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Communion Meditation:
The Very Things That Should Bring Us Together Are Tearing Us Apart

Focus: And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called
in the one body. And be thankful.—Colossians 3:15

Wisdom lies in just this: seeing what is in plain view, or in the words of Yogi Berra, “You can see
a lot just by looking.”

What sort of freak then is man! How novel, how monstrous, how chaotic, how paradoxical, how
prodigious! Judge of all things, feeble earthworm, repository of truth, sink of doubt and error,
glory and garbage of the universe!—Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*

First Scripture Lesson: Genesis 11:1-9

It's been a subject of ongoing debate: When was the internet invented? And who
invented it? 1965? 1986? 1990? British Defense scientists? The US National Science
Foundation? The English computer scientist Sir Tim Berners-Lee?

Well, today I'm going to settle that question once and for all: the answer is right here in
the Bible.

The internet was invented in the year 2242 BCE, by Nimrod, the great-grandson of
Noah. The Bible calls Nimrod “the first on earth to become a mighty one,” and he was,
in the way of mighty inventors, mighty proud of his invention.

“What we're trying to do is just make it really efficient for people to communicate, get
information and share information,” he said in 2235 BCE. And later he boasted: “[We]
Give people the power to build community and bring the world closer together.”

Now if you google those words, you'll find them attributed to Mark Zuckerberg, founder
of Facebook. No doubt Zuckerberg did say them, but whether he knew it or not, Nimrod
said them first. Of course Nimrod did not call his invention, “the internet.” Back then, it
had a different name, as you'll see in Genesis chapter 11, verses 1-9. Listen now for
God's Word.

The Tower of Babel:

Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. And as they migrated from
the east, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there.

And they said to one another, “Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly.”

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; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.”

The LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built. And the LORD said, “Look, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another’s speech.”

So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. Therefore it was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth; and from there the LORD scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.

Second Scripture Lesson: Colossians 3:12-15

Our Second Scripture Lesson provides a picture of human communication as it was meant to be and still might be. It’s from Paul’s Letter to the Colossians, chapter 3:12-15. Listen now for God’s Word to us:

As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.

Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.

Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful.

Communion Meditation

People travel all over the globe to see the world’s wonders: the Grand Canyon, the Taj Mahal, the Great Wall of China. That’s all well and good, but you really don’t need to go that far. The real wonders of the world are the everyday miracles, right in front of us, right under our noses. As the great Yogi Berra said, “you can see a lot just by looking.”

Take right now, for instance—what we’re doing here this morning—it is a wonder, nothing short of a miracle.

I have some kind of idea, call it a thought, if you like. And so the neurons in my brain fire, transmitting electrical-chemical signals across synapses that somehow create certain muscular contractions in my throat, larynx, mouth and tongue which affects the air—becoming waves—which somehow affect the auditory nerves in your ears, which somehow transmit electro-chemical signals, across synapses causing neurons in your brain to fire to somehow become sounds, words and sentences, which somehow cause you to have the same thought, the same idea—snap—just like that, or something like that, more or less.

Hufflepuff. Yes: “Hufflepuff”:

Remember Cedric. If the time should come when you have to make a choice between what is right and what is easy, Remember Cedric Diggory: a boy was good and kind and brave.

Right, that’s from the world of Harry Potter. Right there with only a single word, the slightest movement of air—“Hufflepuff”—we can not only understand one another, we can share a world—a magical world.

And it’s not just the world of Harry Potter: It’s the world of Shakespeare’s poetry, Jane Austen’s prose, Billie Holliday’s music, Abraham Lincoln’s speeches and Oscar Wilde’s aphorisms.

Our power of speech, of communication is not just some crude, rudimentary instrument with only mere survival value: “Danger there,” “Food here!” Not at all. It’s a wonder, a miracle: with it, we can make worlds and live in them together.

In comparison, the internet, like television and radio before it, like the telephone and telegraph, like writing before them all, the internet is a mere mechanical extension of our power of speech and communication that does nothing more than increase its speed and reach.

The real wonder, the real miracle, is human communication itself, although precisely because it’s so everyday, we tend to overlook the wonder and miracle of it. You can see a lot just by looking.

Which is all well and good, and would be great and wonderful . . . Except . . . except for:

Who’s on first? Yes: “Who’s on first?”

That’s what Costello asks Abbott at the beginning of their famous comedy routine about Abbott’s baseball team: “Who’s on first?”

And Abbott replies: “Yes.”

Costello: “I mean the fellow’s name.”

Abbott: "Who."
Costello: "The guy on first."
Abbott: "Who."
Costello: "The first baseman."
Abbott: "Who."
Costello: "The guy playing—"
Abbott: "Who is on first!"
Costello: "I'm asking YOU who's on first."
Abbott: "That's the man's name."
Costello: "That's who's name?"
Abbott: "Yes."
Costello: "Well, go ahead and tell me."
Abbott: "That's it."
Costello: "That's who?"
Abbott: "Yes."

And off they go, on and on and on, their confusion only increasing as the audience's laughter grows more and more uproarious. "I don't know" is the third baseman, "Why" is in left field, and "Because" is the center fielder. Language, the very thing that should enable Abbott and Costello to communicate, is precisely what's keeping them from communicating. In fact, the more they use it, the worse it gets.

Now me being me, I always want to interject myself into this routine and straighten things out with a little prof-splaining:

You see the problem is that, "who," a word normally used as an interrogative pronoun, is here functioning as a proper noun.

But you know what would happen then, don't you?

That's right: Costello would ask "*What* is an interrogative pronoun?" And I would answer, "Yes, what *is* an interrogative pronoun." And then Abbott would say: "No. What's the second baseman." And then off the three of us would go, on and on and on.

Language the very thing that should enable us to communicate is precisely what's keeping us from communicating. In fact, the more we use it, the worse it gets. The tower of Babel. The confusion of tongues.

Even when we share the same language, maybe especially when we share the same language, it seems bound to happen. H.L. Mencken once observed that America and England are two great nations divided by a . . . common language. And he was right: for goodness sake, you put your *foot* in a *boot*, NOT your spare tire.

Even when we love someone, maybe especially when we love someone . . . if you've ever had a disagreement, a fight, with someone you love—a friend, a family member, a spouse—you know what I mean: the more you try to talk about it, the worse it gets.

After a while, it seems like you're speaking different languages, living in different worlds: the Tower of Babel, the confusion of tongues.

Nowadays, it's especially evident in our public life.

We're neighbors: we share a political system, a way of governing ourselves, a representative democracy under the rule of law.

We're neighbors: we share a life and a world: our health, our well-being, our very futures are intertwined; more so than ever in light of our technological advances, we are dependent on each other.

And yet, the more we try to talk about these things—what it means to be neighbors, how our political system is supposed to work, our future together, who we are as people and as a people, what it means to be an American—the more we try to talk about these things, or anything else for that matter, the worse it gets: the more it seems that we're speaking different languages, living in separate worlds.

Especially on the internet, particularly on social media. When Nimrod (and Mark Zuckerberg after him) said, “[WE] Give people the power to build community and bring the world closer together,” they told only half the story. The other half is this: the very things that should bring us together are tearing us apart

And what's true of our words in particular is also true of ourselves in general: Our words—which can work both for us and against us—are representative, are emblematic, of our fallen human condition. In general, we are both for and against ourselves. We have met the enemy . . . and the enemy is us.

We need God.

The problem is that we don't like to admit it. Instead, like Nimrod and company, we like to think that we, with all our many and prodigious powers (and they *are* many and prodigious) and with all our grand and impressive constructions (and they *are* grand and impressive), we like to think that we can build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, to make a name for ourselves—without God.

And then when we fail short, as we inevitably do, rather than admit our need for God, we invent enemies and blame them—especially on the internet, particularly on social media.

Blaise Pascal, the 17th-century mathematician and scientist, got it right, got *us* right, when he said:

“What sort of freak then is man! How novel, how monstrous, how chaotic, how paradoxical, how prodigious! Judge of all things, feeble earthworm, repository of truth, sink of doubt and error, glory and garbage of the universe!”

We need God. Being such a prodigious paradox, we need God. If the things that should bring us together are going to bring us together and not tear us apart, we need God. Right now, if my words are going to communicate, to bring us together, I need . . . we need God.

But here's the Good News: God has not given up on us. God is with us. God provides. Again and again and again and again God provides. Here at this table God provides. It is here that we come into communion with God and one another. It is here that God shares a world with us, and we share a world with God and with one another .

In comparison to that, our human power of speech and communication is a mere mechanical extension that does nothing more than increase the reach and speed of God's communication with us.

The real wonder, the real miracle, is God's sharing a world with us, although precisely because it's so everyday, we tend to overlook the wonder and miracle of it. As Yogi Berra says, "You can see a lot just by looking."

And I have to tell you: I don't know how it works—God's sharing a world, God's communion with us here and now, at this table. I don't know how it works.

In comparison, the story of my thoughts being transmitted to you—via neurons, electro-chemical signals, synapses, throat, larynx, mouth, teeth and tongue, waves in the air, ears, auditory nerves, electro-chemical signals, synapses, neurons, sounds, words and sentences—in comparison to God's communication with us, all that is mere child's play, a lark.

As I said I don't know how it works, but I do know that it does work. In the days and weeks after I take communion, here and there, now and then, often in ways and times and places that surprise me, I understand, I experience, Paul's words:

. . . [H]oly and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful.

God provides.

Which is all well and good, and would be great and wonderful . . . Except . . . except for

This **is** my body . . . This **is** my blood.

It all depends on what the meaning of "is" is. Wars have been fought—and not just theological word-wars but wars of iron, blood and steel —monarchs have been

deposed, empires shaken, maps re-drawn, you could make a plausible historical argument that we are here, that North America was colonized, because of disagreements over the meaning of that one single little word “is.” that Jesus said.

In comparison, “Who’s on first” is mere child’s play, a lark. And so again the other half of the story: the very things that should bring us together are tearing us apart.

But here’s the Good News: God has not given up on us. God is with us. God provides. Again and again and again and again, God provides.

Next Sunday, I’ll continue this sermon with a picture of how God provides: the providence of God, including God’s providence in the life of our church. But for now, may the neurons fire, may the synapses transmit, may the air be moved. And may the Word of the God be heard:

This is my body broken for you. This is my blood shed for you.

The Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

