

June 9, 2019
Rev. Kerry Smith

Genesis 11:1-9 Transformation
Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

Genesis 11:1-9 New Revised Standard Version

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.

Last week one of our amazing youth, Ben Snider, shared about going on the international youth mission trip to Costa Rica. Ben shared that this would be his first time to leave the country and that he was most excited to get to know the people in Costa Rica. Not the touristy parts of Costa Rica but the real people of Costa Rica. Ben wanted to get to know people who look different than him, who have a different life than he does, and who speak a different language than his own.

Ben has grown up in this church and his life has been transformed because of what he finds in this place. He finds healing, relationship, and community. He finds a place where he can ask questions and he knows that he is loved by everyone here and by God. He learned about Jesus in this place. He learned from Sunday School teachers and youth leaders about how Jesus welcomed the outcast. He learned about Jesus telling us to forgive our enemies. He learned about Jesus telling us that strangers can become friends and friends can become family and family becomes the body of Christ. This is transformation, where everyone is invited with grace and compassion and nobody gets left out.

Today is Pentecost, the day that we celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit and the birthday of the Church. It is the story of disciples gathered in a home and a wind rushing through that house. "Divided tongues as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them" (Acts 2:3). They were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages. There were people from different places who spoke different languages, and on the day of Pentecost everyone could understand in their own language as the disciples shared about God's deeds of power. They shared about how God had been at work in their lives. They offered testimonies of how God healed them and set them free. They talked about God moving in the world and it gave others courage to join in that holy work. They shared stories of how being a follower of Jesus transformed their lives.

In the middle of that holy chaos, passion, and testimony, the church was birthed into being. Jesus had been raised from the dead on Easter morning but people didn't know how to talk about it and few people had the courage to try. It was risky because they were in Jerusalem, the center of power. Then the Holy Spirit came and the Church breathed in courage, stood up, and spoke. The Holy Spirit moved the Church from silence to language. The Church talked and the whole world started to hear the good news of the gospel. The good news that proclaims no matter what the world tries to tell you, you are loved. Life is stronger than death and hope is deeper than despair. On Pentecost, the Church spoke hope into the brokenness and tragedy of the world.

Today is a day when we think wonderful possibilities for this experiment we call the Church. Everyone working together to love our neighbor and make the world better. When the world was created Genesis tells us God created the world to be good. But people are people and the partnership between God and people was broken in the garden. Then, the partnership between brother and brother was broken when one brother killed the other out of jealousy. From the disobedience in the garden, to the murder of Abel by his brother Cain, to humanity's revolt against God that led to the flood, we struggle to live as we have been created to be, children of God, created in God's image.

Right after Noah and the ark, God tells Noah and his descendants to spread to the ends of the earth, to be fruitful and multiply. Then we hear all the names of the descendants of Noah and "from these the nations spread abroad on the earth after the flood" (Genesis 10:32). Everything was going great, people had done what God said, and then people were people.

Instead of doing what God said and spreading to the ends of the earth, everyone comes together and speaks the same language. People are working together to build the most magnificent building on earth. It was going to reach all the way to heaven. They are building this tower to make a name for themselves so they could avoid being scattered all over the earth. People wanted to be with people who looked exactly like they did. They desperately wanted to hold on to the simplicity that can come from uniformity and they desired to do whatever it took to gain control of what they saw as an unknown future, in an increasingly frightening world. So, God confused their language and tried again and forced people to spread out and live with people who looked differently and spoke differently.

You might be thinking, wait, I learned this story as a child and it is a warning against humanity's desire to achieve greatness. People decided to build the tallest tower so they might "make a name for themselves." The tower would be a symbol of human achievement and power. You might be thinking the Tower of Babel story is about sinful pride, but what if the primary motivation behind their building was not pride but fear? What if it was human anxiety over a perceived loss of control and power? What if what was actually going on was our spiritual ancestors were scared to death? They were scared of the unknown, scared of strange places and faces, scared of a future they could not yet see. What if fear is what drove their behavior, not sinful pride?¹

Echoes of fear are all around us. That fear pops up in political ads about immigration policy and partisan speeches about job loss. That fear pops up in government legislation over who can use what bathroom and in church debates over same gender marriage. That fear pops up in the middle of the night when we lie awake because we are no longer sure what is going to happen to us next and everything feels like chaos—out of our control. Our ancestors in Shinar might have been some of the earliest ones to feel fear or anxiety, but they were certainly not the last. We hear it and we feel it all around.

What happens when you get scared? You huddle together with others just like you, and you try to build whatever you can build—physically, emotionally, spiritually—to keep out the chaos and to make you feel safe again, in control again. You aim for the security of sameness. You stop trusting God to be God, and you work doubly hard to make a name for yourself and to secure a future both for you and for your kind, those whose language or culture you share, those with whom you feel an easy affinity.

As much as the people want to preserve unity, God wanted them to scatter. Why would God do such a thing? All our spiritual ancestors wanted to do was to build a central city, a taller

¹ Much of this paragraph taken from <http://www.fourthchurch.org/sermons/2016/051516.html>

than tall tower, so all of them could just stay there together, in one place. What was so wrong with that? They were convinced that if they could just batten down the hatches, build the walls, arm the ramparts, pass the laws, concentrate on keeping a uniformity of language, culture, family structure, and religious tradition, all would be well. They would be safe. They would feel happy. They would prosper again, and their children would flourish. They wanted to keep out the chaos of diversity.²

God said “Go, multiply and fill the earth” (Genesis 9:1). God said have courage, have faith in God’s ability to be God, resist fear and anxiety over an unknown future or a dwindling sense of power and control. God wants humanity to have different life experiences, to speak different languages, to be diverse. Diversity leads to transformation. There was a story on WFAA about a relationship between a 4th grade class and Bonton Farms and Café Momentum. The 4th grade class is testing a theory that despite their differences they have a lot in common with homeless and low-income residents of Dallas. Bonton Farms is a small urban farm in one of the poorest neighborhoods in Dallas. Bonton is a south Dallas community where 85% of men have been to prison. Bonton is also a food desert. 63% of residents in Bonton do not have personal transportation and the nearest grocery store is a 3-hour round-trip bus ride away. Bonton Farms is staffed by people who are homeless, ex-cons or others who society has neglected. Café Momentum offers a year-long paid internship for young men and women coming out of juvenile facilities. They rotate through all aspects of the restaurant, focusing on life and social skills, coaching and development. The fourth graders and the folks at Bonton Farms and an Café Momentum have written a cookbook together. One of the fourth graders said, “Before, I was a little bit nervous but as soon as I sat down with them my heart grew so that I had more places for people that were different than I was.”³ How can our hearts grow to include more people instead of less?

God did not create us to live fueled by fear or anxiety. God did not create us to live focused on maintaining uniformity at any cost. God created us to see difference as divine gifts. It is how God calls us to live and who God calls us to be. Today on Pentecost, it is a day for us to choose courage and difference and an embrace of all that God brings into our world and into our lives. That is who we are and what will make us whole. Come, Holy Spirit, transform us. Amen.

² Much of this paragraph taken from <http://www.fourthchurch.org/sermons/2016/051516.html>

³ <https://www.wfaa.com/article/features/originals/tearing-down-walls-fourth-graders-prove-whats-possible-by-bridging-differences-building-friendship/287-d3524373-6232-419e-99f6-36b9e7a7893a?fbclid=IwAR2x333m9epOIFvr4ZyGXpB3-jnagese0xVNKPKajEuaSZCJxEq6SHifWYE>