



# Good Shepherd Lutheran Church

Watertown, WI

## **“Ambition”**

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*“And they said to one another, ‘Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly.’ And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. Then they said, ‘Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth” (Genesis 11:3-4).*

The Day of Pentecost  
May 19, 2013

### **Collect of the Day**

O God, on this day You once taught the hearts of Your faithful people by sending them the light of Your Holy Spirit. Grant us in our day by the same Spirit to have a right understanding in all things and evermore to rejoice in His holy consolation; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

So what's so bad about building a tower? Nothing really, unless . . . unless it's a way of thumbing your nose at God. Then there's a problem.

It all started with an innovation, a new technology: bricks. Not any old bricks but glazed bricks and a special sort of tar that bonded them together. We're in Genesis 11, just a couple of chapters removed from Noah's flood. That means it's early in man's history. And 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, but there is an inexhaustible supply of clay. It's no surprise, then, that innovations in brick technology made advances in this area. Archaeologists say the process of "burning" bricks, or firing them 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, stronger, faster and cheaper with bricks than you can with stones. And so the people are tickled pink with their new technology, and are determined to use it to build something big, really big, something that will bring them fame and immortality. "Let us make a name for ourselves" was the rallying cry.

The text says "tower." We would probably use the word pyramid. Remnants of these are found also in Mesopotamia. They were believed to be dwelling places for the gods. Each city had its own patron god. The typical Mesopotamian temple-tower, known also as a ziggurat, was square at the base and had sloping, stepped sides that led upward to small shrine at the top.

They were thought to be a sort of staircase linking heaven and earth.

So there are a number of things going on here. There's the egotism and pride of the people. (This tower is all about them.) And of course, there's the issue of idolatry. I don't know what gods they plan on calling down from their pyramid, but it's not going to be the one who created the heavens and the earth.

Moreover, these are the descendants of Noah and what God told them to do after the flood was "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth" (9:1). That is, spread out. Scatter. And notice, that's precisely what the people in our text are trying **not** to do. They want to stay together. Maybe because there's safety in numbers? Or maybe it's because it's the opposite of what God told them to do. In any event, "Let us build a city" they say. If a city is anything, it's where a lot of people are living together in little space. Let us build a city with a tower to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and **not** be scattered over the face of the whole earth." They are deliberately disobeying God's command. They don't want God telling them what they can and cannot do. They're going to build like they never did before.

Man has an uncanny ability to turn something that is useful and good and use it for evil. Music can be used to praise God but also glorify violence and rape. Drugs can be used to heal, but also entertain and destroy. You name it; we can do it with anything. Even something as simple as bricks can be used to build a hospital or house; or they can be used to defy God.

Mapping out the DNA sequence can be done with the hopes of curing disease, or with the hopes of making designer babies. . . a boy rather than a girl. Blond hair rather than brown. Of superior intellectual and athletic abilities rather than normal, or below average. Remember Hitler's dream of building the Aryan race? We're taking our innovations and are on

the cusp of trying to do something very similar. I read on Thursday another recent innovation in this line of research brings us much closer to cloning human beings, the ultimate form of idolatry. And the only limits we feel are those we impose on ourselves, as a matter of taste and discretion. Just like those ancient people, we will not hear of any alleged restrictions imposed on us by some alleged God.

The people in our text wanted to make a name for themselves. At least they were ambitious. Granted, their ambitions were too high, but there's also a problem at the other extreme. When you suffer for lack of ambition, you're not being a steward of the gifts God has given you. You're letting them go to waste.

And there are enemies of ambition. Alcohol is one of them. Racism is another, and verbal abuse. If you hear often enough that you're lazy and stupid, pretty soon you'll start acting the part.

I'm convinced video games can destroy ambition and if as parents we don't impose limits, our children will turn into mouth breathing zombies with no greater ambition than to get to the next level.

Sometimes I hear parents say, "All I want is for my child to be happy." And what can be so wrong with that? We all want that for our children. But it also shows a certain poverty of ambition. How about hitching their wagon to something larger and more meaningful than just the pursuit of happiness? How about teaching them how to serve and volunteer?

It's the same idea at the other end of life. If your only ambition in retirement is to try to be happy, chances are you'll be miserable and your talents will go to rot. Social scientists are saying if we want to stay physically and mentally healthy and happy we should not think of retirement as a long vacation, but more like a career change. In fact, research is showing that "too much focus of feeling happy in retirement can actually lead to feeling less happy." Whereas those living "with a sense of purpose as they age are more likely to remain

cognitively intact, have better mental health, and even live longer than people who focus on achieving feelings of happiness” (WSJ, 3/15/11). God has plans for all your days, not just some of them.

So, a poverty of ambition is a problem. Too much ambition is also a problem. An example: If I want to write the best possible sermons I can because I want the Law and Gospel to hit home, well and good. If, however, my motivation is to make a name for myself, then I have a problem, don't I, and so do you!

Similarly, as parents we want our children to be as successful. But sometimes we try to make a name for ourselves *through* our children. The mother of James and John certainly didn't suffer for lack of ambition. To Jesus she said. “Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom” (Mt. 20:21).

There are many ambitions in this room. A common one is to make a ton of money. But Jesus asked, “What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and yet loses his life?” (Lk 9:25). And Paul wrote, “People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction” (1 Tim. 6:9).

For some, our ambition is to be held in high esteem. But Jesus said, “Whoever exalts himself will be humbled” (Mt. 23:12). And remember how the disciples on the road to Capernaum argued about who of them was the greatest. Jesus told them and us, “If anyone would be first, he must be last and servant of all.”

For some our main ambition is to be loved by others, but our ambition should be to please God rather than man (Acts 5:29).

For some, our ambition is to be completely independent. One of the best women tennis players today said, “My ambition is to enjoy *my* life and to do exactly what *I* want to do. And I'll do that. *I will* be free.” Again, on the surface, what's wrong with that? But Paul wrote, “Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of

others” (Phil. 2:4).

Those ancient people wanted to make a name for themselves, and so they started building a tower that would reach up to the heavens. And they were so proud. But the text says God still had to come down to even see the darn thing, and when he did, he was not pleased. “This is only the beginning of what they will do” he said. It’s not that he was threatened by their technology or ours. But by confusing their language, he was tapping the brakes on their evil purposes and curtailing their evil plans. The result? Construction stopped immediately and stood unfinished as a memorial to their vain ambitions. Moreover, what they were trying to avoid happened anyway. They were dispersed over all the earth. (God always wins.)

It’s Pentecost. We’re remembering also that thousands of years later, the disciples of Jesus were gathered in one place. There came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the house. . . and divided tongues as of fire rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages. Normally, to learn a language (to reverse what happened at Babel) requires years of study, flash cards, training your tongue to do things it had never done before. But at Pentecost the disciples were given the miraculous ability to communicate in foreign languages they never learned. Not just the language, but what they were saying was directed by the Holy Spirit. And the faith they have was inspired by the Holy Spirit. For the sake of the Gospel, people could hear God’s Word in their own native language.

So in the end, God is not about creating confusion, but clarity. The Spirit of God is not about inspiring bewilderment, but comprehension and understanding.

The Spirit of God has done that for each of us: Not tongues like he did those early disciples, but saving faith through the Word. How do I know that? How can I be so sure? Because “no one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ apart from the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:3).

The Holy Spirit gives us saving faith, but he also starts rearranging the furniture for us. It's no longer about making a name for ourselves. He points us to Christ and, in effect, says your primary ambition is to be more like him. Amen.

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