

**Genesis 11:1-9, Acts 2:1-21**

*Many Voices, One Language of Welcome*

First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, AL

June 9, 2019

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Hearing the story of the tower of Babel when I was growing up, the prevailing wisdom was that God scattered the people from the tower because God didn't want them to become too powerful. A closer reading, though, shows something else. The word that is translated here, as "Babel," is the same word that's translated everywhere else in scripture as "Babylon," the empire that loomed as a threat to the Israelites throughout most of their history as a kingdom. So, when God says, with alarm, "they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do," it is a particular kind of power that God is opposing—the power of empire. Empires use their power to enforce sameness, believing that greatness lies in eradicating differences. God's action against that one, singular tower can be read as divine judgment against the homogenizing force of empires. Where empires insist on sameness, God insists on diversity,<sup>1</sup> and scatters the people from that monolithic place to ensure that they will have different languages and reside in different places, developing different cultures and viewpoints on the world.

And then in Acts, we have the story of the Holy Spirit arriving on a rush of wind, causing tongues of flames to dance above the heads of the believers. It's not just one, big flame, but individual tongues of flame—and even those flames are divided, because when the Spirit comes, she doesn't suddenly make everyone speak the same language. All the languages are there, from all over the world. What the Spirit does is to help them understand each other, even in the midst of those differences. The Spirit takes what could have been a cacophony of meaningless noise, and transforms it into a harmonizing choir of praise.

And so, as at Babel and at Pentecost, the Church (with a big "c") is at its greatest when it lifts up all of its voices, from all over. Take the hymns we're singing today. Our opening hymn was written by an American Presbyterian laywoman, and set to a Welsh tune. Our middle hymn is an original tune and words by Marty Haugen, a layman in the United Church of Christ, who writes music largely sung by Lutherans. The Sanctus, or "Holy, Holy, Holy," that we'll sing during the Communion prayer, is from South Africa. We've been singing it in English, but

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<sup>1</sup> Sara Koenig, "Commentary on Genesis 11:1-9," on [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org). Accessed June 4, 2019.

today we'll sing it in the original language. That's just some of the music for today, and I didn't even have to go out of my way to create that diversity. If you flip through the hymnal and pay attention to the notes that are at the bottom of each hymn, you'll see that we can't fully sing praise to God without drawing from all over.

When the Holy Spirit swooped in on that first Pentecost, she formed the Church from a great diversity of people. Today, as we ordain and install new officers, we continue that tradition. We know that we are stronger when we can listen with many sets of ears, think with many minds, and speak with many voices. In this particular group of officers, everyone may speak English, but in different ways and from different vantage points—different genders, different places of origin, different ages, different income levels, different life experiences.

When I imagine the tower of Babel, the picture in my head is of a tall, looming building with one, big eye at the top, like the Dark Tower in *The Lord of the Rings*. The Church, though, isn't like that. We see with a multiplicity of viewpoints, and speak with a multiplicity of voices. That is our strength.

Sometimes, diversity is mocked as a liberal agenda. In our readings, though, we can see that valuing and seeking diversity isn't a political agenda: it is God's agenda—God's will that we should embody every color and stripe like a rainbow. "We welcome all whom God welcomes," as we say every Sunday. Welcoming—even insisting on—diversity didn't begin with us, it began with God.

Welcoming diversity makes us stronger and healthier, and makes us more of the church God envisioned when the Holy Spirit landed on those earliest believers.

Last Sunday evening at the Interfaith Pride Service, Logan Knight spoke about the transformative effect that that welcome has had on him. Some of you were there, but I wanted all of you to have a chance to hear what he had to say, so I've asked him to share it again, this morning.