

“Towers, Words, Flames, Futures”
Gen. 11:1-9, Romans 8:14-17 and Acts 2:1-13
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Debi Thomas' parents immigrated to the United States from India when she was an infant in arms. The family's native language was [Ma lay AH lam] Malayalam, one of India's twenty-two official languages. Her parents wanted her to be fluent, and so the family spoke only Malayalam at home. Thomas also grew up, she writes

“With a divided and defensive sense of identity. We (brown people) were Indian and spoke Malayalam, while *they* (white people) were American and spoke only English. As immigrants determined to make America our home, we might cross the great divide and master English, too, but the linguistic traffic would never flow from the opposite direction. After all, I had never even met an American who'd *heard* of my language—this despite the fact that 38 million people on the planet speak it.”ⁱ

One day when Thomas was nine or ten years old, her aunt and uncle called to arrange a gathering of the whole family for what they called a “special surprise.” When all thirty family members were packed into the living room, her uncle introduced a guest—a blond-haired, blue-eyed woman in her thirties, named Sarah. He explained that Sarah had spent a few childhood years in Delhi and that her family had vacationed occasionally in the South Indian state of Kerala, the same area the Thomas’s had emigrated from. “It's hard to do justice to what happened next,” says Thomas. “Suffice it to say that thirty jaws crashed to the carpet when Sarah nodded to my uncle, smiled warmly at us, and saidⁱⁱ “Hello, I'm so happy to meet all of you” [in our language]. Over the next twenty minutes—while my relatives gawked and gaped—Sarah told us her story in careful but convincing Malayalam. Those childhood trips to Kerala had fascinated her . So much so that she moved to South India after college, and immersed herself in the language and culture. “It was very hard,” Sarah admitted. “Learning the script, forming such new sounds—annoying people with my mistakes. But I'm so glad I did...I didn't realize before how limited my own perceptions were. My ideas about humor, about art, about God.

I didn't know how many things [are]
unsayable in a single language.”

It's Pentecost, the day when language ceases to be barrier
as the wind of God blows through our preconceptions
about what we can and can't say, do,
learn, become, share, or experience.

Today God's Spirit empowers every one of us
to reflect the new reality God brings into being in Jesus Christ.
Speech and listening are the key images and symbols today
of the God-granted ability to radiate
the good news of what God has done, is doing, and always will do.

Today is also Presbyterian Women Sunday
when we celebrate the work and ministry of PW,
and we are led in worship by women from the different circles,
which, since words matter a lot today,
is what individual PW groups are called.

A day when women do the leading
is not a big thing at Blacksburg Presbyterian
where women have led worship for a long time
and a woman serves as head of staff
and fills the pulpit most weeks.

But make no mistake.

We still live in world where many churches,
including some in our community,
do not permit women to preach or teach or
or hold leadership positions of *any* kind.

And we still live in a world where women
are not readily welcomed as leaders in their fields.

After all, this church did not have a woman as head of staff until 2010,
sixty years after the ordination of Margaret Towner
the first woman minister in the PCUSA.

I heard a TED talk this week by Sheryl Sandberg,
Chief Operating Officer for Facebookⁱⁱⁱ, in which she talked
about some of the barriers to women's success,
things I wish I had known a long time ago.
For one thing, women systematically underestimate their own abilities.
57 percent of men getting a first job out of college
negotiate their salaries but only seven percent of women do.
Men, says Sandburg, attribute their success to themselves.
Women attribute it to other external factors.
Ask a women how she did such a good job
and she will say "I got lucky," "someone helped me,"
or "I worked really hard."

Worst of all, success and likeability are positively correlated for men but negatively correlated for women.

In other words women in the workplace face a choice between being liked and being successful.

Sandberg based her assertion on a study done by Harvard Business School to test perceptions of men and women in the workplace.

They took the story of venture capitalist Heidi Roizen, who, in addition to pure smarts, was successful thanks to her outgoing personality and networking contacts in silicon valley.

Her story was read by two groups of students with only a single word changed:

in one version "Heidi" was changed to "Howard".

When asked for their thoughts about this successful business person, both groups found Heidi and Howard equally competent, which makes sense since their accomplishments were identical.

But the students called the nonexistent Howard "appealing," "a man anyone would like to work for," even "a captain of industry," whilst Heidi was labeled as "selfish" and "not the person you would like to work for".

The data, remember were exactly the same; gender was the only difference.

Having to chose between being good at your job and being liked is an awful choice for anyone to have to face.

The day of Pentecost strikes me as a good day for us as a church to be aware of what, not just we, but our young sons and daughters are facing, because such a situation isn't good for anyone.

And once we're aware of what our children face we can actively seek a far better future for them.

But isn't God to blame?

In our story in Genesis about the tower of Babel it's God who decides that if people are allowed to be alike and communicate fully with each other, they'll use that power to compete with God, to build towers so they can point to their own accomplishments and not have to worship anything but themselves.

So God scatters the people over the face of the earth and "confuses" their languages, creating the divisions we know today.

So it could be argued that in the biblical view divisions and barriers are God's doing?

Yet when we were studying this story together on Tuesday,

more than one person pointed out
that what God was seeking by this scattering
was diversity, difference, otherness.
There is something God knows about differences
that we human beings *need*
if our communities are going to be healthy and whole.

The biblical scholars agree.

When God intervenes in the land of Shinar
to create a world where differences are real and confusing
the world is being healed not harmed or hindered.^{iv}

Such an understanding of the rightness and the need for differences
fits what's happening right now in our country perfectly.
Right now in the United States many people
who have been speaking the same language all their lives
are no longer able to hold civil conversations with each other.

The reason, according to some researchers, is that
we live today in our own towers,
in little slices of sameness
and what has been called "personalized propaganda bubbles."

Jill Duffield of *The Presbyterian Outlook* writes well about it. Listen:

"We listen to news that reinforces our views.
We pay attention to the social media
that is an echo chamber for our beliefs.
We seek out those who speak the same language.
We build virtual cities for ourselves with those just like us
and, boy, do we feel right and righteous and powerful.
We think there are no other cities,
no other languages, no other words.
No wonder God intervenes."

On Pentecost, all our private towers come tumbling down.
There was not one language, you'll remember
The multitude of languages one would expect
in a Middle Eastern urban hub is still there.
But suddenly everyone is hearing the same words
and listening to each other.

It's windy. It's wild. It's akin to drunkenness.

Something happens that can only be described
with baffling words like tongues of fire.

"This Pentecost speech is electric,
it is two-way, a call and response,
there is a back and forth that fosters relationship and understanding."^v
Some people get it and others don't,
but there *is* a oneness.

"The oneness, the unity, is in the Word,

God's Word, the same Word, Jesus Christ,
made known through a cacophony of speech
coming from the mouths of sons and daughters,
young and old, slaves and free,
gathered together for God's sake, not their own."^{vi}

Now there is a clue we can use.

If we want the oneness, freedom and liberty of the Spirit of Pentecost
it can't be about us, it has to be about the Word.

And the Word is always, always, always
about the good of the whole community,
covenants kept that benefit of everyone, not just some.

Christ died on the cross not just for the women disciples
who stuck around, but for the ones who ran away
the ones who denied him, and the ones whose betrayals
led to his death in the first place.

Towers need to fall and bubbles need to burst
if what they are protecting is individual preferences or success.
The wind unleashed at Pentecost is for the good of all
and it contains things that are unsayable in just one language.
Every language, voice, and set of ears to hear is needed.

Jill Duffield went on in her essay this week to ask
the right question: "Where is the Spirit breaking out in our world?
Where are bubbles being burst, silos being taken down,
earthly cities offering glimpses of the heavenly one?
If you aren't sure, if you aren't hearing God's Word
being spoke in a multiplicity of languages,
if you are hearing only the same words,
then you may be in a bubble, a thick one..."
It may be time to go the other side of town,
or to a different brand of Christian congregation".

Friends, do you realize what that means?

It means in this highly polarized atmosphere that we're in,
that we've got to give the Spirit a chance.

Like taking the risk of talking to each other.
We have to talk to the family member, the workmate,
the neighbor with opposite political party sign in the yard.

We have got to talk.

And listen. To people who differ from us.

We have to listen to people without derision or despair, remembering
that the Word that unites, that frees, that gives life to us and everyone else.

That word is Jesus Christ.

We have got to trust that anywhere where we step outside of our bubble
so the Spirit of Truth will speak,

through you and to you, so that the miracle of understanding
will happen again at Pentecost and always. Amen.

ⁱ Debie Thomas, "Words on Fire," *Journey with Jesus, A Weekly Webzine For the Global Church*, online at <http://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/959-words-on-fire>

ⁱⁱ "Namaskaram, ningalay ellavarayum kandathil ennicku santhosham ondu."

ⁱⁱⁱ Sandberg is the author of *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead*, published in 2013 by Alfred Knopf.

^{iv} Based on a comment shared in class about a biblical footnote by Old Testament scholar Terrance Fretheim.

^v Dufflied *Op.Cit*, quoting

^{vi} Dufflied *Op.Cit*