

Pentecost: Celebrating Unity in Diversity
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May 15, 2016

Acts 2:1-21
Genesis 11:1-9 (Tower of Babel)
1 Cor. 12:12-26

Hymns: One is the Body – Sing the Journey, There are Many Gifts – HWB

I grew up in a multi-lingual household; perhaps some of you did, too. Aside from English and the low German that both my parents grew up with, when we lived in South America, where my parents were church workers, my sister and I attended a German school, so most of our classes were in Spanish and we had German class as well. Though we spoke mostly English at home, as you can imagine, we ended up throwing in a word here or there from one of the other languages. For some reason, this came to really bother me as a young kid – I took it upon myself to monitor my family’s languages, and whenever they got too jumbled together, I would say, “you’re mixing up the languages!” My family found this hilarious, and it became kind of our family joke.

Well, good thing my childhood self was not present at that first Pentecost, because it probably would have made me extremely uncomfortable! Can you imagine it? The disciples and followers and family of Jesus gather in the upper room, still trying to come to grips with their experiences of Jesus’ death, resurrection, and ascension. And then, when they’re “all together in one place,” the Holy Spirit comes in a triune way: First, “like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting.” Secondly, the Spirit appears as “divided tongues, as of fire,” which “rested on each of them.” Third, the Spirit “gave them the ability” to speak in many different languages as *all* who were present in that upper room “were filled with the Holy Spirit”

(2:1-4). Because it was the Jewish festival of Pentecost (also called the Feast of Weeks), there were Jewish people from all over visiting Jerusalem – Acts mentions at least fifteen different languages! And by the power of God, all hear from Jesus’ followers in their own languages, and are “amazed and astonished” to hear this group of Galileans speaking about Jesus in all of their various mother-tongues.

But it must have been noisy, to draw such a crowd! One commentary I consulted called it “potentially chaotic” – but maybe it wasn’t just “potentially” so!¹ It must have been a chaotic cacophony of languages as something like fifteen sermons were delivered simultaneously! In fact, we’re told it was so chaotic that some onlookers “sneered” at them, saying, “They are filled with new wine.” They were scandalized by what they saw, thinking that the Spirit-filled preachers must have had too much to drink, and first thing in the morning, too! They could not see the Spirit of God at work in that kind of chaos, that kind of unapologetic plurality, that kind of delight in diversity. Like my childhood self, they were upset by the mixing of the languages, the crossing of boundaries and categories.

But Peter steps forward and addresses these cynics, saying that there is order to the seeming chaos – that what they are seeing is not drunken disorder, but actually the fulfillment of Scripture, as the Jewish prophet Joel foretold: “In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days will I pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy” (2:17-18). Notice the layers of diversity

¹ *The IVP Women’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Catherine Clark Kroeger and Mary J. Evans (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002), 609.

here: not only do we have people speaking of Christ in many different languages, but we also have *all kinds of people* speaking of Christ. We're told that women, including Mary of Nazareth, Jesus' mother, were also in the upper room, so they are also among those prophesying.² Peter's quotation from Joel names the way that the Spirit of God is poured out on everyone, crossing the lines of gender, age, and class – as well as national and linguistic-cultural divides. And even the Spirit appears in diverse ways: in wind or the breath of life, in flame or light, and in the words of the various languages which spring to the lips of Jesus' followers. It would seem that even the Divine is diverse, at Pentecost, suggesting that our diversity, too, is in God's image.

But is it really so surprising that this chaotic cacophony of languages and prophecy was disconcerting, even alarming, for some? That sentiment seems to actually fit quite well with that *other* narrative about a plethora of diverse languages: the narrative of the Tower of Babel, which we find in Genesis 11. But there, this is not understood as something to be celebrated, but as fragmentation, division, and dis-unity. So what exactly is going on here?

At first glance, things seem to start out well in this story – there seems to be unity as all of humanity, speaking the same language, co-operates to build the tower together. We're told that “the whole earth had one language and the same words. . . . And they said to one another, ‘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’” (Gen. 11: 3a, 4). But God “comes down” to see this city and this tower, and is disturbed by it; God says, “Look, they are

² Ibid.

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 now will be impossible for them. Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another's speech" (vv. 6-7). So God mixes up their languages, and the city and its tower are abandoned, left unfinished. The tower is named Babel, which means "to confuse," because God confused their languages there (vv. 8-9).

But this whole story is pretty confusing. Why did God not want the people working together or co-operating? Why didn't God see this unity and call it good? And how can the multiplying of the languages be considered a punishment, or even a curse, here, when at Pentecost, it was a miraculous gift of the Spirit, and a blessing? According to a common interpretation, this narrative is primarily about human pride. God simply wanted to cut humanity down to size here, because this project was too prideful; it was about humanity making a name for itself, without God's leading. While that might be part of it, I want to delve a bit deeper, asking: in what kinds of conditions does monolingualism flourish? One possibility is that everyone is the same – of the same cultural and linguistic background. Given that this narrative comes just after the flood, when Noah's family was essentially repopulating the earth, this makes some sense. But the other, more troubling possibility for this monolingualism – and one which is much more common in human experience – is that one linguistic group was dominating the others, that those speaking a certain language had declared themselves and their language superior to the others. Looking carefully at the narrative, we're not told exactly who wants to "make a name for themselves" – was it all of the people or was it just some, enlisting – or even coercing – others into laboring for them?

If we think about our own context, the times when Canada, for instance, has aspired to one language and one culture have been some of the darkest of its history. I'm reminded of the residential schools set up to assimilate Indigenous children into the "Canadian" – i.e., white, European, settler – culture, language, and way of life. This raises questions of *whose* language and culture is presumed to be the "right" one, and imposed onto other people on those grounds? In other words, is the dream of one 'universal' language primarily a dream of the powerful and those who dominate others, trying to impose sameness and stamp out diversity and difference?

A few weeks ago, I met with Adrian Jacobs, who is an Indigenous (Haudenosaunee – HO-DE-NO-SHO-NEE) theologian who is the keeper of the learning circle at the Sandy-Saulteaux Spiritual Centre in Beausejour, Manitoba (a centre for training Indigenous students for ministry in the United Church). He spoke about Pentecost specifically as a poignant counter-narrative to the attempts at assimilating First Nations peoples in Canada to the white, settler culture. The Spirit's movement toward multiplicity at Pentecost is crucial. God does not work by allowing everyone to understand the one language of Jesus' followers; instead, God multiplies the languages, so that they can speak to people of every nation in their own language. Doesn't this show us, said Adrian, that God respects and values our various and different languages and cultures, including the different languages and cultures of the First Nations in Canada? Similarly, Isaiah's vision of the future gathering at the mountain of God is not about everyone becoming part of one nation, but about the great variety of nations – precisely in their diversity – gathering in peace at the mountain of God (Isaiah 2). God

desires not the domination of one over the many, but diversity – peaceful relationships between many nations in their very difference from one another.³

This means that what we saw at the beginning of the account of the Tower of Babel was not unity – or rather, it was not true unity. It was actually *uniformity* – the kind of unity based on sameness, on all being insiders, on conformity which is suspicious of difference, and tries to do away with it. Could it be that is what God saw in Babel which led God to mix up the languages, to restore diversity – since, after all, God created difference from the beginning – different animals, plants, people? And again at Pentecost, God *multiplies* the voices, making it possible for *many* nations to hear about Jesus' way of peace. This is a deeper kind of unity based not on glossing over or erasing differences, but on seeing them as *gifts*. In this way, our diversity is transformed from being an impediment to our unity to being the foundation of a more profound unity which acknowledges and is thankful for what each of our different perspectives, gifts, and identities contribute to the Body of Christ, the church.

Though we are used to thinking about this as an either/or – either there is sameness and unity, or difference and fragmentation – Pentecost points toward the blending of the two. African feminist theologian Mercy Amba Oduyoye, who is a Methodist from Ghana, speaks of it this way: “Today we begin to be aware of concepts such as unity in diversity, difference in sameness and sameness in difference, unity within difference, and more. . . . In our desperate attempts at ‘being one’ and being ‘at peace,’ we forget that God put an end to the ideology of the Tower of Babel, replacing it later with the more meaningful and community-building diversity of Pentecost – life in the Spirit of God as opposed to the mentality of ‘let us . . . make a name for ourselves’

³ Personal conversation with Adrian Jacobs, March 30, 2016, Canadian Mennonite University.

(Gen. 11:3-4) and build structures that can never be changed. To strive for unity in diversity is a task we cannot evade – and there are no short cuts.”⁴ She doesn’t pretend that this is an easy task, but she speaks of it as much “more meaningful,” fostering a more profound kind of community. Thus, if “unity” means some are excluded because they are different, then it is not unity at all – true unity makes space for difference, even celebrates it.

Paul’s words to the fledgling church in Corinth echo and elaborate on this crucial Pentecost idea about what it means to be the church or the body of Christ: in other words, that the church is not about unity OR diversity but about unity IN diversity. We’re so used to the language of the church as the Body of Christ that I think we tend to see it as a simple, even a simplistic image. But in doing so, we miss its ingenuity and its poetry – even its humour!

Paul writes, “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

“Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot would say, ‘Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,’ that would not make it any less part of the body. And if the ear would say, ‘Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,’ that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would

⁴ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, “Reflections from a Third World Woman’s Perspective: Women’s Experience and Liberation Theologies,” in *Feminist Theology from the Third World: A Reader*, ed. Ursula King (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994), 23-24.

the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as [God] chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body” (1 Cor. 12:12-20). The church at Corinth was struggling – as many, many churches throughout Christian history have! – with how to balance unity and diversity, with how to be united in its diversity, with how to be an intercultural community where people of different social classes gathered together in peace. So Paul brings them this image: you are one body, infused with one Spirit, yet you each bring different gifts. It’s ludicrous for you to wish you all had one gift, or to be envious of one another! You are one body. You need each other to be a whole body. Without each other, you’re not actually a communal body at all.

And then we get to the really interesting part, as Paul adds a further twist to this image. Not only are the different gifts all to be valued in the Body of Christ, the church, but *those which are perceived to be the least are actually the most important*. In Paul’s words, “The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you,’ nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you.’ On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honourable we clothe with greater honour, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honour to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it” (vv. 21-26). Here Paul spells out for us how this body is to deal with difference – extend the warmest welcome to those deemed the

least important, give the most respect to those deemed the least respectable. Care most of all for the vulnerable among you. And through these loving actions, relationships will form – relationships which encompass the most profound unity imaginable, such that you share your joys and sorrows as a body, suffering and rejoicing with one another, sharing your lives with one another.

As someone who admittedly does not know this particular church community – Nutana Park Mennonite Church – very well, I have been deeply encouraged by what I've learned about you and how you embody God's love together. I have seen this in meeting with your wonderfully intergenerational pastoral search committee. And I have seen this in your careful and warm welcoming statement, where you name especially those differences that “give rise to discrimination and marginalization” – “race, ethnic background, gender, age, sexual orientation, income, education, ability,” and so on. To me, these practices and this statement are a contemporary version of exactly what Paul was calling for in Corinth – for those deemed “outsiders” elsewhere to be intentionally and warmly welcomed into the Body of Christ, the church, as valued members whose differences are gathered up into the unified whole. This, in other words, is unity in diversity in action in this very community of faith.

I encourage you, then, to continue to live into this Pentecost vision of the church as a richly diverse body which is nevertheless one in the Spirit. As the Body of Christ, let's remember that we are invited not to merely tolerate or to erase each other's differences into the uniformity of the Tower of Babel. Differences are no longer to be seen as obstacles to unity. Rather, we are called to embrace them as gifts of the Spirit, who was poured out as wind and fire upon the disciples on that first Pentecost, so that

God's name could be spoken in many different languages by the young and old, male and female disciples who had gathered. Thus transformed by God's love, we can truly embody together the diverse wholeness of the Body of Christ.

AMEN