

What's the Problem with Babel?

Pentecost Sunday

Genesis 11: 1-9

Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. ²And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. ³And they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks and fire them thoroughly." And they had brick for stone and bitumen for mortar. ⁴Then 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." ⁵The LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built. ⁶And 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. ⁷Come, let us go down and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another's speech." ⁸So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. ⁹Therefore 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.

Often we get the Tower of Babel text paired up with the Pentecost text because of the languages. Whereas at Babel they all spoke the same language, in the Book of Acts there is fire dancing on everyone's head as they hear the disciples speaking in different languages. While it is easy to say that the Pentecost moment is the answer to the problem we see at Babel, there is always more to the story.

So let's begin by unpacking Babel. At the outset, it seems that the people are living the dream. The whole earth had one language—so no communication barriers. If you've ever been lost in another country, we need someone who understands our language to help us. No such issues at Babel! It says everyone had the same words—so the people had similar perspectives. No arguing about how to interpret the constitution. They journeyed to a place called Shinar and began to build a tower as high as the heavens to house everyone like a massive apartment complex so they wouldn't be scattered throughout the earth. Sounds kind of nice, actually. Now, doesn't Jesus pray that we are all one? Don't we sing that "We are one in the Spirit and one in the Lord?" I mean, wouldn't it be wonderful if we were all on the same page and could all understand one another while sharing our resources to build an apartment complex high enough to house all people? On the surface it seems Babel is living the dream and God seems, well, a bit insecure about it. So what exactly is the problem?

What if. What if the problem is that we aren't all meant to be the same? What if one of God's central values ever since the beginning has been our diversity. We are not meant to look the same, or speak the same, or think the same, or have the same orientation. What if being created in the image of God—from a Trinitarian standpoint—means that we are created in the image of diversity—just like the rest of creation. Did you know there are thought to be one million different species of algae in the world? There are over 12,000 different species of grass? There are more than 4,500 different species of cockroaches—only 30 of those are considered to be pests. In the ocean there are more than 200 different species of jellyfish. If you feel like it, take out your phones, or zoom people can do this from their computers, and Google “How many species of [fill in the blank] are there?” and shout out or chat what you find. It can be an animal or plant or germ.

The point is God loves our diversity. And what if being created in the image of God means we cannot be fully in God's image if we are all the same?

On the surface of Babel it seems like everyone speaking the same language and being in the same place is a good thing but go a bit deeper and discover that their sameness is going to start creating problems. And how do we know this? Because it tells us the people come upon the land of Shinar to build their city. The root word for Shinar in Hebrew means “expressions of violence.” They build their city on expressions of violence where their sameness creates a system of forced assimilation. And what do we think would happen to someone who does not conform to the dominant norm? The same thing which still happens today.

We know what happens when we don't celebrate our diversity. We blame immigrants. We tell them if they are living in our country, they should learn our language and assimilate to our way. We begin writing legislation which limits the rights of couples who aren't heteronormative. Racism takes root and one group feels superior over the other. When we don't value diversity there are expressions of violence and oppression and forced assimilation into the dominant group and we do not honor the image of God in each other.

Except, God loves how different we are. And it is why God scatters the people and confuses their language. And it is why during Pentecost, there is a violent wind which disrupts our categories, and brings people from all over into the same place, without assimilation. There are people wearing hijabs and dashikis. Who

hablar Espanol and parle vous Francé. There is space for our cultures and voices and all the things which make us...us.

So maybe one of our jobs, as a church, is to keep creating a space where diversity is celebrated and we can all hear the good news in our own language. At one of our Zoom listening sessions, we had a guest contribute his wisdom and insights. This person said that he became interested in Trinity because he drove past and saw our Black Lives Matter sign. He said, “At a Presbyterian church?!” So he started watching to see if we really meant it—if he could hear the good news in his language and he could.

A few years back I attended a presbytery meeting in Taylorsville, NC. Population 2,146—mostly the same. Except, on the front lawn you see a sign which says, “Bienvenidas” which means welcome. Then you go to the bathroom and the signage says, “El bano” next to “Bathroom.” I asked someone who attends there how many Hispanic folks they had at their church. She responded, “None, but if any ever step into the building they will know they are welcome.”

Most times we wait for diversity to arrive before we change, but what if we did it the other way around? Perhaps we can all be thinking about how to help others welcome and where they can hear the good news in their own language.

God loves our diversity. Today, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we make space for each other’s diversity in our signage and worship and music. A diverse people empowered by the Spirit of diversity, to be gathered in the name of a diverse God. May it be so, Trinity. And may we continue to help lead the way. Amen.