

The Birth of Diversity – May 15, 2016

Genesis 11:1-9 and Acts 2:1-21

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A couple of news stories caught my attention recently. The first one was about a man and woman who were seatmates on an American Airlines flight from Philadelphia to Syracuse. The woman began to engage in small talk, but the man, engrossed in his work, gave curt answers, clearly not interested in pursuing conversation with the woman. The woman picked up her book, but took a hard look at the man next to her. He had black, curly hair and olive skin. She was fair-skinned and blonde. The man had spoken with an accent and he was working on something she could not recognize – something containing scrawled symbols.

Her suspicions took over and the woman got the attention of a flight attendant and handed her a note. For a half an hour the plane remained stationary on the tarmac, and after some further interactions, the plane returned to the gate and the woman disembarked. The man thought she was sick. The wait continued and then the pilot came by and escorted the man off the plane, leading him to some kind of agent who began to question what he had been doing on the plane. The man was surprised to learn that his appearance and his written work had been labeled suspicious.

He explained that he was of Italian origin, was an Ivy League professor and an economist and had been working on math equations, on his way to give a presentation in Ontario. He returned to the plane, which finally took off, two hours later. The woman never returned <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/rampage/wp/2016/05/07/ivy-league-economist-interrogated-for-doing-math-on-american-airlines-flight/>

The other story involved a disabled woman stranded in her car after being involved in a crash near Asheville, NC. She needed her car towed home to South Carolina, but when the tow truck driver arrived on the scene and began to hook up her car, he noticed that she had bumper stickers supporting a particular presidential candidate. He stopped and began unhooking her car. He supported an opposing candidate and felt it was his right to deny her service. The woman was understandably shocked and had to wait an additional half hour for another wrecker to arrive. <http://www.rawstory.com/2016/05/trump-loving-tow-truck-driver-says-god-told-him-to-leave-bernie-sanders-supporter-stranded/>

So what do these two stories have to do with Pentecost? In each we see the problem of how unity can divide us from one another. Humans have a natural tendency to create groups of similarity. We find comfort and security in those environs. Being with other people who are like we are is safe. We understand each other because we share a commonality. Life in unity is predictable, and any threats we perceive that might disrupt that predictability are seen in a negative light. Status quo is good, diversity is bad. When all these little groups unified around

their own histories, beliefs, values, and expectations bump into other groups, conflict can arise.

The story from the Book of Genesis gives us a prehistory view of the human race. In this story, the human beings were unified. They were nomads, moving together, working together, and speaking the same language. They found safety and security with one another. They were comfortable. But they grew afraid. In their comfort they began to wonder about the what ifs in life. What if we were to get scattered? What if things began to change? What if someone decides to leave the group and go elsewhere? They wanted things to stay as they were. They didn't want anyone or anything to mess up their routine. They enjoyed their existence, and so they decided to make a name for themselves. They wanted to be known as unified group.

Using their skills they decided to make bricks, from the dust of the earth from which they had come. They used these bricks to form a community. No longer wandering nomads, they wanted to settle in one place and be known. To have a name. They began to build a city, including a magnificent tower that would reach high into the heavens. A city would be a tangible sign of their unity. But it was also a response to their fear of being scattered, of being separated from the larger group.

God took notice of their work. And God saw that they were building not out of industry, but out of fear. They were afraid of change, and they wanted to strengthen their sense of togetherness to avoid any possibility of change. Fear of unknown kept them together. Of course, life without any changes will grow stagnant. If life is simply a series of repeatable routines, with no adventure, no creativity, no industry, is that really life? Can there be growth?

The story tells us that God decided to stir the pot. God scattered the people and introduced new languages. God gave the people the opportunity for growth and maturation. In that event, diversity was born. God created diversity, you can see that simply by looking at the Creation, and I think it's safe to say that God saw that diversity was good.

That's not to say that unity is bad. It's not. But when unity divides us from one another, as in our unified group is better than your unified group, or when unity divides us from God, as in we don't need you God, because we have each other, then it is bad.

And so of course we have seen the problems of exclusionary unity throughout history. It's a problem that seems to be a natural part of our humanity that we have to learn to overcome.

Occasionally we see great examples of unity or solidarity. Generally those come as a response to some unforeseen tragedy. Some horrible disaster occurs or other dreadful event, and people seem to want to rally together in response. In the wake of 9/11 we saw it. After the earthquake and tsunami in Japan we saw it. In the aftermath of the Sandy Hook massacre we saw it. People have a natural tendency to put aside our differences to work together in response to some devastation.

So we naturally want to live in our homogeneous little groups and not let anyone else in, and we naturally want to put aside our differences to help one another in times of crisis. And then once the crisis is over, we go back into the safety of our little unified group.

And then there's Pentecost. The Holy Spirit comes rushing in like a great wind into the room where the disciples were gathered after the Ascension of Jesus. The Spirit rests upon each person, like a tongue of flame – claiming them, empowering them. The disciples rush outside, speaking the gospel in different languages, illustrating and emphasizing that the gospel of Jesus Christ reaches out to all humanity, covering the diversity – none are to be excluded. And the church of Jesus Christ is born.

The Holy Spirit offers this amazing gift of unity within diversity. Through the Holy Spirit, the diverse members of Christ's body, the church, are unified. The Holy Spirit tramples down the barriers that divide us and uplifts our uniqueness and our diversity. The Holy Spirit helps us to transcend our natural tendency to use our unity as a means of discrimination toward other individuals and groups.

God's Spirit also empowers our natural tendency to want to help people despite our differences, not only in times of trouble, but in all occasions. Following any national tragedy, Americans are able to set aside differences for a while. We jump into the fray, side by side, digging out debris, setting up shelters, sending money and food, and waving our flags of unity. But when the dust clears, we go back to the same old hatreds and prejudices.

The miracle of Pentecost is unity within diversity. And Pentecost can happen at any time. We all are struggling to make sense of the world. There are many unknowns and questions for which we have no answers. In our fear, like our friends of so long ago, desiring to make a name for themselves in building a town and a tower, we stay safe and comfortable in what is trusted and known. The thought of becoming scattered is frightening, because we don't know where we might end up. We want to stay with us, our group. We don't want to interact with them, the other. May God open our eyes and our hearts to discover that despite our differences, that in the end, we all are longing for the same things.