



## **Life Together: Slow Down**

### **Genesis 11:1-9**

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July 26, 2020

In the beginning, God created – created the heavens and earth – created the sun and the seas – created the birds, the trees, all that swims in the ocean and all that walks on land. God created this creation in perfect unity, and in its perfect state, God called it “good.” This perfect state of creation was, is, and will forever be God’s desire for creation. It is this image of perfection that we are told will return into full being at the consummate end of creation. It is this image of perfection that we are told God desires for us even in the here and now. Indeed, the Biblical text makes clear this image of perfection is possible in the here and now, for this is God’s will, laid bare through the witness, teaching, and sacrificial love of Christ.

And yet, with little hesitation, it is clear to say we are a far cry from living in to this reality. The present existence for creation is nothing like God would desire. The symbiotic unity that was deemed “good” at creation is missing in our personal, communal, national, and global identity.

Though it is a tall order, and perhaps impossible, for us to easily correct the national and global challenges, we do have the capacity to fix our personal and communal relationships. And I believe that if we can claim God’s redemption in our personal relationships, if we can live in better community with one another, then ultimately, the national and global challenges will correct themselves. But all of this work, from seeking justice and equity, to eradicating poverty and homelessness, to seeing affordable healthcare and immigration, to seeing peace among the different tribes and people across this diverse world ... it all starts with learning to be faithful to God through intentional, vulnerable, and more trusting relationships.

The past two weeks, we’ve named that healthy relationships begin with gratitude. We have to learn to be thankful for one another. Such faithful relationships also depend on us being willing to listen to one another – not with an intent to rebuke or respond, but with an earnest desire to learn from one another. This week, our focus is on slowing down and single-tasking.

I don’t know how many of you operate like I do, but I’m terrible at single-tasking. To be clear, I don’t mean I can’t do a single task well, I mean I’m terrible at compartmentalizing tasks. My mind tends to operate on this hyper-overdrive, where, even when I’m working on a single-task, many other tasks come to mind. Kind of like the dog chasing a squirrel, who, seeing another squirrel to chase, leaves the first behind to pursue the second ... I have this tendency to become task-distracted quite easily. I may be sending an email, which, in the midst of typing the email, another email that needs to be sent comes to mind. Instead of finishing the first email, I start working on the second, only to realize at a much later hour, I never finished the first.

This kind of task-distraction also happens in the midst of conversations. While some of the technological advancements of smart phones, social media, and other communication avenues were created to help us stay more well connected – the reality is, many of these communication avenues have our attention so divided, we hardly ever stay focused on any one conversation taking place. For example, I may be on a phone call, but with the computer in front of me, I have the ability to have a conversation on Facebook, on Twitter, on email, and on many text threads all at the same time. While some may see this ability to converse with multiple people through different threads as being more productive, perhaps it is best to acknowledge that an increase in *transmission* does not equate to an increase in *communication*. In their book, *An Essential Guide to Interpersonal Relationships*, Quentin Schultze and Diane Badzinski offer that “Multitasking is a myth. No one can really do it well.”<sup>i</sup>

The willingness to sit in conversation with any one person, giving thanks for the set-apart time to be engaged with just one person, offering a truly listening ear with just one person ... it seems so foreign in our modern day, fast-paced, tech-driven, results-based society.

Please don't mistake me as offering a curmudgeon's lament on technology. I am usually the first to name the benefit of technology for keeping us connected with one another. And yet, given the present reality of humanity, it does seem that we should reframe the purpose of such connectivity. What is the purpose of our multi-tasking? ... If we're being fully honest with one another, why do we find it so hard to slow down and single task? Why are our relationships so stressed by a lack of direct connection?

The story of the Tower of Babel comes to mind.

After God created all that was good, we see the failure of humanity. We see this failure happen not just once, but time and time again. Genesis lays out four distinct failures in the first 11 chapters.

The first failure is the eating of the forbidden fruit in the Garden. The second failure is the murder of Abel by his brother Cain. The third failure is the wickedness of humanity at large, that resulted in the great flood. The fourth failure is seen in our text in Genesis 11.

Following the flood, Noah and his wife, and his sons and his sons' wives, began to repopulate the earth. Perhaps we can look past the incestuous reality of the first couple of generations to come, but, it was God's blessing for Noah and his sons to be fruitful and multiply. So, incestuous or not, that's what they did.

After many years, and a handful of new generations, we arrive at Genesis 11, which begins in verse 1, “Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. As they migrated from the east, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there.”

If you look up the historicity of this text, you'll likely be disappointed. Though there is little doubt that people migrated out to this area of Shinar – land that would become the home of

the Babylonian empire – the purpose of this text in the history of God’s people is more functional than historical. There are many historical errors with the timing of this story in the Biblical time-line, but there is a need, in the history of the created humanity, to explain how we became so diverse as a human population across the globe. And so, while the accuracy from a historical timeline may be questionable, there is no doubt a significant message to learn for God’s people.

As the people settled in this region, they decided to make bricks, and to use those bricks to build a city for themselves, with a sky-scraper of a tower among the buildings. ... Notice, the building project of these people was not *just* a tower. The text tells us they were creating for themselves a new development in which to live. (I can’t imagine the HOA fees were very costly, but with everyone using the same bricks, I can only imagine how strict were the requirements for street appeal.)

As they begin to build, they have a very finite reason for building. Again, the text lays it out, “Let us build a city for ourselves, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.” ... Do you catch the irony of what is about to come?

Before we continue with the story, let’s look back to the short history of the Biblical text, and consider what it has laid out as God’s desire for creation. God created what was good in the Garden. It was good because it was, at that time, living in the unity of God’s creative design. And, in the midst of that creative design, God offered very few, but very acute, desires for humanity. The first of these desires, laid out in Genesis 1:28, is to “be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it.” So, it can be seen that God has, among others, two very upfront desires for humanity: to be at one with creation, and to fill all the earth.

Here, in Genesis 11, we find that a group of migrators is unified, but that their desire is to build up a city for themselves, so that they won’t have to be scattered across the earth. Instead of living into God’s desire for humanity, they’ve shifted to living out a self-centered desire.

Picking up in verse 5, God came down to see the tower. It may be in the heavens from a human perspective, but it is still insignificant enough that God must come down to see it. Then, we see the Lord speak. “Look,” says the Lord, “they are one people, and they all have one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do now will be impossible for them.”

It is very clear, when we have a single-track mind, we can do anything. When we are not divided in our thought, or in our collective work, all things are possible. And yet, while all things are possible, not all things are permissible ... while all things are possible, not all things are beneficial.

Picking back up, the Lord continues to speak within God’s trinitarian self, saying, “Let us go down, and confuse their language, so that they will not understand – or be able to listen – to

one another's speech." So, the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth.

It's important to note here why the scattering took place. It's a popular reading to say they were scattered because they built a tower in an attempt to usurp divine authority. There was a belief among the ancient near-east civilizations that one could reach a high enough point to become like the gods. And yet, it seems the focus was not on having divine power, as much as communal self-aggrandizement.

It's also been a popular reading in American Christian history, especially during the time of Jim Crow, that God scattered the people across the earth due to a divine desire for diversity and segregation. As if this scattering was God's ultimate will for humanity. Sadly, this belief has not gone away. There are many who still use this text as a way to argue against the desegregating of diversity in our nation.

To be clear, the division of humanity is not God's will for creation, nor is the scattering a direct result of a people thinking they could build a tower tall enough to become "as the gods." We've already named, God's desire was for a unified people who filled the earth. So, why the divine action? "The tower and city are attempts at self-serving unity which resists God's scattering activity. ... The purpose of God is neither *self-serving homogeneity* as though God is not Lord, nor a *scattering of autonomous parts* as though the elements of humanity did not belong to each other."<sup>ii</sup>

Set alone, the story seems to be a judgement on God's people. God's desire to keep humans on the right path is often seen as punishment. And yet, in the full realm of God's will, this act is not a punishment as much as it is righting a failed human desire. God acts time and time again to reframe and refocus us as a broadly diverse and spread out creation whose focus is living into God's will for us as a unified creation.

But again, this is not an isolated event in the Biblical storyline. The story continues, and the good news is, even amidst our inability to get it right, God acts on our behalf. The scattering of the people from Babel is redeemed by God's work in Christ, who sends forth the Spirit.

When they were scattered from Babel, their language was confused, such that they could not hear – or could not understand – one another's speech. When Pentecost came, we read in Acts 2, there was a diverse gathering of devout Jews in Jerusalem. As the Spirit filled the disciples and led them out into the streets to proclaim the good news of Christ, the Jews who were gathered were bewildered, because each one *heard* the disciples speaking in their native language. What God had made impossible at Babel because of a self-focused ideology, God made possible through the Spirit because of a Christ-focused proclamation. "The miracle of Pentecost displays a unity which, far from being a forced uniformity, is a communion in diversity, retaining all that is valid in every nation and in every person."<sup>iii</sup>

When asking, how do we join in the work of God's redemption in the world today, or, since that Pentecost moment, where is the Spirit leading us, we should be taking pause to ask, what are

we hoping to accomplish with our hyperactive multi-tasking? Why are we so divided in our attention to one another? What are we trying to achieve through our constant busyness?

The story of the Tower, or the City of Babel, is a call to recognize God's divine desire for humanity. Our call is not to build up cities for ourselves. Our call is not to seek a name for ourselves, or our family, or our *people*, and no, not even for our nation. As members of the Body of Christ, the invitation of God is to see the work of Christ and the power of the Spirit as having already conquered the divisions and the selfish ambitions that have led us to claim power for ourselves, or to create for ourselves a comfort and dominion while others are suffering in our wake.

No matter how busy we keep ourselves, we cannot ultimately tune out the selfish ambition of American individualism that requires constant multi-tasking and fast-paced production. And to what end? To the benefit of having a top rated, Fortune 300 company? To the plaque on the wall that affirms our professional self-worth? How tall a tower do we have to build before we're capable of seeing that we, as a nation, have become a modern day City of Babel – seeking to make a name for ourselves in the intentional avoidance of being scattered across the face of the whole earth?

Our faithful response to God's desire for humanity begs that we slow down and take the time to really engage with one another – to see the worth in each other. The work of God in Jesus Christ has already proven that when we single-task, all things are possible. The question we must ask when seeking to see God's healing in this land is, what single-task is most important to us? To what end are we working so hard? Is it our name, and our fame? Is it our glory and our joy? Or might we see God's calling anew, to live faithfully into the divine desire for a world filled with a diversified unity – a glorious tapestry of a diverse humanity all living as one to give praise to the Almighty, to give glory to God, to declare the love of the Lord. Slow-down, and may we live in better community with one another. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Quentin J. Schultze and Diane M. Badzinski. *An Essential Guide to Interpersonal Communication*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015.

<sup>ii</sup> Walter Bruggemann. *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, Genesis*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010.

<sup>iii</sup> Genesis 11:1-9. Taize.fr. Retrieved July 22, 2020.