

Dear Friends in Christ,

The story of the Tower of Babel tells about people who lived their lives backwards. After the waters of the Great Flood of Noah God commanded the handful of survivors to disperse and re-populate the earth. So the sons of Noah and their children's children spread out in all directions from Mount Ararat. One group, descendants of Noah's son Ham, settled to east in a broad, fertile valley between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. The people planted their crops, reaped their harvests, and life was good. Their flocks and herds grew fat. Materially, these descendants of Noah lived very well. But *spiritually*, they were already dead, for they had turned away from the worship of the true God. Scripture describes them not as children of God, but as **children of men** – children of Adam—descendants of Noah who had reverted back to the ways of the flesh, the **backward** way of sin and selfishness that had been Adam's undoing in the Fall.

**Let us build us a city, they said, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves.** They built their city, not in obedience to the sovereign God who had said "**Disperse**," but to please themselves. They built not to give God glory or to hallow his name, but to make a name for themselves – a tower that would reach to God's heaven, as a personal monument to themselves!

They executed their arrogant plan with great care and skill. The bricks for their tower were not simply sun-dried; they were kiln-fired for hardness and durability. When the construction began, the bricks were not just stacked in loose rows, one on top of another, as other later ancients would often do. No, their bricks were cemented together with asphalt. Permanence was what they were building. And as the mighty city rose from the valley floor the people watched with great pride and self-satisfaction to see their tower rising into the heavens.

God watched too! He was patient for a time, but then no more. Finally, he said **Come, let us go down!** The almighty God who fills the universe would come down from the expanse of his eternal heaven to a little speck of dust on the plain of Shinar, to a town of bricks with a tiny tower. And God's judgment was swift and sure. Up to now the people had communicated with another in a single language. It was their language of construction. But now God confused their language. The words that flowed from their mouths were mixed up. It was a real ***miracle of absolute chaos and confusion***. What came from the foreman's mouth went into the bricklayer's ear as absolute gibberish. How could anything of the project continue to move **forward** when the workers heard nothing but **backwards** talk from their supervisors?

So because of that confusion of language the people who had lived at Babel were scattered by God over the face of the earth. They multiplied in their scattered state down through the centuries, and so it comes as no surprise to us that their descendants are still with us today, in our own town, yes, sometimes even right here in the pews of our church.

How can you know them? Descendants of Babel are a proud people. Like their ancestors they are filled with a sense of their own importance. Their **backwards** motto in life is: "Me First." They constantly are saying: "I want to live **my own** life." "I only want what makes **me** happy." In modern-day Babel life is centered on self. A descendant of Babel uses his energy to build a comfortable earthly house, surrounded by luxury. If barns are too small, build bigger ones. The descendant of Babel is not a pilgrim traveling through a foreign land with eyes fixed on a distant homeland. No, life here on earth is what it is all about. "Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we're dead." If the descendant of Babel has any thought about an after-life, he is convinced he can win the favor of God in that after-life by being outwardly good in this life, by **doing** the best he can, or simply by **trying** his best.

Now maybe you're thinking "Well, he's certainly not talking about me this morning." But descendants of Babel come in different shapes and sizes, and are of all ages, and they show their true natures to different degrees. If you have ever put yourself in first

place, if you have ever ignored or disobeyed the will of your God, if you have ever bent the law, or refused to forgive, or failed to love, you too unfortunately are guilty of walking the **backwards** way of those people who lived in a city on the plain of Shinar.

If that is in any way you, I am not here to commiserate with with you. I am here to proclaim that for such people, such people that include you and me, who have walked the **backwards** way far too often – I am here to proclaim that there is hope. There is hope for you and me in that sovereign God of heaven who loves us, who has already forgiven our backwardness in Jesus Christ, and who wants to empower us for a **FORWARD** walk through life in that same Jesus Christ.

Today on the festival of Pentecost we celebrate a grand moment in the history of humanity when God brought about a dramatic change in people. It was a day that saw people transformed by the Spirit of God in such a dramatic way that now they began to know who they were, and why they were here on earth, and where they were going. They experienced to their own great delight, and to their eternal welfare, the story of life lived **FORWARD**, the way God intended it to be lived.

It all happened in a city that was filled with a confusion of language. It was the day of a major Jewish festival in Jerusalem – the day of Pentecost, the Feast of Harvest. On this day, 50 days after the Passover, the firstfruits of the wheat harvest were brought to the temple and offered in thanksgiving to God. It was a day of such moment and significance to Jewish people everywhere, scattered across the face of the earth, that the city of Jerusalem was crammed with foreigners, people who spoke in the myriad languages that were the consequence of Babel.

And on this day those foreigners assembled in Jerusalem heard to their great amazement the simple fisherman-followers of Jesus speaking in their own native languages, declaring the wonderful works of God. If you had been on the streets of Jerusalem that day, you might have thought that what you were hearing was just another babble of confusion – disciples of Jesus talking all at the same time in a host of strange sounds. But then you would

have noticed heads turning, and the ears of many nations turning, to listen, and you would have seen a crowd clustered to pay attention, because it was becoming apparent that this was not confusion at all, but a message to **backward-hearted people** spoken to turn their attention **FORWARD**.

If we can use the words of Peter spoken on that Pentecost Day and recorded in the book of Acts as an indicator of what the disciples of Jesus were saying, it was a message that Peter summarized by saying” **Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven.** Turn around. Turn away from sin. Leave your **backwards-looking** life. In Jesus Christ, and through his forgiveness of sins, that he brings, look **FORWARD**. Look forward to the heaven that he has made available for you by forgiving your sins.

Let me share an observation that isn’t immediately apparent from the story of the Tower of Babel, or even from the Pentecost gospel that we heard this morning. The observation is this: Only ten days before this day of Pentecost at the time of Jesus’ ascension, the disciples of Jesus were still asking Jesus whether or not he would soon be establishing his earthly kingdom. But when Peter concluded his Pentecost sermon with those words **Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven,** that marked a dramatic turning point for the disciples of Jesus themselves. From that day on we never again read one word about the disciples believing that the purpose of Jesus was to establish an earthly kingdom. From that day on, their total focus was **FORWARD**. From that day all on, all they would think about, and all they would talk about, was the spiritual kingdom which Jesus has established and over which he rules. Their **FORWARD-LOOKING** focus was completely upon Jesus and the heaven that he was holding out to those who would believe in him.

By the miracle of the Holy Spirit, by the miracle of faith worked through baptism, by the miracle of faith in Jesus Christ that the Holy Spirit accomplishes through the hearing of the Word of God, I am privileged this morning to be speaking to people who have been changed from **backwards-looking** people to the

**FORWORD-LOOKING** people of Jesus' kingdom. We look forward to the future heaven that he has made ours. We look forward in our present world, and in our own community and see souls with whom we want to share the news of the kingdom and of the salvation that is ours in Christ. And yes, as you see from the bulletin insert this morning, I'm speaking to a congregation of people who need to be reminded and encouraged to look **FORWORD** for the rest of this year, and beyond, to the ways in which we can personally and individually, put our material blessings to work so that we can continue to feed and nourish the souls that the Spirit of God has brought into the kingdom of Jesus in this place called St. Matthew's. Spirit of God, as you have touched our hearts with faith, touch now again our hearts with love – love for our Savior, love for his kingdom and love for the souls that you have won for him.

Amen.