

Scattered and Gathered

(Gen 11:1-9; Acts 2:1-8:11-12)

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God chooses both to scatter and to gather us, depending on the situation. That is one of the conclusions we can draw from the readings for this Pentecost Sunday.

In the Tower of Babel story, God sees that the people of the earth are all able to understand each other so well that they are able to construct a tower, an impressive feat of engineering. And God worries that the tower will serve as evidence to them they can rely on themselves and have no need to rely on God.

And so, God disrupts their building project by confusing their language in a way that makes it impossible for them to understand each other. And in so doing, God causes them to be scattered over the face of the earth.

In other words, God puts a stop to what is beginning to look like a consolidation of limitless human potential and introduces serious limitations. God becomes a major civilization buster!

An Origin Story

The Tower of Babel story is a kind of “origin story”; a way of explaining why there are so many languages in the world and why we don’t all understand each other. And it raises interesting questions like: “Can it be that our inability to understand each other is part of God’s intention?”

I think that this and other questions that this story raises are important to help us cope with our situation today where, on just about every level; from a global scale to the level of individuals, we are disheartened by the failure to communicate and the sense that we are being scattered.

Ours civilization is the tallest “Tower of Babel” ever built. And, even though we are going through a time of unprecedented achievement, able to talk with anyone anywhere on the planet, without even a time delay; even though we have built our own towers up to 160 stories high and put people on the moon, we remain deeply and almost inexplicably crippled in our ability to communicate with each other in ways that can save us from ourselves.

And this failure is not only due to the fact that the world has literally thousands of languages. Within each individual language and even within our own communities, we are unable to understand each other. Two people can be talking about the same event in English, but when one

explains something to the other, the other shakes his head and thinks to himself “What is he or she talking about? That makes no sense at all.”

I think we can all agree that beyond all our personal theories and convictions, there is finally only one true objective reality that will determine the future for all of us. And maybe we can agree that, in our human limitation, none of us mortals can grasp that reality in any other than a very partial way. It is, after all, what separates us from the omniscience and omnipresence of God.

But could it be, as appears to be the case in the Tower of Babel story, that our inability to communicate is somehow God intended? Or could we even go further and think of this limitation as a blessing?

A Blessing?

It seems to me that when we have limitations, a space opens up within us that is dominated by uncertainty and the need for humility; a space in which we recognize that we are at a loss. When I listen to you and I don't understand what you are saying, I have to pause and be mystified. And perhaps God uses those pauses, those mystified moments of silence as an opportunity to put something new in our heads and hearts that wasn't there before; from beyond ourselves.

Maybe in order to be a good servant of God's love, it is better for a person to be a somewhat confused listener in search of understanding, than it is to be a person who pushes forward with total confidence that he or she has got it right, even if there is a good possibility of having gotten it wrong. If one is like a cup full to overflowing with self-confidence, what room is there to receive? Whereas there is always room to receive in a cup that is not so full of certainty. (God has a way of keeping us guessing!)

And so, it is worth considering the possibility that being limited in our ability to communicate is not an entirely negative thing, and that God may sometimes intend it as a kind of hidden blessing. It may be that we can think of many of the other limitations we live with also as hidden blessings.

Gathering

If the Tower of Babel story suggests to us that God had an intention to scatter, the Pentecost story does the opposite. It describes God's intention to regather the people.

And God does this by sending the Holy Spirit down in tongues of fire upon the gathered followers of Jesus. In response to the Spirit that has just entered them, his followers begin to speak. And people from far places,

speakers of various languages, who have gathered around to see what is happening, are astonished to hear these “Galileans” speaking in their “native tongues”. They actually understand what the Jesus’s followers are saying!

This story is suggesting to us that when the Holy Spirit is present in a person, it has the power to bridge the breakdown in communication that exists between ourselves and those who speak different languages.

And I would further suggest that this story is telling us that the Spirit has the power to close the gap between those people we know who speak the same language we speak, but whom we fail to understand. The Holy Spirit has the power to communicate God’s truth to all the people in the language that each hears as their native tongue.

I think that the words “native tongue” that scripture uses to describe the words spoken at Pentecost is very suggestive. Your native tongue is something that you feel comes naturally to you, as something that you experience as original and inseparable from who you are; not something superficial that is added later. It seems to me that our true native tongue is something God created each one of us to be able to recognize and speak,

while we were yet in our mother's wombs and even before any other mortal spoke a word to us.

I may be speaking with you in our shared language of English this morning, but if in any way I am speaking in my native tongue, it seems to me that it would be a communication on a deeper level than English itself. The communication would be a direct expression of my being from its deepest source, and it might be that you would recognize and understand it, because it is the same language that God first created you for as well.

At least I think this is a fair interpretation of where this story takes us. So that a person who works in silicon valley or a farmer or someone from a small town or from a big city may all speak English, and they may all speak it in ways that lead them to cultivate different points of view and rely on different vocabulary in ways that lead them to eye each other with distrust or see each other as adversaries.

But when they are touched by the Holy Spirit, that native and universally built-in language of love is activated (let's call it the language of the heart), and they are enabled to speak from their deepest selves in a way that makes them understandable to each other.

And when we listen to others, with the help of the Spirit, we begin to understand them in a deeper way too because we are listening for their hearts.

When the Holy Spirit speaks to us or through us, there is a familiarity in what we hear that we connect with. It is the sound of the master's voice that is recognized by those of his flock. What the Holy Spirit reveals, we recognize not as "shifting sand", but as "solid ground."

Conclusion

I think a good message to take away from these two readings is that sometimes it can be God's will to separate us from each other, because sometimes what is being consolidated is more in service of human vanity than in the service of God's love.

But God did not create us to be desolate and alone. He sent us Christ, who has returned to us in the form of the Holy Spirit. And through the light of his Spirit, we are able to find each other again. Because the Holy Spirit restores us to our native language, the language of the heart that Jesus spoke and God created us to speak. And by the speaking and hearing of

this language that is native to every human being on this earth, we are restored to unity with all of creation and to life in his kingdom of grace.

Is this understanding that God is present both in the breaking things down and in lifting them up comforting to you? It is to me. It tells me that no matter what is going on around us, God is present and will break blessing on our heads, sometimes in obvious ways and sometimes in hidden ways.