

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
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May 23, 2010
Pentecost
Acts 2:1-13; Genesis 11:1-9

Babel Revisited

I love diversity. I love to be surrounded by people who are of different backgrounds, who speak different languages, who have different skin colors and facial features, who eat different foods, who are gifted differently and who worship God in different ways. I think it's fascinating to learn how different people think and live in the world.

So, for instance, I get a thrill each Tuesday and Thursday morning during the school year, when I see the small procession of people who walk through our church door. They come for a class in English for Speakers of Other Languages, and in the time we've hosted these classes I've seen people from nations as diverse as China, Mongolia, Japan, Mexico, Columbia, Pakistan and Guatemala. Right here in Bozeman.

Both the Babel story and the Pentecost story prompt us to consider the diversity of human languages and cultures. 400 years ago, North America was home to about 300 languages. Today 165 of those indigenous languages are still spoken. But most of us are descendants of immigrants, who came and are still coming to this country. In New York City these days, public school students speak 176 different languages. New York City residents, it is estimated, speak 800 languages. But they represent a fraction of the world's possibilities. The Bible has been translated into more than 2400 languages, but if it were to be translated into every language spoken on the planet today, there are 4500 more to go. And language, of course, is a gateway into a culture, which is much broader than language alone. Human diversity is an amazing and wonderful thing.

And when the book of Genesis describes the scattering of people across the face of the earth and the confusion of languages which they speak, it's not exaggerating one bit. Let me borrow the name of a board game to describe this phenomenon—we are scattergories of people around the globe.

I love it. And I think that God takes pleasure in human diversity, too. For human diversity illustrates the amazing creativity and richness of the divine. After all, every one of us is made in God's image.

Yet human diversity also has its dark side. Consider the list of people groups who were in Jerusalem for the Pentecost festival, as reported in Acts. All were Jews, but like Jews of today they had adopted the languages and cultures of their homelands. And their homelands had histories. The "Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia," were from the ancient Persian, Assyrian and Babylonian empires—think of all the invasions and wars which made those empires rise and fall. Today we call those lands Iran and Iraq, lands of great culture but also battles for domination, ethnic cleansings, and struggles for power. Diversity has its dark side, when fear and prejudice and lust for power converge to make one group hate another. The other groups who were represented in Jerusalem that day had complicated histories, too. They came from the provinces of today's Turkey and from northern Africa, from Rome and Judea, from Crete and Arab lands. In all these places, tribalism, the dark side of human diversity, has resulted in wars and oppression of one group by another for as long as anyone can remember. Some might say, "oh, if only we

were all alike, of one race and culture and language and religion, then maybe we wouldn't have these conflicts." Wishful thinking.

Because language and nationality aren't the only distinctives which drive people apart. There seems to be something in our nature which encourages us to let our differences define us as "us" and them as "them." We see this in the political arena. There have been times in American history when opposing political parties could work together. I'm sorry to say, we don't live in such times. And the polarization of our political viewpoints seems to be setting a pattern for everything else. Working together, appreciating the value of different points of view and the art of compromise—these practices aren't highly valued these days. Instead, choosing sides, demonizing opponents, and circling the wagons to defend one's position are the preferred strategies. We are speaking different languages in all arenas of life, and we seem unable or unwilling to hear what others are saying. And because the church is made up of people, we are not exempt from this. At every level of the church, in small and large congregations, in denominational controversies, and between different kinds of churches, there is a tendency to divide into sides. We see us as "us" and them as "them" and can't see any way to live together unless our side wins.

We all need to revisit the Babel story and pay attention to the Pentecost story. In the Babel story the dispersion of the people into many cultures was a judgment and an instrument of God's will. In the Pentecost story, the scattering of Babel is not exactly reversed, but the Holy Spirit makes it no longer an obstacle to communication. If Pentecost is the birthday of the church, then one thing is clear: the church was born in diversity. The church was born among people who couldn't understand one another before the Holy Spirit blew into their midst. The church was born when the Holy Spirit bridged the communication gap between the Babel scattergories of people who were all called to be the church.

And, my friends, the Holy Spirit can still bridge the communication gap between all the different sorts who are called into the church today. For the church is more than a gathering of people, more than a human institution. We are not a voluntary association, nor are we a club of like-minded people. We get ourselves in trouble when we start thinking that way. For we are the body of Christ, we are enlivened by the Spirit, and we belong to God, not to ourselves. So we can transcend the patterns of the world around us, because we have a gift alive among us called Holy Spirit. And if we deny the possibility of being one church, of working together, of communicating with one another across our differences, we deny the presence of that Spirit.

I say all this not because I see divisiveness taking hold in our congregation, but because I see it in our society and I want us to do better, to live better together than that, to represent Christ better than that. We could easily follow the world's ways, but we are called and gifted with another way. The church was born in diversity, and we are blessed to be a community of diversity. We are "the provisional demonstration of what God intends for all humanity." We are "a sign in and for the world of the new reality God has made available to people in Jesus Christ." (PC(USA) Book of Order, G-3.0200) Those are actually phrases from the Book of Order. Yes, the Holy Spirit speaks even in the Book of Order. New elders and deacons, take note!

Understanding one another can be challenging, but the Holy Spirit makes it possible! So when we allow ourselves to be led by the Spirit, we work at listening to one another, finding common language, apologizing if our language polarizes or hurts another, and identifying common ground. We avoid anything that sounds like name-calling or demonizing someone who looks at things differently than we do. We guard our tongues, heeding the wisdom of James when he warns us that “the tongue is a fire” which can set a forest ablaze. (James 3:5-6) We make more efforts to maintain relationship than we do to prove we are right. We respect differences, and we respect one another. Now, this isn’t always easy. Every one of us can think of situations where we were sure that our opponents were aliens from another planet, because they just didn’t get it! But we can do better than that, because the Holy Spirit bridges communication gaps. When we think we are in the most intractable situation, when we think that nothing could bring together people of such different mind sets, we need only recall the diversity of people whom the Holy Spirit brought together on the day the church was born. Pentecost. When Babel was revisited.

For although from many perspectives the differences between us seem innumerable and the variety infinite, and our languages exemplify that diversity, there is another perspective to consider. A biologist studying communication systems in general would observe that all humans use the same system to communicate, a system which is unique to humans but remarkably universal, and that is human language. Our differences are in nonessentials; what we share is our common humanity. After all, we share 99.9% of our DNA with every other human being. It’s the 0.1% which makes life interesting, and rich, and sometimes challenging.

Happy birthday, church! Today we celebrate our diversity AND our oneness in Christ. It is the gift of the Spirit that we can praise God together, on earth as it is in heaven, where an uncountable multitude from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages stands before the throne and before the Lamb, giving glory to God.

Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen. (from Rev. 7:9-12)