

## "REBUILDING THE SKYSCRAPER OF LIFE"

Date: May 20, 2007

Text: Genesis 11: 1-1, Acts 2

First an apology -- I feel somewhat guilty and I think session shares the feeling in switching the observance of Pentecost this year. The Pentecost event recorded in Acts 2 took place 50 days after Easter and is the third great holiday of the church year. This year the celebration falls on Memorial Day weekend. Some of our teenagers would not be here to be confirmed because of the long weekend plus the worship committee wanted to use next Sunday to emphasize a time of remembrance. Hence the change.

Now a question -- How many of you have seen the movie "Babel" starring Brad Pitt which was up for an Academy Award? Did you know that the title is a reference to the story read today from Genesis 11? In a way our own Tower of Babel came crashing down on 9/11/01. Now it seems like people are incapable of living together in harmony, doesn't it? I mentioned to someone that our text for today would be the story of the Tower of Babel and the immediate response was something like "Do you think we will ever get it right?"

Isn't that a question we ask every day listening to the evening news? That was exactly the question that haunted the writer or writers who told of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11. They were trying to describe the divisions that existed among people. Always the question lurked in the background, and still does, if God created the world how come there is so much chaos and violence?

Let me refresh your minds regarding the historical context for the story. Every day when the news reports from Iraq speak of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers I am reminded that the war is taking place in the cradle of western civilization and the birthplace of our faith. Archaeologists have found in that region near the ancient city of Ur where Abraham lived evidence of a temple dating back 2000 years before the birth of Christ. Clay tablets from there tell us of the building of a temple that was called a "ziggurat." The tablets declare that "the first year they molded bricks and when the second year arrived they raised "the structure with its peak pointed toward the gods in heaven. When Genesis 11 talks of people moving to "Shinar" which is another name for Babylon and seeing a huge temple there the writers may have had in mind an edifice akin to the ancient ziggurat that archaeologists discovered.

Thus, the writers of Genesis 11, which is often true in the Bible, tell a story to explain humankind's divisions based on a historical point of reference. People were building "a tower that reached unto the heavens." Originally perhaps it was meant to be a sign of human beings working together and building something to the glory of God but it became a tower that was to bring honor and prestige for the builders. It was a tower that would make them a little less than God. And in the process of trying to be like their Creator, which scripture says is the greatest sin, the world became horribly divided and chaotic. In story form it is greed and pride that creates the mess. People making a name for themselves; people building bigger and bigger complexes unto their own vanity. Does that sound at all like what is going on in our world today?

The question that brings us to church is this: it's obvious that the world has problems illustrated by the senseless and tragic killings that took place at Virginia Tech but is there any chance for restoration? Can the skyscraper be rebuilt? The story of Pentecost supplies the New Testament answer.

Pentecost, though often slighted, is held up as the third great Christian holiday standing right along side of Christmas and Easter. This fact suggests how important this event was and continues to be for the community of faith. A small band of Jesus people are gathered in an upper room, which may have been the same location as for the celebration of the Last Supper. They are discouraged and uncertain. The feeling weighs heavy in that upper room that somehow God had the last word on Easter and that Jesus still is with them but the future remains ever so cloudy. Suddenly a penetrating awareness of God's presence comes upon them. It feels as though a warm glow is burning inside of their hearts. They are inspired to go out into the streets that are packed with people in Jerusalem for the festival. These pilgrims who come from all over the Roman Empire speak as many languages as there are countries but miraculously the disciples can communicate in their native tongues.

Is there any doubt that the writer telling of this experience had Genesis 11 clearly in mind? Selfishness and greed had torn down the kingdom of God but now in Christ there was to be a second chance for rebuilding. The resurrected Christ would bring the power to enable people to move forward and not only create the church but work for a better world, a world in which all of God's people could share peaceably with one another and talk the same emotional language.

The Pentecost experience, this burning sense of Divine Presence, so inspired the early Christians that they marched across the globe. **The power to make things happen** - that may be the best way to describe the Holy Spirit, God's presence with us. The rebuilding of the structure of life may seem too daunting but Pentecost gives us hope. A community has been created with a vision and a mission; we call it the Church and the Spirit gives the Church strength, persistence and courage. Now the Pentecost experience needs to be lived out. Not a day will go by where in one way or other the subtle opportunity to get as many building blocks as you can and start building your own tower will be tempting you. Don't worry about sharing with others or what the Bible says you have to take care of yourself.

If I understand the meaning of Pentecost, which often is called the birthday of the church, it is the task of the community of faith to resist such selfish personal empire building and to help people rebuild what God originally intended. A specific challenge is given to the confirmation class, our newest members, and one that is heard loud and clear in this story. A Sunday school teacher asked her class as they were on their way to a church service, "why is it necessary to be quiet in church?" One bright little girl quickly replied, "Because people are sleeping." Now your challenge is to make sure that First Presbyterian never goes to sleep and that all the adults here will join you in this exciting task. This church, all churches, have a very important role to play if the next generation is to find a world in which people don't try to blow one another off the face of the earth and there is great concern for those who are oppressed and suffering. Together, with God's help, we can join in rebuilding that glorious skyscraper.

Remember that haunting question raised at the beginning of the sermon: "will we get it right this time?" The answer is "probably not" but our efforts are not in vain. Again and again our God has shown that out of the frailties and limitations of our lives He can build something truly significant.