

My mother's father, Henry Quinett, was born in 1904 in Belgium, and with his family sailed on the Red Star boat line to America in 1909. They arrived at Ellis Island, where his name was changed from Henri Quinét to Henry Quinett. Because my grandfather was never one to hurry a decision, he lived here thirty-one years before becoming a citizen in 1939. His citizenship papers are framed and hanging in my garage, above his workbench, next to his woodworking apron.

He and his brother Octave lived in Vincennes, Indiana, where they worked at the Blackford glass factory and spent Saturday evenings together with their wives, playing cards and arguing. They were Walloons and spoke French. More accurately, they yelled at one another in French. It was the first foreign language I was exposed to, and I remember crouching behind the door, spying on them, wondering what in the world they were saying.

Spencer is studying his first foreign language. His teacher is an attractive young woman from Puerto Rico. I can't tell whether he's captivated with Spanish or his teacher, but he now looks forward to school.

The story of the Tower of Babel is an ancient one, perhaps the oldest in the Bible, written to explain the origins of different languages, cultures, and tribes. One of the earliest questions we ask, when we see someone who doesn't look or sound like us is, "Why aren't they like us?" I remember taking Sam down to North Carolina, he was about three, and he asked me, "Why do these people talk funny?"

This story was written to explain why people talk funny, why people are different. God created heaven as a place where the divine could live, and created Earth as a place for humans to live. Then those pushy humans overran their boundaries, building a huge tower that reached into heaven, where God lived. Now there is a territorial dispute. Humans didn't know their place. They rebelled against the limits and boundaries God had given them. But God doesn't go to war, or kill them. This isn't Russia and Georgia. God simply cripples their communications system. It's been said wars in the future will consist of one side destroying the other side's satellites so they can't communicate. That isn't a new idea at all. It's right here in the 11th chapter of Genesis.

Like many ideas that seem wise at first, this one had unintended consequences. While humans could no longer unite to commit dubious

activities, neither could they unite to accomplish positive ones. It probably didn't take long for God to regret his response.

The rest of Genesis reads like a primer on family dysfunction—division, folks not knowing their boundaries, fighting, misunderstanding, miscommunication, fear, intolerance, retribution, and revenge. One gets the feeling God is thinking, “Why did I think it would be a good idea for people not to understand one another? What was I thinking?”

Now let's fast forward a handful of centuries, past the plagues, the prophets, the kings, even past Jesus, to the early, early church. Jesus is gone, but because of his wide appeal, his followers have crossed religious, linguistic, cultural, and national boundaries. Greeks, Romans, Arabians, Asians, Jews. Each with their own language, their own culture, their own way of viewing of the world. But now, according to the book of Acts, they are all together in one place, “devout men and women from every nation under heaven.” (Acts 2:5) God is given a second chance. The last time there was an international gathering, God confused their language. That didn't work. Now God has a second chance.

We don't always get second chances. When we do, we should take full advantage of them. And God does. A mighty wind begins to fill the house. The Hebrew word for *wind* also means *spirit*, so the writer was saying God's

spirit filled the room. The Church has called this Pentecost. What did God's spirit do? It helped people understand one another.

People began speaking in foreign languages, so that everyone present could hear what was being said in his or her own language. Jews were speaking Greek, Greeks were speaking Arabic, Macedonians were speaking Hebrew. Each spoke in a different language, but each heard in his or her own language. Today, we call that phenomena speaking in tongues. This has happened here. At our last fish fry, I was sitting with Ralph Baker, who was speaking Republican, and Jennifer Silvers, who was speaking Democrat, and they understood each other perfectly well.

This is what God's spirit does. It takes people who otherwise don't have much in common, people different from one another, people who don't always speak the same language, and it helps them understand one another, and even love one another.

In a manner of speaking, Pentecost overturned Babel. With Babel, came confusion and division. With Pentecost, came clarity and accord. The stories represent two radically different perspectives on human relationship. Babel was about keeping folks apart, Pentecost was about bringing folks together. Babel was about confusion, crippling our desire and ability to know one another. Pentecost was about comprehension, perception, joining

together, and seeking to understand. Babel was about not having a clue, Pentecost was about getting the point.

Both perspectives are still with us today. There are those who believe the appropriate approach to people who are different is to keep them at arm's length, never learn or speak their language, let them stay in their place, and we'll stay in ours. Just run a fence or build a wall between us and them. Babel is always about cutting off, about separating, dividing, demonizing, takings sides, keeping at arm's length, never trying to understand. There are a lot of Babel folks out there. Some of them in high, high places.

At my last church there was this man who told me he grew up in Cloverdale, but I think he was really from Babel. There was never any effort to understand. We'd hit a patch of choppy water, and he would clam up. You couldn't talk with him. You couldn't say, "Let's paddle over that direction and see if it's a bit smoother." There was never any deep listening. Separation was his answer to everything. Not talking, just pouting. If he did say something, it was always demands or edicts or lines in the sand. No room for creativity or flexibility. I remember one Sunday he came up to me upset about my sermon, saying he was going to leave. I said, "Stick around. I'll probably change my mind next week." But he couldn't stand that we didn't agree, and never came back. Had to leave. That's Babel thinking.

He wasn't bad. That was just the way he was raised. But we can change. We can allow God's spirit to work in us and bring us our own little Pentecost, our own moments of clarity and understanding, openness and reconciliation.

Saturday nights at my grandparent's house. Henry Quinett on one side of the card table. Octave Quinett on the other. Their wives, Norma and Margaret, in-between them, rolling their eyes heavenward. My grandfather and great-uncle would begin the evening in English, but as they grew more excited switch to French. Their voices would rise, their speech quicken. I was little and mistook excitability and passion with anger. So I was always relieved when my grandfather and his brother would stand up from the card table at the end of the evening and hug one another. Taught me a valuable lesson—that we can be passionate people, have clearly different worldviews, but still embrace one another at the end of the day.

Where are we from? Are we from Babel? Are we about separation, misunderstanding, division, and confusion.

Or are we are Pentecost people? Are we so filled with God's spirit that our differences are cherished, not scorned. So filled with God's spirit we hear not with our ears, but with our hearts, so that all people everywhere are not potential enemies to fear, but friends to love.