

“Human Unity without Human Sameness”

When I counsel couples who are getting married, I always stress that good communication is the key to a successful marriage. Of course, this is true in any relationship. Yet, having good communication can also be one of the hardest hills to climb. The story of 2nd grade Zach is a case in point. Listen to what he shares.

Our teacher asked me what my favorite animal was, and I said, “Fried chicken.” She said I wasn’t funny, but she couldn’t have been right because everyone else laughed. My parents told me to always tell the truth. I did. Fried chicken is my favorite animal. I told my dad what happened, and he said my teacher was probably a member of PETA and they love animals very much. I said, I do too. Especially chicken, pork and beef.

Anyway, my teacher sent me to the principal’s office. I told him what happened. He laughed too and told me not to do it again. The next day in class, my teacher asked me what my favorite LIVE animal was, and I told her chicken. She asked me why so I told her, because you can make them into FRIED chicken. She sent me back to the principal’s office. He laughed and told me not to do it again.

I don’t understand. My parents taught me to be honest, but my teacher doesn’t like it when I am. Today, my teacher asked me what famous military person I admired the most. I told her Colonel Sanders. Guess where the heck I am now!

When I read the story in Genesis about the building of the tower of Babel, I wondered if God hadn’t started the communication hurdle way back in our Primeval History! In all honesty, this is a story that I have always just skimmed through because I thought there were no hidden

nuances. Yet, as I studied the Pentecost story in Acts in preparation for today's sermon, I discovered how wrong I was.

According to the writer of Genesis, a united humanity migrated westward to the land of Shinar after surviving the Great Flood. At this point, they all spoke one language. Once they arrived, they decided to build a city and a tower, tall enough to reach heaven. But rather than be proud of their endeavors, God says to his companions, possibly Jesus and the Holy Spirit, "This is only the beginning of what they will do. Let us go down and confuse their language."

What a curious response and one that I had never really examined. You see, somewhere along the way, I have been taught that the people wanted to build the tower to demonstrate their own greatness and this angered God. I have believed this all my life, but it is not exactly what the Scriptures tell us. So, let's look at it more closely.

Why in the world would GOD, the creator of all the universe basically say, "Who knows what will happen next?" Doesn't the all-powerful, all-knowing God KNOW what will happen next? And why does God take the action that He does? Is God threatened by the accomplishments of the people God created in His own image? Of course not. The answer to these questions lies in the Hebrew word "scattered".

The word that is used here, "to scatter" literally means "to dash in pieces". It is most commonly used to describe what happens in war. It means to be separated from each other after a battle. And this word is significant throughout our Biblical history. When the people of Judah continued to ignore God's covenant and worship other Gods, God "scattered" them by sending them into Exile. When David is being pursued by his enemies, he writes a Psalm that says: "Let God rise up; let his enemies be scattered."

When the angel appeared to a young handmaiden in the field and informed her that she would bear the Son of God, Mary replied with a beautiful song of praise and humility. In it she sings: “This savior will ‘scatter’ the proud”, meaning that his presence will turn the people back to their God.

So, in a way, God scattered the people because God knew that if they were not forced to depend on God alone, they might begin to think they were self-sufficient. That they did not need God. That they could handle things on their own just fine – thank-you very much!

Of course, we never do that in today’s society, do we? Rely on our own self-sufficiency so much that we will not ask for help when it is needed? What about the housewife who won’t tell her husband about the credit cards being out of hand, thinking she can pay them down before he discovers it? Or the Algebra student who won’t tell his parents that he needs help until the grade is too low to salvage?

What about the company president who covers up a scandal rather than admitting fault, knowing it may cost hundreds of workers who depend on a job there, to be unemployed? What about the nation that won’t allow another nation to assist after a tragedy? Whether it involves passing English or working toward world peace, we often think that we must carry the world on our shoulders and don’t ask for help until it is too late.

This kind of behavior appears on the classic list of the seven deadly sins. You see friends, it is pride. Pride is a foolish and dishonest sense of one’s personal value. In Judaism, pride is called the root of all evil. St. Augustine defines pride as the love of one’s own excellence. And the writer of Proverbs says, “When pride comes, then comes disgrace.”

(Proverbs 11:2)

As the people considered all that they *could* do once they had settled in Shinar, God realized that their pride might cause them to forget about God. Their sense of importance might take the place of prayer to the one who created them or thanksgiving to the one who gave them everything they had. So God “scattered” the people. God knows that all of us can and will often overstep the boundaries of our own humanity. And God wants us to depend on God alone.

This is not out of a need to satisfy God’s own ego. It is not a power play of a domineering Creator or an effort to show who is right. God simply loves us so much that He always wants what is best for us. That is why we are taught that the perfect prayer is, “Thy will done.” God knows what we need even before we do – even before we can ask for it. But he wants us to ask for His will in our lives out of love, honor and praise and not as a last resort.

Another possibility in this story is that perhaps the people wanted to build a tower out of fear. The people gathered in Shinar may have feared what like would look like if they ventured too far into the unknown. They needed a touchstone. A home base. An altar. A spot where they knew that they did not have to be afraid of any differences they might encounter if they clung only to themselves. But if they only gathered around the tower, how could they experience the beauty of God’s creation? How could they share His love?

Finally, believing that God IS all-powerful and all-knowing, we have to assume that God had a plan when God made this decision to shake up the world. Desmond Tutu once wrote, “God’s intention for humankind and for His entire universe is harmony, peace, justice, wholeness and fellowship.” I am sure when God confused the languages that God knew this was the best way to achieve his plan.

At the time that the Genesis story takes place, God decides that the best way to scatter humankind is to give us different languages. And through God’s providence, we learn two very

important things about communication between humans. First, language is powerful. Some people may believe they are empowered by wealth or weaponry, but the ability to speak is the most powerful tool that we have. In this story, the fact that they have ONE language gives humankind power. So God makes communication a little more of a challenge for them by giving them different languages.

But let's look at the second thing the story teaches us. Effective communication has the power to be harnessed for good or for evil. With our words we can praise or criticize. We can build up or tear down. We can affirm or aggravate. We can caress or corrupt.

Now let's jump ahead a few thousand years to the story in Acts. Jesus has lived among his people and taught them the ways of compassion, healing, love and caring that God intended when he called the Hebrews to be the chosen race. You see, God CHOSE the Hebrews so that they could in turn teach ALL people who their God was and how much God loved them too.

In the call of Abraham, God promises him two things – land and descendants. God ultimately gives the Hebrew people both things. But God also called the children of Israel to be a light to the nations. In other words, God didn't just send the Ten Commandments and the rest of the Law of Moses as an arbitrary act of power. God wanted other nations to look at the Israelites and see the way they treated God and each other and to want to be like them.

God's people failed miserably at this. Rather than sharing the light, they either kept it to themselves, considering their "chosenness" as a pass for doing what they wanted or they adopted the customs and religions of the other people. This was a far cry from demonstrating the need to be covenant children and from shining the light of God in the world.

Of course, those of us who have been to Sunday School or Vacation Bible School a few times know that God's people then and now are a big disappointment. But rather than

abandoning us, God sent Jesus to be our teacher, our brother and ultimately, our savior. Yet, even Jesus knew that he could not remain on earth forever and, during his ministry, he promised many times that God would send an Advocate. A guide. A Presence to direct us.

So, the followers of Jesus who had been with him through his ministry, his crucifixion and his resurrection were gathered together, awaiting instructions from this promised Holy Spirit. Ironically, these followers of Christ most likely shared some of the same characteristics with their ancestors who wanted to build the tower. They could have been there out of pride, to show the Romans and other Jews who had killed their leader that they were not done yet. But they were also there out of fear – fear of venturing too far from their comfort zone, from the places and people that were familiar. Fear of what life would be like if the Holy Spirit never appeared. Fear of what it would be like if it did!

As it so happens, the scattered people of God had also gathered for the Pentecost event, known as the Feasts of Weeks. This was a celebration of the harvest held each year in Jerusalem. Jews from twelve different countries that were dispersed after the Exile are listed in the Book of Acts as being present. They were there, in the place where the tongues of fire lit the heads of the believers and the rushing wind blew through the room where the followers of Christ had gathered.

Now just as I had always been taught that the people wanted to build the tower to challenge God's authority, I have also been taught that the Pentecost event was a reversal of the tower of Babel. But this is also not true. The Holy Spirit gave each believer in Jesus Christ the power to tell the story of his saving grace in the different languages that the scattered people spoke.

So friends, Pentecost does not REVERSE the consequences of the tower of Babel. It celebrates them. Rather than make everyone alike, the Holy Spirit PRESEVES their ethnic, cultural and linguistic differences by making the Good News of God's saving grace in Jesus Christ available to everyone. The Holy Spirit becomes a binding agent that gives us all unity while not making us the same. Indeed, the Holy Spirit is an inversion of the pride and fear that bound our ancestors together, not of their differences. And the Spirit gives us the same freedom from pride and fear today.

When you think about it, the opposite of being scattered is being together. And though God's people throughout the world are different in our creeds and colors, our work and worship, our languages and likes and dislikes, we are victorious as ONE people through the power of the Holy Spirit. God has taken what was born out of fear and trauma and defeat for thousands of years and given us victory for Eternity.

Can we possibly imagine that after that Pentecost event where the Holy Spirit came AND STAYED among God's people, that God said to his companions, most likely Jesus and the Holy Spirit, "This is only the beginning of what they will do." And then God rejoiced because the church had been born. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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