

GOD'S KALEIDOSCOPE

A Sermon preached for North Presbyterian Church

On May 19, 2013 by Cathy M. Kolwey

PENTECOST SUNDAY

Genesis 11:1-9 and Acts 2:1-13

Our scripture readings for this morning are often considered to be the bookends of the church's formation, the two moments of creation that bring our faith into existence. In these two bookends, God gives two of the most important gifts to humanity.

In the Old Testament lesson, we meet the Babylonians shortly after they have recovered from the great flood. They have gone eastward, set up in Babel, and they decided to build a tower to God. The scripture said they were one people, with one language and one goal: to build a tower so high it reached heaven. I am betting that if I asked for a show of hands of who was familiar with this verse, about half of you will have never heard of this scripture. The other half of you will probably know this verse as one of the ones that fire-and-brimstone preachers have used to talk about the wrath of God. Those who interpret this verse as a wrathful God, I think just get it wrong. If you listen close, there is opportunity here. There is a gift from God. I don't believe this verse is about God being wrathful at all; I believe this verse is about the people's vision being small, and God's plan for humanity being much, much bigger. Listen to see: is it punishment, or is it redirection toward a bigger goal?:

(Genesis 11:1-9)

11 Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. ² And as they migrated from the east, ^[a] they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. ³ 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. ⁴ 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." ⁵ The LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built. ⁶ 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. ⁷ Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another's speech." ⁸ So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. ⁹ Therefore it was called Babel, because there the LORD confused ^[b] the language of all the earth; and from there the LORD scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.

The preachers that use this scripture to illustrate God's wrath miss that part in verse 6. Here God essentially says, if they can accomplish this with one language, then there is nothing that they cannot do. Essentially, God is affirming that there is limitless possibility. And so God redirects them. Instead of concentrating on reaching heaven, God confuses their language and scatters them across the earth. This is not a punishment of humanity; but a gift to humanity. It is the gift of diversity. God redirects the humans' task to help them achieve the limitless possibility of divine imagination. Instead of focusing on getting themselves to heaven, God focuses them on giving the world the gift of diversity.

That is not the end of the story however. God does not leave us in that "confused" state. Time passes and earth is filled with endless diversity, all made in the image of God. Again the people are gathered together; the Holy Spirit comes and fills the early church. Here's what happens at Pentecost:

(Acts 2:1-13)

2 When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place.² And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting.³ Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them.⁴ All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

⁵ Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem.⁶ And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each.⁷ Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?"⁸ And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?⁹ Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia,¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes,¹¹ Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power."¹² All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?"¹³ But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."

With the anointing of the Holy Spirit comes the second gift God gives to humanity. You will notice in this scripture that God doesn't make it so everyone suddenly speaks the same language again; no, they continue to speak in their native tongues. What God does, though, is to give to the early church the gift of understanding. The diversity as present as ever; God's gift is giving people the ability to understand the languages that others' are speaking. The people were astonished by this ability – to understand in their own language when others' were speaking a different language. God compliments the gift of diversity with the gift of understanding, and together these make the bookends of our faith and our church.

I cannot think of a better way to describe the way these gifts work together than what Pastor James said in last week's sermon. Last week he described the concept of oneness, saying:

“Oneness in the midst of difference becomes a sacramental presence of God's life in the world. That does not mean, however, that we lose our identity or individuality. Oneness is not about eliminating differences. It is about love. Love is the only thing that can overcome division. We come together from different backgrounds, different experiences, different ideas, different beliefs to celebrate our wonderful, loving, gracious, Triune God. In God we become one, yet each person remains distinct.” James continued to say, “We need each other's viewpoints because none of us sees God fully, none of us fully understand scripture, none of us, alone, have all the right beliefs. United, sharing, glorifying we glimpse more of God than any individual can on their own. We grow in unity and love when we glorify God and another by listening to another.”

Listening to one another is and the unity that comes from it is the key to today's scriptures as well. We build up the church when accept God's gifts for us: when we embrace the true diversity of humanity, and when we understand that we have been given the gift of understanding others.

I have heard the metaphor of a melting pot used to describe the church. That no matter our race or nationality or background is, we all come together as one in Christ. I think this image denies the diversity that God has gifted to us. We don't all melt together; we remain unique in our diversity.

I have heard the church described as a fruit salad, where many difference coexist in the same bowl. This metaphor also falls short for me. In salads, there is a tendency to cover over every with salad dressing, so it all tastes like ranch. This too covers are diversity and difference.

I have also heard the church described as a mosaic. This metaphor describes our differences well, it honors our diversity, but it is static. In a mosaic, parts are glued into a fixed position; this metaphor leaves out the work of the Holy Spirit. It doesn't take into account that we are a part of a continual process of limitless possibility and that the Holy Spirit moving among us allows us to change and grow – we are in constant motion.

The metaphor that I like to use to describe the church's life is a kaleidoscope. This image incorporates both the gift of Babel's diversity and the blessing of understanding that the Holy Spirit brings at Pentecost. In a kaleidoscope, our diversity is celebrated in the variety of colors and shapes present. But unlike a mosaic, the kaleidoscope affirms the

movement of the Holy Spirit through the work of the church in its variety of pattern and possibility that we see as the colors and patterns move together in motion. The kaleidoscope helps us to understand how the gifts of diversity and understanding can work together in the life of the church.

It is important to embrace these two gifts of God's humanity, to understand that diversity and understanding are an integral part of being a people of God. These are God given gifts have not necessarily been realized in our world yet. Though the church is working towards this, there is still a long way to go to have these gifts appreciated in the world. I look around, and I still see a lot of towers being built.

I look into the political spectrum and I see a blue tower where people are trying to speak only one language, and I see a red tower where people are trying to speak only one language, and I feel like the world has missed God's gifts of diversity and understanding. I hear debates over things like gun control, health care reform, earth care, and education, and it seems like everyone is polarized – and on both sides of the debates, towers are being built and people are trying to speak only one language

I look into our recreational spectrum and I see Purple towers and Green towers, each trying to speak their own language, and I feel like we have missed God's gifts of diversity and understanding.

And maybe most importantly, this week I watched what was happening in the rotunda at the State Capitol this week. I saw people divided into pink and orange. But this event was different. I didn't see people building towers. Instead I saw a glimmer of hope. One of my friends who there, had this to say about the event:

“It was amazing to be at the Capitol this week. As I sat and looked over the balcony at the rotunda I was struck by what was going on. Of course, the requisite cheering and jeering went as people tried to get their point across. Pink "no" signs were right next to orange "yes" ones. Yet, amidst the singing and chants and anticipation, I saw something even more important. People were talking. All around that Capitol I could see pink signed people talking to orange signed ones. Certainly there was debate, but I also saw smiles and expressions of care and affection. Thursday was important, not because wickedness was crushed or defeated, but because the stories of people's lives made a difference. When we can see one another as we truly are - of the same humanity - there is little room for anything other than love and respect. More unites us than divides us. I am so very thankful for that.”

- Heather Stucki Vietz

It was a Pentecostal moment. Christians who were holding pink signs and Christians who were holding orange signs were reaching out to each other in understanding, embracing their diversity. It was the church at work in the world. It was the spirit and the movement of God's kaleidoscope being lived out in real lives and real moments of grace.

Let me say this gently, but let me say it: God loves the orange signed people, and God loves the pink signed people. God loves the blue AND the red. God even loves the purple AND the green. God created the diversity that exists in this world at the moment when the people of Babel were redirected from trying to get to heaven to filling the world with limitless diversity. The goal is not to get everyone in agreement – we are not supposed to build one tower with everyone speaking one language. No, the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost brings us the ability to understand one another amidst great diversity. But it also convicts us with the responsibility to be the voice of understanding in the world. As Christians celebrating Pentecost in 2013, we are called to build the kaleidoscope of God's church, where each color and shape is respected and celebrated, and where the movement of the Spirit keeps us moving together in a dance of limitless possibility. Let us celebrate each voice, especially the ones that are very different from our own. Let us share our stories with each other, learn from others' diverse experiences, and honor how the Spirit is moving in us and among us. Let us advocate for all of those who are working toward deep understanding – not of one side or the other – but of the unity that grows out of divine love that overcomes division. Let us create that kaleidoscope together, where God's gift of diversity and understanding dance together to create the sacramental presence of God's life in this world. May it be so. Amen.