

## **Rich Variety**

Acts 2:1-11

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Many of us, from our Sunday school days, have images of the tower of Babel twisting high into the air, even piercing the clouds. In our imagination, it stands incomplete as a symbol of human pride and sinfulness. Its construction offers a strange dichotomy. On the one hand, humankind is here unified in its quest, working together in harmony to complete a project, speaking a common language, and each person understanding the other. On the other hand, that unified quest is marked by insecurity, fear, and insignificance. The people are working together because they desire to make a name for themselves. They are afraid they will be scattered and disappear if they do not build up their nation, protect it, and proclaim its greatness.

It is a strange dichotomy indeed. The people are united. (Unity is a virtue that we often extol.) Their unity, though, is not a source of joy for the Lord, but a source of deep concern. It is concerning because the people are not united by their mutual desire to do God's will, but by both their fear and their desire for greatness. The Lord's concern over this fear-induced, self-gratifying unity is so deep that God sees fit to "confuse" the language of the people and scatter them throughout the earth. It is a story of mythic proportions: the story of how the earth came to hold so many different people with so many different languages. In many ways, it is the story of why we can't all get along.

Pentecost – the day we celebrate as the birthday of the church with the coming of the Holy Spirit – is often understood as the undoing of Babel, or as its redemption. On that day in Jerusalem, with a rush of wind and tongues of fire, the Holy Spirit comes declaring God's deeds of power. The disciples are filled with an inexplicable ability to proclaim the gospel in languages that are not their own. Luke tells us that Jews from "every nation under heaven" were gathered in the city that day and that each and every one of them could hear the message in his or her own native tongue. On one level, the tower of Babel still stands incomplete: humankind does not return to one common language. But on a deeper, more important level, the tower is torn down because despite the difference of language, nationality, and culture, the people all hear and understand the same message: "God has made this Jesus both Lord and Messiah" (Acts 2:36).

We stand on a solid biblical foundation when we assert that it has always been God's intention for the creatures to be diverse and for humankind to be spread across the earth. Psalm 104, which we lifted up in our call to worship this morning, marvels at God's manifold works – each one made in God's wisdom: innumerable creeping things in the sea, birds and the trees they nest in, beasts and grass they consume. For a modern take on this, I checked the internet and called my good friend Chris Marsh. I learned that biologists have counted at least 350,000 species of beetles alone!<sup>1</sup> I do not even like beetles, and God has seen fit to create 350,000 different kinds! There are something like 100,000 species of fungi, 270,000 species of flowering plants, and

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<sup>1</sup> <http://evolution.berkeley.edu/evosite/evo101/VIIB1bBeetles.shtml>

5,500 mammals. If the Psalmist's claim that the sea holds "innumerable creeping things" seems old-fashioned or unscientific we would do well to remember that modern scientists still have no reasonable estimate of how many species really live on our planet.<sup>2</sup> This diversity spread across the earth does not apply to plants and animals alone. Human beings, too, were never intended to be the same or to stay in one place. God's command to the first humans was to fill the earth (Genesis 1:28), and Genesis takes time to number the various tribes and people groups with their various languages (for example, Genesis 10:18). O Lord, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all.

The world exists, by God's own design, in this tension between unity and separateness, commonality and diversity. Both unity and diversity may either serve the purpose of God or rebel against that purpose. When our unity grows out of fear or is motivated by self-serving desires for power or control or comfort, it is not of God. When our distinctions cause us to build walls and wage wars, they are not of God. Where we are so confident in our human achievement that we see no need for God, we sin. Where we are estranged from our neighbors because we are afraid of them or because we fear their judgment upon us, we are captive to evil. Where our vision becomes narrow and we think that God's favor rests only, or especially, on those who are like "us," we fall short of God's rich and varied wisdom.

There is a temptation to think that for God's people to be united we must be alike, if not in language and culture then in belief and thought. But our Scripture readings for today do not make unity the sister of homogeneity. In fact, what Pentecost teaches us is that the Holy Spirit does not make us the same, but makes us able to understand others in the midst of our differences. The story of Babel suggests that our differences may even be willed by God who has a plan to spread his people out all across the earth with different languages, cultures, and beliefs. Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus states quite simply that one of the roles of the church is to make known to the world the wisdom of God in its rich variety. God's people are richly varied because God's own wisdom is richly varied, and our diversity of language, culture, belief, and practice more fully makes God known to the world.

Last Monday, I attended a meeting for faith leaders in Beaufort County to discuss some early plans to open a faith-based homeless shelter in the county. In January of this year, the HUD homeless count identified over 400 homeless men, women, and children in our county. Experience in other communities suggest that the count only represents something like 10% of the actual homeless population. Jesus' call for his followers to care for "the least of these" certainly includes the homeless, and Christians are called to serve the homeless poor as if we are serving Christ himself.

Forty-seven people attended that meeting on Monday night, representing twenty-four churches in our community. It was probably the most diverse group I have ever been part of since I came to Beaufort over four years ago. There were Presbyterians, Pentecostals, Methodists, and Baptists; men and women; black people and white people. Some worship with hymnal and organ, some with projectors and guitars. Some baptize infants, some adults only. Some emphasize

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<sup>2</sup> Information on species taken from these two articles:  
[http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/30/science/30species.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/30/science/30species.html?_r=0) and  
<http://www.nytimes.com/2004/09/07/science/07mush.html>

profession of faith as the key moment of salvation. Some speak in tongues. We read and interpret the Scriptures in different ways. We have different understandings of exactly how Jesus' death and resurrection work to save humankind. If we had been asked to write a theological statement, we probably could not have agreed on much beyond the most basic creed: "Jesus Christ is Lord."

What I am suggesting today is that our differences, while they may separate us on Sunday mornings, can actually proclaim God's rich and varied wisdom, especially when we work together to carry out the task God has laid before us: in this case, to care for the homeless poor in our very own community. The Holy Spirit is not working to make us alike, it is empowering us to work together for God's purposes even in the midst of our differences. There is a long way to go before this homeless shelter grows from idea to reality, but we will not get there if we can only work with those who are most like us. It is our very diversity that God will use to bring hope to the homeless in Beaufort County.

It is my further hope that because of our diversity, God might also use this group of clergy to bring a word of hope not only to the homeless, but to men and women who have turned away from the church, seeing it as a den of intolerance and disagreement. What a witness this group of forty-seven religious leaders could have if we can demonstrate in Beaufort county a unity in Christ that surpasses our differences and enables us to work for the well-being of those in need.

Likewise, in our personal and social relationships we can embrace our God-given diversity and separateness while at the same time claiming our unity in Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit empowers us today, as it did 2000 years ago, to talk and listen in new ways. We begin by speaking to those who are different from us in their own language, getting to know on their own terms, making a conscious effort to take off the lens of our experience and put on someone else's glasses. On a most basic level, we call this empathy, "the ability to imagine oneself in another's place and understand the other's feelings, desires, ideas, and actions."<sup>3</sup> The point is not to agree or persuade but to understand. We go further by identifying places where people need the good news of Jesus Christ and then working together to bring that good news.

The church corporately and Christians individually do not need to overcome all of our differences in order to be faithful to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We worship a God who is both three and one. This is the same God who created us in their image and who with wisdom made 350,000 species of beetles. It is the same God who scattered the people so they might fill the earth. It is the same God whose Spirit called the church into being from people of every nation under heaven. Our unity is rooted not in sameness, but in a mutual desire to be faithful to God's purposes, made known most clearly in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Let us live faithfully and so proclaim together the wisdom of God in its rich variety.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/empathy>