



PENTECOST SUNDAY

DOING DIFFERENCE DIFFERENTLY

GENESIS 11:1-9 & ACTS 2:1-14

DOING DIFFERENCE DIFFERENTLY

GENESIS 11 & ACTS 2

We human beings are very good at noticing differences. We notice when someone's way of talking is different or if they've got an accent; or the kind of food they eat or music they play; or their skin tone or their hairs' texture or colour; even the shape of their nose or eyes. And we divide the world up according to these differences, creating a sense of people like "us" and people like "them," of insiders and outsiders, of the ordinary and the unfamiliar.

People respond to these differences in different ways. Some see differences as superficial things that are best ignored and not spoken of in polite company—potential sources of conflict to be overcome by pretending that we really are all the same. Others see differences as things to be tolerated or dealt with; or worse, as things so threatening that those who are different must be controlled or excluded or eliminated, by circling our wagons and locking our doors, or sometimes, doing worse. Still others see differences as generating a diversity so deep and identities so fixed that we cannot possibly imagine the experiences of those possessing a different identity, much less form a single human family together. We human beings are good at noticing differences, but we often don't do difference well. We either seek to politely look past it, or ignore it, or eliminate it, or we make it so absolute that there is no possibility for unity across our differences. But God does difference differently.

Today is Pentecost Sunday, the extraordinary, inspirational beginning of the Church, when the Spirit was poured out; the day of our birth as the body of Christ in the world. The story is a familiar one; we read only the first part of it today, the exciting bit where the Holy Spirit whooshes in with an overwhelming sound like a great wind, alighting upon each disciple of Christ like a flame. Each disciples spoke the gospel in a language not their own; we stopped our reading there, but I bet you remember what happens next. The disciples poured out of where they were gathered, filled with the Spirit's power, into a diverse crowd of people, all gathered in Jerusalem for a Jewish religious festival.

It is Olympic-level Scripture reading: there are so many foreign names, unusual ethnicities and cultures represented, from all over the greater Mediterranean world; from Rome to Egypt and North Africa, and across Mesopotamia and into Asia. All hearing the gospel in their own languages, spoken by a bunch of Galileans. It's a real showcase of diversity and difference.

But a very long time ago, that kind of diversity and difference was completely absent among God's people. Babel is another one of those old, old stories in our Bibles, from the first eleven chapters of Genesis - what's referred to as the prehistory part of Scripture: stories that are older than writing, that were told and re-told for centuries, perhaps even millennia, before someone finally wrote them into the Bible we have today.

Have you ever heard the story of Babel before? It's a simple enough tale: the people, who spoke and thought and lived the same, got together to build a great city and a high tower. God did not approve of this endeavour, so he intervened by making them all speak different languages; no longer able to communicate easily with one another, they left off building, and scattered, far and wide across the earth.

In Sunday school or in most sermons, I have always been taught this story as a kind of "pride and punishment" story. God messed up their language and scattered them as judgement on their arrogant plan to build a tower to the heavens, trying to reach God - or perhaps intrude upon him - under their own power and initiative. So the scattering and the creation of difference among them is a punishment, and maybe a warning: don't challenge God. Maybe you've heard the story of Babel told that way, too.

But I wonder...we're never told why the people wanted to build a big, strong city and a high, lofty tower. And we're never told that God thought that what they were doing was sinful, that the new languages and the scattering was intended as a punishment. There's nothing said about that at all.

There's not much here to take a closer look at, so let's take a broader look instead; let's see where the story of Babel fits in the larger story of Scripture.

Remember Noah and the great flood? Which wiped out a lot of human and animal life, which definitely was a punishment for sin that God very clearly explained? That's the story told in Scripture right before this one. And whether that flood had happened recently in their past, too, or if it was simply part of their shared cultural history - we can detect its effect in their decision to circle the wagons and build a strong city and a tall tower and stay close together: "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."

They are afraid of being dispersed, of being scattered and spread out and lost to one another, as humanity was during the Flood. Perhaps they are also afraid of falling into the same sinful ways that led to the Flood, too; same language, same goals, same city...not a lot to fight about and get divisive and sin over, is there?

But God promised that he would not flood the world again to reboot creation by wiping nearly everyone and everything out. God promised; I wonder, do they not believe that promise? Perhaps the trouble is that they don't trust God, and God's plans for them? Instead, the people of Babel are seeking to exist on their own, in a self-made world without tension or conflict or difference; their construction projects have become a substitute for a meaningful relationship with God, one of trust and communication, one where the people and God live out God's plans for humanity together.

Because you see, God has a plan. And he's told them what it is.

Way back in Genesis 1, God blessed the first human beings and told them to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth, and be stewards of all creation. Noah's generation failed in that, among many other failings. Walling themselves into a city together, with the same language, the same goal and the same ideas... that's not being fruitful and filling the earth. So God gives them a push out the door.

And the outcome is good: humanity flourishes, that destructive focus on sameness and wagon-circling isolation is no more, and the divine plan is back on track. In Genesis 12, right after Babel, we meet Abraham and his family, the first family in a long line that leads straight to Jesus. And God tells Abraham to "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing...and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." And Abraham goes.

You may be wondering why I am sharing this story with you on Pentecost Sunday. Well, a lot of people think that Pentecost is a reversal of Babel. The difference, the diversity, the scattering imposed by God on the people at Babel is fixed by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, with its multilingual proclamation of the gospel. Punishment revoked; sin- and conflict-inducing diversity erased, by the power of the Spirit.

Except...Babel's not actually a punishment; the scattering of people and the creation of new and different languages was an essential part of God's plan for humanity, a plan that takes us all the way to Jesus, and to Pentecost and its world-sized scope for the Church.

Mediaeval theologian Thomas Aquinas reflected that God could have created a world of sameness, a world with only one kind of thing in it. He notes that such a world might well have had less conflict in it, since difference can indeed be a source of conflict—a world with only lions or only lambs is a lot less bloody than one with both lions and lambs.

But a world without variety and difference is also an impoverished world. Without something interesting and different around every corner, without diversity and beauty and new people and new ideas and new experiences forming part of human life? And more important than all of that, a world without difference and diversity would utterly fail to capture the infinite goodness and creative imagination of our God, its Creator.

At Pentecost, remember, the disciples went out, filled with the Spirit, speaking diverse languages. Outside, in the city, there was a great crowd of Jewish men and women, God's people, who spoke those diverse languages. God's people from all over the greater Mediterranean world; from cities as far flung as Rome, and Egypt and North Africa, from across Mesopotamia and as far away as Asia. All Jews, all God's people, from across the known world, each with their own language and experiences and customs. And still God's.

The Spirit did not make them all able to understand the local Galilean language of the disciples; the Spirit made itself understandable to them, honouring the diversity present among God's people that day.

Pentecost is not the reversal of Babel; Pentecost is Babel come to full and fruitful harvest: God's people scattered, diverse, unique and different, yet, in the Spirit, completely and entirely one. That divine plan to go forth and be fruitful and multiply, to go out and be a blessing to others, that plan is being accomplished.

Nudged into motion again at Babel; visibly happening at Pentecost, the day the Church was born. God does difference differently.

Pentecost is no mere reversal of Babel. It is not the elimination of the diversity of human language and culture and experience, but rather it is the giving of a Spirit that makes understanding possible even in the face of difference; a Spirit that accommodates itself to difference even as it unites those whom difference might divide.

We know, too, that the Spirit not only accommodates difference, but creates difference as well, each one of us unique individuals through biology and family and experience, among the billions of other utterly unique human beings, encompassed by a natural world of near infinite variety, embedded in cultures and societies, each with its own history and traditions and languages. The Spirit of God does not see difference as a threat to its work, nor is it a punishment, an obstacle for us to overcome, as we seek to live into our common identity in Christ.

God does difference differently. And his Son's church, whether we speak of the global Church or our own local iteration, was born in a celebration of diversity and difference; the circumstances of our birth tell us a lot about how we should be approaching difference and diversity in our own church, our denomination and our world, today.

We are called together by the Spirit, into the one body of Christ, not by ignoring or erasing difference, or making it so diversity doesn't matter; but by the Spirit's graceful guidance and out-pouring of power...power that honours difference and diversity, that works through it to present an even more extraordinary spectacle to the unbelieving, those who observed that day what happened at Pentecost and made fun of it or dismissed it, because they couldn't understand.

God does difference differently, not seeing it as a threat nor using it as a punishment, nor ignoring its reality, nor letting it eclipse our common identity as those who have been given to drink of the one Spirit, to eat of the living Bread. And a church that encompasses difference better reflects the reality of Christ, whose body in the world and for the world, we are intended to be. Thanks be to God. Amen.