manatees, sea turtles, dolphins, whales, panthers, wolves, and elephants.

We have been asked to take up the cause of the consumer, the homeless, the imprisoned, the orphaned, and the abused.

Groups and causes try to unite us to do something together.

But we all know how hard it is to speak the same language on these matters even when we speak the same tongue.

The Genesis 11 story of the tower of Babel reminds us that “speaking the same language” is an old, old problem.

In one sense, no human effort can solve these problems and bring people together no matter how hard we work. The tower of Babel story attempts to explain the roots of the problem: we cannot “speak the same language” as long as people and groups try to center life in themselves. When that happens community breaks down and division results. The Acts 2 passage describes the reversal of the tower of Babel story and the restoration of communication and community.

Peter explained how this happened by saying that God had poured out the Holy Spirit on these disciples as the Old Testament had promised and as Jesus said would happen after he was gone.

All at once they “spoke the same language”.

On Pentecost people representing all the rich variety of humanity had gathered in Jerusalem all speaking their own languages. All at once, they could understand each other.

They could understand Jesus and what had happened to and through him.

Jesus had been charged with blasphemy and sedition and was crucified on the basis of those charges.

Now they understood that this had happened according to the plan and foreknowledge of God.

Through Jesus they could now understand the language of God’s love in a way they had not been able to before.

They could understand themselves and see themselves with new eyes and new hopes.

Before Pentecost they were a fearful and discouraged band of followers, and even the resurrection had not changed that.

In their own eyes they were failures who had failed Jesus and failed God and even failed to be the people they claimed to be.

After Pentecost each of them had a very different way of seeing themselves and their failures.

They could understand each other in a new way.

This group of men, and the women who had been followers too, were very different people – fishermen, a tax collector, a zealot. It was amazing that they had been held together by Jesus, and at times there had even been tension among them when he was with them.

Now they began to hear and understand each other in a different way, and they were united by the Spirit of God.

They could understand the plan and purpose of God for them and for the whole world.

All at once they could see the whole picture, the whole design. They had a world vision of the plan of God to bring all things together in Jesus Christ.

It was as if all at once they were able to see things as Jesus had seen them.

On Pentecost the Spirit brought them together as a unified group that spoke the same language.

A few days later things had changed so much that Luke could later write that “they were of one heart and soul”.

They were together as individual disciples and as a group, and they were together with God and with all people.

In a short time they would scatter throughout the ancient world and soon they would be accused of “turning the world upside down”.

It all happened because they were able to “speak the same language” under the power of the Spirit.

It is a miracle that has been repeated many times over the centuries.

It was and is a mystery that no one can fully grasp.

Pentecost continues to draw us and fascinate us.

We can never explain it fully, but we depend on it completely.

There is a wonderful story about a little boy whose grandfather had been a sea captain.

One day they were sitting on a wharf at the seashore, and the little boy asked, "Grandfather, what is the wind?"

The old man thought for a long time, and then said, "I do not know, but I can hoist a sail."

We could say the same thing about the Holy Spirit.

We cannot understand the Spirit, and we certainly cannot control the Spirit.

But we can hoist a sail – we can open ourselves to the power, guidance, and transformation that the Spirit brings.

William Booth was a great leader in the church in England and the founder of the Salvation Army.

At the end of World War II a group of tourists was being shown the church where Booth heard the call of God to him, a call that finally led to the formation of the Salvation Army.

As guides often do, he pointed to the very spot in the church where Booth had knelt to pray when God spoke to him.

A young soldier in the group asked if it would be possible to pray at that same spot, and he was told that he could.

He knelt down and prayed this brief prayer, "O Lord, do it again!"

What better prayer for the church to pray every Pentecost and every day of the year, "O Lord, do it again!"

Only the Spirit can make it possible for us to "speak the same language" in a badly divided world.

Lord, do it again!