Splits, Separations, and Reconciliations: Rooted in Wesleyan Grace”

Heritage Sunday

General Commission on Archives and History
The United Methodist Church

Suggested Sermon Notes:

“A Confusion of Voices”

Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. And they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly." And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. Then 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." The LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built. And 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. Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another's speech." So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. Therefore 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.

Genesis 11:1-9  NRSV

Why does that happen? One moment you feel like maybe you are making some progress. One moment you have a big vision, a goal and a plan. One moment everyone is on board and ready for the next steps. One moment you feel like maybe this thing will actually work - whatever this thing is. You feel as though
you are on top of the world. But then the next moment comes, and it is all
different.

The plans fall apart, the hopes are crushed, it all seems like dead ends. The
relationships crumble, those who were gung-ho and on board are now
abandoning ship like you’ve hit an invisible iceberg and are going down fast.

And the worst part? You have absolutely no idea what happened. What seemed
to be such a wonderful idea, what seemed to be just what everyone wanted,
became a source of confusion and misunderstanding. You thought that you were
telling the story well, but the looks of confusion on those who used to be close to
you told a different tale. It was so clear and unifying before, before the clouds of
uncertainty rolled back in, before the distractions of a complicated world jumbled
the message. It was as if all of a sudden everyone started speaking a different
language.

It always seemed fanciful, one of those Old Testament stories that border on the
mythological. Too grand for us to comprehend. And besides it was obviously
there as an “explanation” story. Like many of the ancient myths, this story was
there to explain the reasons behind the way the world was. Why, someone
wondered, are there so many different languages and cultures in the world?
Well, let me tell you a story.

I’m sure that’s true, in part. But I also think - as with most biblical texts - that
there is something else going on here. Maybe lots of somethings but dismissing
this story as an ancient pre-science myth seems to diminish the power of the
story. So, let’s look more deeply into the Babel and see what we can see.

You remember that story. The babbling story. The tower and the languages and
the scattering and the sin. Except, it is sometimes hard to see the sin. It is as if
God picks a fight. We’ve heard the explanations. They were thumbing their nose
at God. Well, maybe. Though there isn’t a real clear taunt against the divine
powers in this all too brief story.

One explanation that does make sense is that this story forms the end of the first
section of Genesis. After a bit of genealogy, we launch into the story of Abraham
and Sarah. So, this is a bookend to the first part of the bible, which begins with
creation and the command from God to fill the earth. But here we see people
choosing not to fulfill that command. They want to stay in one place. They built their city in order to not do what God wanted them to do. The explanation for the building is “otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.”

It is understandable, really. Safety is our number one priority it seems. Fear of the unknown is a great motivator. Avoiding risk, avoiding change is our prime directive. Yet, God seems to want something else for us. God seems to imply that we were created for more than that. That we would be less than what we could be if we choose to live the way that makes the most sense to us.

Now in the story, God comes down to inspect the construction project. Upon inspection, God determines that something must be done. “Nothing that they propose will be impossible for them,” is the diagnosis. Which doesn’t seem like a bad thing. In fact, you would think that God would be proud of the offspring who have so much potential. But instead, God decides it must be stopped. So, the language trick is done and boom, the construction project is brought to a screeching halt and the migration out into the unknown begins - because the unknown came too close to home.

It all fell apart, and they weren’t sure why, I have no doubt. Except that the folks they thought they knew, all of a sudden, they realized they didn’t know at all. Couldn’t even understand them anymore. They were speaking a whole other language.

Do you remember the books by Dr. Gary Chapman variously titled but all including “The Five Love Languages?” The thesis of these books is that we don’t all speak the same language when to comes to love. Our expectations and our needs are different. And that one of the reasons that relationships fail - whether between spouses, parents and children, neighbors, and co-workers, or whatever - is that we don’t always realize we are not speaking the same language.

OK, here is where we climb out on that proverbial limb. As a denomination, we are in the midst of what feels like an end of a relationship, where various parties are all going their separate ways. Despite years of conversation and argument, we can no longer communicate with one another, we aren’t speaking the same language. We think we should be; or we think we ought to be. But we aren’t, for whatever reason, we aren’t. And the result of this language gap is separation. We
get some distance and maybe some perspective. We stop assuming we are speaking the same language and go off to follow the Words we know and the words we hear. We stop looking inward and return to looking outward. Which is what we were supposed to be doing all along.

Which leads to another risky question: Does the story of the Tower of Babel really talk about punishment? Is God angry at us for going our own way and making our own choices? Or does God give us diversity to enhance the human experience and invite us to overcome our differences and find a true unity not based on fear or complacency but full of the richness of living in relationship with those who stretch us and challenge us to be more than we thought we could be?

OK, not a simple question after all. But then nothing in this life is ever simple. I think this story is witness to the idea that God prefers it that way. And when we think about it, we do too. We often think, if only everyone thought like I do life would be so much easier. Maybe so, maybe it would be easier if everyone spoke the same language, had the same preferences, leaned in the same directions. Easier, but infinitely more boring. Don’t you think?

Maybe God wasn’t punishing us to getting too big for our britches in that story. Maybe God was trying to rein us in before we got so far off track that nothing would stop us from total destruction. Maybe the community you have to work to preserve, to choose to commit to, to stretch to enlarge is worth more than all the towers we could build to the heavens. Maybe our response to the Babel story ought to be “thank you for a new hope and new vision of how we might partner with those who are different from us.” Thank you for the opportunity to go into all the world. Or just thank you as we get about the business of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

Call to Worship

We gather for worship on this day of remembering, O God of all people.

We remember your faithfulness, even when we have wandered astray.

We remember your call to unity, even when we find ourselves in division.

We remember your forgiving grace, even when we have broken your covenant.
We gather for worship on this day of beginning, O God of all that is becoming.  

May our church, may your people, may we all be a reflection of the kin-dom that is not far.  

Let us worship this day.  

We will worship with joy.

_Derek Weber, Discipleship Ministries, April 2022_

“Lead Us Out of Babel!”

_(Gathering Meditation Version)_

_(Genesis 11:1-9)_

Lead us out of Babel where we claim our own languages and cast out others, where we label family by _our_ money status, and shirt colors define our brothers; 
where we care for our own and make wars with other tribes; 
where we create borders we call _protection_ and shun those we say don’t belong inside; 
where we earn all we can, spend all we can and look at others confused when they ask us to give all we can 
while we sit in our own addictions-high; 
where we choose our houses so that we match our neighbors’ skin; 
where we even choose our churches so that our hues all blend; 
where our differences create fear and matter more than the promise you made that we were all adopted into your glory when Christ defeated the grave. 

Lead us out of Babel where we speak a language of _us, ours_ and _mine_. 

Pour out your Spirit upon all flesh, Lord, and make your children wholly thine.

Prayer

Perplexing, Pentecostal God,
    you infuse us with your Spirit,
      urging us to vision and dream.

May the gift of your presence
    find voice in our lives,
      that our babbling may be transformed into discernment
      and the flickering of many tongues
        light an unquenchable fire of compassion and justice. Amen.

Worship and Song: Worship Resources, Abingdon Press, 2011, #38

Benediction

May we go from here to where there is division and proclaim unity. May we go from here to where there are those torn by hatred and by fear and live love in action. May we go from here to where despair seems to rule and embody hope. May we go from here into the kin-dom of God waiting to be, on earth as it is in heaven. We go from our worship of God to where God is at work in the world God loves. Amen and amen.

Derek Weber, Discipleship Ministries, April 2022

Other possibilities include:

Jesus as the source of division

So there was a division in the crowd because of him. Some of them wanted to arrest him, but no one laid hands on him. Then the temple police went back to the chief priests and Pharisees, who asked them, "Why did you not arrest him?" The police answered, "Never has anyone spoken like this!" Then the Pharisees replied, "Surely you have not been deceived too, have you? Has any one of the authorities or of the Pharisees believed in him? But this crowd, which does not know the law--they are accursed."
And...

"Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one's foes will be members of one's own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

Jesus as the source of unity

All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. I guarded them, and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost, so that the scripture might be fulfilled.