

A Babbling Affirmation (Gen. 11.1-9)
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I remember it well. It was my first year as minister at Covenant. I was considerably younger then, if you can believe that, and I had only been on the job for a couple of months when the question was sprung. We needed to revisit our affirmation of faith, I was told. The words printed atop the membership card that read that membership was open to all who affirmed that “Jesus is Lord.” The Covenant community had been uneasy with these words for years, I was told. They were contentious, I was told. They were not our language, I was told. But we were waiting for the new minister, I was told. You will know what to do, I was told. Oddly enough, I did know at least part of what to do. I smiled at my luck. I chuckled under my breath. And I arranged with the church leadership for a series of conversations.

In 2002, just as now, Covenant was divided into small deacons groups. It was decided that these groups were the best place to hold a series of discussions over the course of the summer. The discussions would be led by yours truly; their topic our shared affirmation of faith and the possibility of changing or modifying it in some way. Groups were scheduled and publicized well in advance and, when the summer arrived, our dialogue was begun. Together we plunged into the deep theological waters of who we were and what we meant to affirm about that. Here’s how it went in my memory.

Though the settings for each conversation varied – several were held in homes, one took place in the sanctuary, another outdoors by a pool – the format was the same. I related the current affirmation of faith, “Jesus is Lord,” and we discussed a number of historic and cultural understandings of that claim. In terms of history, there seemed to be

a general warmth to the idea that when the earliest Christians affirmed Jesus as Lord it was a counter-affirmation that meant, implicitly, that Caesar was not. This was a declaration of fealty to the kingdom of heaven as taught by the itinerant rabbi and not the kingdom of earth as enforced by the Roman political empire. In such a context, we understood this affirmation to be quite provocative. Yet in our current context, as those who attended a Baptist church in the state of Texas, we understood the expression “Jesus is Lord” to mean a number of things that were anything but countercultural. Indeed, it was suggested that to see those words painted atop a barn roof, say, on the outskirts of town was to read a message that was uncomfortably congruent with conservative religious and political culture. “Jesus is Lord,” carried a cultural meaning in Texas that we might associate with a fundamentalist faith that was not our own. It was this association that made so many of us uneasy. And as we discussed these matters over that long, hot summer, the conversation seemed to reach some clarity regarding that fact that this was not really our language and then it began to move toward ways we might more constructively say what we meant – in a fashion that was both historically and culturally relevant. Yet let me stop short of making it sound like this was a process that was particularly easy or even, for a time, comprehensible. What it felt like at first was a great big Covenant free for all.

What I remember most about that summer of dialogue was how, in all of those meetings, with seemingly every member of the congregation present at one time or another, there was not ever a moment of complete consensus. One person would speak passionately on the subject and the next would take the polar opposite view. Another would inveigh on the need to rid ourselves of the old language, followed by a voice that

plead for fidelity to tradition. Someone would wax philosophical on the symbolic character of all language and a friend would push back that something had to be said, in any case. On and on we went all summer, through tears, laughter, and befuddlement, sipping coffee or wine, passing the microphone or raising our hands, until our cacophony reached a crescendo and we soared through the season's end with a sonic boom of liberal opinion before we settled somehow into a kind of quiet on the other side. At least that's how it felt to me. What did we decide, you might wonder if you weren't here in 2002. We decided upon some words that we'd already decided upon years early. We replaced the ancient affirmation with the language of our church mission statement. It did not contain the language of lordship, though it read as follows, "Membership in Covenant Church is open to all persons who affirm the loving presence of God, the life and teachings of Jesus, and the revealed Spirit throughout the ages." There. A warm and liberal Trinitarian affirmation of faith to be interpreted as freely and conscientiously as possible. I remember feeling enthused and exhausted when the new language was finally adopted. And I remember that no one complained for a week or two. Then someone caught me in the narthex. "What do you suppose 'loving presence of God' means?" he asked. "I'm not sure I agree with that."

I was reminded of that first year this week as I considered the themes of Pentecost. For today is Pentecost Sunday, a day when the church has traditionally celebrated the coming of a certain Spirit among the people. In the Book of Acts, the text that is typically used, we are told that what came upon the people was a newfound understanding as they each finally heard one another in their native tongues. They moved from chaos to coherence and achieved a unity of purpose that sustained the early

church. It's a lovely story and, in some ways a liberal and linear one, moving forward in a progressive vision of people working together for a new common good. Yet as much as some of us love and affirm that old vision, it may also be true that we haven't always shared its experience. For those of us who grew up in free church congregational traditions, perhaps especially Baptists, we have known churches with at least as many opinions as members or, as the joke goes, possibly more. And this morning we've read not from the Book of Acts, but from the much earlier Book of Genesis, not the story of Pentecost, but its historical antecedent, the mirror image from which Acts draws in order to make a curious allusion. We've read about the Tower of Babel, an old narrative that moves from organization to disorganization faster than you can pull the minister aside and say, "I'm not sure I agree with that." It's a bit of a funny story, actually. And we might just take a brief look at it, considering what it might mean for us at Pentecost.

According to the ancient mythology of Genesis, there was a time when human people were actually beginning to understand each other quite well. "[They] had the same language and the same words," the text tells us. So they began a group project. Baking bricks and stacking them together, the people set about constructing a great tower that would reach skyward. They wanted to make a name for themselves, we are told. A curious thing happened, however, on the way to heaven. God, here portrayed as an anthropocentric character, ducked down from above the clouds to see what the people were doing. Observing their organization, God issued something of a divine, "Uh-oh." Afterwards, the God character spoke to others in a council of heavenly beings and said, "Let us, then, go down and confound their speech there, so that they shall not understand one another's speech." This, it was supposed, would keep the people in their respective

places. So God came down, confounded their speech, confused the people, scattered them all about, and then ascended back up the cloudy stairwell to breathe a sigh of relief. Thus, the ancient account of just how and why we got to be so generally confused. It's God's fault.

Now I'm making light just a bit, but that's because I think it is possible that this story has been read too seriously in the past. I've heard preachers use this ancient story to rail against human hubris or to affirm something transcendent that should and must always elude our grasp or to set the stage for what might be later told in the Book of Acts. And there's nothing wrong with these interpretations. Yet they lack something that has been true of my own experience in ministry at Covenant, namely, the paradoxically playful affirmation that we are working together on a group project in a constant state of confusion and disorientation. And no sooner does one of us place the brick of an opinion on top of the foundation than another moves it or replaces it with a seemingly contradictory idea. What the old story affirms to me, as a minister in this place, is that there is something funny about our shared work. We keep trying to build our tower, our dreams, our church, our beloved community, yet we are constantly confounded by what it means to work together, so many of us with so many different consciences, each of us trying to understand and to be understood, yet all of us dimly aware of the constant buzz of confusion in our midst. I am not inclined to blame the divine for this state as a kind of deficiency. Rather, I am more inclined to laugh alongside the God character, who in Genesis seems to have messed up all the plans and left us hapless and human to see what we might do next. My concept of God is not that of an anthropocentric character in the sky, anyway. My concept has been much more informed by my free church Baptist

parents and teachers, who raised me to believe that there was a divine spark in every person, the truth of which necessitated both the following of individual conscience and the life communal where our consciences could be tested and refined with other people of faith. There is a Spirit in each of us, we said. Yet there is a Spirit in all of us. Both are true, which amazes and confounds. And it brings us back to Covenant.

Near the end of that first year, I believe it was after the discussion of our affirmation of faith, though I'm not entirely certain, we took up the subject of communion. How often should we have it, we asked. And what did it mean, we wondered, the questions of theology and practice joined in our minds. We did not celebrate communion very often at that time. Only quarterly. Yet it was important to some of our newer members, so we began to schedule it every four to six weeks. And though we never did decide on a clear or single meaning (how could we?), communion became that year and has remained in my mind an indelible symbol of Covenant. For, being the young minister, and not knowing precisely what to do, I simply began inviting everyone to the table, in a way that I believed was consonant with the life and teachings of our rabbi and the spirit of our liberal church. Every year since we have continued that crazy conscientious free for all. Come one, come all, we say. Then we go down the list. Gay or straight. Man or woman. Black or white. Old or young. Rich or poor. Happy or sad. Traditional or skeptic. And these are clumsy and simplistic dichotomies, but you get the idea. Anyone for any reason can come to agree, disagree, ponder and partake as we share a symbolic meal together. It never fails to hit home with me every time we do it. For in all of our difference, with all of our confusion, and despite our sometimes deep divides, we come to the table in this

great, awkward, human affirmation that there is something here that we have all come in search of. And though we may call it by different names, still we come.

There is something funny about the observance. For instance, recently I served a man bread who ate it too quickly and choked a bit afterwards, showering me with a crumbly cough. “Sorry,” he wheezed. I offered water to a child, who grabbed wine more quickly than I could put a hand out and downed it like a shot, looking up at me with a sheepish grin and a merlot moustache. I offered bread to a visitor who simply whispered, “No, thanks,” before standing for a moment awkwardly, neither of us knowing what to do next. And just the last communion, I held the cup out to a visitor. “This is the cup of salvation,” I whispered. “Really?” he replied, one eyebrow raised incredulously. (If you’d like to hear more stories just ask any deacon.) Yet alongside these silly moments lie the serious and sublime. For there was also the recent morning when I held out the bread to a person whose cheeks were salted with tears. Her hands shook as she took it and I was dumbstruck by the power of the moment. There was the child who reached for the tiny cup and, rather than drinking it all at once, took three or four small sips, each of them very seriously, before looking up at me with earnest blue eyes to whisper, “Thanks be to God.” There was the person I had seen earlier in private, who had shared a story of deep grief with me. With all of the hope I could muster I held out the tray, “May this be the cup of healing for you.” And then there are the strangers who always come, just the once, never to be seen again. They walk slowly to the front, take the bread and wine in mystery, and disappear out the doorway. “Who was that?” I always wonder. “Did she find what she was looking for?”

Somewhere in all of it, I believe a kind of affirmation is being made. And though it may not be in the Pentecostal language of Acts, where they all understood each other so well and achieved a unity of vision and purpose, it may be something more foibled and funny to match our liberal church experience. Something akin to that old story from Genesis, where they stood confounded and confused by the God who had been in their midst. At Covenant we claim that every person is a bearer of the sacred and that faith is therefore a group project. It's a radical affirmation, and it doesn't really make for a perfect Pentecost. But it does make for something more holy and human than not. And for that we might all say, in our many, many different ways. Thanks be to God.