

Pentecostal Living in Babel
Genesis 11:1-9; Acts 2:1-21
Pentecost Sunday, (May 19) 2024
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The Tower of Babel was the greatest construction project in all of history up to this point. To use a term from Milton, it was a proud tower reaching all the way to heaven. It was the ultimate symbol and effort to regain organization, recover control, and return to one world, one language, one people all sharing the single goal of making the world great again and everything make sense again.

Back in Genesis 1:28, God said to newly created humanity, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.” In other words, migration and diversity is part of God’s plan. Genesis chapter 10 lists the long Table of Nations, giving name after name of the descendants of Noah “by their families, their languages, their lands, and their nations” (10:32).

God’s intention from the beginning in creation is coming to fulfillment. God’s plan has been for humanity to go throughout the earth, spread out, and over time, in different locations, humanity diversifies, different languages flourish, and different perspectives thrive. Here is a picture of a diverse, dispersed, human family.

But that’s not all. While the biblical story of creation and afterwards tends to be human centered, note that all of creation is fruitful and multiplying, and there was a kind of eruption of growth, biodiversity, and dispersion throughout the earth of all living things – people, plants, animals, fish, birds, microbes, and more.

But not everyone likes this. Not everyone sees this as a good thing. The first verse of chapter 11 says that “the whole earth had one language and the same words,” even though back in 10:5, it says of the descendants of Japtheh spread “in their own lands, with their own language, by their families, in their nations.” Down in verse 10:20 it says of the descendants of Ham, “by their families, their languages, their lands, and their nations.” And the same is said of the descendants of Shem in 10:31. Note that the Bible is speaking of languages and peoples in the plural.

So, then there is abrupt change in 11:1 saying that “the whole earth had one language and the same words.”

Why the change? What’s going on?

Most all biblical scholars agree that the abrupt change is a reference and commentary on the rise to power of imperial Babylon and their construction of the towering Babylonian ziggurats as a symbol of imperial control and governance.

Not everyone embraces the spread of diversity with its multiplicity of languages. After all, language is not simply about communication, it is also about how we see and name the world.

Remember the famous story of how Helen Keller learned the power of language. Her teacher Anne Sullivan had been spelling words into the young girl Helen’s hands, but Helen thought her teacher was just playing a game.

But one day Anne took Helen to an old pump house and put Helen’s hand under the stream and began spelling “w-a-t-e-r” into the other hand.

Keller later wrote in her autobiography, “Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness as of something forgotten ... and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew then that ‘w-a-t-e-r’ meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. That living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy, set it free!”

Keller made the connection between words and objects, and it changed her entire life. Language shapes how we see and understand, and different languages enable us to see and understand differently.

Multiplicity of language and diverse people and creation is threatening to many people. It means people think differently, see differently, have different ideas, and read books that even have more different ideas.

Some of us don’t like that. It’s scary. Too much change. Too much unknown and uncontrollable. We do not want to boldly go where no one has gone before. Some of us said, “Let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise, we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth” (11:4). We want to be on our own; autonomous, but we want to be autonomous individuals who all think the same about what is important and how we conduct our lives. We want a kind of conformed individualism, and we end up with a dominating imperialism. Babylon is great again.

But this is not what God wants. God wants diversity. God wants a creation with all sorts of colors and sizes, an abundance of life in all kinds and shapes and sounds. And in our efforts to clamp down and stifle this abundant diversity, God judges us. So, God scatters us. Against our will but according to God’s will, from this one centralized city, we are scattered all over the face of the earth. At the same

time, compounding the scattering is a confusion of language. It says in 11:7 that the people no longer understood one another's speech. This can just as easily be translated as "they no longer listened to one another." If you think about it, the ability to listen to one another involves trust. It implies the willingness to be open to the other person, a readiness and willingness to receive a new word. Listening and trust go together. The Babel story says we no longer listened, and we no longer trusted. The result was then and is now, scattering and confusion.

So, here we have what biblical scholars refer as the fourth "sin story" in the pre-history of Genesis (after Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, and the flood). Human pride and human fear resulting in humanity trying to control and impose a singular, dominating, homogeneity.

God's judgement is to scatter everyone. To put it differently, God's judgment is often to give us what we want. And if we want to make a name for ourselves, and if we do not want to listen to one another, the result is chaos and confusion. It is creation run amuck.

And in our confusion, we think God has caused all this and we also think this curse and judgment of God is the end of the story. Once more, we are chastened to remember that this is not the end but the beginning. God is still at work, no matter what we think.

Which brings us to our New Testament story and the birthday of the church at Pentecost.

The resurrected Jesus gives his last words on earth to the disciples. He is about to ascend. He tells them to go back to Jerusalem and wait and pray. Wait and

pray. They want to know what the plan is, and he says, it's not for you to make a plan. Give up control – go wait. Pray. Trust me. Be open. Listen.

So, they're waiting and they're praying, and they're trying to learn patience and trust. It's Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost, where there are Jews from all over the known world in the city for the festival celebrating the giving of the Ten Commandments on Mt. Sinai. And suddenly, the windows blow open, papers and dirt and dust are blowing every which way. They are hit like a hurricane. And they hear a roaring sound. Like people describing a tornado, "It sounded like a roaring locomotive," so maybe they thought they were having a tornado.

And then there is fire shooting throughout the room. Some sort of fire or flame or crackling spark appeared above or around each of them. Old-timers who remembered the Dust Bowl in the U.S. in the 1930's say that during the dust storms that the static electricity was so great that if you touched someone else it would knock you down and it grounded out the electrical systems of cars so they stalled on the road and wouldn't start. They said you could see the sparks fly when people shook hands.

Blowing wind, crackling fire – and these disciples, every one of them from Galilee begin to speak in other languages. Nearby were Jews gathered from all over the known world and these Galileans begin speaking to them in languages these diverse peoples understand. In Acts 2:4 it says the disciples could speak in other languages. And in 2:6 it says that each person heard in their own language. And v. 8 says, "And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?" It emphasizes hearing also in vv. 11, 14, and 37. In other words, "we're able to understand what they're saying." And they listen. They listen to one another because it says in v. 13, they were listening to the disciples speak about

God's deeds of power. To put it differently, they were able to discern what was going on. Discernment – one of the most basic gifts of the Holy Spirit, which is the gift to be able to recognize the work of God in the middle of the most mundane occurrences. During the confusion, they were listening and discerning God at work.

We learn to listen for what God is saying to us from different kinds of people, that we would likely miss if we only paid attention to people who speak and look just like us. What wonderfully imaginative things might we miss if we live in the world of Babel with one language and one people?

And as we listen to others, Pentecostal power moves us outward. According to Scripture, the love of God is poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit (Romans 5:5). According to the early chapters of Acts, following Pentecost, the new church moved outward to feed the hungry, visited the sick, and even welcomed those heretofore were considered strangers. The Holy Spirit gets us off the couch and into the hurting and suffering world. By the empowerment of the Spirit, we listen – to God, to one another, and we listen to creation. We listen to the creek running behind our building and the watershed it is a part of, we listen to the trees and to the ecological biodiversity of this planet. And in our listening, we are compelled, called to respond to hurting and suffering people, those barely hanging on, and to creation groaning under extraction and exploitation.

And there is another aspect I think that is going on here at Pentecost and here I'm drawing largely from the work of Baylor theologian and friend of mine, Jonathan Tran (see his *Asian Americans and the Spirit of Racial Capitalism*, 2022). Tran asks a great question about all our efforts at diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). He asks the fundamental question: Why do we want diversity, equity, and

inclusion? Given, as we well know there are considerable efforts to shut down DEI in our schools and stifle the multiculturalism of our society, ban books and ideas, while building walls to try to regain control of a changing world. But for those of us, who seek to embrace multiculturalism and anti-racism, Tran asks why?

This story of Pentecost and the book of Acts gives us some clues at answering why.

The great theologian Augustine of the late 4th/early 5th century, said, “true religion, true Christian living envisions creaturely existence in terms of depth, ever-deepening – involving, revolving, evolving – participation in the divine life as the consummation of creaturely longing” (“Of True Religion,” in *Augustine: Earlier Writings*, pp. 218-253).

Pentecost, through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit we are thrust into the divine life with God. In other words, God throws us into the deep end. And at first, it scares us, we come up coughing and trying to figure out how to keep from drowning, but we soon learn to dog-paddle and eventually, if we keep at it, and we do it together in God’s care, we swim up and down, take deep dives, float on our backs, and on and on. You get the idea.

Pentecost is about us – the church – taking a deep dive into God and God’s extravagantly diverse people and creation, where, as we’ve said, we learn to listen to God, to one another and especially the other considered different, and we listen to creation.

But the whole reason we listen is so we can embody, practice what Jesus told us: to love God, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. The book of Acts is the story of the Holy Spirit calling, pushing, pulling, compelling, the church into

the deep end of participating in the divine life of loving God, loving our neighbors as ourselves (and our neighbors include the natural world).

And here's the thing, the book of Acts also shows us that the church, empowered by the Holy Spirit, loves not simply by feeling or thinking in certain ways. Love is embodied, incarnated, put into practice – are you ready for the deep end? – in revolutionary economics.

Recall Jesus's first sermon back in Nazareth in Luke 4 when he "proclaimed the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:19), which is a direct reference to the Jubilee year, from Leviticus 25. After 7 cycles of every 7th year (the sabbatical year) when the land rested and had a chance for restoration, on the 50th year there was the Jubilee, when all debts were cancelled, lands were restored back to the original families, and servants and slaves were released. The Jubilee was an economic and environmental rebooting of Israelite society. And Jesus said in him, the Jubilee was to be practiced.

Acts 2 and 4 gives us pictures of this new revolutionary, Spirit-powered people called church, figuring out how to love God, love their neighbors as themselves by practicing a first century Jubilee economics in sharing all things in common and making sure everyone had enough.

Jonathan Tran calls this a "deep economy," Martin Luther King, Jr. called it an "inescapable network of mutuality," Pope Francis calls it a "sense of deep communion," and Thomas Aquinas called "a humane economy." I don't have time this morning to go into detail, but I do want us to think about what this might mean for us.

I am suggesting that our efforts at trying to learn to be antiracists and our efforts to listen to our diverse neighbors is simply a prelude to learning to love in practical, economic ways.

In participating ever more deeply in the divine life with God, we learn how to have a proper relationship with material things, especially with money. I say especially money because in our capitalistic world there is nothing more important than money. The proudest towers in our cities are not palaces or temples or cathedrals. Our most central and tallest, most proud towers are for capitalism – money, commerce, free enterprise economics.

And in Jesus Christ, I believe that we called to have a proper relationship with money where enough is enough and we learn to share in ways reflecting God's goodness and love.

Fifteen years or so ago, I led a weekend retreat with Redeemer Community Church in San Francisco, talking with them mostly about Wendell Berry. It is an amazing congregation of almost all Asian-Americans – Korean, Japanese, Vietnamese, Thai, Chinese, Cambodian, Filipino, and on and on. The church is full of professionals who, interestingly to me, almost all went to Stanford or U Cal Berkely, intense rivals I soon learned.

Part of the beginning of Redeemer in 2002 was hand in glove with a software startup called Dayspring Partners, in which two or three Stanford graduates, Chi-Ming Chien and his wife Juliette, and Danny Fong and his wife Cindi founded. Eventually Danny and then Cindi became the pastors of Redeemer Church and Chi-Ming does much of the music and worship leadership while also developing and running this software company.

From the get-go, Redeemer Church and Dayspring has sought to “live into what they call ‘the grace economy’ in contrast to the ‘mammon economy,’ which has meant experimenting in economic sharing, communal living, intentional friendships, racial reconciliation, personal accountability, political solidarity, financial investment, institution building, and community organizing – all woven together through their religious life” (see Tran, p. 21). They intentionally moved into a neighborhood that was historically a site of blatant environmental racism, and committed itself to local relationships of neighbor love in a part of town that was predominantly black.

They have learned to think and live and practice their faith together. Think Wendell Berry and his thick descriptions of sharing life together in Port William, Kentucky combined with Acts 2 and 4 creatively lived out by mostly Asian-Americans in a blighted mostly black neighborhood of San Francisco. Hear me on this: if this is not Pentecostal living, I don’t know what it is.

Jonathan Tran from Baylor spent a year living and serving with the folks of Redeemer a couple of years ago. He writes, “Their work in the community starts with their work as a church. As one member put it, ministry to the community is ‘as much a kind of time for members of the church to serve together and enjoy working with one another as it is a way to serve the community; it is a way of practicing embodied mutuality’” (p. 171).

Redeemer Church and Dayspring Partners software company sees themselves as stewarding what belongs to others. Over twenty years, as both the church and the company grew, matured, and developed, they recently transferred the \$3.1 million company shares to Redeemer Church, with all proceeds being used for local economic and community development. Furthermore, part of the

transfer agreement Redeemer itself will transfer Dayspring shares to other micro-companies, start-ups, and non-profits in five years.

All of this is one way a particular congregation is embodying the love of God, love of neighbor and thyself in their context today.

I am not suggesting we attempt to do exactly the same here. I am, however, saying that the Holy Spirit urges us to think outside of the box about our life together into the future – and that includes such things as what might a deep economy or economy of grace might look like here?

In a Babel world of change, and what seems scary and unknown, what might Pentecostal living look like?

When I was at Redeemer Community Church, they asked me what I might like to do for dinner one of the evenings I was there? I suggested a church potluck with everyone bringing their favorite native food. They loved the idea, and it turned out to be one of the most amazing dinners I've ever experienced. The food itself was amazing – Thai dishes, Cambodian, Vietnamese, various kinds of Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Korean, Laotian, and on and on. But there were also native Californians with Mexican backgrounds, so we had Mexican dishes and a couple from Minnesota brought a German dish. It was incredible. Then we had people get up and tell what the dish was and why it was important to them. The stories added another layer of richness and goodness to an already wonderful dinner. As the dinner was underway, the noise of conversation increased in volume. I could hear Japanese and Mandarin, Korean, Vietnamese, English, Spanish, Galilean, Parthian, Cappadocian, Egyptian, Phrygian, and even Mede and Elamite ...

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God,
Mother of us all. Amen.