

Today we conclude our series on the first portion of Genesis, Chapters 1-11. In these chapters we have observed the majesty of God's creation, the intimacy intended in the relationship of humanity with our Creator. All too soon, given free will, humanity exerted our own wills as over against God's will. The consequences of disobedience led to expulsion from the Garden, sibling rivalry that led to death, and the rampant reach of sin, to the degree that God determined to destroy all creation. However, at each and every turn God met sin with grace: first in the form of clothing for Adam and Eve and culminating in a covenant with Noah and a promise to "never again" destroy creation. Chapter 10, often called the Roll Call of Nations, represents a genealogy of the generations after Noah. And so, we come to our text today.

Genesis 10:32-11:11

³²These are the clans of Noah's sons, according to their lines of descent, within their nations. From these the nations spread out over the earth after the flood.

11Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. ²As people moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there.

³They said to each other, "Come, let's make bricks and bake them thoroughly." They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar. ⁴Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves; otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth."

⁵But the LORD came down to see the city and the tower the people were building.

⁶The LORD said, "If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. ⁷Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other."

⁸So the LORD scattered them from there, over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. ⁹That is why it was called Babel—because there the LORD confused the language of the whole world. From there the LORD scattered them over the face of the whole earth.

[Pray]

Imagine this: a marvel of urban planning, 137-square miles of shining towers, futuristic architecture, schools, condos, shopping malls and pristine parks.... Built in the grasslands of Mongolia, it is a thoroughly modern city, but for one thing: No one lives there. It is a ghost city in China. Imagine another, called Binhai New Area, just outside Tianjin. Construction on the 1.5-square mile area, includes a life size replica of Manhattan—complete with a Rockefeller center and twin towers. Construction began in 2008 and will cost an estimated \$30.4 billion.

These are but two of hundreds of examples of cities built in China, in an attempt to urbanize vast numbers of rural citizens by 2026. Developers reason that these new urban centers will showcase political accomplishments and provide a safe, high-return investment that can help fuel economic growth. As far as I can tell, this remains to be seen! Just google “ghost cities of China”! (<https://www.wired.com/2016/02/kai-caemmerer-unborn-cities/>)

Did you know that the tallest building in the world is scheduled to open next year? Known as the Jeddah Tower, it will be 3,281 feet tall or 157 stories tall, with 2 floors below ground. Designed by American Adrian Smith, the tower will cost about 1.25 billion dollars and is located in Saudi Arabia. Construction began in 2011. There have been some delays in construction, but it is scheduled for completion in 2020. It is meant to expand the prosperity, growth and regional emergence of Saudi Arabia on the global stage. (<https://www.rankred.com/jeddah-tower-worlds-tallest-building/>)

In other words, it is hoped that it will help them make a name for themselves! It sounds strangely like our text in Genesis 11! The setting is not far from present day Saudi Arabia. Shinar is reference to the plain or valley between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, historically known as Mesopotamia and later, Babylon.

The descendants of Noah have now repopulated the earth. As generations pass, the people appear to have forgotten their relation to the Creator. Technology and culture are advancing, cities are being built, in an apparent transition from a nomadic to a sedentary way of life. The people seem to be unified by one language, while they fear being scattered; so, they attempt to secure their future and establish a “name” for themselves.

Names carry significant meaning in ancient Hebrew culture, reflecting upon the individual's character and reputation. "To make a name" for oneself, means to gain notoriety, popularity. This expression in Hebrew carries with it the same meaning, only more exaggerated, than it does in English.

There are tower-building parallels in Babylonian mythology—a ziggurat—a terraced tower or temple that served in as a link between heaven and earth. (D.Kidner p.111)

By building such a tower – an edifice of some stature – it would serve to reflect the significance of their "name"—it would reflect their power, their ingenuity, their ability to achieve greatness. Such an endeavor would accomplish the purpose of uniting the people further. And what would be wrong with that? Unity is a good thing, is it not?

There is some humor and irony in the fact that God must "come down" (v.5) in order to see this great tower. One scholar notes: "Yahweh must draw near, not because Yahweh is nearsighted, but because God dwells at such tremendous height and their work is so tiny. God's movement must therefore be understood as a remarkable satire" on human activity. (G.VonRaad, p. 149)

God then, acts in a way that expresses both judgement and prevention. "For the telling theological commentary of v. 6 provides the crux of this passage: this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them".

Is God afraid that people will succeed? Can they become gods? Is God reactive to human action –controlled by human action – or proactive in the face of human action?

The ripple effect of sin can be seen throughout these chapters—our human capacity for disobedience and disruption appears to proliferate as the population increases. History is replete with examples of our inhumanity toward one another: from the Holocaust to the killing fields of SE Asia, and ethnic purges in Rwanda, the Balkans and the Middle east. Given recent events in Syria and Turkey, one fears now for the Kurds.

The primary issue is a misunderstanding of unity. On the surface, people are united by a common language, however the true focus of their unity is their own ability to establish themselves in the world, and their autonomy apart from God.* (*D.Bratcher,<http://www.crivoice.org/lectionary/YearC/Cpentecostot.html>)

Attempts to bring unity for the wrong reason, has potential for horrendous harm: unity against a common enemy by means of vilifying or scapegoating one group, over against another. This is at the core of these examples of genocide. Anytime “we” can unify and come together against “them”, such unity is formed around a false center.

In this instance, there is no external “enemy”; the implicit rivalry is with God and resistance to God’s plan, which is has to do with fulfilling God’s creation command: To “be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth and subdue it” (Genesis 1:28). Hence the fear of being scattered represents resistance to God’s will.

Blinded by their perception of power and self-importance, the builders of the tower imagine that God is acting against their aspirations. Possessing one language creates a false unity, because its basis is outside of God and God’s plan. It is no coincidence that in the Hebrew text, there is pun or play on words, as the word “babel” means “confusion”!

In a sense, God acts pre-emptively. By confusing their language and scattering the people, God is, in fact, protecting them from the consequences of their illusion. Their inability to communicate will have a positive and paradoxical result: it will compel them to go out beyond the city walls and fulfill God’s creation command. (Commented Bible Passages http://www.taize.fr/en_article167.html?date=2010-09-01)

As I’ve pondered this passage, it occurred to me that having one language is helpful, but far from being an answer to our problems, it also does not necessarily promote unity. Let’s get real for a moment: Have you ever experienced miscommunication, even though you and the person with whom you were communicating, both were native English speakers??

I’m quite sure each one of us could share our own examples of miscommunication and misunderstanding. One language is NOT a guarantee of unity. I daresay most

of you are familiar with the classic comedy routine of Lou Costello and Bud Abbott, Who's On First? In it, Lou announces that he's been hired as a coach with the Yankee's baseball team and he and Bud are discussing the names and the positions played by the team's members.

Lou Costello: I'm asking YOU who's on first.

Bud Abbott: That's the man's name.

Lou Costello: That's who's name?

Bud Abbott: Yes.

Lou Costello: Well go ahead and tell me.

Bud Abbott: That's it.

Lou Costello: That's who?

Bud Abbott: Yes.

PAUSE

Lou Costello: Look, you gotta first baseman?

Bud Abbott: Certainly.

Lou Costello: Who's playing first?

Bud Abbott: That's right.

Lou Costello: When you pay off the first baseman every month, who gets the money?

Bud Abbott: Every dollar of it.

Lou Costello: All I'm trying to find out is the fellow's name on first base.

Bud Abbott: Who.

Lou Costello: The guy that gets...

Bud Abbott: That's it.

Lou Costello: Who gets the money...

Bud Abbott: He does, every dollar. Sometimes his wife comes down and collects it.

Lou Costello: Who's wife?

Bud Abbott: Yes.

And on it goes...more confusion because the second baseman is named "What" and the third baseman is named "I Don't Know"! You can see how having one common language does not bring unity, in and of itself!

It seems to me that God, in God's infinite creativity, loves diversity. In that light, multiple and diverse languages are an expression of God's creativity, just as differing cultures are as well. To think that one language is the key to unity, is false.

What is needed – no matter the language – is true listening to the other, and mutual understanding. That is the miracle of Pentecost. Diverse peoples with multiple languages, hear in their own language, the Good News about salvation in Christ. It is clearly proclaimed and clearly understood. That is the miracle of Pentecost!

The hoped-for unity will come, **not** through our building a tower up to the heavens, but through the descent of God’s Holy Spirit on Pentecost.

The hoped-for unity will come, **not** in a common language, but through speaking and hearing the Good News of God’s love and Grace, each one in our own language.

The hoped-for unity will become a reality, **not** through conformity or uniformity. God’s Holy Spirit does not erase uniqueness but celebrates diversity.

This hoped-for unity is the gift of God—it is **not** of our own making, or a result of our efforts. Any human attempt at unity will only end in confusion.

True and lasting unity is centered in God’s Holy Spirit who is in us and among us, filling us with God’s love and power. “When we wait for that living presence of God and employ the Spirit’s power for God’s purposes rather than ours...then it may be that “This is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing...will now be impossible for them”. The Acts of the Apostles and the existence of the church, more than two thousand years later, bears witness to that reality. May our unity be found in our true center, Jesus Christ!

[PRAY]