

BEING THE SAME AND BEING DIFFERENT

Genesis 11: 1-9; Acts 2: 1-18

Have you ever struggled to fit in? I think this is the experience of many immigrants and refugees, for example – trying to find a way to fit in, to become part of the larger whole.

I remember when my family came to Canada. We settled into one of the immigrant neighbourhoods of Montreal, Quebec. It wasn't easy. It was a poorer neighbourhood. As a young boy, I witnessed racism, aggression and violence on the streets. In order to survive, you needed to find friends, and even, to be part of a gang. Being a loner and being on your own was a recipe for being picked on and abused regularly.

The problem with being part of a group, however, is that you have to fit in. That means even if you don't always agree with what the leaders are deciding, even if you don't feel comfortable with what the majority is doing, even if there are things about you that make you different, you downplay such differences and keep them under your hat, trying to fit in and follow as best you can so that you can be fully part of the group.

Anyone who has had the experience of being a minority... anyone made to feel different because of their culture, their accent, their name, the colour of their skin, their religion, their sexual orientation, or something else that makes them stand out in some way from the majority group, is vulnerable to being isolated, mocked, dismissed or persecuted.

One of the most beautiful and promising aspects of being Canadian is the possibility of being fully a citizen without having to hide our differences. This is far from perfect and there is still plenty of racism and prejudice around, but certainly compared to so many places in our world, we are mighty fortunate to be Canadians. Let's keep growing our inclusivity and let's keep fighting racism and prejudice whether it's on the streets of Toronto or toward indigenous people, visible minorities, Muslims, trans-gendered persons or whomever.

But all of this raises an even bigger issue. Is there a deeper kind of unity that can empower us to feel part of something larger together without us having to silence or repress that which makes us different? This is exactly what our scripture readings are all about on this Pentecost Sunday.

And let us begin with our Old Testament lesson. Genesis is the first book of the bible, and the tower of babel story is one of the foundational stories. These stories tell us in story form what makes us human, how we relate to one another and why things are the way they are in the world. What divine wisdom does the Babel story offer us?

Well, on the surface, it seems that God is threatened by humans. Humans organize themselves and they want to achieve greatness. Building a tall structure is a way of doing something great and building confidence in who you are and what you can do. But it seems that God doesn't want this to happen. And so, God confuses humans' ability to communicate in one common language. Without a common language, communication, cooperation and agreement break down. Confusion sets in and people cope by separating themselves from one another and spreading all over the world to find some space and peace. The story also explains how the various languages of the world come into being. It's also how the word 'babel' came to be associated with babble. When we don't understand what someone is saying or they're not making sense, we say they're babbling.

But why would God want to cause confusion and conflict when humans want to work together to do something great? Well, this story is written down at the time the Israelites are servants of the great Babylonian empire. Empires get power through brutality and force. Empires force conformity. If any differences from the majority are allowed, there is always a price to be paid for it. Think about all the ancient structures of the world – the Pyramids of Egypt, or, the ancestors of the Babylonians who built what have been called 'Ziggurats.' To build such great structures you need thousands of slaves. Slaves have no choice but to comply to enforced domination. They serve the greatness of their masters.

How many of us have felt pressured or forced to do something because we didn't want to stand out, or because we needed to get someone on side, get that job or opportunity, or because we felt this was the only way to survive? Sadly, it happens in families, in workplaces, in neighbourhoods and in so-called friendships all the time. Whether by force or by social or emotional pressure, we silence our difference, our uniqueness, even our values and beliefs, in order to fit in with the majority. If one language is spoken, it is always the language of the powerful. Everyone else has to hide their differences and conform.

Could we not see the confusion of languages as a gift, a gift for people to be free from domination, free to be different and free to spread out across the world rather than stay under the brutal thumb of the dominant peoples of the world? God liberates people by confusing the languages into many different kinds of language. Only empires would be threatened by a God who encourages difference. Babylon does not want Israel to be stirred

toward independence and freedom. Their differences should be minimized and downplayed. This also means Israelites must be forced to assimilate and speak Babylonian only. They shouldn't speak Hebrew. By writing down these stories, Jews are committing the revolutionary act of safeguarding their traditions, their language, their faith and their culture.

Sadly, we as Canadians did to the indigenous peoples exactly what the Babylonians did to the Jews. We took away the children from their communities and put them into residential schools. They were punished if they spoke their language. We had to educate the Indian out of them and make them into good Canadians. The church was very much part of this all as we know. Clearly, we weren't reading the story of the tower of babel from the side of the Hebrew minority but as Babylonian masters.

So then, if you are a minority people or a dominated people, the story of babel is a revolutionary story of liberation. Only dominant people who want to conquer the world are threatened by a God who wants to break up such ambitions.

Okay. But even though the multiplicity of languages and the celebration of difference is a liberating thing if you are a minority or a small nation like Israel, it can also, in time, become a problem. Why? Because differences lead to conflict, misunderstanding, racism and prejudice of all kinds. How well do we understand other people of other cultures and beliefs unless we open ourselves to their world and their culture and beliefs? But we continue to act oppressively against those whose practices rub us the wrong way. Women wearing hijabs, for example, are interpreted by many of us as the subordination of women. But why is it up to us to have to make those judgements. Why not simply recognize that there are things we don't understand and things that on the surface strike us in a negative way. We can't force people to see things our way even if we're convinced we're on the side of freedom and justice.

How far can we stretch ourselves to make room for differences rather than make judgements and create exclusive boundaries? Unless we are prepared to dialogue with women who wear hijabs themselves and their families, we should not be making final judgements at all. Unless we open ourselves to understand black youth protesting on the streets of Toronto, or indigenous people struggling on reserves and demanding land rights, or Muslims who feel misunderstood and wrongly understood, or transgender persons who feel pressured to accept the gender they're born with, or anyone else who just stands out in their difference one way or another... unless we open ourselves to such difference are we not forcing people to conform to our way in some way?

We have the Babylonian oppressor in us as well, and even though we may not force people to build towers that serve our own grandeur, we judge and shame people regularly so that those things about them that make them different we silence in them.

But here's where things take a radical turn in a different direction when we get to Pentecost.

The story of Pentecost is a very deliberate response to the Babel story. When the Holy Spirit of God who is also the Spirit of the risen Christ comes to the early Christians, difference is not repressed. Difference is celebrated. Even more, when the Holy Spirit comes, conflict and misunderstanding that comes from difference is overcome. Through the Holy Spirit there is room for difference within a larger oneness we can all share. The oneness we can all share is not about one culture, one language, one faith or one way, forcing all other cultures, languages, faiths and ways to be shut down. No. And in order to understand this, let's look more closely at the story.

The Christians who are gathered together on the day of Pentecost all share one language and one culture. They are all Jews and most of them come from Galilee. But once the Spirit of God comes upon them in a powerful and dramatic way, they are open to see all people everywhere as equally children of God spoken to by God where they are. The Jews gathered in Jerusalem from all over the world for the festival of Pentecost speak all kinds of languages and have grown into all kinds of cultures from where they have come. But the Holy Spirit speaks all their languages. God comes to them where they are rather than forcing them to conform to one language and one way. The miracle is that they all hear God speaking to them in their own language. God comes to them where they are. They do not have to change or conform to some other language and culture to find God.

And my friends, this is the way the love of God works. Love builds bridges of understanding and friendship over differences, without forcing people to be less than the unique and distinctive people they are. As individual persons we are unique, unique not only in our culture and language, but unique in our personality, our experiences of life and how we have been shaped in who we are and what's important to us. How can God speak to us where we are and give us light in the very details of our lives? God's love can speak in any language and into any culture. If we don't see it, that's a failure of imagination on our part, not a deficiency in God.

You see, speaking God's love into the various languages and cultures on the day of Pentecost was only the beginning of what would happen to the church. Within months, the

apostle Peter was also having a vision challenging him to recognize the Holy Spirit also speaking God's love to non-Jews and even to Roman military officials who represented the oppressive enemy of the people of Israel, just like the Babylonians were centuries earlier. If God the Holy Spirit can open up Jesus-love even to enemies, is there any door to possible friendship and communion that cannot be opened? What kind of communion is the church capable of when the Spirit is among us? Imagine what we can offer the world as church if we show by example what it means to celebrate our differences within the larger oneness of God's love in Christ we all share.

And this brings it all back to us, here and now, today, as individual persons and as members of the church of Jesus Christ. Have you experienced God speaking to you in your language, speaking to your experience, answering your questions, addressing your specific doubts and struggles, your specific burdens of care and concern? Unless the God of Jesus, God the Holy Spirit becomes your own, there is little value in holding a belief in God. We can all believe that Jesus is the way to God, that God's love is the centre of our faith and all that. But unless such love and such faith become specific enough to who we are, what we need and where we live, the Holy Spirit has not found us. And only when we have experienced God's love in such a personal way unique to who we are and what we're going through, only then can we take such love and reach out to others who are different than us. How much have we been changed by really listening and understanding others in who they are as they express themselves in their "language" to us?

May you and I discover anew God within, speaking to us in fresh and powerful ways, engaging our concerns, our fears, our stress, our anger, our hopelessness and our deepest desires... May God speak to us our language so that we can be open to listen to others when they speak their language to us... Amen.