

June 5, 2022 – Genesis 11:1-9 & Acts 2:1-21

I enjoy learning about nature. I enjoy biology and the natural sciences. I consider myself reasonably knowledgeable about such things, for an amateur. And so you can imagine that it came as some surprise to me what I learned this past week: that a bee is a fish. You didn't know that either? Well, that's what a California court ruled.

You see back in 1970, Governor Ronald Reagan signed into law the California Endangered Species Act, which defines as a fish a whole bunch of things that live in the water, but aren't actually fish. Included in the list was “invertebrates.” The lawmakers who wrote this bill probably meant aquatic invertebrates, but they didn't actually say that. And a few days ago, a court ruled that because they didn't say that, the state of California must consider all invertebrates to be fish.

Which means that not only are bees fish – which was what was at the heart of the case – but all insects are fish. When you swat a mosquito, you're swatting a fish. When you dig up an ant hill, you're digging up fish. You thought it was a spider that spun that web in the corner of your living room, but it's actually the web of a fish.

It's absolutely absurd, of course. But that's how the law works sometimes. Whenever lawyers and politicians get involved, it seems like language itself starts to break down. And our current culture doesn't help anything.

After all, is it really so crazy to say that a bee is a fish when you can say that a man is a woman. Or that a person is a clump of fetal cells. Or that the union of two men or two women is a marriage. Words are losing their meaning left and right. So bees being fish is the least of our problems.

Words are important. And our Old Testament lesson for today shows us just how important words are. The timeframe here is just after the Flood. Only about four generations. Now, four generations back then was a little more than it is today, given that men lived to be 400 years old, had a dozen wives, and a hundred children.

Noah's family soon multiplies into a huge number of people. And they begin migrating, traveling east, expanding out into the earth, as God had commanded them. “*Fill the earth and subdue it,*” he had said after the flood.

They do just that... for a while. But at a certain point they decide, “No. We're going to settle down. All of us. We're going to ignore God's instructions. We're going to defy his Law. And we're going to build a city. And not just any city. A city that will make a name for us. A city that everyone will know and flock to because it will have a symbol of our greatness at the very center of it: a tower that reaches into the sky.”

But God isn't happy with their plan. He isn't happy that they've ignored Him. He isn't happy that they've disobeyed Him. And He isn't happy that they are effectively trying to replace Him with a symbol of their own pride and arrogance.

And so God confuses their language. Previously, they had all spoken one language. Probably the language of Noah, whatever that was. But God imposes upon them new languages. Dozens of them.

And instantly, the project comes to a grinding halt. Because there is very little that people can do if they can't communicate. It's like pointing to a bee and calling it a fish. They can't build a tower. They can't build a city. They can't even work together. And so with that one simple act, this entire group of people that had been so resolute in settling down at Babel now finds themselves right back where they started. Dispersing themselves once again over the face of the earth.

Humanity has always been like that. Proud and arrogant. Thinking we can do anything. Achieve anything. No matter the consequences. No matter the immorality. No matter how many of God's Laws we break in the process. Often do we look at ourselves and say, “Can I do it? Yes!” Rarely do we look at ourselves and say, “Should I do it? No...”

And we are punished for it. We're punished for our greed. "Can I buy it? Yes. Should I buy it? No." We're punished for our lust. "Can I have sex outside of marriage? Sure. Should I have sex outside of marriage? Absolutely not." We're punished for our violence. "Can I hate my neighbor? Yes. Should I? No."

And God has lots of punishments to dole out. If the Tower of Babel proves one thing, it is that God is really creative at punishing humanity. I mean, making them all speak different languages? Come on. That's impressive.

But more often, He punishes us with natural consequences. With credit card bills and STD's and hostile relationships. More often, He punishes us with guilt. With shame and depression, until we look at ourselves in the mirror and just hate what we see.

More often, He doesn't punish us in this life at all. Because sometimes the wicked really do prosper. And I hope they enjoy themselves. This is as good as it gets for them. Beyond this short life, all they have waiting for them is an eternity in Hell.

No, God is not a fan of people who ask only what they can do and not what they should do. And yet, that's what makes today so special. Because today is Pentecost. Today is the day that we celebrate God reversing the curse of Babel.

Of sending His Spirit to twelve men locked in an upper room. And giving them the ability to speak in a way that everybody understood. People from all over the world. Each hearing the Apostles speak in his own language. As if Babel had never even occurred.

Did God change his mind? Relent altogether from his punishment for their sin? No, not really. Keep in mind, they may have each understood what the Apostles said, but they still couldn't understand each other.

Each of those people in Jerusalem was still a sinner. Each still guilty of disobeying God's Law. Many of them probably guilty of literally calling for Jesus' death. Of mocking him and spitting on him. Remember, this is only 50 days after the crucifixion.

No, God didn't change his mind about their sin or their punishment in this life. But he did change his mind about their eternal punishment. He did send his Son to die and rise again. That whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life.

That, as Peter says, "*everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.*" Everyone. In whatever language He speaks. In whatever country he lives. No matter his past. No matter his shame. Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.

You see, we still have lots of languages. And we will always have lots of languages. Because the sin of Babel is still with us. We still ask only what we can do and not what we should do. We still twist our words – and God's Words – to make them say whatever we want them to say. And God still punishes us for that.

And yet, in the midst of all that confusion, God has given us something that transcends language. The Word made flesh who dwelt among us. The name that is above every name. He has given us His own Son. Jesus Christ.

Who died for people who twisted his words and called him a liar. Who died for people who mocked his love and his grace. Who died for people who refused to listen to the truth. And then rose again, that his Word, his love, and his truth might persevere over death itself. And become the cornerstone of a Church filled with his Spirit of truth and grace.

God has poured out that very Spirit into our hearts. He has given us His Word. And His Word is a message that goes beyond language. Because it is a message that erases even the punishment of language. And brings salvation into every heart. And shows us the absolute truth of Christ's unfailing love. Amen.