



Sermons

from Northwood United Church

“To Babel or not to Babel?”

Genesis 11:1-9

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The acquisition of language is a marvellous gift with which humanity has been blessed. The amazing thing is that if we put two young children together without contact with a language, they will develop a language of their own. They will develop names for the objects in their environment and action words for their activities. They will learn how to communicate their needs and wants. They will joke and laugh and eventually begin to communicate abstract ideas.

Sometimes this happens even when children have contact with other language. I want to show you a video from Youtube, of twins, probably about 18- 24 months old who have developed a language of their own. They are able to communicate with each other in a language that is understandable only to them. They seem to be talking about their socks or their lack of socks. (Show video entitled “Talking Twins,” part 2)

Isn't that funny! Isn't it amazing how these two children have formed a language with meaning, inflection and nuance. In addition to voice, they are also communicating with body language. They are able to express emotion and humour, even at this young age.

Well, do you realize that this is what God wanted us all to do? God wants us to create language. Today's story from the scriptures is all about creating language and culture around the world. Genesis 11 is known as the story of Babel and it is one that we often do not take the time to understand. So let's explore the meaning of this story for us today.

Firstly, it is important to consider where the story is placed in the Bible. And we find that the story is placed in Genesis after the flood. Following the flood, God makes a covenant with Noah and tells Noah and his sons “To be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.” (Genesis 9:7-17) And this injunction is quoted more than once. However, it seems the descendants of Noah do not want to do that. They wander until that find this beautiful fertile plane in the land of Shinar and they settle there. They want to stay there and establish a place for themselves. They are afraid to spread out around the world. They say, Come, let us make bricks and burn them thoroughly.... 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. (11:3-5)

“Let us make a name for ourselves” does not mean what it means today. It does not mean becoming rich and famous. In the Bible in general, making a name for one's self is never used to describe personal accomplishments. Rather, making a name implies an act of establishing a corporate identity that will endure. It means establishing a culture, a legacy. Hence, building a city and making a name for themselves is only a means to perpetuate their culture, and only their culture.

They are afraid to spread out. Let us build a city...otherwise we shall be scattered upon the face of the whole earth. They are filled with fear and they want to holdout together as one. They believe in power in numbers. It is a form of protectionism. They want to set down roots. They want to keep their identity. They want to keep their common language. However, this is not God's plan or God's dream for them. God wants them to spread out and fill the earth, to continue God's plan for creation.

As the story goes, God comes down, remember they see the world as a three tiered universe,(heaven, earth and hell) and says, “No, no, no. This is not what I had in mind. I want

diversity of language and culture. Go forth and multiply. Fill my world with diversity. This is my plan for the world. And so, according to the story, God moves the process along and diversifies their language. This is not presented as a punishment but is seen as God nudging the people in the direction that God wants them to move.

The people's desire to stay together and preserve a single culture is held up against God's intention to disperse them and to diversify their language and their culture. Cultural diversity is part of God's design for the world, not the result of God's punishment for trying to maintain a single culture. In this story the people desire uniformity, and God desires diversity. In a sense, both desires are good. 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.

According to this story God's desire is to have a world of faithful people of different colours, sizes, shapes, ideas, and languages. Writer Annie Dillard puts it, "the creator loves pizzazz." (page 137, Pilgrim at Tinker Creek) I like that, the creator loves pizzazz. Meanwhile, our tendency as human beings is to maintain uniformity and sameness. We are afraid of differences. We are suspicious of other cultures. We want to remain separate and maintain our own identity even at the expense of other people. But, God wills diversity. God wills many languages and cultures and each one of those cultures is valuable and important to God.

When I was a child I lived in an isolated area of New Brunswick. About four or five miles from where we lived there was a family of people who had emigrated from Russia. They had escaped during the Russian Revolution. When I was young, the family consisted of a grandmother, Tekla, a daughter Matrona, a grandson, Edward. Matrona's husband had abandoned the family many years before, leaving Matrona with six young children whom were now grown and gone. Edward had taken over the farming and together with his mother they had raised the family. Edward spoke good English, Matrona spoke English with a heavy accent and Tekla spoke very little English and what she did speak was difficult to understand.

My father, who was an alcoholic and a very prejudiced person, did not like these people. He always spoke very negatively about them. He referred to them as "the Russians" and told jokes and said terrible things about them. To help you understand the depth of his bigotry, I will tell you about an incident that occurred.

One day my father was driving by their place in a car with several of us children and our mother in the car. As we approached, their dog came out on the road. Most people would have slowed down, my father sped up and hit the dog and killed it. I cried and couldn't understand why my father would do such a thing. It was very traumatic for me to see this dog dead on the road. For a long time I could see that dog laying there with its feet in the air. Even as a young child, I knew this was very, very wrong.

Time passed. I grew up. In my early twenties, I was in the local hospital. It happened that Tekla was in the hospital at the same time. I decided that I was going to go into her room and visit her. I did not know how she would receive me. I thought she might yell and scream at me and tell me to get out. (Remember I had been given a very negative image of these people.) But I decided that I needed to find out for myself what they were like and perhaps even apologize for my father's behaviour.

Finally, I gathered up my nerve and went into her room. I told her who I was. She welcomed me and was very friendly but I mostly couldn't understand what she said. In an effort to find something to say, I remarked about the beautiful bouquet of flowers on her bedside table. She responded but the only word I caught was family. I left her room and returned to my own room.

After several minutes, I heard the scuff, scuff, of her old slippered feet coming up the hallway. She entered my room with the bouquet of flowers in her hands. She spoke very clearly and said, "You like my flowers, I give you my flowers!" And she turned and left.

I was astounded. I could hardly believe what had just happened. Here was a kind woman. Here was a compassionate woman. Here was a woman with a big heart. Everything I had been told did not fit the picture of this woman and her family. Here was this old woman giving me her flowers! And it was my father who had caused them a great deal of pain over the years. I couldn't believe it!

After I got out of the hospital and Tekla was home, I went to visit her, with a small gift and a deep friendship grew between us. We developed our own ways to communicate with lots of hand gestures. She lived until she was 97 years old.

She taught me about faith not through words but by how she lived. She taught me much about love and forgiveness. About how prejudices and bigotry separate people needlessly. About how we need to be kind to one another. About how we are called to accept our differences and even celebrate them. "We all people," she would say.

After becoming involved in ministry, I took communion to Tekla in her home. That was one of my most moving experiences of communion. In those days, I used the order from the Service Book and when I came to those familiar words of the service, for example "Do this in remembrance of me." Tekla repeated them in her own language. And when I repeated the words of the Lord's Prayer, Tekla repeated the words in her own language. At that moment, I experienced communion – communion with God and with Tekla. At that moment, I experienced Pentecost. We understood each other and had a deep connection. Language and culture was not a barrier. It was beautiful!

I had learned that I did not need to fear the differences of our world. Language and culture were a blessing. We did not need to build a wall or a tower of Babel. For this was part of God's dream. This was a way of reaching this God of love.

Now, we do not believe there ever really was a tower of Babel. This is simply a story, used by ancient believers as an explanation for the existence of different languages and people. The story recognizes the human desire for identity and the struggle between the two. In the past, cultural and language differences have often been interpreted as a punishment by God. In the traditional understanding, cultural difference is devalued and seen as a source of confusion and curse upon the human race, even as a judgment of God. When we take a fresh, new, look at this story we see an alternative understanding that values difference highly and explains it as God's aspiration for the new world after the flood. Creation is moving in the direction that God desires.

So does this story have anything to say to us today? Yes, I believe this story has much to say to us today because we still struggle with the same issues of cultural identity and diversity! Do we Babel or not Babel? Just think about the issues we deal with here in our country - the French/English issues, the Native/White issues, illegal immigrants, and the suspicion of other religions. We struggle with the multi-cultural versus the melting-pot approach to immigration. Sometimes we see ourselves as a "Christian" country rather than a secular country with Christianity as one of many faiths and this affects how we relate to other religions. There are many, many issues in our country and in our world around cultural and language diversity. This story speaks volumes to our society today because we are still trying to build that tower of Babel. We are still trying to build a huge city, a fortress for ourselves that will contain our culture and language. We are afraid of being "scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth" and finding our selves living in the midst of the unfamiliar.

As human beings we seem to want a Babel, a place of safety. We just have to look at our newspapers to see Babel being built all around us – both literally and figuratively. In the United States those who are not citizens or legal immigrants are not allowed to obtain a driving licence,

in Arizona. In addition, Mexicans are required to carry proof of status, and along the border between Mexico and the United States a wall that is being built to keep Mexicans out. This is Babel. And then what about the Berlin wall and the Israel/Palestine wall – Babel? So often we seek to build Babel by excluding others or throwing others out.

And before we begin to feel we, in Canada, are above the ways of Babel, only need to keep our eyes and ears open. Just open a conversation about Quebec and you will soon hear of a desire for Babel. Or begin to speak about the problems of the Native population, or speak about the Canadian immigration policy and we will hear Babel. Babel. Babel.

Come, let us make bricks and burn them thoroughly....

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. (11:3-5)

Come let us build a Babel – a homogenous world, where everyone is the same race, speaks the same language and has the same culture. Most of us in North America can only speak one language and we expect others to learn ours. Babel.

The twin towers in New York were the symbolic towers of the American Babel. That is why they were attacked by those who felt the American way of life and culture was being forced on the world.

Babel is what makes injustice thrive. Babel is what makes a distinction between rich and poor, men and women, young and old as well as races and cultures. Babel is what makes people think they are better than other people. Babel is what makes people think they can condemn other people. Babel is what makes enemies. Babel is what makes wars happen. Babel is often lived out in individual and corporate evil, because we tend not to look to God but to ourselves for the ultimate answers. But we end up in chaos. Babel does not work.

We not only struggle with this as individuals, as communities, and as countries, but also as churches. We like being with people who are like us in language and culture. We even like being with people our own age. We do not understand a lot about other peoples and cultures and we want to be with those who are like us. We know this about ourselves. But God is calling us out of our fears, calling us to tear down the walls of Babel. Calling us to scatter. Calling us to open our arms to different cultures and different languages. This is God's dream and no where should God's dream be more real than in God's church.

As a congregation, I know that you are opening your arms to people of different languages and cultures and you are to be commended for that. But awhile ago when you were discussing this, I told someone that you were voting on whether or not to include people of another culture and the person was amazed that there would even be a vote. "Don't we welcome everyone in the United Church?" they asked. To this person it was astounding that the church would vote on whether or not someone should be included in a congregation. I understand change happens slowly. This is new for us. We have been a white, middle class church for far too long. You are making progress. You are leading the way. You are teaching other congregations to reach out and risk.

So does the story of the tower of Babel say anything to us today? Yes, it helps us to see and understand our seemingly human fortress mentality. And it helps us to see that it leads to pain and anguish. It also shows us that God has another plan. God has a dream of a rainbow world - a world of diversity, diversity in race, language and culture. God has a dream of a rainbow church – a church of diversity, diversity in race, language and culture. God has a dream for world at peace, a world of Shalom. This is the kingdom of God. This is God's plan. May God nudge us towards this kingdom of love and peace.

Amen.