

Pentecost Sunday
May 24, 2015
Homily for the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass
of
St. Thomas More Catholic Parish
celebrated at
St. Joseph Catholic Church
Scranton, PA
John 20:19-23

Today I'd like to begin by recalling the story of the Tower of Babel in the Book of Genesis. In that lesson from the Old Testament the people of the earth conspired to build a monument to themselves, a tower into the heavens, whose effect would be to keep them together in one place. The Lord's response to men's pride was to confuse the speech of the builders. No longer able to communicate with each other, the people were scattered abroad the face of the earth. The people's pride was defeated, and they left off building the monument to themselves.

The story from Acts that we heard read today in German was the reversal of the Genesis dispersion. The Holy Spirit enabled the apostles to speak in different languages so that people from all over the known world came together and were able to hear the Gospel proclaimed, each in his own native tongue. Acts tells us explicitly, "...the multitude came together," the precise opposite of the scattering that we saw after the Tower of Babel was abandoned.

In the Tower of Babel story confused speech was the vehicle used to scatter the earth's population, but at the root of the dispersion was sin. Our desire to build monuments to ourselves invariably causes division because such works feed our pride. In our pursuit of the bigger, better, stronger, and faster the small, the bad, the weak, and the slow are left behind, dispensed with, or otherwise ignored. Monuments to man divide and exclude, even when those monuments are not accomplished by murder, deceit, treachery, and coercion. The atheists and their regimes of the twentieth century showed us how monuments to man end badly.

Pentecost ended well. The fruit of the Apostles' ability to speak in various tongues meant that thousands understood the Gospel message, and three thousand people were baptized that day. Their baptism points to the underlying purpose of reversing the confused speech of the Tower of Babel. Where sin had divided our forbears of the Old Testament, repentance and the forgiveness of sins draws people together, unites people who were previously dispersed across the face of the earth. The Holy Spirit rarely gives people today the ability to speak different languages; but in communicating forgiveness and sanctifying the faithful, the Holy Spirit continues His ministry of drawing people of every race and nation together. Where sin drove people apart in Genesis, forgiveness draws people together in Acts.

Our Gospel indicates both why we forgive and how we receive forgiveness. Remember that the first thing Jesus said to the apostles upon His resurrection from the dead was, "Peace be with you." That is, he forgave the men who had abandoned Him, denied Him, who quite simply had not believed Him and who as a result were living in fear behind locked doors. Our Lord did not desire vengeance upon those who had failed Him, but instead wished them well: "Peace be with you." In the same way, then, that we have been forgiven by Jesus for our failures towards Him, so we are called to forgive others for their sins against us. Indeed, we pray in the Our Father every day that God should forgive us only insofar as we forgive others. "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." In other words, "don't forgive us if we don't forgive."

The Our Father points to the method everyone must use if we are truly to forgive those who have sinned against us. While seeking the grace to forgive those who wronged us, we are not first to think about those wrongs. Instead we are to contemplate the myriad ways we have offended our Heavenly Father. Rather than focus on the hurt we suffered, we are to contemplate the hurt we inflicted. The crucifix stands before us at every Mass as a monument, certainly, of God's great love for us, but it is also simultaneously a monument to our self-love. We are the ones who nailed Him to the cross; we are the ones who crowned Him with thorns; we are the ones who plunged a spear into His side, who spat upon Him, whipped Him, and mocked Him with taunts and purple robes. Before we play the victim we must repent of how we hurt the actual Victim, Jesus Christ.

When we know the Lord loves us, despite all that we did to Him, then we can begin to love those who have wronged us, despite all we've suffered. Jesus does not ask us to do anything He has not already done. He does not ask us to extend mercy before first showing mercy to us.

If this method shows us why we must forgive, it does not tell us how we actually accomplish so tremendous a responsibility. Again we look to the Gospel. Jesus said to the apostles, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." Authority to forgive sins has obviously been given to the apostles and their successors. But this is not the entire story. We see also a dispensation of the Holy Spirit.

The same Holy Spirit that gives the apostles and their successors the authority to pronounce absolution upon a penitent sinner also resides within the soul of him who has been forgiven. If we hope to be able to forgive the wrongdoer, we need the power of God residing within us. As we leave the confessional, we have been sanctified, to be sure, our slate wiped clean; but we have also been empowered. The grace that sanctifies us gives us the strength to let go of old hurts and begin to desire the sanctification and salvation of those who have done us wrong.

What we learn is that without the power of God, unity among men is impossible. The United Nations hasn't united us. The people of the United States aren't united. Only in the Church do we find the means to bring together diverse peoples from every corner of the globe so that they may live in unity and peace. And speaking the same literal language only goes so far. Even if we all spoke German, unity and peace with the German people would only come if we forgave them for the war they started and they forgave us for the obliteration of nearly every one of their cities, a carnage that ended only seventy years ago this month. Even if we all spoke German, we would still need to speak words to each other of repentance and forgiveness.

Those words are given to us by Holy Mother Church at our baptism, when we first received the Holy Spirit, and in every sacrament of which we partake. The vehicle for world unity is the Church, and her principle tool for unification is forgiveness, made possible in the Blood of the Cross and sealed by the gift of the Holy Spirit. If you want to draw closer to your neighbor, you could learn to speak his language, but you would do better to forgive him by the power of the Holy Spirit, because Jesus has already forgiven you. And then in all humility, ask him to forgive you.