

From Babel to Bethlehem to Spirit and Truth

From the series: A Millennial Vision

Genesis 11:8; Acts 2:6

Richard A. Rhem
Christ Community Church
Spring Lake, Michigan
January 16, 2000

Transcription of the spoken sermon

I described for you last week a millennial vision of mine, the vision of a world where the great religions would live at peace with one another, mutually respecting one another, teaching each other, enhancing one another, and dedicated together to the well-being of the whole world and the whole human family. I used my favorite image of a cathedral whose respective areas have stained glass windows that relate the biblical story, but no section has the whole story. Each section has a part of the story and the common element that draws all together is the common source of light, the one Light that illumines all of the parts of the story that create the whole, and you can use that analogy for the respective religious traditions, none of which has the whole story, all of which are illumined by the one Light that enlightens us all. That particular image, I think, is justifiable on the basis of the biblical story, for that image speaks about the particular and the universal, all of the particular traditions pointing to the one universal, and I think that is true to the biblical understanding, as well.

In the book of Genesis, the first eleven chapters are pre-history to Israel's history. What we refer to commonly as the Old Testament is the story of Israel. But, Israel, in telling its story, knew that it was a part of a larger story. It wasn't the whole story. It was well aware of that, and so those first eleven chapters of Genesis deal with universal themes, creation themes, the human theme, creation of the human being, and disobedience and alienation and confusion and judgment and salvation - it's all in there. After the judgment of the Flood, the rescue of Noah, there is, very interestingly, in the eighth chapter of Genesis, this covenant of God never again to destroy the earth. And that's with the whole of creation. And then in the ninth chapter we find the covenant with Noah, never again to destroy all flesh, and that covenant is with all flesh; it is a universal covenant with humankind. Israel doesn't exist yet. And then, as though to demonstrate that we human beings never would get it right, there's one more story told, the story of the Tower of Babel, a fascinating little tale about the human family, the flood survivors going to get together and build themselves a tower and create a city, a sort of a fortress over against God, as it were. They were going to do their own human thing, so God looks down and says, "Oh, that's

interesting.” God comes down and confuses their language because they had had one language and so they could pass bricks with one another and they could build a tower together, and then suddenly, they can't understand one another. But, the word for understand is *shema* in Hebrew, it's a word to listen or to hear, so ostensibly, that little myth perhaps explains why people are scattered over the face of the earth and why there are so many different languages but, at its deeper level, it was a story of our human community that is broken. It was a story of human beings who do not listen to one another, and when one does not listen to another, there's a breakdown of communication and then there's a breakdown of trust, and there's a breakdown of community.

The story which prefaces Israel's history is a story of universal humankind marked by broken community. So, God knows that another strategy is necessary and so, in the 11th chapter of Genesis we find Abraham and Sarah, and Sarah has a barren womb because God will start over and out of barrenness will create a people and that people will be light-bearers to the nations. Israel understood its particular vocation; it believed it had the light, it believed it was in touch with God the Creator, and it believed that its light in the Torah was to be the instruction for all nations. All nations would someday flow to Mt. Zion and Israel would be the instructor. But, Israel knew it was not the *whole* story. It knew it was a particular amidst a universal humanity, and so its prophets dreamed of a day when one would come fully endowed with the spirit of God who would create shalom and there would be a time when they would not hurt or destroy in all God's holy mountain.

You see, the biblical understanding, in this case Israel's understanding of God's intention for creation, was that it would dwell in peace and that there would be well-being and that it would be marked by community. In the Christian reading of that story it culminates in the birth of a child in Bethlehem, the child Jesus, and the parents bring the child to the temple and aged Simeon, the voice of all of Israel, takes the child in his arms and says, "Now, Lord, lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, for mine eyes have seen thy salvation which thou hast prepared beforehand for thy people, a light to lighten the Gentiles and the glory of thy people Israel."

Beyond Jesus comes Pentecost and the outpouring of the Spirit of God and what is the consequence? Well, the city is full of visitors from around the ancient world and the Spirit falls on the disciples and they go out into the streets and they proclaim the story of Jesus and everyone, from the respective geographical locations and various languages, hear as though the word was spoken in their own native tongue. And Babel is reversed at Pentecost and the Spirit causes people to listen, to hear, to understand, and out of that gross community in those early chapters of the book of Acts we have that early Jesus movement marked by community in which no one had any need and all cared for the other. There was the intention of God realized.

Too bad it didn't last. Too bad Pentecost got sidetracked. Too bad the church got stuck in Christology rather than in the theology of the Holy Spirit. Let me suggest, and it's a rather radical suggestion, but I do think that I can support this, that the intention as the story unfolds post-Pentecost was that God Who was Spirit would embrace the world until there be world community. What really happened? Well, this Jewish prophet, this one in whom God was visible, the embodiment of God, this Jesus, this Jesus in those early centuries, was exalted to high heaven, made to be none less than God, resulting in a rupture between that Jewish movement that gave birth to the Jesus movement, and the Christian church, and instead of community, we had one more great religious tradition.

I wonder if that was not a betrayal of Jesus and Jesus' own vision. Take, for example, that conversation with the woman from Samaria at Jacob's well. Does that one impress you as God of God, Light of Light, before all world, etc, etc.? Or, is this Jesus, in all of his humanity and all of his fullness of spirit, engaging a hungry, thirsty human being, pointing her to the universal? She says at one point, "I think you're a prophet. Should we be worshiping here, we Samaritans on Mt. Gerizim where our shrine is? Or, should we worship at Jerusalem where you Jews say God is to be worshiped?"

And Jesus says to her, "Lady, the hour is coming and now is when you'll not worship in Mt. Gerizim or Jerusalem, but in spirit and in truth."

It seems to me that Jesus in that conversation, or the gospel writer instructing that conversation, was pointing to a universal that would transcend those particularities, that the intention of Pentecost would be that God would be worshiped in spirit beyond all tribal loyalties and religious particularities. It seems to me that the reversal of Babel at Pentecost can only be realized in global community, and that would be my vision, a millennial vision, a vision for the third millennium.

As I grow older and more reflective on the religious scene which marks me more these days than once it did (once I was a busy pastor, I was building a congregation, I was working in the broader Church, I was involved in all of this institutional concern and construction and structuring and hardly had time to think about God), these days as I observe the religious scene, I'm not pleased with what I see. I see a frenzied religious activity on every hand. I know we live in Western Michigan which is saturated with churches and religion, but there are other places, Bible Belts, for instance, where this is evident. I think that what we see here is not characteristic of the whole country, but it's also not totally without duplication in other places. There is a tremendous amount of religious activity and it's a frenzied effort in many cases, it seems to me, to miss the point of Pentecost and the intention of God for the whole creation and the creation of a global and world community.

There is worship as entertainment. It seems to me that it is a church in trouble trying to find out what will possibly bring people in. There's the whole

therapeutic religious dimension, bringing health and healing, which is certainly a positive thing, and yet, it's not the main thing. There is the hot salvation sector calling people to repentance and faith, to deliver them from eternal condemnation. There is the emotional, charismatic community. One can go to any one of these sectors and find an intensity of activity which is religious, it is busy, it engages tremendous financial resources and a lot of human energy, and the more I look at it, the less satisfied I am with it and I wonder if it is really dealing with the longing in the heart of the Samaritan woman which is the longing in the heart of all of us who are human, which is to have our lives touched, in touch with experiencing the living God who is Spirit, that God beyond all of the trappings of our respective religions, the structures and institutions and forms, the various stories that we tell, that God Who is the Source and the Ground of all being, that God Who is eternal Spirit Who embraces the whole world.

In a preacher's mind, a simmering sermon idea is like a magnet that draws filings from all over, but I didn't have to look very broadly yesterday. The religion section of the *Grand Rapids Press* had one article after another on God as Spirit and Truth. There was the note about the National Council of Churches that's in trouble, hoping that the Presbyterians will give them \$400,000 because they have a \$3.2 million debt, and the Methodists have withheld funds until they get financially responsible. Well, the National Council of Churches is a good organization. Dr. Joan Campbell went to Cuba and talked to the father of Elian Gonzalez who has the good sense to know that a child belongs with the child's parent. I know Joan Campbell; I've preached to Joan Campbell; she is a lovely woman, and the Council does a good thing, but it cannot get support anymore. Structures are just not there.

And then I saw a little note about the University of Michigan Research Center that did some comparisons between 1981 and 1998 and there was a fall-off of church attendance in the country from 60% to 55%, which isn't too bad, actually. But, they said, then, that they had added a question about the meaning and purpose of life which they ask people and there had been a significant increase in the number of people who think regularly about the meaning and purpose of life. In Italy and South Korea and Australia and Germany, The Netherlands, over 10% increase in the number of people were asking spiritual questions. And then there was the Jewish Rabbi Laibl Wolf, who was in Grand Rapids last week who is from Australia but who is a Jewish mystic dealing in the old Cabala system 3500 years old, a system of meditation and contemplation which seeks to bring a balance between body and soul, and it reported that he has recently held a seminar with Fortune 500 company CEOs and also that Madonna is into Cabala. The rabbi didn't put Madonna down because he saw it as a sign of that emptiness, that hunger which is so common to our humanity, whether we're CEOs of a Fortune 500 company or Madonna or any one of us. In all the frantic religious activity, I wonder how much is offering some living water for the parched soul that cannot

ever be satisfied with religious busy-ness and activity and tribalism and triumphalism and success.

And then there was an article about the great religious traditions of the world that are the same at the third millennium as at the second millennium - Hinduism and Confucianism and Buddhism and Christianity and Islam and Judaism. If I could have gotten to the writer before he wrote his article, I would have told him the article could be better than it is because you could have said that it is the same as 2000 years ago, as well, because, as a matter of fact, great religious traditions arose simultaneously around the globe between 800 and 200 Before the Common Era. They all arose simultaneously, and the reason those great religious traditions arose with their significant insights is that there was a transformation of human consciousness. We call that period the First Axial Period when the human individual emerged out of that tribal sense and came to a sense of self-identity and individualism, and with the rise of that human self-consciousness arose these great religious traditions, and they are representative of that which was happening similarly around the globe, in the human family.

And then I wonder, are we at a hinge point in history now for another transformation of human consciousness to break forth? Might this period of time in which we are living be a time of the transformation of human consciousness from individualism to global consciousness? Might this not be the time to pick up Pentecost and to reverse the Babel sounds that mark the failure to listen to one another and the breakdown of trust and thus the breakdown of communication and the devastation of community? Is it not time that we look at the intention of God reflected in the scripture that the respective particularities pointing to the grand universal need to come into conversation and community? Might we have detoured off Pentecost for 2000 years when the one at the well fully intended that that particularity would be transcended as people came to worship God as Spirit and Truth? This Jew who dared speak to a Samaritan between whom there was terrible hostility, this male who dared speak to a female which was unheard of in that day and culture, this Jew who dared to say it's not in Jerusalem, not is it at Gerizim, but it is in spirit and in truth.

Do you think there's hope? Is it the possibility that this vision and this dream could catch fire? Do you think that in a thousand years someone will write an article and will say that the same great traditions that there were 1000 years ago, or might someone a thousand years from now write and say, "You know, there was the breaking forth, here and there, of a larger dream, of the premonition of global community."

Well, it's a dream, but Martin Luther King, whose birthday we celebrate this week, had a dream, too. It was just a simple dream of how little black children and little white children could learn to play together and to live together, where there wouldn't be domination, prejudice, bigotry, hostility, and brokenness, but where there would be community, and that dream is far from being realized, but

the dream has become a dream widespread. Isn't it time that we learn to listen in order that we might understand in order that we might live in the Shalom of God whose Spirit is beyond all of our separateness? The God who is beyond all of our partial insights, absolutized and made exclusive. Isn't it time for us all to wake up to the dream of Jesus?