

A Confusing New Order (1/5)

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Catherine:

Genesis 11:1-9

Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. And they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly." And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. Then 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." The Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built. And 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. Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another's speech." So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of the earth, and they left off building the city. Therefore 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 2:1-12

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

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

sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."

Justo:

From early Patristic days, it has become commonplace to set these passages in contrast with each other. Both stories have to do with language and communication. The story of Babel appears in the middle of a table of nations; in the case of Acts, a table of nations, probably taken from an ancient source, appears in the middle of the story. In one story, humans come together to try to ascend to the heavens; in the other, Spirit descends upon those who are gathered. Babel was the epitome of sin and pride; Pentecost is the advent of grace and renewal. Usually, the main point of all these comparisons is that, whereas in Babel unity gave way to confusion, in Pentecost that confusion was overcome by unity.

But look again at the text in Acts. In verse 6, we read that the crowd "gathered, and was bewildered." The word which the NRSV translates as "bewildered" can also be translated as "confused." Indeed, it is the same word that appears in the LXX translation of Gn. 11.7, where God says, "Come, let us go down and confuse their language." If Pentecost produces unity, it is not a simple, straightforward unity.

Pentecost is not simply the reversal of Babel. Before Babel, according to the story, there was unity of language. In Pentecost, according to the story, there was a multiplicity of languages. In Babel, God intervenes to cause confusion. In Pentecost, God's intervention causes confusion among the crowd. In both stories, the flow of the text is from unity to diversity. At the beginning

of the Babel episode, they all spoke one language, and could come together in a single project. At the end, they can no longer understand each other, and they have to go their separate ways. At the beginning of the Pentecost narrative, they “were all together in one place,” presumably speaking the same language. At the end, these same people were speaking a variety of languages, and they had caused confusion and even division among those who heard them.

Catherine:

We cannot say that until Pentecost, no work toward unity in the human family had been undertaken. There is a great deal of existing unity shown in this passage even before Pentecost occurs.

Judaism provided unity. Through the effects of the Exile and less traumatic migrations, Diaspora Judaism had spread throughout the Empire and beyond. Therefore Jerusalem—especially on feast days—had quite a cosmopolitan mix of Jews from the Mediterranean basin. According to the text, not only had Jews come to Jerusalem, but also proselytes had come with them.

Nor can we discount the effects of Empire. Empires had forced the dispersion of the Jews in earlier centuries. Conquest by Alexander the Great had provided a lingua franca—Greek, in the eastern portion of the now Roman Empire. As one can see from the text, those who gathered around the nascent church on that first Pentecost did carry on conversations and were understood in some common language, even if it was not their native tongue.

Imperial power had imposed some unity--particularly on those who lived in cities, or who traveled or had business with people outside their immediate, smaller communities.

The Roman Empire provided relatively safe roads and made travel by land and sea safer than it had been. Commerce provided new links among different cultures, even though much of the commerce was of a colonial character, and the roads were created in order to move armies rapidly in case some of the conquered peoples began an uprising. Early Christian writers mention these commonalities as part of the reason for the incarnation occurring at the time it did. There was a kairos that was partly created by the Roman Empire.

Language, roads, commerce, travel: there were unities existing before Pentecost. Some attained at great human cost--imperial unities we might call them—but links nonetheless across the Babel that human sin had created. Sin can create division, and sin can also create unity.

God's purposes for human history include the ability of human beings to communicate with each other. Community is a divine goal, a community based on love. Human empires also demand some unity—otherwise it would be very difficult to govern. Yet human empires impose uniformity by means of power. There is little or no respect for those who have been conquered. Therefore, God's purposes for unity cannot be added to the unity created by human empire, as though part of the job had been done, and all that was needed was an added touch of grace. They are unities based on radically differing principles.

Justo:

It is a situation we all know. Even as we study the history of missions, it is clear that mission has frequently been connected with colonialism and imperialism. How are we to deal with this situation? Are we to reject the unity that the worldwide mission has brought, because of its connection with colonialism? Are we to bless colonialism and imperialism, because of their connection with the mission of the church?

In some mysterious way, God's purpose of unity was being worked out in the very fact that there were in Jerusalem "Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia," etc., etc., and in that those people, even apart from the miracle of Pentecost, were able to use some common language to say to each other: "What does this mean?"

This is not to say that we are to bless all the horrible, cruel, unjust events that bring about this sort of imperial unity. The famous *pax romana* was wrought at the cost of much bloodshed and much injustice, and it is a terribly ecclesiocentric view of history to claim that all the wars and oppression connected with the Roman Empire were brought about by God simply so that Christian missionaries and evangelists could travel from land to land, and so that Paul's epistles could be safely carried from one corner of the Empire to another.

If we look again at the story of Pentecost, we see that the Spirit uses, but also undercuts, the unity of Empire. Those who gathered were able to understand each other. No matter whether

they did this in Aramaic or in Greek, their very ability to communicate was the result of a long history of conquests, in which their various languages, cultures and traditions had been pushed aside as conquest led to empire, and empire to communication.

Note, however, that in the text the Spirit undercuts the unity of Empire. Empire leads to all these people being able to understand each other in a language that is not their own, whatever it might have been. But by the power of the Spirit, these people are able to hear, as they say, “each of us, in our own native language.” I do not know if there was a Hebrew-only movement in Palestine, as there had been in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. I do not know if there was an Aramaic-only movement. I do know that among the cultured elites there was a Greek-only movement. And I certainly do know that whatever attempts there might have been at imposing uniformity, the Spirit did undercut it, for all these various people, from different parts of the world, were made to hear, not in the language of Empire, but “each in their own native language.” (And, for the purposes of our concerns here, we could also say, “each in their own native culture.”)

If we then look back at the story of Babel, we see that the parallelism between these two stories is more complex than we thought at first. In Babel, God intervenes to confuse the unity of a rebellious humanity. In Pentecost, God’s intervention confuses the unities that empire has built. What is new about Pentecost is not that they all speak the same tongue. They do not. What is new about Pentecost is that God blesses every language on earth as a means for divine

revelation and makes communication possible even while preserving the integrity of languages and cultures.

But that is not the whole story: The Holy Spirit also causes confusion among some who do not believe. As the text says: “others sneered and said, ‘They are filled with new wine.’” How can this be? In the face of such a miracle, with all sorts of different people hearing each in their own native language, how can anyone be so dense not to see that this is a miracle?

The author does not tell us. But there is only one explanation I can imagine: Those who sneer do so because they do not see the miracle. They do not see the miracle, because to them there is nothing extraordinary happening. There is nothing extraordinary happening, because to them being able to understand what is being said is not unusual. All hear what is being said in their own native tongues. So do these mockers. But they don't see the miracle, precisely because they are natives. They are used to hearing everything in their own native tongue. They see all these people excited, and all they can say is, what's the big deal? In other words, they did not understand what was going on, precisely because they expected to understand.

The miracle that is taking place is that God is taking all these people, whose native tongues and native cultures make them outsiders, and bringing them inside, making them insiders. They, the Medes, the Elamites, and the Phrygians, can understand that something extraordinary is taking place. But those who are already insiders, those who expect to hear their own language, those

who are already at home, those who expect to understand, can do nothing but sneer.

What could one of those natives, who did not perceive the miracle, do? They could have turned to their Cappadocian or their Egyptian neighbor, and asked them, what is going on? Perhaps then, through the witness of those who were not supposed to understand, such a person could have understood, and would not have sneered.

The implications for the discussion about Christian mission in various cultures should be obvious. And we better beware, those of us who belong to cultures where we expect to understand, lest we fail to see what God is doing in our world. Perhaps, like those who could not see the miracle, we may need to turn to others, to others who are still astounded that the message is proclaimed in their own native tongue and ask them to give us a glimpse of what is really going on.

The logo for AETH features a stylized yellow and purple triangle above the word "AETH" in a light purple, serif font.

Catherine:

The direction of God's action is seen in the Pentecost event. A new age had indeed dawned, but that does not mean that uniformity has been imposed. Unity was given and experienced even though diversity has remained.

There is much more here in this second chapter of Acts, however, than unity in the face of previous divisiveness. Look at the diversity that is assumed and maintained at Pentecost. They

all hear in their own language: as Justo has said, the variety has not been ended. In the passage from Joel that begins Peter's sermon just after the description of Pentecost, we read: "Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young shall see visions, and your old shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit".

The diversity of age, gender and social situation are mentioned, but these diversities are no longer a barrier for the gifts of the Spirit.

There were divisions and unities in the world before Pentecost. There is diversity as well as unity in the new creation Pentecost exhibits. Diversity may be good; divisiveness is not. Unity is good; uniformity, however, is questionable. The account of Pentecost shows all of these characteristics.

But as we face our own day—particularly in intercultural situations—how can we distinguish what is unity but not uniformity? How can differences be diverse but not divisive? Is it easy to tell? When I work for unity am I unwittingly stifling diversity? When I work for diversity am I causing division? It may not be easy to separate good and evil. Do we check motivation or results? If love and respect are not the basis of unity, can God's purposes be served by it? Does the good that we would do lead to evil results in the midst of a world not yet totally transformed? Does the evil that some intend lead to good results they never anticipated? Empire and Pentecost are strange companions in Acts—even here at the beginning of the book.

The same ambiguity is to be found back in that strange story of Babel. The reason the people gave for wishing to build a city and a tower was so that they would “make a name for [themselves]. . . otherwise we shall be scattered abroad on the face of the whole earth.” Their desire was to be united in order not to be scattered, and their means was to build their project. Yet the judgment of God upon their work was precisely to scatter them abroad over the face of the earth. In what they had sought to accomplish they had failed. What they tried to avoid had happened.

How strange it is, that in the passage immediately following the story of Babel, we find the beginning of the Abraham narrative. To Abraham is given the promise that his name will be made great, and his descendants a mighty nation. In some ways, the real undoing of Babel is the covenant with Abraham. What the city and tower builders at Babel sought to accomplish for their own sake God granted to Abraham for the sake of the world.

The covenant would hold, though empires would rise and seek to impose their own unity by means of scattering the people of the promise. Yet Israel saw even in that scattering the continued work of God in judgment and return.

At Pentecost we come to a new point in the gathering process, built on that ancient covenant with Abraham, built also on the diversity created by their dispersion under various empires, and in the midst of the forced unities created by yet other empires. At Pentecost, the Spirit gathers

those whom the Spirit will also disperse in preparation for a greater gathering.

Babel and empire. Pentecost and empire. God's purposes and judgments in the midst of human empires. Somehow, they meet in these passages, even as they meet in our encounters with one another. They cannot be easily untangled. But in faith, we must seek to discern their roles.

Discussion

We would like to discuss some issues that these passages can raise for our own day. In groups of two or three, discuss: What are three or four of the most important sources of unity right here in Arizona? In what ways are these warped or demonic? In what ways do they show God's intentions for this world? Will some of these unities need to be undone before the unity and community God intends can be created?

Justo:

We have been asked to deal with the issue of Hispanic ministries. We could give you all sorts of statistics as to why the National Plan for Hispanic Ministries is important. I am sure you have heard such statistics repeatedly and will readily agree that the changing demographics of the nation are quite a challenge.

But I submit to you that the reason why the church must take this challenge seriously is not so much the statistics themselves, as the very nature of the church. To say that the church must be

concerned about Hispanics, because there are many of us, and if we don't join the church, membership will decline, makes the church a marketing institution, very similar to Reynolds Tobacco Company deciding to begin advertising in Spanish, because smoking is down among English-speaking whites. The church must certainly take into account demographic and other trends. But the church must do so out of a different motivation and approach than Reynolds Tobacco, Coca-Cola Bottling, or Continental Airlines. The church must do so out of its own self-definition as “catholic.”

The church is catholic. Any good Methodist knows that. We recite it in the Creed. “Catholic,” we are told, means “universal.” What we are not told is that such a translation, while partly correct, also misses the mark. That is the danger of every translation, for languages do not exactly correspond to each other, and therefore a translator must find the word that most closely approximates the original. In this particular case, both “universal” and “catholic” have elements in common. But the stress is different.

You can see this as you look at the etymology of the two words. “Universal” comes from *unus* and *versus*, meaning having a single direction. The contrary of *universus* is *diversus*. “Catholic,” on the hand, comes from the preposition *katàt* and *hólos*. *Kata* is a preposition that has a number of meanings. But in this case, it means “according to”—as in the case of the Gospel according to Mark, or according to Luke: *Katà Márkon*, *Katà Loukan*. *Katholikós* does mean universal, but not in the sense of all going in one direction, as *universalis*. It means universal in

the sense that it is “according to the whole.” A king might deploy his armies seeking to attain universal rule. In theory, he may be able to achieve such a feat. But this universal empire would not be “catholic” rule. Catholicity, by its very etymology, implies a variety of contributions, each bringing its own perspective.

Actually, that is the reason why we have four gospels in our New Testament. I must confess that I have often wished there were fewer gospels. When I was a teenager in Cuba, trying to bring my classmates to Christ, my thorn in the flesh was a particular classmate who knew the Bible better than I did, although he did not believe in it. I remember many an occasion when I would be talking about Jesus with a group of students, and he would break in with a series of contradictory quotes from the gospels, and then ask me such impossible questions as, how many people did Jesus feed, with how many loaves and how many fishes, and how much was left over? Oh, how I wished for a single gospel, one without differences or contradictions!

But somehow the church in its wisdom, and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, very wisely decided that these various gospels, different though they are—and precisely because they are different—must all be taken together as the catholic witness to Jesus Christ. And the result is a canon which is catholic, not just in the sense that it is universally accepted by the church throughout the world, but also in the sense that it includes a variety of perspectives within itself—that it is not only according to Matthew, or according to John, but *according to the whole*.

We may resent the problems created by the existence in our canon of four gospels that do not agree; but those four gospels are there precisely to keep us from the easy assumption that we can somehow create, or that we have inherited, a theology that encompasses all truth.

Uncomfortable as this is, it is a reminder of the absolute catholicity or universality of the gospel, which cannot be encompassed by any one perspective, any one theology, or any one culture.

If that is part of what it means for the canon to be catholic, it is also part of what it means for the church to be catholic. For the church, to be catholic does not mean simply that it is everywhere. It means also that it is a body in which a variety of perspectives and experiences are included.

At the end of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus commanded his disciples to go and make disciples of all nations. We have often understood that in the sense that the nations need the Christian message—or, as it was put a few generations ago, that the “heathen” need our message. And there is no doubt that the message is for every human being and should be shared by all.

But that is not the entire picture. At the beginning of the passage, Jesus says that **all** authority in heaven and on earth has been given to him. In other words, even though we might not understand exactly how, his authority **already** extends to all those to whom the disciples are sent to make new disciples. If that is so, it is precisely in missionizing the nations that the disciples will begin to discover those hidden dimensions of their Master's authority. Therefore,

oddly enough, in preaching to the nations they will learn more about who this Lord is about whom they are preaching!

Or, put in another way, the Church must do missionary work, not only for the sake of the nations, but also for its sake. Not only do the nations need the church; the church also needs the nations. Without them—without the variety of perspectives that they can bring to it—the church loses something of its catholicity, of its being “according to the whole.”

The United Methodist Church in Arizona must face the challenge posed by the increasing number of Hispanics in the state. But there are at least three different ways of facing that challenge, resulting in three different responses, and ultimately in three different results.

One way to face that challenge is to look simply at the numbers—and the numbers are impressive. They clearly indicate that any institution that ignores the Hispanic presence will become increasingly irrelevant in years to come. This response is very similar to Coors deciding to advertise its beer on Spanish TV. Statistics show that this is an important sector of the market, and good advertising and marketing practices require that this sector be reached.

The problem with this response to the challenge is that it doesn't work. All over the country, mainline denominations are spending vast sums trying to respond to the “Hispanic challenge” in this fashion. And the results are dismal. Hispanics take their religion—or even their lack of

religion—too seriously to allow it to be peddled to them like a consumer item. A religion or a church that is interested in me because there are many like me does not take me seriously, and there is no reason why I should take it seriously.

A second way of responding to the challenge is also based on numbers but responds to a higher motivation. As good, sincere Christians look at the population around them, and realize that such a high number are Hispanics, they become concerned that the Gospel must be shared with these people. This approach has the advantage that it is not centered on the church as an institution, but on the people whom it seeks to serve. And a certain measure of this approach is absolutely necessary for an adequate response. If we do not think we have anything worth sharing, we certainly are not going to do much about sharing it; and those with whom we try to share will immediately see through our lack of enthusiasm. This approach, based on compassion, has been the traditional missionary and evangelistic approach, and it has much to commend it.

Yet, that approach, too, is insufficient. A third approach, which it is our hope to explore with you during these days, is to begin with the vision of catholicity we have tried to outline, and to realize that, just as the church has much to offer to the nations, so do the nations have much to offer to the church. That the United Methodist Church has much to offer the Hispanic population of Arizona, but that the United Methodist Church also needs the Hispanic population and perspectives on the Gospel in order to be more fully catholic.