

Sermon "Scattered and Gathered"
Kirk of St James
Sunday June 8, 2025
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I came across a story about a journalist in Hollywood back in 1973 and how he went into a store to buy a tube of toothpaste. He asked at the counter for a small tube, and the clerk handed him a tube that said large. He gave it back asking for a small tube to which the clerk replied, "Sir we only have three sizes: large, giant, and super. So if you want the small size, you have to ask for the Large." Humanity loves the idea of bigger and better even when it comes to toothpaste!

In Genesis the people of the earth have arrived in Shinar and decided they would stay. They discovered they could make bricks and mortar and together they could build a great city. Now the traditional interpretation of this passage is that it describes human arrogance and their attempts to build a tower that would reach the sky. This provoked God; therefore, He punishes them, confuses their language, and scatters them so their plans will not be finished. While this may in fact be the intent of this passage, there is another possibility that has been brought forward. In recent years some biblical scholars have suggested another way to look at this passage—that the story of Babel in fact deals with the origins of cultural difference, and not with pride and punishment. It was an interesting suggestion, as I have always read it as a story of human arrogance and God's resulting intervention.

As one biblical scholar writes this new reading of Genesis suggests that cultural diversity is the consequence of God's design for the world, not the result of God's

punishment for it. Which can be an interesting shift in how we view our world. In fact, this diversity is so unique, and abundant God must have had a hand in it. “Humans need identity and cultural solidarity, but it takes divine intervention and initiative to bring about the extravagant array of the world’s cultures. The story embraces cultural solidarity and cultural difference and acknowledges the value of both. In the traditional understanding of the story cultural difference is devalued and seen as a source of confusion and a curse upon the human race, even a judgement of God. The new, alternative understanding values difference highly and explains it as God’s aspiration for the new world after the flood.” To be honest I really appreciate both readings of this scripture passage, especially because I believe there is truth in both possibilities. History has proven time and again that humans when left to their own devices can come up with some catastrophic things. The world has also demonstrated that far from being a punishment, the diversity in our world is a beautiful thing. There is merit in both readings, and I am not prepared to say whether I believe one is right and one is wrong for that reason.

While I may not be certain of which reading is the correct one, what I do know is that the people of earth were prepared to hunker down in their great city and remain there. At first it may sound like a utopian dream, but the reality is any community that remains contained within itself becomes static. There is a Belgian physicist whose work illustrates the importance of challenges, and the growth potential in times like these. Ilya Prigogine was awarded the Nobel Prize for his theory on “dissipative structures.” In this theory he contends that friction is a fundamental property of nature and nothing grows without it—not

mountains, not pearls, not people. Any structure—whether it is molecular, chemical, physical, social, or psychological—that is insulated from disturbance is also protected from change. It becomes stagnant. It is important that the people of the earth do not become so insular that they cease to grow or change, and there is a great danger of that until their language is confused.

The other part of this story that we know for sure is that no matter what there is always a Babel component in our lives, even when we speak the same language. Babel has come to represent the confusion, individualism, and miscommunication that exists between people, or creates discord in our communities. As one minister said “Babel is what makes injustice thrive. Babel is what makes a distinction between the rich and the poor. Babel is what makes people think they can own other people. Babel is what makes wars to happen. Babel is often lived out in individual and corporate sin, because we tend not to look to God, but to ourselves for the ultimate answers.” In many ways as Cain and Able first demonstrated Babel has existed since humans first took matters into their own hands, and it will continue through until the end, simply because it is born out of our fear, insecurity, and longing for power and control.

It seems that if the Holy Spirit had come and unified people then the way forward should be marked with co-operation, and peace. But Babel is familiar, and things did not last, a few chapters later in Acts we find the members of the early church arguing among themselves and forming division. Sometimes Babel is easier.

And perhaps this is both the gift and the challenge of Pentecost. We experience moments of Pentecost where we are of one mind and we all speak the same language, and for a while we do things as we should. We help, we heal, we reach out to others. But the experience does not always last, and once again we find a Babel component in our lives that confuses us, and mixes everything up again. The promised presence of the Holy Spirit helps us where we may lack and helps us get back on track. We may be people with a Babel component, but we strive to be people of Pentecost. As one author said we strive to be a people of Bethlehem, where unlike Babel the news was frustration, confusion and defeat, a manger in Bethlehem came to hold good news, joy, and victory. We live knowing that at that Pentecost moment we were a united people, and we continue to work and strive and grow into that reality, with the help of the Holy Spirit.

While Babel may continue to be a part of our lives it does not define us, for the scattered peoples of the world were once again united in an Upper Room when the Holy Spirit first came among us. Pentecost represents the inbreaking of God's purposes for all humanity, bringing humanity together in understanding, despite their differences. The beauty, the uniqueness, and the diversity that makes this world amazing is united through our common identity as the children of God. Today we are also united through the table that we share together through the power of the Holy Spirit. "Communion assumes difference—not uniformity, not conformity to a single idealized form of life, or nationality, or ethnicity, or tribe." Communion is community in its best form. Today we celebrate our diversity and our unity through the power of the Holy Spirit.