

First Presbyterian Church  
"The Marks of the Church: Including"  
Rev. Bethany Peerbolte  
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Genesis 11:1-9; Acts 8:26-40

I got an F on the first sermon I ever wrote in seminary. Actually, everyone in the class got an F. We had three weeks of instruction, and then we all went down to the sanctuary to preach our sermons from the pulpit. When we were all done, the professor returned our manuscripts with giant red F's on the front.

He asked us, "Whose words are more important, yours or the ones in the Bible?" Obviously, we all said the Bible. Then he asked each of us how much time we had spent writing and rehearsing our sermons. We all gave our estimated times (with maybe a little bit of inflation) and then the professor asked us, "How much time did you spend reading and rehearsing the scripture?" We saw what he was saying. We had spent hours on our words and a couple of minutes reciting the Bible's words. Lesson learned.

A while back I preached a sermon with the story of Babel and as I spent time reciting the words in the bible, as I had learned were needed, I played around with different speaking tones just to try and make the words sound fresh. When I tried with a lighter brighter tone I had to stop and restart because I didn't think I was reading the right words. They sounded very different suddenly. Normally when I read God speaking about the people of Babel I hear an angry, frustrated God fed up with humanity. But when I lightened up my tone it sounded like God was proud of them. Let me show you:

(Excited, proud, tone) "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."

Such a different impression, but those are the same words! That version of a proud parent God echoed in my mind this week as I looked over the story of Phillip and the Ethiopian eunuch. Now don't freak out but I am not going to focus on the fact that this is a story about a gender nonconforming person of color. Because the specific identity labels scripture gives this court official does not matter. The point scripture is making is that Philip and this court official represent two different groups of people.

Their ancestors that were at Babel ended up in different tribes. If Babel is God dispersing humanity, this moment is God drawing them back together. This is why for me the proud excited God makes more sense than a frustrated angry God. If God was angry that humanity had found unity it would be foolish of God to send Philip to the court official at this moment.

If the people being "one" caused them to sin and build those heaven-bound towers then this seems like a terrible idea. If the creation of diversity was God's way of punishing humanity for Babel, encouraging it now feels like the wrong plan.

But if God was proud of the people of Babel, if God was thrilled that they had worked out their issues and wanted to live together as one people, in the same city, this is a huge development for humanity!! Diversity isn't punishment, it is the next level in God's design.

Does anyone play video games out there? What do you do when you beat a level in a game?

Right, you make it harder, start again. I recently began my exploration of the metaverse. Yes, I have a virtual reality headset. Do you expect anything else from the millennial pastor? There is a game called Beat Saber where a song plays and you have to slice these boxes that come flying at your head. You have to hit them with the correct hand, in the correct direction, and on the correct beat.

When I first started playing I was horrible! I could not beat a level! So I did what all good gamers do, I found cheat codes. I tricked the game to make the floor higher, I told the game I was shorter than I was, I turned off the walls (oh yeah, there are walls you have to duck around too), and for a few songs I found the place I could slow down the whole song until I got the pattern.

A week later I was feeling confident so I turned the walls back on. Then the next day I was honest about my height, and slowly I removed the cheats and now I can play the game as intended. I was only able to do that because I started with what I could handle. I took small steps to build my confidence, then attempted something harder. I failed a few times, went back to an easier level to build confidence up, then tried again.

We see God and humanity doing this in the Old Testament. Noah's community could not stand one another, then we get Babel where humanity is choosing to all live in one city. They leveled up. Then we get Abraham's partnership with God, which has a couple of issues with trust, but eventually, level up. Try having judges, then kings, we see this trajectory begin to form. With more responsibility being entrusted to humanity, and God, the proud parent, guides them along the way.

Then we get to Phillip and the court official. Their meeting sets up the challenge. Since Babel, the fullness of God's creativity, from Philip to the court official, has been expressed in humanity AND NOW they are ready to be drawn together and begin building again.

Phillip and the court official prove that humanity is ready to see more in each other than just what is different. With Jesus' teachings, the family of God begins to notice God's image in "the other" and learns to value and include diversity in their community.

Babel was an accomplishment for humanity, but what they would have been able to build was not yet worthy of God's intended world. God knew diversity would make what was built far better. And so the people of Babel were gifted with the fullness of human diversity and spread out into the world to develop their unique identities, preparing for the moment when they would be ready to be drawn back together to begin the work of building a grand kingdom, the kingdom of God.

Now a sermon about inclusion to Everybody's Church is a bit of a soft ball topic. Just because we do this well does not mean we can forget why inclusion is a mark of the church. When we recognize how important diversity is to God we can push past our fears and go meet the strangers God is sending us to.

Phillip and the court official felt the same Spirit tug on their heartstrings, strings that ran through their family line all the way to Babel and they knew they were actually from the same family. That all humanity is meant to be united. All the things that made them different in the eyes of the world actually connected them to the same source. A God that is diverse in expression, a messiah that welcomes everyone, a Spirit that runs through humanity tugging and drawing us together so that we can build a city truly worthy of reaching God in heaven.

We have lived long enough hearing God's words to Babel as a condemnation. It is not innately bad for us to work together. They were not punished for their unity, they proved they were ready for something greater. Let's hear God's words to Babel as our objective, to meet the challenges diversity presents, to include, to feel the Spirit drawing us together by that one string that connects us all so that one day God looks at us and says,

"Look, they are one people, and they all understand one another, and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them."

May we meet the challenges and push ourselves past what we think we are capable of, and may we keep leveling up, improving and living closer to how God intended this world to be.