

“Pentecostal Hearing”
Genesis 11:1-9; Acts 2:1-13
Pentecost Sunday
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What’s God’s problem with Babel? After all the mistakes that human beings have been through in the first ten chapters of Genesis here they seem to have finally gotten it together. After trying to become like God by eating the fruit, Cain killing his brother Abel, violence and evil spreading across the earth, the flood – here they seem to have finally figured out how to live in unity and peace. Isn’t this what we strive for in our communities, in our city, in our nation and world? It’s what the Apostle Paul prays for in the church – unity. It’s part of an ordination vow that pastors, elders, and deacons how to take – to work for the unity of the church. It’s behind the One Baltimore we’ve been working so hard for in the last year.

Human unity is more often one of God’s *goals*, not one of God’s problems. Pentecost is a case in point. The rushing wind blows through Jerusalem and suddenly people from different cultures and different languages can communicate across difference. Unity is the *outcome* of that story. Unity is the outcome of God’s choosing of Abraham so that all nations of the earth will be blessed through him. Unity is the goal of Jesus’ living, dying, and rising among us. Unity is praised in the book of Acts when all the believers share everything in common together. Unity is the great hope in Revelation at the end of our book – one city, one people, one God. Clearly God is not opposed to unity in every situation. *Unity alone doesn’t seem to be a problem.*

So what’s God’s problem with Babel? “They are one people,” God says, and they have all one language and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them.” It would have been helpful if God had added another sentence or two for clarification: “Nothing that they propose to do such as building a nuclear weapon or burning too much fossil fuel, or creating an entire synthetic human genome capable of creating human beings without parents¹ – nothing will now be impossible for them.” If God had said *that*, we would have known more about God’s view of the situation. “It’s not towers that kill people; it’s people who build towers who kill people.” Then we’d know. Or if God had said, “nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them including overthrowing my rule.” Then we would have known that God is like every other tyrant – petty, threatened, ego-driven. Or if God had said, “this is only the beginning of what they will do; next they’ll get rid of the weak ones among them, they’ll divide and conquer each other, then concentration camps will come, and then war and the crimes that go with it; too many humans in one spot with that kind of power never

¹ <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/14/science/synthetic-human-genome.html>. History is replete with examples of scientists developing new technologies at a pace that exceeds human wisdom for governing its use. Reformed theology is not negative on the development of such new technologies but insists that knowledge is as susceptible to sin as every other part of human nature. History seems to side with theology in this case.

ends well.” Then we’d know that God’s punishing move was driven by the hope for peace coupled with a firm knowledge of human nature.

But we get none of that. Nothing explicit to tell us whether God scatters this unified people because they are arrogant, or because their technology is headed for sinister ends, or because God is threatened. We do, however, get some interesting clues.

“Let us make a name for ourselves,” the people of Babel say, “otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.” The whole point of making a name for yourself is to get recognition from someone else to allay our fear that we will be overlooked or forgotten. It’s why we build big buildings with names of donors or corporations or historic figures on them. It’s why corporations pay to put their logos on stadiums and t-shirts and tennis shoes and pop-up ads. It’s why nations raise flags on foreign lands they conquer: *recognition*. You make a name for yourself to curry friends or intimidate enemies. But if you are the only human beings on the planet there is no one else to intimidate but God.² For the people of Babel, that’s the only other audience there is.

“Let us make a name for ourselves, otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.” It’s fear of being scattered of not having a united front against God that unites the people, that gives rise to their new brick technology, that brings them together. It’s fear that drives their unity. Not a hope to build a city of peace for all to enjoy. Not a hope to make sure no one is left out of care and concern. Fear of being alone. Fear of God. Fear of being alone before God.

Which makes me wonder how many of our human projects are motivated by the same kinds of fears. Is rebuilding Baltimore driven by compassion for those left out, justice for victims of unequal treatment, or by the fear of an uprising that might affect *my* neighborhood, *my* family, *my* privilege? Is our total embrace of social media motivated by a desire to connect more deeply with other human beings, or by our inability to be with ourselves, our fear of being alone? Is patriotism or religious faith, or political party affiliation driven by a positive embrace of important values we cherish, or do we just need to elevate ourselves above people we fear, people we don’t even know?

When is unity a positive outcome and when is it evidence of our persistent human fear? When is unity evidence of the Pentecostal movement of the spirit and when is it that old human desire to drive everyone to conformity?

At Pentecost, the Spirit descends and people are given the ability to communicate across difference. Some say it’s a reversal of Babel. But unlike Babel, the people at Pentecost don’t suddenly begin speaking in one language. And the miracle isn’t charismatic expression so much as it is the ability to hear each other. To really hear each other, not by becoming the same, not by adopting the same language, not by unity through conformity driven by fear, but by the grace of listening, of hearing.³

² The Assyrian kings in the 9th century BCE threatened challengers to their power by setting up steles in lands they conquered. The Assyrian king Assur-nasir-pal II reported on one stele he set up after defeating one of his opponents: “At that time I fashioned a heroic image of my royal self, my power and my glory I inscribed thereon, in the midst of his palace I set it up. I fashioned memorial steles and inscribed thereon my glory and my prowess, and I set them up by his city gate.” John T. Strong, “Shattering the Image of God: A Response to Theodore Hiebert’s Interpretation of the Story of the Tower of Babel,” *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Winter, 2008, Vol. 127 Issue 4, p. 630.

³ “. . .each one *heard* them speaking in the native language of each” (Acts 2:6); “how is it that we *hear*?” (2:7); “. . .in our own language we *hear* them speaking about God’s deeds of power” (2:11);

This is the gift that births the church. The gift of hearing people we're not supposed to be able to hear. In knowing others the world says we're not able to know. The gift of unity that comes without conformity, coercion, or control. Walter Brueggemann calls the church "a new language community where human speech is possible."⁴

I count this church a gift in these days when so much of the world seems unable to hear each other. When too many of us seem to prefer one liner put-downs to compassionate listening even from our presidential candidates. When an entire state – my home state of NC – seems consumed with fears about the differences of a few, fears that could be dissipated easily with the right dose of listening, of hearing, knowing, of understanding. I'm grateful for this new language community where the Spirit makes human speech possible on our different experiences of race, our different experiences of God, our different experiences of faith. The church is birthed with the gift of hearing, of listening – to God and to each other.

Of course Pentecost is similar to Babel in at least one respect. There is no way to be close to God without being vulnerable. There's no way to be close to each other without vulnerability. You can't hear others speaking in their own language without getting close enough to listen. You cannot connect in community without putting yourself out there. The tallest towers in the world cannot insulate you from the God of relationship. And purchasing our unity by erasing difference only erases the possibility of real relationship. Brene Brown, in her book *Daring Greatly* defines vulnerability as "uncertainty, risk and emotional exposure." Love she says, brings that kind of vulnerability to the surface. "Waking up every day and loving someone who may or may not love us back," she writes, "whose safety we can't ensure, who may stay in our lives or may leave without a moment's notice, who may be loyal to the day they die or betray us tomorrow—that's vulnerability," she writes.⁵

God knows that kind of vulnerability. Our God who wakes up every day and loves a people who too often don't love back. This God who, in the stories of our ancestors, endures chapter after chapter of a people who try to guard their own vulnerability with towers, and weapons, and knowledge. This God who knows just how deeply human beings are driven by fear. God knows this about us and keeps right on loving.

In these days of division in our country, the temptation is to look for unity by erasing our differences. Closing the gaps between human beings by ending difference. Bombing the opposition with our destructive words or actions. Closing the gaps between heaven and earth by ending the distinction between human and divine. But God knows these projects rarely end well. There is another way, made possible by the Spirit whose gift enables human beings to cross difference without obliterating it. To hear and be heard. It starts among a small group of disciples who gather to remember the One who bridged the human divine difference by walking into uncertainty and risk to show us a different way.

⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, (Atlanta: John Knox Press), 1982, p. 104

⁵ Brene Brown, *Daring Greatly*, (New York: Penguin Books), 2012, p. 34.