



First Congregational Church of Ashfield ❖ United Church of Christ
Creating Community, Welcoming All

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Rev. David Jones, Minister

Sunday, May 8, 2022 “Towering Spirit” Rev. David Jones

In the Old Testament, in the Book of Genesis, there is this story about a still young humanity gathered all together and speaking the same language. It is a humanity that is really pleased with themselves. So pleased that they decide they will build a tower up into the sky, a tower that will allow them to stand higher than God.

Humans are remarkably talented creatures, and if they can work together toward a common goal, if they can understand one another, they can even pierce the sky. And in this story, they do. The tower they build soon stands over everything, and God can hardly believe it. God comes down to earth to inspect humanity's achievement, and immediately becomes worried. God decides that this human creature is truly capable of anything. God decides to stop them. God scatters them, confuses and mixes them up so that they can no longer understand one another, and the building stops.

When I was younger I thought this was strange. I didn't understand why God would do this. I thought this must mean God was insecure, that God did this harmful thing to humanity to safeguard God's own power. Aren't we *supposed* to set out to do big things? Aren't we taught to do exactly what the people who built the tower of Babel did? To build higher, to run faster, to be smarter, to work harder? Isn't it a good thing to work cooperatively together to do what has never been done before?

When I look back on my education, how fascinated my history courses were with conquerors and empires, how much the curriculum insisted on a story of unending progress; or how my science classes always seemed to celebrate particular discoveries and inventors, challenging us to study so that we might one day make a name for ourselves; or how we ought to learn to code or to crunch numbers so that we could grow up to have lucrative careers or run successful businesses—looking back, I can see how much the narrative about education and work revolved around individual achievement and private happiness. And how if we all succeed—if every student grows up to be the very best, the most talented and hardest working version of themselves—this would in turn build up the country, would build up even the whole community of nations around the globe, and send all of humanity into the stars.

But we know there is a problem with this simple narrative. For starters, not every student, let alone every country, starts at the same place. If it is a race, it isn't a fair one. If we push on to build the next great monument to humanity but never stop to consider who will do the hard labor and who will do the light work; never stop to see who will be overlooked and who will be celebrated, who will struggle to get by on their wage and who will live in extravagant comfort, what exactly will this monument end up saying about us? What will God think of what we build? Will God have to stop us?

In the Old Testament story of the tower of Babel, there are no details about how the society is organized or how the work is shared. We only know that humanity is full of pride and wants to make a name for itself. They seem to have no regard for anything but the monument they are building. They do not consider the earth's resources, they don't take care to design the tower so it doesn't crowd out or uproot the trees. They don't think about all the other creatures they share the earth with. They are clearly working together as one people, but they seem to have completely forgotten the Garden of Eden, where they were just one creature among many. They are building this tower only for themselves.

Chasing grandeur high up in the sky, they seem to have forgotten their humble birthplace on the ground. They have forgotten that long after the garden was lost, each of them had to be born of a womb

and raised in a home; that their parents or others in the community had to sacrifice and suffer to bring them into this world and to keep them safe. A powerful, united people that forgets where it came from— forgets that their life is an unearned gift—is a dangerous people. It is a people that would build a tower to replace God, would build a tower that blocks the sun's light and uses up Creation for their own narrow purpose. They are a people of greatness and power, but they have come to live without love, without humility toward others. In the place of God, they would not care for anyone else. This is what God comes down to stop. This is what is unacceptable to the God of Israel.

In the Book of Acts, on the Day of Pentecost, a very different kind of humanity has gathered. Small and diverse, speaking many languages, from many nations, they are united only by faith—faith, in the goodness of God and the goodness of Creation. They remember their teacher Jesus, they remember his commandment to love one another and to feed and clothe one another. And they remember that in the wake of his death and resurrection, someone else would be sent to them, someone or something called the Spirit of truth or the Holy Spirit.

This Spirit of truth was the same Spirit that was in Jesus's body, the same Spirit that was there in the beginning, the same Spirit of true love that hovered over the waters before the earth was formed. This Spirit of love was in the Creator, a love for every blade of grass and every kind of tree, for every creature, even prideful humans. And, this Spirit is the love of the Son, a love in a human body and alive in human history, a love for people who have been cut out or left out, a love especially for those who live in poverty and suffer unkindness like his mother Mary; a love for those who are lost, like the rich and powerful who do the mistreating, who forget themselves in the monuments they build; the Spirit is the love that *reminds*. Love like a wedding or an open table, where those who live in the shadow of debt and discrimination will no longer be judged, no longer be excluded and persecuted, where those who oppress and exploit and hold others down for their own selfish purposes will see the terrible error of their ways and forgive debts, and will be stopped from trespassing against the dignity of other men and women. The Spirit of truth, the Holy Spirit of true love that created all life and every stone, that confronts a selfish and forgetful humanity and presents it with a new kind of kinship and community, a new kind of fearlessness, a revolution undaunted even by the cross—this same Spirit of truth will come to us all.

And in this place in Acts, where people of every language and nation have gathered perhaps uneasily but by the strength of faith, a rush of wind does come. Selfless and faithful, seeking only to follow God's will, the Spirit washes over them, and the previously scattered nations rediscover the unity that was once squandered, the unity of love that is acceptable to the God of Israel and of the Gospels.

We remember on the Day of Pentecost that it does not matter what one's native language or nationality is, what religion or race or gender identity; by the Spirit of truth with us and in us, a common purpose to love one another is easily understood. This is the work of God among us, it is the unlimited, unbounded, towering cosmic love that is the Spirit in all things. Such a people, wherever and whenever they may be—by whatever name they call themselves—have the God of Israel's blessing to build as tall and as wide and as deep as possible, because they do not aim to take the place of God; they do not forget themselves. Rather they seek and try to build the institutions and the simple monuments of true love: the conditions for justice and peace, a home for every person, abundant food for all, health care and support, membership in community, and countless experiences of joy in this short life.

On the Day of Pentecost we remember the Spirit, of love and truth that is here with us and in us. So let us keep on building, with God's blessing and with the power of the Spirit, with love for one another. I know we will.

Alleluia and amen.