

Adventures in Mis-unity
Genesis 11:1-9; Acts 2:1-11

The last few weeks, we've been exploring the theme of reconciliation. We've looked at God's core mission of healing the alienation of all creation. We've talked about how belonging to Christ means rethinking basic distinctions like race and class that normally order our social relationships.

But perhaps some of you, like me, have felt the shadow of the elephant lurking in the choir loft. Here we are, declaring reconciliation the grand mission of God and the primary ministry of the church—at a time when the only place more divided than the church are the sands of the Middle East. Before his death, Jesus prayed that his followers would be one as he and God the Father are one. Hearing this prayer, it's impossible not to think of the 33,000 distinct Christian denominations and 'network' scattered across the globe and feel a keen sense of grief and shame at our complete and abject failure.

We all know that the tower of Babel is supposed to be some grand symbol of human degeneration. But honestly, from a 21st century standpoint it sounds downright admirable. Not the project itself, of course—building a skyscraper that reaches heaven seems like a rather dumb idea even for prehistoric people. Yet the miracle is, they all somehow agree to work on it together. I mean, the whole world united around one massive construction project? We couldn't get a bunch of U.S. Mennonites to agree on a headquarters building. Heck, most of us can't get our own kids united around what pizza to order. Our hats are off to you, citizens of Babel!

The first 11 chapters of Genesis are called "prehistory." They are universal stories, outside the confines of Israel's own particular history, creatively exploring what it means to be human. So you might ask, what deep-seated human impulse sends these ancient people off on a quest to build a city with a record-breaking tower? Genesis offers two related answers.

The first impulse is ambition. The people, we're told, want to "make a name" for themselves. They want, in other words, to secure their place in the history books. They want to build something that will outlast them, buy that precious hint of immortality. They want to have something solid they can point to and say, "We built that. How great are we?!" They want a lasting monument they can look to for reassurance that they matter.

The second impulse that drives Babel is anxiety. "We should build," the people say, "so that we won't be scattered over the face of the whole earth." They are experiencing that primal human fear of change and its inevitable loss. They've found the perfect spot and they don't want to leave it. They need a tower to defend their turf, to let God and everyone else know this land is theirs. They need a tower to ensure everyone they love is held together in one place. They need a tower to make sure they never have to leave this familiar ground.

It turns out, few things bring humans together like common fears and common ambitions. They design a project that is grounded on shared anxiety about the future and a shared need to assure their legacy. And they build up and build up and build up in total unity.

But this unity is displeasing to God. This is the part of the story that's so mysterious to many of us. Why isn't God happy that they're all getting along, that they've finally found something they can agree about and all work on together? The problem is that, as God observes, humans can achieve almost anything when they unite around shared fears of the world and around greed, determination to get what they want. But this kind of unity rarely results in God getting what *God* wants.

Back in Genesis 1, God gave humans their mission—to be fruitful and multiply; to fill the earth and bless its every corner in the name of its Creator. Yet here they are just a few chapters later, building a tower so that their own names will be remembered and so they'll never have to

leave this one small plain they've settled on. All this glorious unity, all the grand building projects they've taken on together, are actually diverting them from their essential purpose. While they're united around this tower, gathered in one city, the rest of the world is going untended. And God sees that, left their own devices, they will stay this way—building themselves bigger and bigger towers that make them feel secure and important while ignoring the big, bad world outside that God desires to bless.

So God forces them to confront their fears. God 'muddles' them. 'Muddle' is what Babel means. God breaks up the building project, muddles their tongues, and drives them out of the city until they scatter across the world. It sounds, perhaps, like a punishment, but that is not what's going on. This is course-correction. God is putting them back on course for global fruitfulness.

I think the author of Genesis is quite right in believing there is something essentially and universally human about this story. It's all so painfully familiar. We erect towers—sometimes literal buildings, sometimes institutions, sometimes group identities. We ease our anxieties about morality by trying to build something—something impressive, something lasting, something concrete that represents our worth. We are terrified of dispersal—of losing these external symbols of our identity, of being distanced from each other, of being forced off familiar ground into unknown territory. And so we build and we cling to the bricks and the mortar because if we stop, we don't know who or where we'll be. 'Dispersal' just sounds to most of us like another word for 'death.'

But so often the unity we achieve with all our tower-building is precisely the wrong kind. It's a unity of tribalism or nationalism. It's a unity of insecurity or self-absorption. It's a unity based around all the wrong projects. We keep on building *up*, while God is trying to build *out*.

Babel tell us it is fully possible for motivated and unified humans to build a tower all the way to heaven and then find out that *God isn't there*. God is working out on the corners of the world where the rest of us were trying so hard not to go.

A unity based around fear of change or loss, around our desire to secure our territory or leave a monument in the image of ourselves—this is not the unity Jesus prayed for. But if that isn't unity, then what is? That's where we come to Pentecost.

The events of Pentecost have often been described as a reversal of Babel. At Babel, the languages are confused. At Pentecost, the language barrier is finally overcome. Problem solved. But I think describing Pentecost as the opposite of Babel misses the point of both stories. Because the result of both Babel and Pentecost are exactly the same: the people of God are scattered to the farthest ends of the earth. Pentecost, you might say is Babel 2.0.

Pentecost is a revelation of what unity means to God—the same unity the people of Babel so misunderstood. At Pentecost, the one Holy Spirit of God is poured out all flesh. Men, women, young, old, Parthians, Egyptians, Cretans, Jews, and Arabs—the same Spirit on them all. At Pentecost, the people of God are empowered for one mission—to witness to the living Jesus to the very ends of the earth. One empowering Spirit, one mission, one Lord Jesus Christ.

But the effect of all this unity is not what you'd expect. Because before the Spirit came, they were all *Jews*, sitting around praying in *one* room in the center of *one* city, speaking in *one* common language. But after the Spirit comes, all of the sudden this same group of people is speaking 100 different languages. And all of the sudden they're not gathered in one room or one city—they're scattered in the streets and in all corners of the globe. Some are sent to Jews. Some are sent to Gentiles. When persecution forces them to disperse, the good news disperses

with them. Even when on occasion in Acts inability to come to agreement forces church leaders to take different roads, still the gospel only travels farther.

The unity of Pentecost scatters people gloriously, like confetti being shot from a cannon. The unity of Pentecost takes diversity as one of its most fundamental characteristics. This is the unity that Jesus prayed for before his death, at the same time he prayed for the Spirit to come. It's a unity that banishes fear and propels people outward into new territory, singing God's praises in a thousand different tongues, each more glorious than the last. Scattering at Pentecost is not a failure or a sign of disaster—it's a mark of an incredible new age where instead of one giant, immoveable tower, there's an altar springing up on every hill and in every alleyway.

Now don't hear me wrong here—I'm not in favor of divisions among followers of Jesus. Jesus Christ died to bring the walls of division down. There's no excuse for calling someone 'enemy' who Jesus has called 'friend.' But I do suspect sometimes that the church spends too much time fretting over Babel, chasing a single tower in the name of unity. We, like the people of Babel, have confused what real unity means.

The gift of Pentecost is not diversity gone—there may be more languages after Pentecost than ever before! The gift of Pentecost is not an end to dispersal—we may scatter farther than we ever have. The gift of Pentecost is that diversity and dispersal no longer divide. We may speak about faith in vastly different languages, but through the Spirit we are able to listen across them. We can hear another speaking in words that sound nothing like ours and recognize that they are declaring the wonders of God in their own tongue—and the tongue of many of our neighbors.

Homogeneity is not the unity of Pentecost—it's the unity of Babel, the kind God has rejected. Unity without difference, unity without dispersal, is not the Spirit of God—it's the

spirit of the world. It's a spirit too weak to tolerate difference, too fragile for its bonds to stretch to the ends of the earth. But that weakness is not our weakness. Our God is greater, and our bonds are stronger.

We are a people filled with one Spirit, following one Lord, who is sending us out with one mission to bear witness to Jesus to the farther corners of the world. Our unity is given, and it is inescapable. So we can let go of fear of unknown territory. We can let go of our need to hold the tower together. We can let go of our impulse to judge our neighbor's road. And we can celebrate the Spirit in whom it all holds together. We can look at each other across vast differences and be bold enough to agree with our Creator, who says, "It is good. It is very good!" And we can disperse in joy and creativity to bless every corner of creation...

Until the day the prophets speaks of, when the trumpet sounds to draw us all back to the city of Zion for a grand celebration that the earth is finally filled with the knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea.