

6-8-25 Sermon: “No Monocultures in the Gospel” – Genesis 11:1-9, Acts 2:1-21

Happy birthday, Church! Today is Pentecost, the day when we celebrate the Holy Spirit descending like a mighty wind – with tongues of fire! – and breathing the breath of life into her newly born church.

But this Pentecost, I’ve not been thinking so much about tongues of fire the breath of life. This year, I’ve mostly been thinking...about cheetahs.

Cheetahs? Yes, cheetahs! Specifically, a fascinating discovery biologists made in the 1980s about the world’s cheetah population, as outlined by Malcom Gladwell in his 2024 book *Revenge of the Tipping Point*.

It started with a problem: Zookeepers were having a hard time getting cheetahs to breed in captivity. They tried all the tricks their tricks – poured the champagne, turned on Marvin Gaye...but even when they did the deed, these cheetahs weren’t having babies!

A geneticist named Stephen O’Brien got involved and he began running blood tests on the cheetahs. And what he discovered shocked him: The DNA of every cheetah he tested was nearly identical. Unlike most species, which share many genes but contain a fair amount of genetic diversity, cheetahs show almost no variation. They all have the same genes.

This happens from time to time in nature; It’s what biologists call a genetic bottleneck. At some point in history – probably during the last ice age – the world cheetah population was nearly wiped out. O’Brien estimates that fewer than 100 cheetahs were left on the whole earth. When the temperatures warmed and the surviving cheetahs began to replenish the population, they only had each other to mate with. So while cheetahs made a comeback, these new cheetahs lacked genetic diversity. They were, for all intents and purposes, a monoculture.

Here the story takes a sad turn, because while O’Brien was conducting his studies, a wildlife safari in Oregon purchased two new cheetahs from the Sacramento Zoo. Shortly after their arrival, one of the new cheetahs got sick and died. And in the months that followed, other cheetahs in the zoo began to get sick – one after the other, with varying symptoms – and not a single sick cheetah survived.

An autopsy finally revealed that the cheetahs were suffering from Feline Infectious Peritonitis – a feline coronavirus, if you’ll believe it. In normal circumstances, some of the sick animals would have died, and most would have recovered. But remember, these cheetahs are genetically *the same*. If one was susceptible to the virus, all were susceptible. A virus can wreak havoc on a monoculture, because it lacks the genetic diversity to build resilience.

This is, admittedly a strange comparison. But friends, I think *this* is what’s going on at the tower of Babel. The people are trying to build a monoculture. And God intervenes with the blessing of diversity.

As the story goes, all the people on earth all live in one place and speak one language. And quite frankly they like it that way; they say, “Let’s build a monument to us!”

But when God looks down and sees what’s going on, God says, “Hmm, that’s a bad idea.” So God mixes up their languages and scatters them over the face of the earth. God intervenes in the people’s plans because there are no monocultures in the Gospel.

Likewise, at Pentecost, Luke tells us that the disciples are all together, in one place. And what’s more, they’re all the same *kind* of people – Jews from Jerusalem who speak Aramaic. The entirety of the Church is literally sitting in one room (apparently, they forgot to appoint a designated survivor), when the Holy Spirit descends.

This restless Spirit drives them out into the streets, where they begin to preach the gospel – but not in their native Aramaic. No, instead the Spirit gives them power to speak other languages, so that more people may understand. They preach in the vernacular of all kinds of people – Parthians, Elamites, residents of Mesopotamia, *and* the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene! The whole known world is there at Pentecost. And everyone hears the Gospel in their own language.

Christian teaching has often said that Pentecost reverses the curse of Babel...but that's not really what happens, is it? The people don't all go back to speaking one language. Instead, the Spirit gives the disciples power to preach in *many* languages so that more people can hear the good news. Pentecost ends, not with a return to linguistic unity, but with bridges built and relationships deepened across linguistic diversity.

The scattering of Babel is not a curse; it's a blessing. A blessing of diversity that is *deepened* at Pentecost. The Holy Spirit starts building a church of people who are *very intentionally* not the same. She intervenes for the sake of genetic variation, makes sure that the church does not become a monoculture, which might be susceptible to illnesses like closedmindedness, tribalism, we've-always-done-it-that-way-ism. And in its place, the Spirit builds a church that is resilient enough to survive...and thrive...and grow.

Usually, we celebrate Pentecost in May. But every now and then, the liturgical calendar pushes us into June. And I like it when Pentecost falls in June, because that means it coincides with Pride.

In case anyone lives under a rock, Pride is a month that celebrates the LGBTQIA+ community. And actually, it's bigger than that: Pride is a time when we celebrate the diversity of sexuality and gender identity in *all* of us. You don't have to be gay to have an identity that contains some nuance! For the last several years, Session has voted to display a rainbow flag during Pride, as a way of proclaiming to the community that we not only accept but *celebrate* the diversity of God's people.

I find it especially powerful when a *church* displays visible support for the LGBTQ+ community, because, well, the church has not always been on the right side of this issue. Hanging a rainbow flag becomes an act of confession and repentance, of saying, "We're sorry. We were wrong. We'll do things differently going forward."

I take great comfort in the rainbow flag. For me it's a symbol of safety and welcome. But I know that some of you kind of wish we *didn't* hang the flag. Not because you've got something against gay people – let's be honest, you're here! – but because you're uncomfortable with such a visible statement. Some folks worry that it makes us a target for vandalism or hate mail (we've experienced both!). Others fear that it might be divisive, might turn some people off.

So I get a little nervous each year before the Session meeting where we talk flags. Because I know that no matter what we do, some people in the church will be happy with our decision, and others will be unhappy with it.

And friends...you know what? I think maybe that's the *whole darn point*.

God's church is called to be a place where people who have different and even opposing opinions worship side by side. We are richer, stronger, more *faithful* as a church because some of us are comforted and some of us *discomforted* by that rainbow flag...and yet all of us are still here.

The truth of Pentecost is that we need both of these kinds of people – and everyone in between – to fully reflect the image of God. The stunning diversity of God's Church can, at

times, be frustrating, but it is also our greatest gift. Because the Kingdom of God thrives on genetic variation. There are no monocultures in the Gospel.

So happy birthday, Church. Put on your party hats, light up your candles, fly your flags. The Holy Spirit is indeed here among us.

Let's see where she takes us next.