

## *Confusion: A Strange Gift from God*

Genesis 11:1-9

Not to be too irreverent, but I have often thought that God did some crazy things. Perhaps *unexpected* or *surprising* or *mysterious* would be more respectful language, especially coming from a minister. I'd settle for *ingenious*, but still, *crazy* seems appropriate. I mean, who would create a platypus or an iguana? Or put a whole bunch of antagonistic animals together on an ark (think not only of the odor, but of the wolf and the lamb or the snake and the mouse closed into tight quarters for 40 days to ensure their survival? Who would think of using sinners and prostitutes to get across your message about righteous living? Who would build a church on a *rock* (aka Peter) who has already let you down more than once and then ultimately betrayed you? And a crucified messiah? Who, but God? Crazy!

So who would think of taking a whole bunch of people ( in fact, *the whole earth*), who were getting along nicely, speaking the same language, trying to get closer to heaven – who would be displeased enough to confuse their language and spread them across the face of the globe? Who, but God?

In my untutored state, before I went to seminary and had to learn a whole lot of things about studying the Bible, I always thought the Tower of Babel account was the weirdest story. Why would God mess up things that seemed to be going so well. What's wrong with unity, common purpose, easy fluid communication? They seems like good things, don't they?

Of course, digging a little deeper, looking at context and placement and literary style, and considering God's overall intentions for the world, we can see that there was something amiss in building that tower. Something not right, something not noble, not faithful. In truth, the people on earth, all of them, wanted to make a name for themselves, be famous; they thought they could use their ingenuity and skill to solve any problem or challenge they faced (bricks and mortar would ensure their future); they were sure they knew the one way to God – build a structure that would reach to the heavens – taller and stronger than any that had ever been erected before – the biggest and the best – insurance! It would be something to boast about. Why bother with God – we can handle everything on our own. Never mind God's instructions to Noah to *Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth*; we'll just stay here and count on our tower to take care of everything.

God was not happy, not at all pleased. *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* (which is a play on words and means *confusion* in Hebrew).

Was this *confusion* a punishment? A penance for human arrogance, our desire for security and fame, our efforts toward willful autonomy? Going it alone, or on our terms? That is the way this story is most often understood – divine punishment against the continuing sin of

humanity. But I have begun to look at it differently and I invite us to consider its meaning for us today at FC C. Maybe the confusion (and also scattering) is a gift from God. More of God's smart craziness!

After all, if people can't be sure that everyone is on the same page, don't speak the same words, don't share the same set of experiences, don't come from the same background and culture let alone geography, then won't we have to listen carefully to each other? We will all have to be open to learning from one another about really important things – like the nature and presence of God in our lives. Otherwise we will always think that our own experience and perspective and relationship with God is all that there is to know about God and life. That's human craziness – there is so much more, so much more, than any one of us can comprehend.

There is an old story about two shamans sent out to study the holy mountain so that the people could know what their gods expected of them. The first shaman came back from the north side of the mountain to tell that that it was covered with fruit trees, a sign that their god would always bless them abundantly. The second shaman came back from the south side of the mountain to tell the people that it was barren and covered with rock, a sign that their god would always be with them, yes, but intended them to take care of themselves. So which shaman was right? Do both have the truth or a truth? Do we need to listen to each or just stick to our own limited version of reality? What can be gained if we are able to listen to another's words, thoughts, feelings?

Learning to listen, to not judge or criticize harshly, to not label or condemn, is not easy. Think about our political climate these days. Members of one party, one persuasion, can hardly talk to the other. But look at any group, any organization.

Look at this church. Talk about craziness. Who would put us all together in one body? A plumber and a professor, a "recovering" Catholic and a dyed-in-the-wool puritan, a born-again and a unitarian, a teetotaler and an addict, a disciple and a doubter, a praise-r and a protestor, a couple of sinners and a lot of saint. Quite a hodge-podge. Not quite as bad as the ark, with its 2 snakes and 2 mice, but still, we're a lot of disparate people hanging out together trying to be faithful.

This God of ours has called us together from all sorts of different places, backgrounds and experiences, speaking different tongues, using different words. Then God mixed us all up together at First Congregational, and confused our language so that we have to listen carefully to one another, learn from one another, in order to create a vibrant inclusive kin-dom community, welcoming newcomers as well as honoring old traditions and longtime members, singing new hymns as well as golden oldies, repeating covenants dating back to 1687 as well as making new promises. Being the church requires opening ourselves, hearts, minds, souls - reaching beyond ourselves to greater truths - sometimes beyond our comfort level, our sense of the one and only way, which is always our way.

What do we hear when we listen carefully, actively, attentively to one another? A woman from our congregation, sitting right here in our midst today, told me she was praying for a

*divine intervention* for my sister who is, as many of you know, under in-home hospice care out in Michigan. *Divine intervention!* How bold, I thought. I am much more constrained in my prayer life. Perhaps too long a Presbyterian. One of God's *frozen chosen*. Anyway, I don't ask too much specific of God, don't dare to be too demanding or too precise. Maybe I pray sincerely, very sincerely, for *comfort* or *peace*. But not for *full healing*. She and I don't use the same words, but I was much touched by her vivid experience of God's presence and power, her confidence, her trust. It opened my eyes and my heart to new dimensions, new insights, even new hopes. I don't have to live relegated to my own little world if I am open to listening to others'. I don't know all there is to know about God and God's purposes for my life, our lives, this church, the world. We, all of us, are in this together; we can grow individually and as a people. Confusion of languages can be a good thing, not a punishment but a gift, if it leads to a different kind of unity.

But what truly binds us together at FCC? On what do we build our unity? A tower reaching to the heavens, a brick building on the town green? Our ability to talk the same language, think the same thoughts, run good programs, hire the right staff, do noble things so we look good to ourselves and to others, confidently ensure our own future? Is it those Babel things, or is it a trust in the power and presence of a God who defines who we are, where we are headed, gives us meaning and purpose, and brings unity amidst our diversity. A God who confuses our language so that we can listen to God's voice and learn to talk to one another as disparate and un-alike as we might seem.

It can be hard work – giving someone another chance, forgiving, being open-handed and open-minded, offering our future to God rather than dissecting the past and rigorously planning each action, seeking joy rather than worrying about being right. But we can take small steps forward - with God giving us a taste of life we'd never thought possible, beyond our dreams and schemes, finding lives we thought we had lost, binding us together in a center that holds.

Reinhold Niebuhr said that *nothing we can do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore, we are saved by love.*

It comes down to that, my friends, love not towers of whatever shape, and trust in a center that holds.

Is it God in Jesus Christ that gives us our unity and our future? Whom and what do we rally around? Is it God in whom we place our confidence rather than our own efforts? I hope so as we go forth into this day and into our future together as a delightfully *confused* people of a surprising-but-oh-so-wise-and-wonderful gift-giving God.

May it be so. Amen and amen.

Sermon preached by Susan Power Trucksess. First Congregational Church in Branford, 17 September 2017. With gratitude for insights and quotations offered by Joan Chittister in her book *Between the Dark and the Daylight: Embracing the Contradictions of Life* (New York: Image Press, 2015).