

My whole life, I've heard that the builders of the tower were arrogant and proud,
that they were trying to rival God in building a city and a tower—
and that God saw their arrogance and pride and brought them low.

I asked, "what's so wrong with building a tower and a city?"
So I began to read what the Rabbis wrote about the tower,
and I found a Rabbi from the 19th century who said
that the builders of the tower and city
"were the first social engineers,
hoping to create a utopian society where all lived and thought as one."

This sermon grew from that thought...

Pray with me please...God of grace, look down on your servant right now and give me the
grace to preach this message. Please God, make it a message worthy of the giftedness of this
gathered community. May my words and our meditations be pleasing to You. Amen.

There's a brand new book out, called *I'm Still Here*,
subtitled *Black Dignity in a World Made for Whiteness*.
It's by Austin Channing Brown, a
Black woman writer,
speaker, and practitioner
who helps schools, non-profits, and religious organizations
practice genuine inclusion.

Let's hear her words:

It's been a hard week at the office. Because I work at a Christian organization, my co-workers ask if they can pray for me. I am moved that they've noticed my emotional distress. They gather round, lay their hands on my shoulders. I close my eyes and breathe deeply, listening to their words. But before I know it, the prayers take a turn. They are no longer about my circumstances but about me.

They ask not that I would be understood but that I would find it within myself to give more grace. The prayers don't ask that doors would open for me; they ask that God would gift me with skills they wish I had. These prayers aren't for me. The prayers are that I would become who they want me to be. "Lord, make this Black person just like us."

I'm not sure my co-workers even realize the difference; they've been praying the prayer for so long. In this way whiteness reveals its true desire for people of color. Whiteness wants us to be empty, malleable, so that it can shape Blackness into whatever is necessary for the white organization's own success. It sees potential, possibility, a future where Black people could share some of the benefits of whiteness if only we try hard enough to mimic it. The initial expectation is that I simply code-switch, conforming to the cultural communication of white people when I'm with them. But in the end, this is never enough. The ultimate expectation is

that I will come to realize that white ways of thinking, behaving, communicating, and understanding the world are to be valued above all else.

Whiteness. Expects. Sameness.

And today's Old Testament text is all about sameness.

"Now the whole earth had the same language and the same words."

Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin, our 19th century Rabbi,
says that although the opening verse tells us that the builders all
"had the same words,"
it never tells us anything about what they were saying.

The Rabbi argues

"God was not distressed by what they said,
but by the fact that their words [and by implication, their thoughts]
were all the same" (*Ha'amek Davar* to Gen. 11:1)

This same-ness, this uniformity, some call it totalitarianism.

Or, if I can be so bold, some of us call it white supremacy.

As a natural result of their same-ness, the people became afraid of strangers, xenophobic,
and in verse 3, the people decided to become brick builders.

They built a city and a tower "lest we be scattered all over the world."

We can handle a city and a tower, right?

But we cannot bear to be scattered over all the world.

Yet we already know that God said, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill all the earth."

You see, the Tower of Babel story is a story of "reducing the wild and wonderful world into one thing that we can grasp, handle, hold onto, and advance."

Can you see that the people are afraid?

Rabbi Berlin says, "They feared that since not all human thoughts are alike, if some would leave they might adopt different thoughts. And so they saw to it that no one left their enclave."

They build a city and a tower. And that city became a prison, and that tower a guard tower.

And you know what happens in prison?

Anonymity.

All difference is coercively erased.

Wear the same uniform,

sit in the same cell,

eat the same meals...
there is no room for the individual—no room for individual thought,
taste,
or aspirations.
No room for creativity.

How's that for Unity?

You see it? The heart of this story is fear of the different. Xenophobia.

And that fear makes us build a prison of our own devising. Agoraphobia.

I don't know about you, but I've got a fear of being stuck in small places,
so I'm getting a little claustrophobia.

And the Lord came down to see their city and their tower, and said,
"Look, they are one people and they have all one language;
(see? I told you the people had unity!)

And God saw that it was problematic.

You see, what God wants, for these builders, and on this Unity Sunday,
is diversity.
Difference.
Dissimilarity.
Heterogeneity.
Multiplicity.
Multiformity.
Variety.
Possibility.

Creating more possibilities is how we shape tomorrow towards abundance.

We are not called to reduce the wild and wonderful world into one thing.
Because when we do this, people get left out—
not left out in a "didn't get picked for the team" way,
but left out of how we construct every aspect of society,
infrastructure
and culture.

Adrienne maree brown says

"We come up with incredible plans
that don't account for crucial segments of our communities,
leaving behind people with disabilities,
or trans,
Indigenous,
immigrant communities,

and [so many] others.”

She continues:

“We live in a system that thrives
when conditions are abundant and diverse,
in a universe that holds contradictions and multitudes,
and we often reject that chaotic fertile reality too soon,
as if we can’t tolerate the scale of our own collective brilliance. “

Because staying afraid of our brilliance? That’s death.
Because staying there in the city, in this manmade prison? That’s death.
Because living in the sameness? That’s death.

It’s the same death that we see in these school shootings.
It’s the same death we see at the border of Israel and Palestine.
It’s the same death we see at the hands of the police, killing Black men and women.
It’s the same death we see sending immigrants back to their countries of origin.

Brown says, “We live in a system that thrives
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God recognizes our own collective brilliance,
and says so in our passage ,
“this is only the beginning of what they will do;
nothing that they propose to do will be impossible for them.”

So God confuses their language and scatters the people,
not-so-much-a-punishment,
but more of a nudge in the right direction?

The builders quit having the same thoughts and the same words,
so they’re able to face their fears
and strike out, as God wants them to do, to the ends of the earth.

Then thousands of years later, devout Jews from every nation under heaven meet up in
Jerusalem.

There were:
Parthians,
Medes,
Elamites,... well, you heard the list..
and residents of Mesopotamia,
Judea

*and Cappadocia,
Pontus and Asia,
Phrygia and Pamphylia,
Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene,
and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes,
Cretans and Arabs*

And the Holy Spirit sweeps through the place they're standing, and suddenly, all these languages that divide the people, all the culture that divides the people, all the history that divides the people...

And through the power of the Holy Spirit, we find unity. But this time, it's unity without the same words, without the same thoughts, without the sameness. True unity, found in Christ Jesus, found in the Holy Spirit, and found in our collective brilliance.

Holy Spirit, give us a fresh anointing this morning. Fill us with your power. Fill our mouths with your words. Our hearts with your love. And our lives with your fear-less-ness. Amen.