

Genesis 11:1-9 Bill Uetracht Pentecost 6.5.25

“And the humans 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; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the whole face of the earth.’”

This latter line jumped out at me this past week, revealing something that I had missed before in what is our first reading for today. We need to make a name for ourselves, or we will be scattered all over the place. That is so telling to me. We got to go big, fame and fortune need to be ours, or we will disappear into the dust of history and culture. Our lives can’t be validated unless we together have our names in lights. “Let us make a name for ourselves, or we shall be scattered abroad.” We don’t want to be scattered. We want to stay together so we can toot our own horns.

If you have studied with me, you realize that many of the stories that appear in the so-called primeval history of Israel, stories that show up in the early portion of the book of Genesis, are stories that in their early form attempted more than likely to explain the origins of many things. They are called etiologies. Ancient people wanted to know where many things came from—why, for example, work is so hard, why childbirth is so difficult, why women are afraid of snakes, why men and women are attracted to each other, why cities were named what they were named, why humans, who came from one source, speak a variety of languages. Their wondering caused them to tell stories, which were attempts to explain these things. It is likely that the story in our first lesson was in its origins a story that was told to explain the final “why” in my listing, that is, why do people speak so many languages, why don’t they communicate with one language, why don’t they all speak English?!

The story at first glance appears to be critical of the development of the diversity of languages. God seems to be angry with the pride of the humans. The various languages appear to be

God's judgment on the human attempt to make a name for themselves, to create a big building that can reach the heavens.

By the way, the ancient Babylonians who were a real pain in the neck to the Jews later in their history, were known for creating such buildings. These buildings were known as ziggurats. They were like religious temples that were meant to enable people to climb to the divine. The tower in today's story is referred to as the tower of Babel, which sounds a lot like Babylon. I hear ancient Jews in this narrative making fun of an enemy who took their power way too seriously. This Babylonian power mongering is really just a bunch of babbling. Dear Babylonians, take that!

In many ways, our text is much more complicated than meets the eye, which takes me back to wondering about whether the diversity of language, whether being scattered is the problem in the text. Is the reality of speaking all these languages God's judgment, or perhaps what God wanted all along. I can't be certain, but I sense this story struggling with something that all people throughout history struggle with. I will call it the struggle with the one and the many, the struggle over unity and diversity.

What does unity mean? Does it mean that we are all the same? You hear Americans struggle with this all the time as some of us say, "Oh, I just wish we were one nation, not a collection of individual groups." You hear married people and families struggle with it often. "Oh, we are so different. Our kids are so different from each other. I am so different from my wife. Is there unity in the family? Is there unity in marriage?"

I am struck by the fact that the humans in the Tower-of-Babel story are resisting being scattered. We have to make a name for ourselves, or we will be scattered. We don't want to be scattered, sent off to various places. We want to use our unity to promote ourselves. Perhaps you remember that earlier in Genesis God told the humans that they were to be fruitful and multiply and to *fill the earth*. No thanks, they seem to be saying. We would rather just stay

in our little hometown and become famous where we are. We'll use our unity to keep things under control. So, I must wonder if God is not saying, there is a bigger world out there; unity doesn't look like sameness. What may look like God's judgment to you is really what God wants: the fascination of a diverse human community.

This is what I sense the Spirit of God is up to in the very familiar Pentecost story from Acts. Jews from every nation are gathered for a party in Jerusalem. God's Spirit acts, and the wind blows. Tongues of fire appear on the heads of the disciples. And the disciples start proclaiming the good news of Jesus in languages that are not their own. Speaking in a wide variety of languages is not God's judgment of humans, but rather, the means by which the faith is starting to reach the then-known world. Diversity of tongues was necessary for the health and well-being of the early Christian movement.

Unity is not sameness. Unity is discovered in the midst of the wildly different. To be *one* doesn't mean that everybody has to look, think, talk, vote like each other. It doesn't mean that we can't disagree. My wife and I disagree with each other quite often. We are wildly different. The older we have become the more we recognize how very different we are from each other. But that doesn't mean we are not one flesh, as the Bible likes to put it. Unity is not sameness.

Now I am very aware of the challenges that come with negotiating the unity/diversity conversation. I am one who often says that in our own time and land uniqueness can be overplayed. In a nation where individualism is rabid, that which holds us together can fall through the cracks. Even common meals can be a problem because, it seems, so many people have their own individual approaches to food. The kind of consumer culture that you and I live in makes it easy to see everything we do as a matter of individual choice. I personally believe that you and I can experience what is called "choice fatigue," a condition that we encounter

because we are overwhelmed by the need to make choices about everything. Sometimes it may be worth our while not to have to *choose* everything, maybe on occasion just to go along with what is expected and provided. Overplaying our need to be individuals or unique isn't always helpful or good news for us.

Yet it is clear from the Pentecost story that God revels in diversity. The apostles are not involved in crazy behavior because they are individually drunk from too much wine. No, the Spirit is opening up the world to them. The Spirit is giving them languages that they didn't know they could speak, languages that help them proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ to people from far-off places.

What's happening on Pentecost is what the prophet Joel said would take place in the last days. God's wild spirit is being set loose everywhere. The Spirit is falling on *all* flesh. Not only are your sons speaking boldly; your daughters are, too. Young men are seeing visions. And believe it or not, old men are dreaming dreams. Even slaves, *both* men and women, are proclaiming truth. The Spirit is getting everybody involved—a diverse everybody. The Spirit is beginning the process of scattering the early church to the far corners of the world. And in case you don't get it, I'll say it clearly: the world doesn't always look, act, or speak like us. The good world created by a good God is remarkably diverse. The Spirit who moved over the waters at the beginning gifted us with a creation that is marvelously varied.

I get it, though. Reveling in that diversity can be threatening. I mean, how will we make a name for ourselves unless we are all the same, building the same tower, reaching up to God from the same place, avoiding the call to be scattered?

You know, it's kind of funny. In our Genesis story, God decides to come on down to check out the tower that the humans are creating. In other words, he can't even see the tower that the humans are building. And here they are trying to reach him. Good luck, humans. What a silly endeavor you are involved in! You ain't

going to reach God. Get over this ridiculous preoccupation. At the heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ is this message: God is busy reaching us. God doesn't need your towers, especially the high ones. Get to work looking around. Be prepared to be scattered for the sake of the diverse world that God loves so much.