

Sermon Text – Sunday, June 8, 2025 – Pastor Paula Kraus

1st Reading: John 14:8-17, 25-27; 2nd Reading: Romans 8:14-17
Scripture for Message: Genesis 11:1-9 “Scattered”

To give us some context to this passage, we should read some additional scripture, listen to Genesis 1: 27 & 28, “So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.” Additionally, the genealogy after the flood is in chapter ten of Genesis, and in Genesis 10:32, the verse just prior to what we read today, it is written “These are the clans of Noah’s sons, according to their lines of descent, within their nations. From these the nations spread out over the earth after the flood.”

Now it might have been God’s intent for the people to build nations and spread out over the earth but from what we just read in Genesis chapter eleven we realize that did not happen. One caveat before we continue, I don’t believe the book of Genesis gives us a factual historical account of God’s people although it does contain truths of God’s relationship with God’s created creatures – humanity. There is, however, a lesson for us to explore in this story of the tower of Babel.

This narrative falls between the flood narrative and the stories about God’s call to Abram and Sarai. I get curious as to why this narrative is in the history of God’s people. From early ages we hear this story as an explanation of why we are different, of how God’s people came to have different languages and live in separate places. We are taught that God scattered the people to punish their arrogance in thinking they could reach the heavens by building a tower. Some would even say that God scattered the people because God “feared” the consequences of what they were doing, “This is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them.” Consequently, God scattered the people so they wouldn’t understand each other.

But I wonder – is God afraid of what humanity can do. What was so wrong with the people having one language and being one people – wasn’t that the goal of the New Testament church? Do we look at these few verses as a commentary against globalization? Maybe there is another point of view to examine in this narrative.

Look again at what we read from the creation story in Genesis chapter one. God blessed them and said to them, “be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth” – this was God’s will for the male and female God created, this was God’s will for the earth and all creation. When God “saw” what the people were doing, and their desire to “make a name for themselves” God saw disobedience

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to God's will. God saw unity forged in fear of being scattered, fear of the unknown – the people had quickly forgotten God's promise of protection and presence. The people were expending their energy in service of self; ego had become more important than God.

God thwarts their efforts, not because God feared the consequences of what they were doing, but maybe because of the consequence of what they failed to do. They failed to fill the earth and care for creation. They failed to rely on God and God's promises, instead they chose to reach heights based on their own efforts. They chose to ignore God's directive to fill the earth because they were fearful of being scattered.

What is the problem with being scattered? We sometimes look at the biblical image of scattering as a response to the people's disobedience and therefore as punishment. Is sameness the goal for humanity? I wonder if we can see the power of human unity without expecting sameness – I wonder if we can forge connections through diversity and inclusion even as we are scattered. Cultural differences are not God's judgment, but rather we could consider them God's promise. I know God desires unity, but maybe not sameness, unity comes through reliance on God in all circumstances. According to theologian Walter Brueggemann, "A human unity without the vision of God's will is likely to be ordered in oppressive conformity."¹

God created diversity in humanity – think about that – after the flood God caused diversity to happen and God scattered the people to compel occupying the whole earth and caring for all of creation over the whole earth. This was God's will from the beginning when the spirit parted the waters. At Pentecost, that diversity came into view not as what divides but as what can bring humanity together. When the bible mentions a common language in the New Testament – could it mean not sameness in language but a language that all can understand. The language of God – Jesus showed us that language with outstretched arms, a language of love, forgiveness, and grace for everyone then and now.

Read Acts chapter two verses one through four – "When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them." This was spirit enabled – God's Holy Spirit that moves among us scattering and unifying according to God's will. One of the first images in this passage is they were all

¹ Bruggeman, Walter. *Interpretation: Genesis – A Commentary for Preaching and Teaching*. WJK. 1982 Print. 100

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together in one place, were they too afraid of scattering? Hadn't Jesus told them to "go and make disciples of all nations"?

Most Christians consider the "Day of Pentecost" as the birthday of the Church, when the Spirit of God filled all the believers with words enabling the spread of the Gospel to all the earth, all nations under the sun. The spirit enabled a common language that all would understand. That is a reason for the joy of Pentecost. "In Christ we speak all the world's languages, not to "make a name for ourselves" but with the apostle Peter to call "upon the name of the Lord." By the mercy of God, the world's multiple languages have become vehicles for spreading the Gospel."² That might not have happened but for the Holy Spirit scattering the people.

So, what does this mean for the church in the 21st Century? How do we respond to this scattering and to the unity of diversity and inclusion? Maybe we could look at the scattering of God's people as God's blessing on the whole earth and on the people themselves. It can be looked at as an illustration of God's will accomplishing God's purposes even when humanity is uncooperative. Nothing is impossible for God. Our response might be one of joy – joy for what God is accomplishing even today as we recognize the unity of our differences.

Look around this sanctuary – we are not all the same although we do share the same basic culture and the same language, how we express ourselves is not the same. We dress differently; we have different interests, different political leanings, different hobbies, and different occupations. We do have unity in our differences because of our shared desire to worship and our shared love of God and neighbor. I am glad we are not all the same, it would be boring if we were and you certainly wouldn't need a Pastor because you would believe as one people.

I do believe God desires unity in all creation, not unity forged out of fear of being scattered but a unity that comes through as we scatter and unity forged from diversity. Scattering has been a blessing for creation, differences and diversity make creation and creatures stronger. Maybe the lesson is woe to you who desire sameness, who spend your energy in service of self. Woe to you who choose to make a name for yourselves – God will thwart your efforts.

I once had a conversation with a colleague regarding free-will. I believe God created humanity in God's image with free will, the freedom to choose by either choosing God or choosing self. The people in the story of the tower of Babel chose self and it didn't work out so well for them. God thwarted their plans, but the scattering was a blessing for them and for all of creation. God said, be fruitful

² Gail Ramshaw. "Day of Pentecost: Psalm 104, Connecting the Psalm with Scripture and Worship" *Connections Year C, Vol. 2. Lent through Pentecost*. eds. Green, Long, Powery, & Rigby. WJK. 2018. Print. 323-325.

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and increase in number; fill the earth – and that is what the scattering accomplished.

I wonder, when we are reluctant to follow God's direction will God also scatter us so that God's purpose will be fulfilled. Even in religious practices we are separate, so that there are more choices and more opportunities to serve in God's kingdom. There can be unity as we all believe in one God – one Lord and Savior of the world.

Consider the joy of knowing that there is much diversity in God's kingdom. Think of the Holy Spirit hovering over the waters, scattering seeds, settling on the baptized believers, and creating a language that everyone will understand. God's language. "For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God." What an amazing family!