

August 3rd, 2008
Isle of View

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(Casting Crowns song “If We Are the Body”, and BlueFishTV Video “How to Fit In”)

I don’t think that anyone in this church has ever had any problems like the gentleman we just saw. Or have you? Maybe I shouldn’t speak to hastily!

In all seriousness, however, I think that we can agree that in our society, and even in our churches, there is a certain pressure to conform; that is, to do what everyone else appears to be doing. We may be recipients of this pressure, or, sometimes we may dish it out ourselves. Like in the song that AltarNation sang earlier, judgment does seem to happen in our churches when we perceive someone as different.

But today, I want to offer the idea that God is a God of diversity, and using the story of the Tower of Babel, offer a different interpretation that may move us to think critically about diversity in our church and how God is calling us today to encourage and value others who are “different” from ourselves.

Let’s pray.

Lord God, please bless these precious moments ahead of us. May my thoughts and words be inspired by you, and may our hearts be ready and open to reflect on any new thing that you might be teaching us. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.

I’ll start with a quick story. Most of you know that I was an exchange student in Germany in 2000. I remember fondly sitting on the banks of the Rhine River in Cologne with a few students from German language school. My friend, Ramin, was from Iran. A few other were from Russia, Belgium, Singapore, and Japan. As we sat around, I distinctly remember Ramin saying, why weren’t international politics like this? A bunch of friends just enjoying some time together on a beautiful evening, talking about what we all have in common and even what makes us different. The following year, right after 9/11, I received an email from Ramin with images from candlelight vigils in Tehran, Iran. Funny how those images never made the news in America. But in that moment on the river, I remember how much I enjoyed the diversity of my friends. Each of us had a different perspective, a different Isle of View.

Before we get into the scripture text for today, I want to contrast my experience with a story from the book, “Return to Babel.”

[Read excerpt from Tower of Babel, Westminster John Knox Press, 1999, pages 27-28]

In 1895, Japan defeated China and took over large amounts of territory, including the island of Taiwan, more than 100 miles from Chinese mainland. As the islanders discovered the news that they had been annexed, a surge of fear swept over them. Japanese imperials were not known to be kind to the lands they occupied. A particular

fishing village hurriedly gathered together to form some plan of action. They decided to try to work out a peace treaty, essentially capitulating to the Japanese in return for sparing their lives. They wanted to give the invading army everything to avoid dying. “But,” they said, “none of us speak Japanese, and they certainly won’t speak Taiwanese!” Someone came up with the idea that the Japanese could read Chinese writing, so they sent five brothers to the beach to write out their surrender.

Taking with them a brush, an ink stick, an ink slab, a small bottle of water, and some paper, the brothers set out to meet the Japanese troops. When they arrived, they were quickly surrounded by the armed soldiers. No sooner had the brothers raised the brush, ink stick, ink slab, paper, and the bottle of water above their heads as signs of surrender and walked toward the Japanese soldiers than the gunshots were heard. The next moment, the five Taiwanese brothers all lay dead on the beach.

What is the story of the Tower of Babel really about? Most of us who already know the story probably have heard it interpreted something like this:

After the Flood, everybody is speaking one language. They get together and decide, Let’s build a great city with a huge tower. Let’s go up to heaven and displace God. The people are arrogant and capable of enormous things. They start to build, and God gets a little concerned, or maybe, outright afraid. “They’ll be able to do anything. This is bad. If I confuse them and make them speak different languages, then they’ll stop building this tower and stop threatening me.” So, multiple languages are formed, God wins, the people are scattered, and everything is set right. How does that sound? Am I close?

Now, based on our interpretation of the Tower of Babel story, who is to blame for this senseless bloodshed in Taiwan? God? He did confuse the language. It would be not difficult to conclude that every conflict on the planet between people of different culture and different languages could be squarely placed on God’s shoulders. The Spanish conquistadors and the native South Americans. The white Europeans and the Native North Americans. And on and on. How does this mesh with the idea of a good, loving, and caring God? Frankly, it makes him seem small and insecure.

But wait. What if the Tower of Babel could be interpreted another way? For example, what if the tower represented a brutal, occupying power? What if the people building the tower were forced into labor, and forced to exclusively use only the new language, new customs, and new religions of this powerful, ruthless nation? What if, in fact, the tower represented a form of dictatorship?

Now a whole new meaning emerges. God is in fact a champion of diversity! He joins the cause of the oppressed people, ruining the plans of the oppressors to force everyone into one language, one culture. He loves diversity and scatters them into the world, maybe back to their original homes. He tears down the Tower of Babel, which represents every point in history when those in power (dictators, for example) tell people how they should behave, what they should think, and how they should speak.

Think about the story of creation in this new light. God spends so much time creating diversity of animals, plants, stars, everything, why would he stop with just one race, one culture of humans? Did you know that there are over 3,000 languages spoken on the planet today?

A wholly new interpretation, isn't it? And one that provides some real lessons for us today.

First is this: God wants us to be intentional about cultivating and celebrating diversity. He loves the fact that we are all different.

Think for a moment on this question: who is Jesus? What is the first thing that comes to mind? If you are visual person, and a lot of us are, you probably thought about an image like this: white robe, long hair, beard, sandals. What does his face look like? Where did this image come from? I offer you this video as a potential answer.

([An Insider's View of Jesus](#), by Ted and Lee Comedy – Scene fades in, Andrew and Peter are preparing for Passover in the upper room. Andrew has a seating chart that resembles the famous Da Vinci painting. Clip ends with “I think it will catch on.”)

Did it catch on? I challenge you today to walk around the building after church and look at some of the pictures on the walls. What do they teach? I love my 3-year-old daughter Emily's response every time I ask, “Did Jesus have long hair?” “No.” “Did Jesus have a beard?” No. I didn't put her up to it. Honestly. All of her children's Bibles show him that way. Maybe she reads into my voice too much.

If we want to be intentional of cultivating diversity in this church, maybe we should give some time and reflection to other images, like these. How about a Chinese Jesus? A Black Jesus? Why not? We seem to have remade him into our own likeness, probably in an attempt to understand him better. Of course, my graduate assistant at seminary this summer asked, so, Why not make Him a Her?

This leads me to my second point. Just because we seek diversity, doesn't mean we have to agree all the time with everyone. We can learn to live with the tension that diversity creates.

I did something today that probably most of you noticed: the order of worship is different. Actually, I based it off of the order of worship at the Lake Louise Christian Community summer cottager's services up at camp. But the diversity, did it heighten your senses? Make you more alert? Did it challenge you, make you feel a little lost or uncomfortable?

You know, we don't have to agree with the changes I made today. Here's a great phrase for you to remember: If you and I agree on everything, one of us isn't necessary. Every biologist knows that diversity is necessary for an ecosystem to survive. The emerald ash borer? If your forest is 100% elms, you're in trouble. But if you mix in pines, oaks,

maples, birches, etc., the forest has a better chance to survive. So, too, our Christian faith is stronger from divergent opinions.

You don't have to follow those Christians who want to view God as a woman, or sexless. That's OK. But I think our faith grows and becomes less of a thoughtless reflex when we hear other differing opinions. Did you know that there are over 2 billion people on the planet with a Christian background? (I won't go to the point whether or not they are actually all Christians. That's not my call, anyway.) Did you know there are 2 main Islamic denominations, about 12 different Jewish denominations, and over 34,000 Christian denominations? Not churches. Denominations. We cannot avoid our diversity. So let's learn from it.

I have spent time in a Mormon church (although I wouldn't recommend it to anyone here.) I have read books by Jewish authors, Muslim authors. I've spoken with a Russian Orthodox. My TA friend? She doesn't believe in the doctrine of the Trinity. My professor? Thought that substitutionary atonement (Jesus died to pay the price for my sins so I wouldn't go to hell) is an antiquated doctrine that has historical importance to the church. Huh? Does that mean I can't believe in that stuff?

Of course not. What it does force me to do, however, is to be a theologian. I have to think critically about what I believe, and in the end, make a claim. I have to be convicted about what I believe and yet make room for others. It is not an easy tension to live with, and it does not mean that I condone certain things.

Diversity teaches us to learn to live with tension. It's OK to disagree, but how do we teach others to love in their disagreement? We practice the gift of hospitality. We welcome diversity.

So, we seek diversity, we learn to live with the tension it brings. Why? The answer is my third and last point.

Diversity is an asset to our faith. Diversity helps us be the Body of Christ to ALL people. You are best at ministering to people who are most like you! This is one of the reasons I love to have as many people as possible working with youth. I can only reach a few types of kids. Joel, Mike, Roxanne, Heidi, Bill and Rhonda have the ability to reach others that wouldn't relate to me. Why did Jesus describe the kingdom of heaven as a mustard seed that becomes the home for many birds; the net that catches all types of fish; the banquet where all are invited? The kingdom of God is diverse.

Your Isle of View is yours. But when someone different enters into it, will you commit to loving that person as a child of God? Is your Isle of View saying, "I'll love you?"

Are we, as the church, saying, "It's my way or the highway" or "We've never done it that way before" or "This is what everyone believes – take it or leave it"? That's not loving. Love asks questions, "What is important to you?" and "What do you know about us?" before deciding and defending something.

[Read I John 4:15-21] – Perfect love drives out fear. We can start encouraging diversity by loving people who are different, not fearing them. Most of us will leave Houghton Lake someday, some time, and encounter others of different religions, or diverse Christian denominations. Have you thought about how you will respond to them?

Look at the diversity we do have in this church. Different ages. Different economic statuses. Different countries of origin. Right, Katja? (My wife is from Germany.) OK, so this isn't Detroit or L.A. But we can intentionally cultivate diversity in our actions. We can support Fair Trade coffee and tea, to encourage small, independent farmers who are resisting the Tower of Babel of corporate coffee plantations and unfair wages.

Let's face it, it can be awkward to speak to someone who is different. And, when you are placed in the minority, it can get silly very quickly. I once sang a beautiful hymn in German, but through a slip of the tongue, instead of "dew of heaven" sang "heavenly traffic jam". But reaching out to embrace diversity is worth the risk.

The Tower of Babel teaches us to live in diversity. It does not mean, "pretend we are all the same." It does not mean "I can just gloss over our differences." For example, Christians do believe that Jesus is the way to salvation! And then we debate over exactly what that means. This is the process of theology. We all must answer the question sometime: What does my faith have to do with the way I live my life? And embracing diversity will help us grow in our faith.

You are a theologian! We make choices everyday. Every choice has consequences, good and bad. We won't reach everyone! That more than anything else tells us why we need to cultivate and celebrate diversity. We need a variety of opinions, walks of life, and ideas to be the one body, many parts.

Being diverse is an intentional decision. It is radical hospitality. It is radical community. And it is completely biblical and in line with the will of Christ, no matter what you think he looked like.