

“The Bias of Babel”

Genesis 11:1-9

FPC Charlotte

August 30, 2015

Rev. Erika Funk

I hope I'm not about to spoil anything for you. I hope you've already seen the movie “The Sixth Sense” because it is in my opinion a great example of how we read scripture. So if you haven't seen it you can cover your ears. Toward the end of the film the audience discovers that Bruce Willis' character has been dead all along and as soon as you realize that (and are able to put the pieces of your blown mind back together) your mind suddenly races back through all the previous scenes to see how this is even possible. And then you realize, that for the whole telling of the story you have been making assumptions about why he is saying or doing what he is saying or doing. You've been making assumptions about the reactions others are having or not having to him. Suddenly the entire story is flipped on its head and everything is different.

As I said, reading scripture is very similar - once you know the ending it changes how you interpret everything that came before. We read scripture knowing that the Messiah has already come and when Jesus is born we know it's him and when he dies – spoiler alert – we know he's coming back!!

But we also read scripture sometimes with a lens of bias that isn't in the text. Babel is a great example of that bias.

The story is not long but we seemed to have added a lot to it. For example, flip open Genesis if you would and look for the part in the story where God gets angry. You know that part, right? God gets angry because of the people's arrogance and pride. Not finding it? What about the part where God destroys what the people have built? Not finding that either? Because it's not there.

What is there is a tight group of people who want to build a city and seem to not want to be scattered. Nothing really terrible about that. Perhaps they feared being alone or separated. Perhaps they had experienced a period of diaspora and did not want to go through that again. Perhaps they had built some good rules of community living and didn't want to mess with that. Perhaps that's all it was.

The writer doesn't say anything about pride or arrogance.

Even God's response is somewhat benign. God seems to look at what they are doing and wonders what more might be possible with these people. I think God looked at them and thought “They're ready, they're ready for more, they're ready for what I have in store for them. They are ready for phase 2.” And then God turns to God's number 1 and says “engage.”

And so God scattered them. Not because God was angry, because God doesn't seem angry here, I think God knew what the people were capable of if they stayed and how much more they would be capable of if God dispersed them.

In 1991 I lived and worked for a year in a peace and reconciliation community in Northern Ireland called Corrymeela. The community was established in 1965 because the tensions between Protestants and Catholics were becoming violent and deadly. In the US during the 60s many people dropped out and created communes – what we might now call “living off the grid”. But the founding members of Corrymeela didn't want to check out, drop out or leave the grid. So they created a “dispersed community”. 50 years later Corrymeela is still an intentional community of people who gather at regular times throughout the year at the Corrymeela center on the Northern coast but the members live in cities, suburbs and rural areas around the country. Because they know that's where the work of reconciliation needs to happen. The motto at the center is “Corrymeela begins when you leave” meaning the real work happens not on the mountaintop or on the retreat or in our safe places but once we leave, once we scatter and reach out to the places and people who are different from us. The community knew that if they huddled together, safe and secure in their like-minded circle, change would not come. And change was needed.

By building that tower the people wanted to establish and maintain their culture, not necessarily over anyone else's culture. But God sees other possibilities, God sees the various ways this could go perhaps how it could go badly, God knows what the people are capable of and chooses this moment to act – to make a change, to change the course of the ship just slightly, believing now that the people are at the right place in their development for the best possible change.

It was for good that God scattered people, not as a punishment. So why has the church read it and taught it as punishment? Because the sin of the people that is not in **the story** exists in us. **We**, the readers, are the ones who are arrogant and prideful. **We**, as the church, are the ones who are afraid of diversity, we are the ones who want that tower finished so we can live it in.

Why is scattering so scary? Why is leaving your tower assumed to be a bad thing? Because we are afraid of what we do not know? Because we might learn we are not the best? Because we might discover we have been wrong about things? Are we, in fact, afraid of those who look and act different from us?

Differing shades of skin color is a blessing from God, that you can say “freedom” in 86 different languages is good news. If the people had stayed in that one plain we probably wouldn't have Hawaiian pizza or caramel macchiatos or cronuts. We wouldn't have other wonderful products of crossing cultures like Steam punk or Ska music or Blue Willow China. You wouldn't know the poetry of Hafiz, the story of Siddhartha or rock and roll.

Leaving the valley is not a punishment it is a gift from God!

Now, I know you know that. I know you love a Benetton ad as much as the next person and that you celebrate diversity and cherish the opportunity to travel to other countries. But it's important to stop for a minute and ask ourselves how we came to have such a negative impression of dispersment when the punitive and destructive God is nowhere in this story.

It's there because of our bias. The very bias God was trying to destroy by scattering the people. In some ways the church stayed behind in that valley with the half built tower. It's quite the irony in fact....our bias is not demonstrated in the story but in the church's teaching of it. Bias, anger, violence is a powerful narrative. It is long lasting and deadly. Consider the damage this interpretation of Babel has done....we have subtly come to believe that diversity is an unnecessary struggle, something to avoid and this had led to, among other things, the justification of racial segregation by the church.

“Cultural diversity is the consequence of God's design for the world, not the result of God's punishment of it.” Where we desire safety and uniformity God desires adventure and diversity. Where we seek after a reflection of ourselves, God expands our fences.

Our traditional reading of this text has reinforced bias and racism. Cultural differences and the experience of our neighbors are to be valued not feared or diminished. We shouldn't be building walls or gates, we should be building bridges and transportation lines.

And yes, that relates to housing policies, border police, and school desegregation. Instead of learning to be afraid of God I think what we should learn from this story is the danger of bias. It's crucial we ask ourselves now and then if we really understand the danger of bias and the sophisticated ways it works in a system.

{Or signs in **Spanish at the bank**? Tell that story...what was so threatening to her about a few signs she couldn't read? }

To be scattered is to be blessed by God. To be scattered is to be granted God's confidence to do great things – things beyond our imagination or perceived courage. To be scattered is to gain proximity to the stranger...who might be thirsty or hungry or in prison. Or Jesus.

What is our Babel moment? In what ways are we as a community of people attempting to build a tower – perhaps for benign reasons – but that will eventually reinforce our bias', agendas, fears and stereotypes? What towers – whether they are towers of attitude, security, policies or education – are we building that serve us and our tiny little tribe in the valley over and against what God has dreamed up for **all** the people?

Dr. Oliver Sachs, who passed away this weekend, brilliant doctor, researcher and writer. He said once, “I love to discover potential in people who aren't thought to have any,” Most people recognize his name as the author of “The Man who mistook his wife for a hat” and as the doctor Robin Williams played in the film “Awakenings” about catatonic patients whom he helped

emerge from that state . He said, “I would like it to be thought that I had listened carefully to what patients and others have told me,” “that I’ve tried to imagine what it was like for them, and that I tried to convey this. “And, to use a biblical term,” he added, “bore witness.”

Let us be brave. Let us be scattered. Let us bear witness to what God sees is possible.