

Genesis 11:1-9

Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. ²And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. ³And they said to one another, “Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly.” And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. ⁴Then they said, “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.”

⁵The Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built. ⁶And the Lord said, “Look, they are 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 will now be impossible for them. ⁷Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another’s speech.” ⁸So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. ⁹Therefore it was called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth; and from there the Lord scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.

Acts 2:1-21

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ²And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

⁵Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. ⁷Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? ⁸And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ⁹Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” ¹²All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” ¹³But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.”

¹⁴But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, “Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. ¹⁵Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. ¹⁶No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: ¹⁷‘In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. ¹⁸Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. ¹⁹And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. ²⁰The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord’s great and glorious day. ²¹Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.’ (616)

I had occasion to fall in love with our country again recently. It was when I'd been out of the country. This winter, Costa Rica, which is itself a beautiful society. It was when I was coming back into the country.

We'd wended our way through the torturous lines of the airport in San Jose, and then the airport in Miami. Disorderly lines, and orderly ones. Lines where the rules were clear and lines where they changed with each different person in charge. Were we to put our phones in a separate bin or a bin with other stuff, or to keep them in our pockets? Do our shoes belong in a bin or just right there on the conveyor belt? And our belts—shall we take them off or leave them on but unbuckled? What about jewelry? What about laptops? Do I move my bin along or do you?

You can get a lot of people miffed just by trying to do the right thing.

There were lines where you could take advantage, and a few did—figure the game and play to win. There were the cutters of the line, and then my own out-of-proportion internal response to those cutters, wanting to lift those people over my head and throw them into the sun.

At last, we moved through to the broad, flat place of customs, where holders of U.S. passports await reentry into our country. And I had a flooding memory of having been here before, ten years earlier when we were coming back into the United States from the Dominican Republic. I had the same feeling then, a rush of love, weepy, breathless familiarity with this wild and orderly and strange.

In this line there was no type of person, no typical style of dress, no norm of self-presentation or actions of relationship, no norm at all, no common language even. Mostly English, of course. But this was Miami; people were coming back in from the global south. The whole world was here, and this was America, US-America. And I loved it. And it was a wild, orderly mess; *is* a wild, not-always-orderly mess.

We are either the best, most faithful idea ever to occur in the world, or the absolute worst. How could this possibly work? What binds us together? What here are the ties that bind, and how very loose they are, they *must* be!

There's a notion that the United States is based in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Some even assert ours is a "Christian nation." I think there's truth in this, the former, if not the latter. For, of course, there's no such thing as a Christian nation—this is an oxymoron. But that this is a country based in the Judeo-Christian tradition: I think there's some truth in that.

And it's not a matter of religious doctrine. It's a matter of mode. It's a matter of whether a mess is to be tolerated or to be mowed over to make uniform. The United States, like the church,

isn't about the uniform. *E pluribus unum*, after all. And, as it happens, the God of the Bible seems to concur.

Usually.

Often.

Sometimes. Really, the God of the Bible is deeply ambivalent about civilization, is deeply ambivalent about the socio-religious ties that bind.

Sometimes God seems to endorse tight ties that bind. A strict law code. Painstakingly dictated religious practices. A Temple whose every detail (and there are many) is accounted for. And then people like Nehemiah and Ezra who, when the people were coming back from Babylon into the Promised Land from exile, when they had rebuilt the Temple and now were rededicating it, reinstated the strict practice according to the Law not to intermix with any Gentiles. These were to be a people apart, and this a people tightly together.

Sometimes, though, God seems to let loose those otherwise-tight binds. A prophetic insistence that the most strictly obeying worship means nothing if there's not justice in the land, justice for the poor, justice for the orphan and the widow and the cut off. A spirited insistence that the old boundaries past which God's intent wouldn't venture now come down so God's love could reach even beyond the furthest limits of the sea and encompass everything that is—every creeping thing, every flying thing. Stories of characters like Ruth, stories that come to us from around the same time as when Ezra and Nehemiah were active, but which say the exact opposite thing: that intermixing, and even inter-marriage, are God-blessed.

Apparently, there was a lively conversation going on around the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, around the time when the story of Ruth became canon. Which was it to be, a people apart or a people interwoven with the rest of the world? Clear boundaries or porous boundaries, fortification or proliferation?

See, debates around immigration aren't so new to our time. As for what *God* intends: I guess it's true, that there is a time for everything under heaven: a time to build up and a time to break down. And then there's a time to spread out.

I wonder what time it is now.

The story of the tower of Babel might have us imagine God as defensive of his power, worried about human power encroaching on it. Looking at the human ingenuity behind the building of the city, the building up of empire, of civilization: "This is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them." This story seems to

imagine God as one who leaves a lot to be desired. Not magnanimous, he seems petty. Not gracious, he seems selfish.

When it comes to stories like these, it seems to me a good approach is to wonder why they might have been told in the first place. Since it's not reporting, since it's not a recounting of actual fact, since it doesn't concern something that actually happened, why might this story have been told? What phenomena does it seem to seek to make sensible?

The astonishing possibility in human endeavors, the breath-taking potential in human building up because of language: humans can cooperate, divide labor, strategize, unlike any other creature as far as we know. And the possibilities are amazing. Art. Architecture. Heavier-than-air flight. Auschwitz. The middle passage. The nuclear bomb. Truly, nothing is impossible for us now.

This is a story to make sense of this, or at least to call attention to this.

To read the story from a deeply embedded place: it's the time of origin of this story. You're in your tribe. You're embedded in your culture and devoted to your traditional practices. And they're fundamental. They've been around forever, since time immemorial. And by these you function as a culture. The language you all speak: it's good, it works. The community life, its art and architecture and cultic practices: these are good, they work, they hold. But then there are these other tribes with other languages and other art and architecture and cultic practices. Yet why should that be, when this one you're familiar with works so well? Why are there others when this one is good?

It must be God's will—for everything that is, is a reflection of God's will. So, it must be good and right that God created a world in which there is a scattering of people, a confusing of expression and practice. It might be to balance the power, so human beings don't accrue more of it than God, so humans don't come to overpower God—God who is good, Gods who are eternal.

Bad things happen when the children of the family have more power than the parents. Children lack perspective. They can't be the ones to decide. It's good and right when the parents have more power.

Just so, to read the story from a more removed perspective, there's the enduring cycles of kingdoms that rise and fall, of empires that subsume and subside. Indeed, it's thought this story is in reference to the Babylonian empire, the more ancient manifestation of this, the one not from the 7th century before Christ but the one that dominated from the 19th-15th centuries before Christ. As empires do, this one came along and aimed to subsume all local custom into something more across the board, something more hegemonic and uniform. Everyone everywhere would

become Babylonian. And their building would be as a great tower reaching the sky, a monolith, a monoculture. And it would be neat and clean and orderly and powerful. It would be too big to fail. It would be so established as never to be moved. It would be as an unsinkable ship.

Huh.

As I write this I look out across my lawn, which I every so often think I should really eradicate and replant. It's a mess, my lawn. There's too much clover. There's too much crabgrass, too many dandelions and wild violet. But then I remember having read somewhere that monocultural lawns aren't as resilient. They suffer drought much more. They suffer bugs and worms much more. So, then I figure I'll just the wild things grow. It's easier. It's in many ways better, just not always better *looking*.

Whatever.

The Pentecost story, which we heard this morning, is sometimes said to be about when the curse was reversed—the curse following the collapse of the tower of Babel, the curse following the collapse of the Babylonian empire, when everything became confused and confusing again (though told as if done for the first time, in primeval time). The Pentecost story is said to be about when that curse was reversed, as now, on that long ago Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit made it so people of all different places who spoke all different languages could hear and understand one another as if all speaking the same.

That's what today is, by the way. It's Pentecost, which comes on the 50th day after Easter, and comes to us from a Jewish holiday, also called Pentecost, which was 50 days after Passover. It just so happened to be that day when, with Jews from every nation now gathered in Jerusalem, the apostles were also in Jerusalem to celebrate. And the Holy Spirit came down, just as Jesus said it would, though not in such clear terms that the apostles knew exactly what to expect. And since it happened on the Jewish Pentecost, the church, just now being born, appropriated it as its birthday, and placed it to be celebrated on the 50th day after Easter.

It was a dramatic occurrence, to be sure. Ten days earlier, according to the book of Acts, Jesus, resurrected, had been seen as taken up on a cloud to heaven, to transcendence, but not before having told the apostles gathered there with him that soon enough the Holy Spirit would come down. In the same way he was going up, so he would come again in spirit.

And so, it happened. And so, it was happening, divided tongues, as of fire, appearing among them, a tongue resting on each of them and filling them with the Holy Spirit so they began as if to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability—now to be heard and understood,

now all these many languages no longer a barrier to understanding but, though still there, now also somehow to be transcended.

This story is said to be of the time when the curse was reversed. But I don't think that's quite right. I don't think the faltering of the ancient city and civilization that's imagined in the so-called story of the tower of Babel is a curse. Rather I think it's indicative of the trouble we can get ourselves into with our ambitious upbuilding. Powerful overtaking, powerful subsuming, powerful destruction bordering on the sublime: I trust a God who doesn't entirely trust us.

What's more, I don't think the coming of the spirit and the birth of the church is a reestablishing of what seems to have been lost in that ancient tower whose upbuilding was abandoned. The church isn't to establish a monoculture. Neither did it establish a monoculture according to the book of Acts, where we find this story of the church's birth. Here we then watch as it flourishes across the land, though not by taking over and not by force. And neither did it establish a monoculture in history, though it has made a few attempts at it. There were attempts, the church at establishing hegemonic power. But they were thwarted, and usually by collapse—internal division, as first with the great schism, and as later with the Protestant reformation, to name two. Apparently, this just isn't a way to build anything that lasts. It's as if subsuming and building up just doesn't work. It's as if hegemony and monoculture just don't work.

So, what does?

You know what I think. Customs in Miami and clover in my lawn.

The thing is, it's not so easy and it's not so gratifying. You can't boast about it. You can't glorify in it, not in the way the world understands glory. The church as we've been charged to have it be isn't something we can point to, some grand sparkling stunner that will induce awe in others, some vision of the sublime. It's low to the ground. It's human-scale. It doesn't subsume like a mighty civilization, it proliferates like a weed, which Jesus even likened it to in some of his many parables, the kingdom of heaven being as when someone planted weeds among the wheat. We assume that we're the wheat and what's bad about the world is the weeds. But read it again. Spend some time with it, this parable. *Play* with it. It turns itself upside down and inside out, and suddenly you see that maybe the gospel of love is the weeds, and it ruins the world for more glorious things such as the building up of power and the creation of wealth and the doing of deals where instead there now would be love, messy, sticky, transgressive of boundaries, love.

Can we tolerate it? Can we?

I knew an old lady once, Scottish-born and raised. She'd lived in the same small Scottish town most of her life, practiced a strict Scottish Presbyterianism with her small church with its tight membership until, at 80 years old, she moved to the United States. Her daughter lived here, in the Berkshires, and her increasing frailty made it so she should be near family. She had but this one daughter. So, she moved to the U.S. Her faith remained firm, though now it would be practiced in the far looser U.C.C. As for America, U.S. America? In my brief time of knowing her, whenever it came up, a bemused look would come across her face, bewilderment. Once, she said, spontaneously, "You'd have to be God to tolerate it."

Seems about right. Indeed, that seems true.

Which means we're on two wild rides of the spirit, we of these United States and we of the church. We are in two ways children of the Spirit, and we're called to trust, to trust.

I don't say this blithely. I know what's at stake. The church's breathing slows to nearly nothing while the country hacks away at itself. Power asserts, unmoored from reality. Order imposes, but through the most disorderly means. Chaos is the vehicle for a fascistic aim, and the internal contradictions of this present our best hope that this fail. Meanwhile, the Holy Spirit insists as ever on freedom to love. This is our standard. This is charge. Freedom to love. Unboundedness to nurture the bonds of love. Ours ties that bind must be loose for love.

Walls solid, windows clear, doors open: the churches that I love.

Thanks be to God.