

Camille Cook Murray
Georgetown Presbyterian Church
Washington, D.C.

Genesis 11:1-9
Pentecost Sunday
They Might Be Giants

Theologian Reinhold Neibuhr has written powerfully on anxiety as the true source of our sin. He says that as we work to eliminate our anxieties and seek security for ourselves we can easily fall into vicious cycles of pride, selfishness, and sin. You could apply this logic to what happened in the Tower of Babel story. In this story from Genesis, the people were multiplying at a great rate. And they were anxious about how quickly things were changing and what it would mean for their families. They were afraid of being scattered to the farthest reaches of the world. So they decided they needed do so something about it. “Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly.” Nothing wrong with this idea, showing a little industriousness. So they made their bricks. “Come, let us build ourselves a city.” Cities are good – nothing wrong with this plan so far. “Now let us add a tower with its top in the heavens.” Hmmm, this seems precarious. “And let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.” Danger!!

With their bricks, and their city, and their mighty tower – they would make a name for themselves. They would be forever known for their ingenuity, their prosperity, and their unity because of this fortress. They wanted to make a name for themselves. They wanted an identity that would endure. They wanted to do this for themselves and be known because of it. Their name, their identity, their accomplishments would keep them united – or so they thought. Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann says, “This is a self-made unity in which humanity has a “fortress mentality”. It seems to surviving by its own resources.”

In theory, when the great Cathedrals and Basilicas of the world have been constructed the goal of these buildings is to lift humanities sights towards the heavens so they might know God and praise God. ‘A Mighty Fortress is our God’, Martin Luther taught us to sing. Not so in the case of Babel – the goal was to get the tower into the heavens so they would make a name for themselves – no mention of God at all.

This is part of our sinful inclination – trying to create for ourselves but then forgetting the real Creator. John Calvin writes, “For as soon as mortals, forgetful of themselves, are inflated above measure, it is certain that, like the giants, they wage war with God.” What the people wanting to make a name for themselves, wanting to build an impressive tower, really wanted to do was to turn themselves into giants - important, united, permanent giants. In their actions, they were boldly turning away from God.

In the bible stories when people are misbehaving usually we have a character representing the evil one – the bad guy Saul or rebellious Jonah or corrupt Judas. But in this story of the Tower of Babel it says it was the ‘whole earth’ vs. God. All of humanity has participated in this sin. The whole earth was acting in ways that

were counter to God's plans. Before we get too nuanced about this story there is one important lesson from this text that you should remember – when the whole earth gangs up against God, God still wins. And winning in this case means God thwarted the plans of the wannabe giants and scatters them so they will never accomplish their goal.

It seems like quite a harsh punishment that humanity would forever be divided, scattered, and at odds with one another. It is not that God desires fractures and division but remember what the people wanted; they wanted unity for themselves and by themselves. God would never allow them to become giants in this way. Any unity they would find must be sought through God alone.

In Roald Dahl's book the BFG, the Big Friendly Giant, the British army captures the nine human bean-eating giants. The prison created for these nine giants is to throw them in a hole so deep that not even if they all stood on each other's shoulders could they reach the top of it. That is sort of the condition of sin – we dig holes so deep for ourselves that not even if we all worked together could we dig our way out.

I read an article this week about the behavior of parents at one of the local private high schools. A few parents, hoping to give their own children legs up in the college admissions program, knowingly began spreading vicious and false rumors about other people's children. The logic being if you defame someone else's child it will make your child more desirable to the Ivy League schools of their dreams. You can't make this stuff up. When I was growing up it was scandalous if your parents helped you with your science fair project but this is next level parental involvement. My parents were so principled on this point that they wouldn't even help me load my science fair project into the mini van. But on the other end of the spectrum is the over-parenting to the point of not just helping your own children but hurting other peoples.

Let us make bricks, build a tower, and make a name for ourselves – or rather dig a hole so deep that we might never find our way out. We are broken. We are scattered. We are divided against ourselves. This is fairly depressing news but I know you are not surprised. You have seen the kind of toxic work environments when people act out of self-interest. You have experienced the bullying in the hallways of political power. You have heard the way we speak about those we disagree with and dislike. Scattered indeed.

So what's next? It is all just Babel forever? Thankfully no. Thankfully God took pity on us and sent us the answer for how we could find unity again. Jesus was the answer God provided for our broken humanity. Jesus and the lasting gift of the Holy Spirit would be the things which would bring us together again around common table and common purpose and common faith. Divided in politics, perhaps. Divided in language, sometimes. Divided in backgrounds, often. But united in the person of Jesus Christ. The person who taught us how to love God. The person who taught us to love one another. The person who reminded us that

we do not need to independently make a name for ourselves because our names are already “written in heaven.”

On this day of Pentecost, we are supposed to celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit, the flames of the Spirit, the mighty wind, the unifying gift of God’s continued presence in our midst. It is a contrast to the dividing Tower of Babel tale. We don’t always know just what this mysterious third person of the Trinity is doing but we can point to it at times. We can point to it when we see people serving our nation in defense of the ideals of the common good. We can point to it when we see bi-partisan efforts making a difference on Capital Hill. We can point to it when we serve homeless neighbors, support schools in countries we have never visited, and give to remodeling projects, which will only benefit other peoples children. Every time we come together, work together, worship together in praise of God’ name, the Holy Spirit is there, stirring us, calling us, and unifying us. Preacher William Sloane Coffin said, “Our business in life is less to make something of ourselves than to find something worthy of doing and losing ourselves in it.” Remember we were never called to build towers and create names for ourselves. We were called to love God and love each other.

The expression ‘standing on the shoulders of giants’ was first attributed to Bernard of Chartres because of his student John of Salisbury writing in 1159, "Bernard of Chartres used to compare us to dwarfs perched on the shoulders of giants. He pointed out that we see more and farther than our predecessors, not because we have keener vision or greater height, but because we are lifted up and borne aloft on their gigantic stature." The Cathedral in Chartres, France has a rose window with the four prophets at the bottom - Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel, all placed as gigantic figures. Then the New Testament writers, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are figured as ordinary people sitting on their shoulders. The gospel writers are all looking upward at Jesus. Though smaller they can see much more than the prophets. And the gospel writers in their quest to tell the good news help us to see even more. We can see how Jesus continues to change the world. We can see how God continues to redeem creation. We can see how the Holy Spirit sustains each one of us throughout our lives. These visions give us hope even in the face of division, anxiety, and insecurity. These visions help us lift our sights towards the true Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer of our lives. These visions help us see that the Almighty and Triune God, is our Rock, our Fortress, and our Tower of Strength.

On our own, we will never make a name for ourselves but with God we already have.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.