

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Watertown, WI**

“Megalomania”

Rev. David K. Groth
Pentecost Sunday, 2022

“They said to each other, ‘Come, let’s make bricks and bake them thoroughly.’ They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar. Then they said, ‘Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth.’ But the LORD came down” (Gen. 11:3-5a).

They were so proud of those bricks ... not just any old bricks but glazed bricks and a special tar to bind them together. This opened a world of possibilities for construction of buildings, bridges, idols.

We’re in Genesis 11, just a couple of chapters removed from Noah’s flood, and man is already back to his wicked ways. We’re in the valley of Mesopotamia, the plain between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. There are not many stones lying around in that area for building purposes, but there is an abundance of clay. Archaeologists say the process of firing clay bricks with glaze was being done here before anywhere else in that part of the world. Now the advantage of bricks over stones, of course, is their uniform shape. You can build higher, faster, stronger, and cheaper with bricks than with stones. And so, the people are smitten with their new technology, and are determined to use it to build something big. “Let us make a name for ourselves” was the rallying cry. Let us build a tower, something that will reach up to the heavens. They want to build and work their way up to where God lives. They want a titanic tower that would bring a certain fame and immortality to them. Like Adam and Eve, they want to be like God, and they feel they can do anything if they stay together and put their minds to it.

Way back in Genesis 1, God told Adam and Eve, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it.” Scatter and have families. Then, after the flood, God tells Noah and his descendants to “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth” (Gen. 9:1). And six verses later, God repeats the command, “And you, be fruitful and multiply, teem on the earth and multiply in it.”

But generations later, the people are afraid. They know God wants them to spread and re-populate, but they don’t like the idea. They think it would be better to stay in one place. There’s strength in numbers, and they’re going to use a tower as a focal point for their tribe, something to gather around, something with which to intimidate the neighboring tribes.

They’ve lost their center. They do not know the Lord nor love Him. And since they have lost their center, they decide to make one for themselves. Instead of gathering around the Lord and His Word, they will gather around a tower that reaches to the heavens. It will take them all the way to God’s height. It’ll make them equal to God. It’s a fool’s errand, of course, but they don’t see it. They’re caught up in the self-confident spirit of the times.

Maybe we see this spirit in our own day. “I am my own master” says man, “and therefore I am not going to be prohibited by the alleged restrictions of some alleged god. I’m going to do what feels good and right. That’s my moral compass.” Without God, the only restrictions man feels are those he places on himself. Without God, we are free to determine our own values, and follow our own instincts.

So, for example, if we want to use CRSPR gene therapy technology to create designer babies, who’s to say we can’t? Like building with bricks, who doesn’t want a kid that is bigger, faster, stronger, smarter, better looking? It’s all part of making a name for oneself. It’s all part of pretending to be God. And it’s not too difficult to imagine that the wealthy will have the money to purchase these services, while the poor will be left behind, creating an ever-expanding gap.

Let us make a name for ourselves. Actually, it motivates a lot of what we do. When young we study hard, not so much to master a topic, but to see that “A” next to our name. As adults, we work hard to live in the right house in the right neighborhood. To make a name for ourselves, we give major gifts so others can see our names engraved into a paver, or scratched on a plaque, or printed in a program.

To make a name for ourselves, we signal our virtues. An example: reusable grocery bags. There's nothing wrong with them; it's good to avoid all the plastic. But my guess is some use them mostly to signal that they are environmentally mindful and therefore worthy and good and righteous.

In the Middle Ages, man tried to win the favor and approval of God with their good works and virtues. Today, we're more concerned about the favor and approval of people. In the Middle Ages we feared being humiliated on the Last Day before the judgment seat of God. Today, we fear being humiliated on social media.

Think how social media plays into this. Many folks are collecting "Friends" and "Followers" and "Likes" as a way to affirm their value, their righteousness. They are trying to build a case for their own self-worth. When someone Likes you on Facebook, befriends you, gives you a thumbs up, it's all visible affirmation from others. We're not altogether different from those ancients in the valley of Mesopotamia who said, "Come, let us make a name for ourselves and build ourselves a tower that reaches to the heavens."

There's a touch of humor that breaks into this old Bible, a stroke of irony. Verse 5, "And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower which they had built." This tower must have been a wee little tower if God could not see it even while squinting through his telescope. Nor is God impressed or threatened by our technology and our gadgets. He *is* concerned, however, for he knows there's no end to the evil and suffering that a godless people can stir up.

So, the Lord takes a little trip. He comes down and confuses mankind with a multitude of languages. The construction of their tower comes to a screeching halt. But the confusion of their languages is ultimately an act of God's grace, lest men should think they do not need God anymore and suffer eternally for this delusion.

The LORD does not invite us or require us to somehow climb up to God, either with our virtues or our works. Instead, He comes down to us in the person of Jesus to hang on a cross.

Imagine, for us who want to ascend to the heavens to be like God, God, has come down to earth to be like us.

For us who try to hold on to whatever power and authority we have, Jesus emptied Himself, not counting equality with God something to be grasped.

For us who would like to be all-powerful and muscular, God becomes small, weak, and vulnerable.

For us who would love to have many serving us, Jesus flips it. He serves us, healing the sick, feeding the hungry, washing the feet, teaching the crowds, giving us His life-giving sacraments.

For us who suffer delusions of grandeur, Christ suffered the humiliation of the cross, for the forgiveness of our sins.

For us who say to one another, "Come now, let us build ourselves a tower to the heavens", God cries out, "Come now, let us reason together. Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool" (Is. 1:18).

For us who are inclined to make a name for *ourselves*, the Lord rejoices to put His name on us in Holy Baptism.

Any way you slice it, building towers sounds like grinding, exhausting work, carrying a load of bricks up higher and higher. But it will never be high enough. And besides, the neighboring tribe has already built something higher. It's madness. So, for us who say, "Come, let us build ourselves a tower to the heavens, Jesus says, "Come to me all you who are weary and burdened [of building towers] and I will give you rest."

You and I like to see our names on diplomas, awards, trophies, but all that is as temporary as grass. Your name has been written in the Lamb's book of life, and it cannot, will not be erased!

To curb their evil that day, God came down and confused their languages. He frustrated their wicked plans. Work on the tower stopped and the people dispersed as God had desired.

Today, we praise Him that He enabled His Church to overcome language barriers at Pentecost, so that the Gospel of Jesus Christ could be preached to all nations. He sent the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth, the Spirit who opens hearts, enkindles faith, and breathes into us the breath of life. The Spirit who gathers us together for Word and Sacrament. He sent the Spirit who loosens our tongues to say "Jesus is Lord".

At Pentecost, when God sent the Holy Spirit, it meant the Good News of Jesus got out into the world at top speed. Thousands heard the Gospel in their own language. Thousands believed and were baptized. That is where God's heart is. That is where our hearts belong as well, not in making a name for ourselves, but in proclaiming His name and His salvation. Amen.