

C Pentecost 6.9.19

Genesis 11:1-9; Acts 2:1-21

Focus Statement: God created us to be different.

It's Pentecost Sunday and Pentecost always feels like a day for experimentation, so I want to take a direction I don't normally take here and talk about the first reading about the Tower of Babel. Weirdly nestled within the genealogies in Genesis, I admit I've give very little thought to this story before, but I read a commentary this week that interpreted it in a way I'd never considered before and that interpretation helped me see really all of creation in a new light, so I wanted to share that with you.

Quick recap for those of you who, no judgment but, checked out during the first reading since I just about always preach on the Gospel. We're still super early in the existence of humanity, just a handful of generations after Noah and the story tells us that "the whole earth had one language and the same words," meaning there was no language barrier, everyone could talk to everyone else. Not that language is the only barrier of understanding, but for the sake of the story, let's says that it is. So this super connected group of people, because they could all communicate openly with each other, decided for whatever reason to make some bricks and build a giant tower that reached all the way to heaven. And God saw this giant tower and was like, nope. These humans are getting too smart. We need to confuse their language and scatter them all over the world. A Word for God's People. Thanks be to God?

It's a weird little story. And as weird little stories can, it's got a pretty problematic history. Including use by South African theologians to justify apartheid, that God desired for

different languages and cultures to be kept separate from one another. Or that diversity was a “problem” that needed to be “solved” by the Spirit at Pentecost. Theologian Sara Koenig offered three different interpretations on what was meant by the Tower of Babel. The first was that this was a story about the danger of pride. The people attempted to build a tower to “make a name for themselves” rather than trust in their God-given identity. Another possibility is this is a critique of empire. The city name, “Babel” is the same Hebrew word as “Babylon,” the empire which eventually destroyed Judah and forced the Israelites into exile. And one of common tricks used by empires to force obedience is to implement a common language. A third understanding of this text was the problem was not the people’s unity itself, but how that unity made them want to stay together in one place instead of fulfill God’s mandate at creation to “spread out and fill the whole earth.” God scattered them because God desired more diversity, not less.

So I was thinking about these and I was thinking about unity and diversity, and then I started thinking about one of my favorite guilty pleasures, which is the TV show Survivor. The basic premise is eighteen or so people are stranded in the wilderness where they vote each other off one by one, until the last one left wins a million dollars. If you’ve seen the show, you know there’s a lot of lying and trickery and gameplay to keep your fellow contestants from not voting for you. One of the ways people protect themselves is to create alliances with other players to agree to vote together for someone not in the alliance. And the best way to break up an alliance is for those outside the alliance to remind those inside that, yeah, everyone’s all friendly now, but someone is always on the bottom of an alliance, and if that someone is you, maybe you should break rank now and make a “big move”

before the rest of your so-called alliance votes you out. Sure everyone is “Kamu strong” today, but if you’re the bottom of the Kamu, they’ll have no problem cutting you later.

The game of Survivor is a made for TV example of the classic truth of humanity, unity is not always all that unifying. If someone is preaching the glory of unity and uniformity, it is always good to ask ourselves the question, who benefits? Who benefits from us all being the same? Who benefits from things staying status quo? Who is at the top if we keep things as they are, and who is at the bottom? Something unity can be a great thing, we can come together and accomplish way more than we could have apart. But sometimes unity can just be a convenient way for those at the top to remain at the top, and to keep others at the bottom. Reading the Tower of Babel story through Koenig’s critique of empire lens makes me ask the question, who benefits from the construction of this tower? And whose labor, whose lives, may have been sacrificed, whose voices silenced, whose needs overlooked, in pursuit of this project of reaching to heaven?

Flash forward to Pentecost when the disciples were “all together in one place.” In other words, not out “proclaiming repentance and forgiveness of sins... to all nations” as Jesus had instructed them to do before his ascension. But despite this oversight, conveniently, they just happened to be “all together in one place” in a place that had “devout Jews from every nation under heaven” and with “a sound like the rush of a violent wind” the Spirit came over them, and they “began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.” And this crowd of people from every language and culture, heard the word the disciples were proclaiming each in their own native language. That, I think, is hugely

important to understanding the Pentecost story. The crowds did not hear the disciples speaking the same language, they heard them speaking in different languages, in their own language. The Spirit did not bring everyone together under one universal tongue, the Spirit made the disciples adaptable, able to reach others and communicate with them not in the way the disciples knew best, but in the way that those being reach out to could best understand.

And, and this should probably not surprise anyone but, this speaking in a bunch of different languages thing made some people uncomfortable. It's much more comfortable, easier, if everyone sounds like us, speaks like us, thinks like us. But that's not what the Spirit did, the Spirit made the disciples able to communicate differently to a bunch of different people. Because yes, in uniformity there's less confusion, less opportunity for misinterpretation and misunderstanding. But there's also less space to be challenged, be changed, to grow and learn from others. There is less young men seeing visions and old men dreaming dreams, less sons and daughters prophesying, less Spirit poured out on all flesh.

And that friends, is I think both the gift and the challenge of Pentecost. God created each of us different because the world needs us to be different. The world needs us to speak in many languages, to transcend many cultures, to communicate in many ways. And let's be clear, I'm not just talking about languages here, though certainly language is a part. But also life experiences, socio-economic backgrounds, orientations and opportunities. I try to be pretty open and adaptable, but at the end of the day, I'm a straight, middle-class white clergyperson in my mid-thirties. As hard as I might try to be different, I speak a very

particular language and there will be people who won't be able to hear me. But they may be able to hear you. Who you are, what you know, what you bring to the table, your visions, your dreams, your prophecies of a different future, the world needs you, God needs you, to be that, to share that.

So that's the good news. The challenge is, God doesn't need you to build a tower to heaven, God needs you out in the world. The whole we could even build a tower to heaven theory breaks down pretty quickly anyway. And the entirety of our theology as Lutherans can be summed up in the promise that we can never make ourselves great enough to get to God, nor do we need to because in the person of Jesus, God came down to be with us. So we don't need to reach God, but you know who we do need to reach? Each other.

That, my friends, is the message of Pentecost. The Spirit is upon you, you are loved by God. So go and love others. Amen.