

World Communion Sunday
We Make the Road by Walking
God's Work: Toppling the Towers That Separate Us
Genesis 11:1-9

The rainy season that year had been the strongest one ever. The river broke its banks. There were floods everywhere and the animals were all running up into the hills. The floods came so fast that many of the animals drowned--except the lucky monkeys, who used their natural agility to climb and scamper up into the treetops. And from that height they looked down on the surface of the rising water, where they could see the fish, swimming and gracefully jumping in and out of the water. It was as if they were the only ones enjoying the flood that was creating ruin for all the land animals.

As they were looking down, one of the monkeys shouted to another, "Look down, my friend, look at those poor creatures. They are going to drown. Do you see how they struggle in the water?" "Yes," said the other monkey. "What a pity! Probably they were late in escaping to the hills because they have no legs. How can we save them?" "We have to do something. Let's go close to the edge of the flood where the water is not deep enough to cover us, and we can help them to get out."

So the monkeys did just that. They started catching the fish. It wasn't easy, but one by one, they took the fish out of the water and put them carefully on the land to dry out. After a while of this hard work, there was a pile of fish lying on the grass, motionless. One of the monkeys said, "Do you see? They were tired, but now they are just sleeping and resting. Had it not been for us, my friend, all these poor people without legs would have drowned."

The other monkey said: "They were trying to escape from us because they could not understand our good intentions. But when they wake up they will be very grateful because we have brought them salvation."

This is a traditional Tanzanian folktale. Its title is, “How the Monkeys Saved the Fish”.

Difference is hard for us. We are honestly, sincerely confused by creatures who are so different from us that they don’t need what we need, or don’t feel the need to put things in order the same way we do. We think they’re odd or irrational or uneducated when they say things that make no sense to us. With all good intentions, we imagine that what is good for us is good for everyone.

In addition to serving on the staff at Pacific School of Religion, I was a member of its Board of Trustees for a while. The day I started a term there, I sat next to the seminary student who was also beginning a term as the student trustee. Her name was Emily. She was in her twenties, and she was in seminary to train for ministry in the United Church of Christ. As we sat there, I looked over and noticed that both her arms were completely covered in tattoos. Later I noticed that both her legs were also heavily tattooed. “Oh, honey,” I thought; “You are never going to get a job as a pastor.” Boy, was I wrong. When Emily graduated, she received an award as the best preacher in her class, and many in the faculty thought she was one of the best students to come along in years. She has been an extraordinarily successful pastor of a growing young adult congregation in the Midwest.

That’s what it means to be part of a culture: we are so immersed in it, so shaped by it, that it is just what we think of as “normal”—not just for us, but for everyone. It’s hard to understand _____. I think it has always been so. I imagine that’s what a group of faithful people were talking about one night when someone asked—maybe a child: “If we were all created by the same God, how did we all get so different? How did people start to speak in different languages and wear different clothes and eat different foods, and think differently about what is right and wrong?”

And to answer, someone told a story that we have often repeated like this:

At one time everyone on the whole earth did speak the same language, and they ate the same foods, and they all lived together as one community—easily, because they were all very much alike. But they were not satisfied just living that way. They wanted to do something really important, maybe even to be as great as God. So they decided to build a tower that would reach into heaven, so that they could sit up in the sky, with God. And they did. Working together—which was easy, because they all understood each other—they made bricks and they built a tower so tall that it reached far up into the sky.

One day God came down to earth, and God saw the tower. And it made God angry that the people were so arrogant that thought they could be like God. So God smashed the tower and the people scattered in all different directions to escape the falling bricks. God was worried that if they could all work together, they might try again to be like God. And so God punished them by sending them out to live in different parts of the earth. And then God separated them even further from each other by confusing their language, so that they could no longer understand one another. And that is how people came to speak different languages and to have different customs and cultures—so that now there are misunderstandings and conflicts, and even wars.

Have you heard this story of the Tower of Babel? Do you hear how the story has been told, in a way that suggests that God would have preferred that humans be just like one another and never try to reach for something beyond themselves? Does this make sense, about the God whose creation includes thousands of different species of animals and an overwhelming extravagance of different colored and shaped plants and flowers and trees? Does it seem like the God who said to Adam and Eve, “I have made you in my image” would punish their descendants for trying to be find God and be like him?

What if the story were told like this:

At one time everyone on the whole earth spoke the same language, and they ate the same foods, and they all lived together as one community. They were all very much alike. But they were not satisfied just living that way. Just like us, ancient people needed to find their God, the One who had created them, the One they needed to connect with so that they could remember who they were and how they should live.

They never saw this God; they believed that God lived high above them, up in the sky. And so they said to one another, "Let's build a tower that will reach up to the heavens, and we will find God there." And so they did. They worked together; they made bricks and piled them on top of one another until it became a tall tower. God saw what they were doing, and God saw that they had misunderstood something important about how to find the holiness they were looking for. God's heart was moved with compassion, because God loved these people he had made and wanted them to be able to find him.