

No Skyscraper Christians

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 all 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 2:1-8

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?"

In January, when we visited Larson's brother and family in Knoxville, I was excited to have the chance to read bedtime stories to my nieces, ages six and nine. I was delighted to see that the book they were reading was in fact one that I had enjoyed when I was their age. Have any of you read the *Wayside School* stories? It's a fun and quirky series of short stories about the students and faculty at Wayside School. The school was meant to be built as a one-story building with 30 classrooms. But instead, it was built as a 30-story building, with one classroom on each floor.

You'd have to be crazy, right? You'd have to be crazy to mix up the blueprints that badly and end up building a skyscraper elementary school. Who would want a tall, skinny building instead of a wide, stable school? But those are exactly the choices I'm presenting to you this morning. In Genesis, we have the story of the Tower of Babel. Think 30-story building. And in Acts, we have the story of Pentecost. Which isn't about a building, but is about building community. And doing so widely.

So what's going on with the Tower at Babel? Well, we have to realize that this story happens pretty early in the Bible. First we have Adam and Eve, then Noah, then this story. After Noah and his family get off the ark, God gives them basically the same instructions he originally gave to Adam and Eve. "Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth." It takes them a while to get going, but our story today begins with 'the whole earth' migrating from the east.

The text also says that the people have the same language. This shouldn't surprise us though – we're only a few decades post-flood. There aren't that many people around. But they have finally set out on their mission to fill the earth, and the first thing they do is settle down. Do you see the problem here? The people don't want to listen to God. They don't want to fill the earth.

But there's more to it than that. Listen to their motivation: "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." They are afraid that they will be separated. They want to stay together, which sounds like a good thing, right? We talk about Christian community all the time. But we have to look even closer. They want to stick together for the purpose of making a name for themselves. They want to band together to secure their own future, rather than depending on God.

The sin of Babel isn't building a tower or working together. Their sin is placing their faith and trust in themselves instead of in God. They are essentially erecting a temple to worship human effort, instead of worshiping the God who has just saved them through the flood! That's a problem for God. He just finished his great do-over of human history, wiping out everything in a flood, and the first generation of survivors are already turning away from God!

So God's answer to this problem is to give these people a chance to learn to trust him. He confuses them by making them all speak different languages, then he scatters them across the earth. God doesn't make anyone depend on him, but he wanted them to at least have the chance to develop trust and a relationship. Now that they can no longer depend on one another, they are able to see that God is faithful and reliable.

That story happens in Genesis, and our next story doesn't come up until Acts. That's a pretty big leap. I'd love to tell you how many years have passed, but the Tower of Babel story is so old, it's considered pre-history. Events from before we can even fathom how to measure time. Suffice it to say it's been a couple thousand years. Enough time for the rise and fall of the Israelite nation. Enough time for the life and death of Jesus.

Remember last week, when Jesus was about to leave earth for good, he tells his disciples to stick around in Jerusalem after he leaves. To wait there for the Holy Spirit. And then, once they have the Spirit, they will be his witnesses to the ends of the earth. That was last week. And for the last week, Jesus has been gone. There is no more direct contact with God. That's a pretty big problem. And God's solution is the one Jesus told the disciples was coming, to send the Holy Spirit.

This week, it has happened! The disciples were all gathered together, and the Spirit appeared like a violent wind. That would have been amazing enough, but then they all start speaking in different languages. Languages which up until a moment ago, they didn't understand. Now they truly are prepared to witness to Jesus to the ends of the earth. Oh sure, they could have learned a dozen new languages the hard way, but this greatly simplifies the process of sharing God's message.

At the Tower of Babel, God scattered the people. But at Pentecost, the Spirit gathers us back together. At Babel, the people sought unity by going up. They were afraid of what would happen if they were separated. They wanted to maintain their community, and thought the only way to do that was to persuade everyone to physically stay together. And the only way they knew to do that was to create something so big that it could only be done with everyone. The project would hold them together during the process, but also after, who would want to abandon it? Let's stick together, because we're all we've got.

At Pentecost, God created unity by going wide. By creating community and inviting everyone to be part of it. Yes, we should stick together, but not because we're all we've got. We should stick together precisely because we have unity of purpose! God created us to love and to be loved. To care for the earth. To make a contribution to his creation. Each of us has received different gifts, strengths, and talents from the Holy Spirit. No one of us has everything, so we need to come together as a community. And when we do, and each offers their gifts, the community starts to reflect the glory of God.

In the end, once we've developed our unique differences and learned to appreciate variety in the world, God brings us back together. Now we're finally ready to stick together and contribute to a greater whole. No longer do we stick together out of desperation. Now we stick together because we are bound to one another by our common baptism in the Holy Spirit. God connects us! That was the case in Babel, but the people didn't see it. They thought it was only their striving that kept them together.

Let me put it another way. Jesus said, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there in their midst." When God's part of the equation, we can connect with anyone, even if we don't speak the same language. And that's a pretty good analogy. Even among people who live

in the same state, when we disagree with each other strongly, we say it's like the other person is speaking another language. When God is part of the equation, we can connect with people we otherwise could barely stand. The people at Babel had bitumen which they used for mortar, to hold their bricks together. The people at Pentecost had the Holy Spirit, which we use even today, to hold us together as a community of faith.

And maybe that oversimplifies things. Two people, both baptized and trying to live faithful lives, can disagree about fundamental issues. They can say and do very hurtful things to one another. But I think that all too often, we let the issues be the things that hold us together. Two or three people don't gather in the name of Jesus to discuss issues like homosexuality, or abortion, or war. Two or three people gather in the name of homosexuality, or abortion, or war. We only want to stick with the people who agree with us. But when we let issues be our glue, we find ourselves as divided and scattered as the people at Babel.

God commands us to spread out across the globe. To be different. Jesus instructs us to witness to the ends of the earth. To embrace those differences. And the Spirit equips us to do just that. But we have to let the Spirit work in and through us. When we try to replace the Spirit with our own effort, our own understanding, we fracture the Kingdom of God. When we let the Spirit guide our efforts and our reasoning, we find ourselves drawing closer to one another and closer to God. Amen and amen.