

“THE TOWER OF BABEL”

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“So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city.” (Genesis 11:8)

STARBUCKS REVELATION

A few months ago I had a “repeat revelation.” You know what that is? It’s an epiphany, a sudden revelation of a thing that has been revealed to you in the past but that you forgot.

Repeat revelations happen to me more and more often as I get older. That’s probably because I forget more and more stuff and God has to repeat it to me if he wants me to remember it.

Anyway, this is how the revelation happened:

Jean and I were at the Tri-County Mall in Cincinnati. She was Christmas shopping and I was schlepping around with her, carrying bags and trying to convince her that I was really interested in the stuff she was thinking about buying. Me, I would have given everyone gift cards, but that’s just me.

After a while I began to experience that kind fatigue which only boredom and schlepping around after your wife with your arms full of shopping bags can bring on and I told her that I was going to take the bags out to the van and then I was going to go to Starbucks in the center of the mall and get a cup of caffeine to reinvigorate myself for more shopping.

A little bit later I found myself standing in line at Starbucks lusting over the pastries and trying to limit myself to only a Grande Café Americano with Sweet ‘n’ Low and skim milk. Suddenly the sights and sounds around me began to leak into my consciousness.

In front of me was a teenage couple of Middle Eastern descent. The girl had her head covered with a colorful scarf and they were speaking perfectly unaccented, mid-western American English. To my right, standing at the counter waiting for their order were two men, also of Middle Eastern descent, both talking to each other at the same time in a language that I didn’t understand or recognize.

Seated at a table over there was a young family, Hispanic, mother and father speaking Spanish to each other and their two preschool aged kids were whining and interrupting them in unaccented English. Three middle school aged, white girls were talking to each other and on cell phones in a language that I’m pretty sure was English but I could understand only about every third word which was “like.”

There was a couple seated at a table, reading books, she in a wheelchair.

There was an enormous fat man sleeping in one of the comfy cushioned chairs that I had hoped to snare.

A white guy in a beautifully tailored designer suit was in line reading the New York Times while he waited to give his order.

And two college aged gay men were holding hands across the table and playing chess on a tiny little chess board and laughing at something while sipping cappuccinos.

I remember all of this in such detail because I was so struck by the scene that, after getting my Grande Americano I sat down and surreptitiously wrote a description of it all on my little laptop computer. Then, under the description, I wrote this observation, my repeat revelation:

Diversity is a fact. We had better get comfortable with it because the world is not going force everyone into our mold just to make us happy.

This morning the Bible brings us a story which suggests that diversity may not just be a regrettable reality that we have to endure; it may very well be God’s will for us.

THE TOWER OF BABEL STORY: CONTEXT AND HISTORY

The story of Noah ends in chapter nine of Genesis. Chapters ten and eleven are given to a rather dull reading of the family trees of Noah’s three sons. At the beginning of chapter eleven, however, those family trees are interrupted for nine verses to tell us the story of the city of Babel.

Scholars are, as is so often the case, not in agreement on the purpose and meaning of this story.

Since most of these stories were collected and written down during the Babylonian captivity from 586 to 500 BCE when the Hebrew people were being held captive in the city of Babylon this story could simply be a little “gocha” aimed at the city of Babylon and the Babylonian Empire of which it was the capitol. The name “Babel” actually is just a shortened version of the name “Babylon,” much the way we might call Philadelphia, Philly, or Chicago, Chi-town.

Since Babylon was the biggest, most progressive and modern city these people had ever seen, it is also possible that they took a folk tale out of their own history and placed it in Babylon or vice versa.

The Hebrews didn’t much like or trust cities. They were an agricultural people who came from nomads and herdsmen. Remember that Cain, when he was driven from Eden, went off to be a builder of cities, an occupation which most Hebrews would find low class and suspect.

Most scholars don't address the placement of the story, plopped down, as it is, in the middle of all those family trees. These stories were all collected and cobbled together to try and create one coherent history of the Hebrew people. Who knows why it shows up where it does. And, really, who cares.

The real issue is the story's meaning. What is the purpose of the story. What did it mean for those who first heard it, repeated it, wrote it down and preserved it?

For centuries the popular translation of story has led us to interpret it as a cautionary tale about human pride and ambition.

We start out with all human beings speaking the same language and they start migrating out Eden to the plain of Shinar in the Mesopotamian River Valley. (This happened to be where Babylon was located and is credited with being, along with the Nile Valley, the cradle of western civilization.)

When they got to that lovely plain they decided to settle down and they invented bricks and mortar and the art of masonry and they discovered that they had a real knack for the whole building thing. So they built a city and they decided to build a tower in that city that "reached to the heavens."

The term "reached to the heavens" has been a problem for translators and interpreters. It can mean, literally, reached to heaven where, everyone knows, God used to live. (That would later change when God came down to earth and lived in the Ark of the Covenant and, later, in the Temple and, finally, through Jesus, in the hearts of human beings.)

But, the term "reached to the heavens" was also a euphemism that simply meant really, really high. Like, to the sky.

They decide to do this so they will all have something to rally around, a central figure, something that will define them as a people. They will be "The People of the City with the Really High Tower." And they will all be the same, alike, uniform in their language and their practices. They will talk the same, act the same, look the same, be the same.

One day God comes down from heaven and sees what they are doing. He sees the city and that doesn't seem to bother him. But he also sees the tower and that kinda vexes him a little. And this is where the trouble comes. The translators have a problem with God's little soliloquy, here.

The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible uses the translation pretty much like we are used to hearing it. God notes that they are all one people, they are all alike, and they all speak the same language. Then he says: "Nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them."

It's almost as though God is intimidated by the amazing achievements of his creation. He seems a little concerned that they might get too powerful.

A NEW INTERPRETATION

Many contemporary scholars, however, remind us that ancient Hebrew is not a precise language. It is full of subtleties and nuances which depend on context for their meaning and can radically change the meaning of a sentence. That is the case here. The sentence in question, God's response to human achievement can be translated differently. Instead of, "Nothing they propose to do will now be impossible for them," it can also be translated, "The thing they propose will not be impossible for them."

The traditional translation means that God is concerned, even worried about human potentiality, which is just ridiculous. Why would God be worried about human achievements?

This new interpretation says that what worries God is that humans will achieve the goal not of building a tower, but of becoming all alike. He is concerned that they will become too homogeneous, too alike.

It is not progress and achievement that displeases God in this story. It is conformity and uniformity.

He confuses their languages and disperses them not to limit their achievement but to increase their diversity.

The story of the Tower of Babel was created to explain human heterogeneity, our differences. It answers the question, "Why are people so different? Why are there different races? Why there different languages? Why are there different customs and traditions and beliefs and ideas?"

The answer the story presents is not, "Because God doesn't want us to get too powerful."

The answer is, "Because God had decided that there is strength in diversity. God doesn't desire conformation for us. God desires confirmation in the midst of diversity. God desires unity, not uniformity. God has said, 'If you're going to be the same, let that similarity come as a result of your free choice. Then it will be genuine and beneficial to you.'"

It's good for potatoes, after all. Why not for people, too.

SPUDS, COWS, AND CLINTON COUNTY

The potato was first brought to Europe from the Andes region of South America and introduced to Europeans in the mid-1500's. Sir Walter Raleigh is credited with bringing to the English (who called them "earth apples") around 1600. It was not popular at first but, because it grew well in Europe, especially in England and Ireland, it was well marketed and became one of the most common foods in Europe by the early 1800's.

It was particularly popular in Ireland where the cool, damp conditions were ideal for potato production. It has been estimated that, by 1845, the average Irish adult ate approximately 6.6 pounds of potatoes each day! For many of the poor, the potato was the only food they ate.

Then, from 1845 – 1852 Ireland was invaded by a fungus-like organism called *Phytophthora infestans*. Also known as “the blight” this organism destroyed potatoes almost instantly upon contact.

No one is quite sure where it came from – some say from guano imported from South America as fertilizer and others say from infected potatoes stored on cruise ships between the United States and Europe. At any rate, it traumatized the economy of Europe. In Ireland, where it hit the hardest, it was devastating.

In Celtic, it was known as *an Gorta Mor*, the Great Hunger. In places outside Ireland it has become known as The Great Irish Potato Famine.

A million people died of hunger and starvation. Another million left Ireland for America, Canada, England and Australia. So impoverished was the country of Ireland, so beaten by the famine was it, that the famine has become one of the defining moments in the history of the country. Irish historians speak of Ireland “before the famine” and Ireland “after the famine.”¹

While the cause of the famine is known and the reasons for its total devastation and near collapse of the country are debated, one thing is clear to agriculturalists and biologists. Europeans had ignored the wisdom of those who introduced the potato to them in the first place - biodiversity.

Andean potato farmers always planted different types of potatoes together in the same fields. That way, if a blight came along that affected one breed of potato, there was a good chance that the other breeds would be spared. In order to increase production the Europeans ignored this practice and planted only one or two kinds of potatoes. When the blight came, it took them all.

Today, we understand the value of biodiversity. No farmer plants only one crop. Beans **and** corn. Every year, it seems, a new kind of apple or tomato hits the market. If you listened to the restaurant ads you’d think that the only kind of beef came from Angus cattle. But, in fact, though all cattle come from a single ancestral breed, there are currently more than 50 beef breeds being raised in the world and this diversity of breeds helps to guard against all cattle being killed by a single virus or germ.

Eco-diversity is one of the key ingredients in successful organic gardening and farming. Planting different kinds of plants together allows them to feed and protect each other. Of course, most of our grandparents already knew this. It’s a repeat revelation to us.

Surround your vegetable garden with marigolds and their pungent odor will help to keep rabbits away from your carrots. Plant onions or turnips next to your tomatoes and the tomatoes will have a stronger flavor.

And anyone in Clinton County can tell you the importance of economic diversity to the health of a community. Better, we have found, to have a hundred small businesses employing twenty people each than one big business employing two thousand. A mixture of big and small may be the best of all.

So, if diversity is good for our farms and our cattle, and it’s good for our gardens and our economy, and, according to the story we have heard this morning, diversity is God’s will for us as human beings, then maybe it would be good for our churches, too.

Martin Luther King said, “It is appalling that the most segregated hour in America is eleven o’clock on Sunday morning.”²

DIVERSITY IN CHURCH

In article in last November’s Christianity Today magazine, Phillip Yancey wrote: “As I read accounts of the New Testament church, no characteristic stands out more sharply than diversity. Beginning with Pentecost, the Christian Church dismantled the barriers of gender, race, and social class that had marked Jewish congregations. Paul, who was a rabbi and had given thanks daily that he was not born a woman, slave, or Gentile, marveled over the radical change: ‘There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female,’ he said. ‘For you are all one in Christ.’”

Yancey then goes on to tell this story: “One modern pastor in India told me, ‘Most of what happens in Christian churches, including even miracles, can be duplicated in Hindu and Muslim congregations. But in my area only Christians strive, however ineptly, to mix men and women of different castes, races and social groups. That’s the real miracle.’”

May God create more such miracles in all of His churches.

AMEN

¹ For an excellent account of the Irish Potato Famine see Leon Uris’s novel, “Trinity.”

² Speech at Western Michigan University. <http://www.wmich.edu/library/archives/mlk/q-a.html>

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Usually, when we think or talk about diversity, we think of racial diversity. What other kinds of diversity are there in modern American churches and institutions.
2. What is the difference between unity and uniformity? Confirmation and conformation? Homogeneity and heterogeneity?
3. Of unity and uniformity, which is more desirable, according to the text?
4. What are the implications of this text for the ecumenical movement?
5. Can you share an experience where diversity has been a strength for a group that you were involved with? Can you share an experience where it has been a problem?
6. Discuss this quote: "Never in recorded history has diversity been anything but a problem...Diversity is a difficulty to be overcome, not an advantage to be sought. True, America does a better job than most at accommodating a diverse population. We also do a better job at curing cancer and containing pollution. But no one goes around mindlessly exclaiming: "Cancer is a strength!" "Pollution is our greatest asset!" (Ann Coulter. "At the End of the Day, Diversity has Jumped the Shark." Op-ed Columns archived at: <http://townhall.com/columnists/AnnCoulter>)
7. Discuss this quote: "Left to ourselves, we seek our own. Movie stars marry movie stars. Doctors seek out doctors. Middle-classers seek out middle-classers. Bikers seek bikers. But when Christ comes, that changes. In the church of Jesus Christ, we discover that people we love and with whom we fellowship are different from us. The more there is of the love Christ exhorted us to have, a love for one another, the greater will be the diversity within the body of Christ." (Rev. R. K. Hughes. *Preaching the Word*. Wheaton, Ill. Crossway Books, 1999.)
8. Which one do you think the story teller in Genesis would agree with? Which one would the Apostle Paul agree with? Why?