Nu‘uanu Congregational Church

Pentecost Sunday

June 4, 2017

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EARTHBOUND Genesis 11:1–9

Psalm 104:24–35

Acts 2:1–21

On this Day of Pentecost, let us begin with the story of the Tower of Babel. When we hear this story, we have the feeling that we are hearing a myth. Indeed the story is a myth, which was created to explain the diversity of languages and cultures in the earth. But let’s not allow the word “myth” to fool us; there is often truth to be found in myth.

However, for us today, the story presents a sharp contrast and a backdrop for the story of Pentecost. What we think of most often when we hear the story of the Tower of Babel is the confusion of tongues and the scattering of the human race that occurs at the end. Upon observing the tower that the people have built, God says,

“look, they are one people, and that have all one language; and

this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that

they will propose 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.

—Genesis 11:6–9

On the Day of Pentecost, God comes down to earth again, but this time not to confuse and scatter but to clarify and gather. Through the work of the Spirit, all are able to understand what is being said, no matter what language is being spoken, and people from all the nations of the earth are brought together in the unity of the Spirit. This is the Spirit’s work on the earth. Pentecost, then, is a remarkable story of reversal and yet another gracious moment to get it right. The Spirit continues to enable us in the community of faith to understand one another, no matter what our language or cultural heritage. The Spirit continues to bring us together and unite us together in faith, in hope, and in love.

Yet, as usual, there is more to say, especially if we focus our attention on the building of the tower in the story from Genesis. After settling upon a plain in the land of Shinar, 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 into the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves;

otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the

whole earth. —Genesis 11:3–4

There is an inclination among us human beings to take life into our own hands without regard for God, to become prideful and willful in our human endeavors, to rise above creation in order to establish dominance over the things of the earth, to seek security for ourselves and to establish ourselves out of a fear that we may lose control over our destinies.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Protestant pastor who was put to death by the Nazis during World War II, goes even further in his reflection on the stories of the Tower of Babel and Pentecost.[[1]](#footnote-1) Bonhoeffer says that Babel is the Bible’s most dramatic symbolic depiction of the religious impulse—the impulse of human beings to rise above the earth and grasp after the ultimate (the tower reaches into “the heavens”). In this myth, human beings, fearful of their own precarious creaturehood, reach up to heaven and attempt to gain a divine transcendence in an effort to secure the future. What they get is still a greater consciousness of their frail humanity.

The Pentecost story depicts the reverse. The Spirit of God comes to earth as wind and fire to grasp and transform us human beings, not to lift us above the earth, but to give us the power to become the human beings we were created to be. And to be the human beings we were created to be is to be drawn together in the unity of the Spirit so that we can be reconciled one to another and understand one another no matter what our language or our cultural heritage.

This morning, I want to suggest that Pentecost brings us back to earth and our earthliness, away from our foolish pride and back to our humanity with all its failures and all its potential; with all of its vulnerability and all of its possibilities. Pentecost brings us back to human life as it should be lived, in harmony with one another and with the creation itself.

I’m sorry, but the beloved hymn, “Spirit of God, Descend Upon My Heart” has it all wrong. The first stanza of the hymn reads: *“Spirit of God, descend upon my heart/* ***wean it from earth****, through all its pulses move.”* But the Spirit’s work is not to wean us from earth. It is to connect us to the earth and to one another in a whole new way. The Spirit is not heaven-bound; it is earthbound. And the goal of Christian faith is not to get us to heaven; this was the goal of the people who built the Tower in the ancient myth. And, unfortunately, it is still to goal of many, many Christians in our day. Pentecost stands a corrective to our desire to get to heaven, for the Spirit of God is earthbound, and it is the Spirit’s work to make things new on the earth, or, as the Psalmist declares, to “renew the face of the ground” (Psalm 104:30), here and now. The Spirit comes in order to fulfill in greater measure the petition of the Lord’s Prayer: *“Thy Kingdom come; thy will be done,* ***on earth*** *as it is in heaven.”*

The implications of the Pentecost story are far-reaching. For the Early Church, Pentecost led the followers of Jesus to sell everything they owned, put the proceeds into a common treasury, from which each was provided for according to his or her need.

For us, Pentecost has the possibility of driving our witness and mission in the world. A case in point. David Brooks, in his column yesterday in the Star-Advertiser, reported that this week, two of Donald Trump’s top advisers, H.R. McMaster and Gary Cohn, wrote the following passage in the Wall Street Journal: “The president embarked on his first foreign trip with a clear-eyed outlook that the world is not a ‘global community’ but an arena where nations, nongovernmental actors and businesses engage and compete for advantage.”[[2]](#footnote-2) David Brooks went on to say, “That sentence is the epitome of the Trump project. It asserts that selfishness is the sole driver of human affairs. It grows out of a worldview that life is a competitive struggle for gain. It implies that cooperative communities are hypocritical covers for the selfish jockeying underneath.”

May I suggest that the drive to “make America great again” and its isolationist ideology, its desire to withdraw from trade agreements and from the Paris Climate Accord, and its distrust of the worth of NATO is a reflection of the Tower of Babel myth. It’s like the attempt to build a tower reaching into the heavens in order to gain dominance over the earth. What we will end up with is separation and confusion. Inspired by Pentecost, I hope and trust that the witness and mission of Nu‘uanu Congregational Church and our sister churches will always represent the opposite direction. Let us believe that the Spirit’s work in the earth is to unite rather than divide, to bring together rather than separate, to build a human community based on sharing and co-operation, a community in which we will understand one another, love one another, and work together for the common good.

Such is the earthbound work the Spirit seeks to fulfill among us. This day, moved by the Spirit, let us re-commit ourselves to be a Pentecost people. May God help us so to do. Amen.

1. Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s interpretation is to be found in *What Christianity is Not* by Douglas John Hall (WIPF&Stock: Cascade Books, 2013) 23–24 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. David Brooks, *“From Global Cooperation to Competitive Self-interest,”* The Honolulu Star Advertiser, Saturday, June 3, 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)