

The Tower of Babel

June 17, 2012

Genesis 11:1-9

Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. ²And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. ³And they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly." And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. ⁴Then they 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 face of the whole earth."

⁵The Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built. ⁶And the Lord said, "Look, they are one people, 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. ⁷Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another's speech." ⁸So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. ⁹Therefore it was called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth; and from there the Lord scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.

There is one question that churches have been asking through the ages. It is a question that reflects our anxiety about the future and our need for certainty. It is, "What if everyone brings the same thing to the potluck dinner?" What if everyone brings dessert? What if there aren't enough main dishes? What will we do? I know – let's create a sign-up sheet just to be sure we have a feast of diversity and balance of food groups.

The potluck dinner has got to be the greatest offering of the church to humankind. There is a certain smell that fills the air when all the food is arranged on the tables. There is a certain excitement as you preview the desserts hoping no one takes the one thing you want desperately to eat. It is the one time you will allow your Jello to touch your green beans. We seem to mix up more when we have potlucks because we cannot be choosy about where we sit, we are just happy to find a chair. Chatting across the table, discussing the flakiness of crust and creaminess of sauce, we find community, and it is a beautiful thing.

What IF everyone brought the same thing? No one wants a potluck where all the food is the same color, or the same temperature, or the same texture. It is the diversity of offerings that makes the meal and a single plate that brings it all together. What if everyone brought the same thing? We'd have a good laugh and make sure it never happens again.

In the language of potluck the idea of unity and diversity is easy to understand – diverse food, one meal. It is more difficult for us to appreciate when it comes to the human community – diverse people, one God. When it comes to food we love variety, but when it comes to people we tend to struggle with the different colors, cultures, and languages. Rather than seeing our differences as a beautiful thing, we are threatened by them. The same is true for beliefs. It is

easier when we all believe the same things, worship the same way, love the same songs, and share the same values. That is why people church shop until they find one that fits.

The only problem with a group of people that look alike, talk alike, believe alike, sing alike, and act alike is the potential for such a group to start thinking they set the standard for the ONLY way to look, talk, believe, sing, and act. To be part of this group you have to conform – you have to make yourself look like, talk like, believe like, sing like, and act like the group.

If a group like this gets too large it can become powerful and loud. Like the old game king of the hill, challengers are beat down to the bottom and silenced. In fact if a group like this gets too powerful it can start have a mind of its own – and what if that mind is not God's mind? What if that group has Hitler's mind? It can become God-like, but nothing like God at all! It can become brutal and self-serving.

So, what if God had a group of people who looked alike, thought alike, talked alike, and acted alike? We get to find out in the book of Genesis with a story known as the Tower of Babel. When reading a story like this it is tempting to reach for easy answers. Perhaps you learned that this story is about pride and human ambition. In a different time and era it was interpreted as a story again urbanization and the building of cities. Many simply say that this is a story that explains how we got different languages.

Most people tend to read the scattering of the people as punishment. But really they were just doing what people who look alike, think alike, talk alike and act alike do, which ultimately leads to some form of destruction. So there is no reason to think that God is punishing the people, he just sees where they are headed. Even though it was God's intention from the beginning that they scatter and multiply they liked the comfort of their sameness. The tower seemed to be some kind of attempt to dig in their heels, put down roots, and resist scattering.

So God looked down and what God saw wasn't good. "This is just the beginning of what they will do," God said. So God reached down and scattered the people, confusing their language. God also tore down the tower that functioned like a magnet holding them all together in a force field of security and comfort.

This story is confusing to those of us that have been taught that God wants us to be unified – you know "One in the Spirit." So which is it? Does God want unity or not? And wouldn't unity be easier if we all looked alike and thought alike and talked alike and acted alike?

It turns out that there are two kinds of unity. One kind of unity is based upon likeness. There is an expectation that everyone conform to the party line. Dissenting or differing voices are perceived as threats, even demonized. This kind of unity speaks with a single voice. This kind of unity speaks with certainty. This kind of unity promotes itself as the ONLY way, or the ONE TRUE WAY. In this kind of unity, power is usually concentrated at the top and more likely to be brutal.

The second kind of unity is unity around purpose. I can say with absolute certainty that this is the kind of unity God wills for us. I know this because of the story of Pentecost in the New Testament. When people come together around a purpose different and dissenting voices are welcomed as additional resources to serve the purpose. Diversity in all areas enriches the life of the group and is encouraged. This kind of unity is comfortable with uncertainty and able to grow and adapt to an ever-changing world. When you have unity around a purpose the power is spread throughout the group and everyone is empowered to work toward the purpose. This kind of unity is compassionate and does not promote its truth as the only truth.

This is the kind of unity God established at Pentecost. Different languages, a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic community, all empowered to serve God's purpose. From day one, the Christian church took off in different directions and there was NEVER one moment in its history where there was one understanding of what it meant to be a Christian.

So God scatters us, not to punish us, but to carry out God's purpose on earth. And God calls us to be unified around that purpose even though there is no one way to understand it and never has been. It's called unity in diversity, which happens to be the motto of the Christian Church Disciples of Christ.

We are unified in our purpose to love God and our neighbor as ourselves, AND we are enriched by our diversity. It turns out that being one in the Spirit has nothing to do with being alike and everything to do with loving the same God.

And that is the story of the tower of Babel. Amen