Pentecost:

Understanding and Connection

*Genesis 11:1-9 Acts 2:1-21 Rev. Todd B. Freeman*

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In the great Old Testament narrative of the Tower of Babel, we read, *“Now the whole earth had one language and the same words... And they said to one another, ‘Come, let us make bricks...’ ...Then they said, ‘Come, let us build...’ ...And the Lord said, ‘...Come, let us go down, and confuse their language...so that they will not understand one another’s speech.’ So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of the earth, and they left off building the city”* (Gen. 11:1-9).

Like a large portion of the Book of Genesis, this is what is called an “**origin story**”. While other stories in Genesis seek to answer questions like: Why are we here? Why do we do that which is not pleasing in the sight of God? and, Where did our people come from?, **the Tower of Babel story was most likely written to try and explain why there is diversity in the human family – why people look and speak differently from one another**. And like other biblical origin stories modern biblical scholars do not think this particular text was ever meant by the author to be interpreted as a literal historical event, but rather metaphorically.

This fascinating narrative begins with the monotony of a single language in one location. It ends in a babble of multiple languages all over the earth. In essence, God transformed their uniformity into multiplicity – their sameness into diversity. A careful reading of this ancient text reveals that **God, our Creator, delights in differentiation and variety in God’s vast creation**. So when God brings to an end the prideful, narcissistic, and arrogant building of the Tower of Babel, we are to discern that this action expresses **God’s opposition to all the towers of cultural, social, religious, or political conformity and sameness that men and women try to construct today**. **The Babel narrative protests against every human effort to achieve a sense of unity through uniformity – of either forcing or expecting all people to be the same**. There are many fundamentalists, both conservative and liberal, who would do well to learn this.

Let’s now switch gears and look at today’s text from the New Testament. When the author of the Gospel of Luke wrote his account in the book of Acts of **the gift of the Holy Spirit at** **Pentecost** it seems that he had the narrative of the Tower of Babel in mind, and that he wanted his readers to recall it as well. There are lots of linkages between the two narratives. In both, people have gathered together *“in one place”* (Acts 2:1). In both, divine intervention *“from heaven”* transforms the circumstances of those who have gathered (Acts 2:2). And, of course, **the main similarity between the two narratives is that they both focus on language and stress the issue of being able to hear and understand, or not.** These two stories, most believe, are meant to be read together - like bookends. They are two separate but related depictions. And somewhat an origin story itself, Pentecost answers the questions, When, Where, Why, and How did the Christian Church begin?

As revealed in Luke’s Pentecost narrative, God intervenes so that people *will* understand one another (which is an entirely different issue than uniformity). **We learn that the presence of the Holy Spirit brings a miracle of *listening –* the ability to communicate in a way in which we truly hear and understand what others are saying!** From verse 6 we read, *“Each one heard them speaking in the native language...”* From verse 8, *“And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?”* And from verse 11, *“In our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.”*

The miracle of Pentecost, the gift of the Spirit, creates “a fresh capacity to listen,” as theologian and Old testament author/scholar Walter Brueggemann observes in his book entitled, *Genesis*. He contends that **the Holy Spirit creates a capacity to hear and then respond to persons who are different than ourselves**. Perhaps most importantly, then, **this story reveals the creation of** **connectedness as a community of faith**. That’s why this Pentecost story is often considered to be the birth of the Christian Church.

Perhaps one of the primary purposes of this Pentecost story, then, is to indicate that **it is the Holy Spirit, God’s Presence with and within us, that allows us to truly “hear” and understand and connect with others, especially with those who are different from ourselves**. So this begs the question: **Who are the people who are different from you**, from us, whether it be religiously, theologically, politically, culturally, or socially? Are you and I, are we, truly “hearing” them? **All this is a good reminder of the crucial importance of providing a safe space here at College Hill** for others to share their stories and lives with us – a hospitable place, a place of sanctuary in which, by the grace of God’s Spirit, we are able “hear” and therefore understand and connect with one another.

However, German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, imprisoned and finally killed by the Nazis, wrote in his book *Life Together*, that there is a common “**kind of listening with half an ear** that presumes already to know what the other has to say... an impatient, inattentive listening, that despises the [other] and is only waiting for a chance to speak and thus get rid of the other person.” We all know of examples in our own lives when we, or others, are stricken with that dreaded disease known as “selective listening.”

**At Pentecost, however, we celebrate** **the gift of God’s Spirit that creates in us a fresh capacity to listen – and not just to the *words* others are speaking, but rather deep into the heart and mind of the *person* who is speaking those words**. In the Spirit, the loud certainty of our own convictions need not keep us from really hearing and considering the ideas and perspectives of other persons.

Preacher Steven MacArthur summarizes the Pentecost story this way, “In the Spirit we are brought out of the locked-door mentality of natural self-centeredness into lives of genuine encounter with diverse persons, just as the first fearful disciples were driven from an upper room with locked doors into Jerusalem streets teeming with visitors from all over the world.” Like those disciples, we too are sent forth from these sanctuary walls each Sunday out into our world, a world teeming with people different from ourselves in many ways.

**So as we celebrate our unity in Christ, let us also remember to always celebrate our diversity**. That’s something many are particularly celebrating during this Pride month. This story, therefore, casts **the church as an inclusive, diverse, prophetic community of bridge-builders**. This is a reflection of the kin-dom of God itself. And that’s especially critical now since we’re living in an age of polarization and division, contempt and conflict.

Teri McDowell Ott, editor of *The Presbyterian Outlook* states, “The vision [portrayed in the story of Pentecost] contrasts with the world we know today, one that **feels like a return to Babel**; arrogant, power-hungry leaders playing god and seeking to amass more power regardless of the cost.” Therefore, our mission, the very essence of Pentecost itself, is to seek, by the power of the Divine Spirit, to understand and connect. As McDowell Ott concludes, “We are to build relationships of mutual respect and understanding in a world full of people who talk over others, fail to listen, and dominate. We are to build a Pentecost alternative.”

Pentecost is not a one-time event. The Divine Spirit hasn’t retired. The Spirit is still showing up, guiding and empowering us as individuals and as a community of faith.

Amen.

Resource:

David Steele