

Our Truest Myth, or, The Story That Tells Us Who We Are

Rev. Dr. George Kimmich Beach

[The Unitarian Church in Summit](#)

June 4, 2000

What is our truest myth? It is the story that tells us who we are. And which is that? Hard to say, for there are no myths, there are only versions -- I mean, there are ever new ways of telling the old, old tales. The Tower of Babel, for instance, which can even be told in reverse. The trouble begins when one group or another latches on to what they think is "the one true version." (Some will say, "If the King James Version was good enough for Jesus, it's good enough for me.") Consider the way in which various versions of the Christian myth have been enshrined by various denominations, and these are pressed into service, as prickly defenses, keeping outsiders out and insiders in.

There's the story of St. Peter's tour of the heavenly mansions: Passing a high-walled cloister, he says to the tourists, "Shhh, the Catholics are in there. They think they're the only ones up here." But I can imagine another version: Passing the Unitarian Universalist lounge, St. Peter says, "Shhh, don't spoil it. They're discussing whether any such place as this exists."

The power of any group to sustain and renew itself depends on the power of its central myth. That's why my old friend Alice Wesley believes it is so important that we recognize -- and celebrate -- our myth. Indeed, "our truest myth." The story may seem absurd -- to outsiders; to insiders, the absurder the better. Consider the Roman Catholic story: It says the bread and the wine really do become the body and blood of Christ when the priest says the right words. Outsiders may laugh -- pure nonsense! But to insiders, that's the one thing you really do have to believe, and when you do, that's it -- you're securely inside.

Or consider the Calvinist-Presbyterian story, called "predestination." Bill Schulz tells this version: An elderly Presbyterian lady falls down the stairs, picks herself up, brushes herself off and says, "Thank goodness that's over!" To the Calvinist, it's quite obvious that God, being all-powerful, must foresee and foreordain all things, including everything we humans do. Seeing how Calvinists became the capitalist movers and shakers of the Western world, you'd think they would abandon this foolish idea. But insiders, true-believing Calvinists, cling all the more tightly to the belief that ... well, God's will is done in everything the truly faithful do! In the days of the English Puritan revolution, they used to say, "There's nothing so dangerous as a Presbyterian just off his knees." We may laugh, but they wouldn't.

Now, what's sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander. Consider the Unitarian Universalists. Consider Alice Wesley's paradoxical assertion: "Individual members of a coherent free church may be ever so singular and diverse ... The more singular and diverse, the better." Did I get that right: "the better"?

Yes, if we say, with Channing, that an authentic church is "a place of perfect spiritual freedom," then it follows, as the night the day, "the more singular and diverse, the better." Outsiders will shake their heads and laugh: *A religion without obligatory beliefs? What on Earth holds you people together?* They miss the miracle of it: That the greatest unity will encompass the greatest diversity. "In the place of friendship, there is freedom," remember? Consider freedom as a gift we give to others; then our diversity is precisely the sign of our unifying spirit.

End of prelude. (Thank goodness that's over!) This sermon begins an experiment in two parts. What I am saying here, today, I will say in our partner church in Transylvania, the Unitarian Church in Barot, next Sunday -- Pentecost, one of the four Sundays on which their community gathers around the communion table. Apparently they think Pentecost is a big deal -- while to us it seems odd, as un-Unitarian a day as you can get. Hmmm. Can the same message be preached and heard in both places? Or was it only an accident of history gave us the same proud name of "Unitarian"?

I am asking: What if Transylvanian and American Unitarians, thrown together, are a modern-day version of the Tower of Babel? Note that their church has built a fine new building with a high tower, and our church will break ground this year for a fine new building with a new steeple. Does this mean we each aspire to build our own Babel? In the Babel of Transylvanian, the Unitarians speak Hungarian, the Orthodox speak Romanian, and the Gypsies adapt -- outwardly, but not at heart. But judge not: Here in Summit, we have a Babel of our own. I am told that some 50 languages are spoken by schoolchildren -- but not in our church!

We read in the Book of Genesis that, just after the days of Noah, "the whole earth had one language and the same, few words." And there in the plain of Shinar, the people said to one another, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens. And let us make a (great) name for ourselves. Otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the Earth." The Lord God is not pleased! He says, "This is only the beginning of their ambition. Come, let us go down and pull down their proud tower. And let us confuse their language, so that they will not be able to understand each other. They will fall into confusion and be dispersed across the face of the Earth."

You cannot build something great if you cannot speak freely and understand one another. So their city-building was abandoned, and the tower became a ruin, and the people were scattered across the Earth, with many different languages. The name of the place is Babel, confusion. At one time or another, I suspect we have all been there.

We call the story a fable. It holds the ancient belief that, originally, all people spoke one language and all understood each other. But they got too clever. They over-reached

themselves. When they tried to build the most powerful and famous city on Earth, God was provoked. Why? Because building such a city and such a tower, in one giant system, demands unquestioning loyalty and unremitting labor. Unity depends on strict conformity -- in state, and school, and church, and marketplace. But conformity that is forced always breaks down. The proud tower always crumbles. In its place, Babel -- confusion and disunity -- prevails.

Maybe, as I said, even we "kindred American and Transylvanian Unitarians" are like that today -- houses of confusion, accentuated by our coming together.

I hear American Unitarians saying things like, "Well, aren't those Transylvanian Unitarians very different from us? Why, they base their religion on the Bible and celebrate holy days like Pentecost, don't they?" Then I hear Transylvanian Unitarians saying, "I hear those American Unitarians are humanists. They seem to think Jesus was a nice guy and maybe even important, but they're not so sure about God! But that's our very basis: *Egy ast Isten!* Aren't those American Unitarians completely different from us?"

To both sides I say: "Yes, of course we are very different." How could it be otherwise? For we have been strangers to each other for so long! For more than 50 years, the Cold War kept us apart. Barbara and I first went to Transylvania in 1989, before the anti-Communist revolution. Then I said to myself: WHY? Why were we so timid, not to challenge their isolation through all those years? Why did we think "nothing can be done"? We were people of "little faith," resigning ourselves to hopelessness and impotence. We knew what it was like during the last years of Ceausescu. That is when I began to feel ashamed: We knew about them, and yet we did not even say "Hello!" and "We too are Unitarians, people like you."

But now, everything is changed. Now there is nothing to keep us from finding out how we are different from them. And nothing to keep them from finding out how they are different from us. Getting closer, in this way, we may feel that we are further apart in spirit, in faith, and in understanding than ever. But do not be dismayed. The feeling of being strangers always happens when we meet for the first time. You must persist and get beyond it before you can be friends. You know this from your everyday experience: Until you learn how you really are different, you cannot discover how much you are the same - - how all of us reflect the image of God, but each of us does so in a unique way. It does happen. I call it a miracle, the miracle of friendship, something almost too wonderful to believe.

So this is an experiment to see if the miracle of understanding can happen, even though we are so very different, even though we must trust in God's Spirit as something larger than us all, even though we must believe in this miracle of understanding, for it to happen at all.

(Remember what Jesus said, when he healed the sick: *Your faith has made you well.* Not some magic formula, but your faith ... has made you well. And our faith, even across the oceans, will create our mutual understanding, and make us whole.)

Now you have heard the reading of the story of Pentecost from the Book of Acts. How Peter declared that the people babbling in many tongues could not be drunk, since it was only 9 o'clock in the morning. (In Transylvania, they regularly take a shot of palinka -- homemade brandy -- with breakfast, so maybe these were Transylvanians.) And how this fulfilled the prophecy of Joel: "And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; yes, and on my manservants and my maidservants in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy." Which means at least this -- that we must be open to, we must watch and listen for the Spirit of understanding, at work among us!

Pentecost means the 50th day. The Jewish Pentecost -- or Feast of Weeks -- celebrates the giving of the Law of God to Moses on the 50th day after the first Passover. So Pentecost marks the birth of the Jewish community of faith. No wonder that Christians took as their Pentecost the 50th day after Easter. The Book of Acts tells the story: That the Spirit of God descended upon people, gathered from many lands, speaking many languages, and gave them one Spirit. This, we are told, is the true birthday of the church. But there's more.

Pentecost is the Tower of Babel in reverse. Now, instead of all languages becoming confused and incomprehensible, the Spirit came down in tongues of fire so that each one could hear and understand all others, all at once. Even as each babbles in her or his own tongue. It is a miracle story -- a wonder that lies beyond explanation -- but not so fantastic that each of us has not experienced such a thing: the wonder of spontaneous speech, and being heard with a whole heart.

We all ask the question of questions: What kind of a story am I in? We answer this question first by living, and then by telling, our story. And if it turns out to be a story of spiritual freedom, then Pentecost is the story that shapes our community and directs its heart and mind. For this we believe: That when we come together, and when each of us speaks freely the truth that springs from our own hearts, then we discover the miracle of concord, between us.

We have a name for it: unity in diversity. But our unity will be weak and lifeless if it is not fired by the spiritual freedom we carry within us, and share with each and all we meet. "I call that church free," said James Luther Adams, "which in charity promotes freedom in fellowship, seeking unity in diversity. ... But it will remain unity in diversity."

Therefore, Unitarians of America and Unitarians of Transylvania -- or let us just say "Unitarians of Summit" alone! -- give thanks for your differences! Defend them and celebrate them! So will we find the true unity in our full-blooded diversity. We have not come together in order to make the other after our image. Or if we have, we shall surely fail. We have come together to speak the truth of our hearts, to meet one another from the center our spiritual freedom, and to know the love that says *Vive la difference!* If, then, we are changed by our encounter, we will feel its liberation to be more truly who we are. This is the miracle of unity in diversity, the miracle of Pentecost we celebrate this day.

The Tower of Babel was a megastructure built with slave labor, a place of forced uniformity and human deformity. Pentecost happens wherever spiritual freedom is found: for the Spirit is free as the wind, and the very breath of life, and equally available to all. It transcends and translates our languages and communicates diverse truths. It goes to work in the miracle of dialogue, and in the unfathomed creativity of art. It speaks in the many voices of one community. Coercion betrays it; violence kills it. Yet it rises again in holy persuasion, and it comes with prophetic fire. It lives by our will to give all to love.

This is why I say that Pentecost is the story that tells us who we are. And still we wait for our sons and our daughters, our manservants and our maidservants, to discern the tides of the Spirit in days to come, and prophesy. What is our truest myth? It is the story that tells us who we are. And which is that? Hard to say, for there are no myths, there are only versions -- I mean, there are ever new ways of telling the old, old tales. The Tower of Babel, for instance, which can even be told in reverse. The trouble begins when one group or another latches on to what they think is "the one true version." (Some will say, "If the King James Version was good enough for Jesus, it's good enough for me.") Consider the way in which various versions of the Christian myth have been enshrined by various denominations, and these are pressed into service, as prickly defenses, keeping outsiders out and insiders in.

There's the story of St. Peter's tour of the heavenly mansions: Passing a high-walled cloister, he says to the tourists, "Shhh, the Catholics are in there. They think they're the only ones up here." But I can imagine another version: Passing the Unitarian Universalist lounge, St. Peter says, "Shhh, don't spoil it. They're discussing whether any such place as this exists."

The power of any group to sustain and renew itself depends on the power of its central myth. That's why my old friend Alice Wesley believes it is so important that we recognize -- and celebrate -- our myth. Indeed, "our truest myth." The story may seem absurd -- to outsiders; to insiders, the absurder the better. Consider the Roman Catholic story: It says the bread and the wine really do become the body and blood of Christ when the priest says the right words. Outsiders may laugh -- pure nonsense! But to insiders, that's the one thing you really do have to believe, and when you do, that's it -- you're securely inside.

Or consider the Calvinist-Presbyterian story, called "predestination." Bill Schulz tells this version: An elderly Presbyterian lady falls down the stairs, picks herself up, brushes herself off and says, "Thank goodness that's over!" To the Calvinist, it's quite obvious that God, being all-powerful, must foresee and foreordain all things, including everything we humans do. Seeing how Calvinists became the capitalist movers and shakers of the Western world, you'd think they would abandon this foolish idea. But insiders, true-believing Calvinists, cling all the more tightly to the belief that ... well, God's will is done in everything the truly faithful do! In the days of the English Puritan revolution, they used to say, "There's nothing so dangerous as a Presbyterian just off his knees." We may laugh, but they wouldn't.

Now, what's sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander. Consider the Unitarian Universalists. Consider Alice Wesley's paradoxical assertion: "Individual members of a coherent free church may be ever so singular and diverse ... The more singular and diverse, the better." Did I get that right: "the better"?

Yes, if we say, with Channing, that an authentic church is "a place of perfect spiritual freedom," then it follows, as the night the day, "the more singular and diverse, the better." Outsiders will shake their heads and laugh: *A religion without obligatory beliefs? What on Earth holds you people together?* They miss the miracle of it: That the greatest unity will encompass the greatest diversity. "In the place of friendship, there is freedom," remember? Consider freedom as a gift we give to others; then our diversity is precisely the sign of our unifying spirit.

End of prelude. (Thank goodness that's over!) This sermon begins an experiment in two parts. What I am saying here, today, I will say in our partner church in Transylvania, the Unitarian Church in Barot, next Sunday -- Pentecost, one of the four Sundays on which their community gathers around the communion table. Apparently they think Pentecost is a big deal -- while to us it seems odd, as un-Unitarian a day as you can get. Hmmm. Can the same message be preached and heard in both places? Or was it only an accident of history gave us the same proud name of "Unitarian"?

I am asking: What if Transylvanian and American Unitarians, thrown together, are a modern-day version of the Tower of Babel? Note that their church has built a fine new building with a high tower, and our church will break ground this year for a fine new building with a new steeple. Does this mean we each aspire to build our own Babel? In the Babel of Transylvanian, the Unitarians speak Hungarian, the Orthodox speak Romanian, and the Gypsies adapt -- outwardly, but not at heart. But judge not: Here in Summit, we have a Babel of our own. I am told that some 50 languages are spoken by schoolchildren -- but not in our church!

We read in the Book of Genesis that, just after the days of Noah, "the whole earth had one language and the same, few words." And there in the plain of Shinar, the people said to one another, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens. And let us make a (great) name for ourselves. Otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the Earth." The Lord God is not pleased! He says, "This is only the beginning of their ambition. Come, let us go down and pull down their proud tower. And let us confuse their language, so that they will not be able to understand each other. They will fall into confusion and be dispersed across the face of the Earth."

You cannot build something great if you cannot speak freely and understand one another. So their city-building was abandoned, and the tower became a ruin, and the people were scattered across the Earth, with many different languages. The name of the place is Babel, confusion. At one time or another, I suspect we have all been there.

We call the story a fable. It holds the ancient belief that, originally, all people spoke one language and all understood each other. But they got too clever. They over-reached

themselves. When they tried to build the most powerful and famous city on Earth, God was provoked. Why? Because building such a city and such a tower, in one giant system, demands unquestioning loyalty and unremitting labor. Unity depends on strict conformity -- in state, and school, and church, and marketplace. But conformity that is forced always breaks down. The proud tower always crumbles. In its place, Babel -- confusion and disunity -- prevails.

Maybe, as I said, even we "kindred American and Transylvanian Unitarians" are like that today -- houses of confusion, accentuated by our coming together.

I hear American Unitarians saying things like, "Well, aren't those Transylvanian Unitarians very different from us? Why, they base their religion on the Bible and celebrate holy days like Pentecost, don't they?" Then I hear Transylvanian Unitarians saying, "I hear those American Unitarians are humanists. They seem to think Jesus was a nice guy and maybe even important, but they're not so sure about God! But that's our very basis: *Egy ast Isten!* Aren't those American Unitarians completely different from us?"

To both sides I say: "Yes, of course we are very different." How could it be otherwise? For we have been strangers to each other for so long! For more than 50 years, the Cold War kept us apart. Barbara and I first went to Transylvania in 1989, before the anti-Communist revolution. Then I said to myself: WHY? Why were we so timid, not to challenge their isolation through all those years? Why did we think "nothing can be done"? We were people of "little faith," resigning ourselves to hopelessness and impotence. We knew what it was like during the last years of Ceausescu. That is when I began to feel ashamed: We knew about them, and yet we did not even say "Hello!" and "We too are Unitarians, people like you."

But now, everything is changed. Now there is nothing to keep us from finding out how we are different from them. And nothing to keep them from finding out how they are different from us. Getting closer, in this way, we may feel that we are further apart in spirit, in faith, and in understanding than ever. But do not be dismayed. The feeling of being strangers always happens when we meet for the first time. You must persist and get beyond it before you can be friends. You know this from your everyday experience: Until you learn how you really are different, you cannot discover how much you are the same - - how all of us reflect the image of God, but each of us does so in a unique way. It does happen. I call it a miracle, the miracle of friendship, something almost too wonderful to believe.

So this is an experiment to see if the miracle of understanding can happen, even though we are so very different, even though we must trust in God's Spirit as something larger than us all, even though we must believe in this miracle of understanding, for it to happen at all.

(Remember what Jesus said, when he healed the sick: *Your faith has made you well.* Not some magic formula, but your faith ... has made you well. And our faith, even across the oceans, will create our mutual understanding, and make us whole.)

Now you have heard the reading of the story of Pentecost from the Book of Acts. How Peter declared that the people babbling in many tongues could not be drunk, since it was only 9 o'clock in the morning. (In Transylvania, they regularly take a shot of palinka -- homemade brandy -- with breakfast, so maybe these were Transylvanians.) And how this fulfilled the prophecy of Joel: "And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; yes, and on my manservants and my maidservants in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy." Which means at least this -- that we must be open to, we must watch and listen for the Spirit of understanding, at work among us!

Pentecost means the 50th day. The Jewish Pentecost -- or Feast of Weeks -- celebrates the giving of the Law of God to Moses on the 50th day after the first Passover. So Pentecost marks the birth of the Jewish community of faith. No wonder that Christians took as their Pentecost the 50th day after Easter. The Book of Acts tells the story: That the Spirit of God descended upon people, gathered from many lands, speaking many languages, and gave them one Spirit. This, we are told, is the true birthday of the church. But there's more.

Pentecost is the Tower of Babel in reverse. Now, instead of all languages becoming confused and incomprehensible, the Spirit came down in tongues of fire so that each one could hear and understand all others, all at once. Even as each babbles in her or his own tongue. It is a miracle story -- a wonder that lies beyond explanation -- but not so fantastic that each of us has not experienced such a thing: the wonder of spontaneous speech, and being heard with a whole heart.

We all ask the question of questions: What kind of a story am I in? We answer this question first by living, and then by telling, our story. And if it turns out to be a story of spiritual freedom, then Pentecost is the story that shapes our community and directs its heart and mind. For this we believe: That when we come together, and when each of us speaks freely the truth that springs from our own hearts, then we discover the miracle of concord, between us.

We have a name for it: unity in diversity. But our unity will be weak and lifeless if it is not fired by the spiritual freedom we carry within us, and share with each and all we meet. "I call that church free," said James Luther Adams, "which in charity promotes freedom in fellowship, seeking unity in diversity. ... But it will remain unity in diversity."

Therefore, Unitarians of America and Unitarians of Transylvania -- or let us just say "Unitarians of Summit" alone! -- give thanks for your differences! Defend them and celebrate them! So will we find the true unity in our full-blooded diversity. We have not come together in order to make the other after our image. Or if we have, we shall surely fail. We have come together to speak the truth of our hearts, to meet one another from the center our spiritual freedom, and to know the love that says *Vive la difference!* If, then, we are changed by our encounter, we will feel its liberation to be more truly who we are. This is the miracle of unity in diversity, the miracle of Pentecost we celebrate this day.

The Tower of Babel was a megastructure built with slave labor, a place of forced uniformity and human deformity. Pentecost happens wherever spiritual freedom is found: for the Spirit is free as the wind, and the very breath of life, and equally available to all. It transcends and translates our languages and communicates diverse truths. It goes to work in the miracle of dialogue, and in the unfathomed creativity of art. It speaks in the many voices of one community. Coercion betrays it; violence kills it. Yet it rises again in holy persuasion, and it comes with prophetic fire. It lives by our will to give all to love.

This is why I say that Pentecost is the story that tells us who we are. And still we wait for our sons and our daughters, our manservants and our maidservants, to discern the tides of the Spirit in days to come, and prophesy.