

As it is in Heaven

"Now the whole earth had one language and one speech."

Genesis 11:1

By the Rev. Derek Elphick

Communication is not a simple thing.

A lot of pieces need to fall into place in order for healthy, human interaction to go well.

And if the communication between two or more people is to be *helpful*, and *meaningful*, and *satisfying*...

all parties involved need to be flexible,

...willing to listen, and, ultimately,
be prepared to submit their will to
something "higher" than their own individual
needs and wants.

This type of communication is the angelic norm.

But we tend to think of communication in a mechanical, "robotic" way...

...as a "skill set" or "technique" to be learned and mastered by
following a prescribed set of rules

...and that once the necessary skills have been adopted...

we magically become fantastic "communicators"

- everyone understands us
 - ...our family, friends, workmates
- no misunderstanding, no hurt feelings or grudges

- no annoyance, or disagreement
- or argument or distrust

But we know this isn't how relationships work.

Almost all human pain and suffering, and it's opposite, all human joy and happiness, is...

- directly proportional to our interaction with others...

As a general rule...

- the interaction between two people tends to be *healthy* when things like
love, trust, patience, kindness, honesty are present

- and the interaction between two people tends to be *unhealthy* when things like...
anger, distrust, contempt, or suspicion are present

In reality, communication is a lot more complicated and difficult to do well because it's **tied up with our loves...and not all of our loves are pure...**

So, good communication really requires spiritual work because we're...

- learning how to love our neighbor
- learning how to understand and appreciate those different from us
- learning how to disagree w/others and still be friends
- learning how to not make spiritual judgments
- learning how to let go
- learning how not to impose our will on others
 - or control them
 - or shame them
 - or belittle them

All of these skills require spiritual work & self-examination

- in short, they require the work of regeneration
 - repentance and reformation
 - shunning of evils
 - seeking forgiveness

So why are we talking about communication?

The ancient parable of the Tower of Babel begins by saying...

"...the whole earth had one language and one speech" (Gen 11:1).

On a historical level, this is talking about the Ancient Church...

It's talking about a time on earth when people spoke with "one voice."

They spoke the universal language of mutual love and respect because (as we read in our lesson today)...

everyone had the same end-in-view,

namely the common good of society,
the common good of the church, and, ultimately,
the Lord's kingdom (see AC 1316).

People had different ways of seeing things, for sure.

We read that people *"differed greatly when it came to doctrine, but they **still made charity the main focus**" (AC 1799).*

As a result, their communication with each other was...

**healthy
happy
and helpful**

Why? Because they were willing to subordinate self to the common good...

- they were willing to look past differences and focus on higher things

- they were willing, as the Lord teaches in the Gospels, to "be last" not "first"
- they were willing to put the needs of others before self

Let's consider this a little deeper...

What does it mean to submit ourselves to the common good of society, the church, and the Lord's kingdom?

And, for the purposes of our sermon today, how does this help us communicate or interact w/each other better?

Simply put, we become good communicators every time we rise above self

- every time we adopt causes bigger than ourselves

This is the Psalmist's prayer: *"Lead me to the rock (the truth) that is higher than I"*

Battling our own selfishness is a life-long project.

- it doesn't happen overnight
- we fluctuate between *altruism* and selfishness
 - between being genuinely helpful and loving toward others...
 - to being downright selfish!

So, why are we talking about selfishness?

It's because it's the #1 barrier to our own peace and happiness?

It's the #1 barrier to good, healthy communication?

Or, to use the language of the Writings:

"Self-love is the love that agrees least of all with heavenly life" (AC 1307)

But let's go back to this idea of looking to the "common good"

There are three levels of life that we can choose to **focus on, and operate within...**

1st Level - Self.

Focus on our own wants, needs, preferences, rights.

2nd Level - Society

This level focuses on the common good of the family unit, and groups, and organizations, nations. This is where things like service, and duty, responsibility, and patriotism come into play.

3rd Level - Church, Heaven (God)

This level focuses on the common good of the church, heaven, and ultimately, God. On this "highest level" we submit ourselves to the deepest parts of life - the mind and soul, eternal life, to the Lord Himself.

If we get stuck on Level 1 - self, we miss out on the common good, on the more meaningful and satisfying levels of life.

And the point of today's sermon is that this level of living *degrades* our communication...

This is what the Tower of Babel is all about...

- **degrades our communication (or interaction) with others so badly**
- **that we no longer understand each other**
- **like the inhabitants of Shinar, we find ourselves**
 - **wandering amid this half-finished city**
 - **unable to communicate**
 - **unable to recognize the same truth**
 - **a scattered people who'd once been a community**

But then people said, "*Come, let us make a name for ourselves*" (v. 4)

and that precious, angelic form of communication was lost so that...

"...they did not understand one another's speech" (v. 7).

What caused this spectacular collapse in communication?

The symbolic building of a "tower."

The Tower of Babel represents the *uncontrollable* nature of human selfishness which, left unchecked, wants to take over heaven...

for "when people set themselves up above everyone else, they wish to be worshipped" (AC 1306).

Swedenborg was once permitted to experience the "love of ruling from the love of self."

It was one of the most frightening experiences of his life because it felt so pleasant...it *"surpassed all other delights that exist in the world"* (DP 215:9)

"Babel" or "Babylon" is the number one destroyer of relationships...

Why? Because we are so easily susceptible to its lure, it's hidden influence and we know we must constantly battle against it.

We read today that whenever we impose our will on others,

"...we deflect and divert to ourselves the common good of society, the common good of the church, and even the Lord's kingdom, treating them as if they exist for our own sake" (AC 1316).

The parable ends with the construction of the tower stopping abruptly...

...because their language was "confused"

...and the people were "scattered" over the face of all the earth.

Let's put this in perspective - it's a "heavy" topic.

This is a parable about extremes...

On a historical level, this parable is talking about the fall of the Ancient Church (Babylon = fall of churches, love of dominion)

But as is the case with every story in the Lord's Word, what was lost can be found again.

We can learn to speak one language again...

we can leave the valley of Shinar and head back East.

This is what the work of regeneration is all about...

"All people in heaven have the same language. They all understand each other... This language is not learned but innate; it flows from their very affection and thought" (HH 236).

Our communication, our speech, is based on what's in our heart.

We do the work of repentance because we want to become kinder, gentler, more giving individuals

- we do this for our families
- for our friends
- we do it for our community, for society, for the church

"Since the angels' language corresponds to the affections of their love, and since heaven's love is love for the Lord and love for our neighbor, we can imagine how elegant and delightful their conversation is. It affects not only the ears but also the deeper levels of the minds of those who hear it. ***There was one particular hard-hearted spirit with whom an angel talked, and eventually he was so moved by what the angel was saying that he burst into tears, saying he couldn't help it, love was speaking, and he had never cried before***" (HH 238).

Parables are stories that need to be told, and re-told...

The ancient parable of the Tower of Babel is story about us...

The antidote to "Babel" communication (fractured, divisive communication) is...

...mutual love or charity, in which the Lord and our neighbor are loved above all else

Think of how much joy you get in...

- whenever you forget about self
- in being useful, in doing simple things for others (our neighbor)
- volunteering for an organization that helps people in need
- working for a company that provides a service or product that's really making a difference for a particular segment of the population

And think about the purpose of a church community...

- why do we get involved?
- it's our connection to the Lord and our neighbor
- we want to love one another as the Lord loves us

We forget self...

We forget our differences when we engage our hearts and minds in the greater good, in doing things that benefit others

We speak w/one voice.

We adopt the language of heaven

This heavenly language places...

our differences,
our annoyances,
our hurt, in their proper place,

making our interaction with each other pleasant, happy, and helpful again.

AMEN.

Lessons: Genesis 11:1-9; AC 1316, AC 1799