

**Under the Big Top**  
**Genesis 11:1-9**  
**World Communion Sunday**  
**October 2, 2011**  
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We all have a longing to be with our own people, our own tribe. This came home to me this past summer while I was in Europe. The night before I began my 7-week trek on the pilgrimage trail of El Camino de Santiago, I was in the little French village of St. Jean Pied de Port, staying in a pilgrim hostel where I was the only English-speaking guest. I had found few English-speakers in the village, and I was feeling very, very far away from home.

That evening as I finished my lonely dinner in the garden of a small restaurant, I heard a woman at the next table place her order in an unmistakably American accent. I never knew that the words, “I’ll have a beer” could sound like the most beautiful music in the world. As I left, I stopped to introduce myself, saying, “You can’t know how wonderful it is to hear another American!” As it turned out, the American, whose name was Kari, and I became good friends and walked together the first week of El Camino.

Throughout my pilgrimage, I always felt a special connection whenever I met another American.

There is a fundamental human longing to be with our own people, our own tribe. This bone-deep desire to be with people who are like us is one of the cornerstones of an evangelism methodology called “the church growth movement.” One of the tenets of the church growth movement is homogeneity. Homogeneity means being alike and the church growth movement says that growing churches are homogeneous, full of people who are alike theologically, ethnically, racially, educationally, socio-economically.

From a marketing standpoint, this understanding of evangelism is very savvy, very shrewd. The problem is, it just doesn't have a lot to do with the gospel. It's a cookie-cutter understanding of Christianity that makes great sense—if you are making cookies. It just isn't a very faithful way of making Christians.

God is about variety, not homogeneity. God is about diversity, not conformity. We just need to look at the world around us to know God loves variety. Do you know that there are more than 25,000 different types of fish? More than 10,000 species of grass. And nearly 120,000 different kinds of flies! So if God values variety and differences enough to create

such diversity in something as lowly and annoying as a fly, how much more does God value variety and differences and diversity in God's own beloved community, the church.

God loves variety.....even if we are not always personally fond of it.

My experience on El Camino would have greatly impoverished if I had only made friends with other American, or even just with other English speakers. Some of the most meaningful experiences on my pilgrimage were my encounters with people who were different from me. A joyful group of Japanese men that I kept meeting for a few days, who always greeted me with big smiles and enthusiastic waves, and with whom I puzzled about the right way to go. A Frenchman who spoke little English, but with whom I nevertheless had a profound conversation about family, walking El Camino, and world politics. Rita from Italy, who spoke almost no English, but with whom I walked for two weeks, who was one of the kindest, most caring people I've ever met, not to mention a phenomenal cook. It is natural and human to want to be with people who are like us, but it is dangerous to let that instinct control us, to create for us a prison of isolationism and self-preservation.

In fact, our scripture for today suggests the dangers of uniformity. We often read the confusion of the languages in the story of the Tower of Babel

as punishment, but I wonder if this story isn't a lesson on the need for diversity. I wonder if the story isn't about God's understanding that diversity and differences are necessary, that when we are only with people like us, when we aren't challenged by different perspectives and viewpoints and understandings, we are in danger of becoming arrogant and self-absorbed. This scripture teaches us that God's will is for community that is not based on strict uniformity, but on creative diversity.

On this World Communion Sunday, we celebrate the diversity and differences of the Body of Christ all around the world, and right here in our own community. But let's be honest, the church growth people are onto something when they advocate homogeneity as a key to church growth. Everything is a lot easier when people are alike. Diversity is messy. It creates problems. When you have lots of different people with lots of different perspectives and ideas and opinions, you have disagreements. It can get difficult. Life in the church is more challenging when there is diversity. As Rick likes to say, wherever there are two or three Disciples gathered together, there will be four or five opinions. Diversity is messy.

But the gospel vision of the church is not of a bunch of cookie cutter Christians. It is of the church as a big tent, with room for everybody— young and old, rich and poor, black and brown and white, conservative and

liberal, biblical literalist and questioning seeker. We come together because we have discovered that what binds us together as the people of God is more important, more enduring, more compelling than differences that would separate us. We need always to remember one of our Disciple watchwords: “In opinions liberty, in essentials unity, in all things love.”

As we wrap up our series on evangelism, we need to reflect on the fact that we do not get to pick and choose who will become a part of our church. Evangelism is about good news and not just good news for people who are like us. I remember going to an evangelism workshop several years ago and the topic then, as it often is today, was on how to attract young people to the church. One pastor said, “Our church is mainly older folks. They SAY they want young people, but what they really want is young people who like to hang around old people and do old people things.” Growing as a church means change as we welcome in all kinds of people—not just the people who want to hang around us and do church in whatever way pleases us. It might be easier if everyone was alike, but our church would be the lesser for it.

Lillian Daniel, a writer and United Church of Christ pastor, recently said this in a column on those who identify themselves as “spiritual but not religious.” While she is speaking of those who have given up on the church,

I think what she says also describes the tensions of all of us who struggle to live in community with one another.

*On airplanes, I dread the conversation with the person who finds out I am a minister and wants to use the flight time to explain to me that he is "spiritual but not religious." Such a person will always share this as if it is some kind of daring insight, unique to him, bold in its rebellion against the religious status quo.*

*Next thing you know, he's telling me that he finds God in the sunsets...Like people who go to church don't see God in the sunset! Like we are these monastic little hermits who never leave the church building. How lucky we are to have these geniuses inform us that God is in nature. As if we don't hear that in the psalms, the creation stories and throughout our deep tradition.*

*Being privately spiritual but not religious just doesn't interest me. There is nothing challenging about having deep thoughts all by oneself. [or with people who think just like you do]. What is interesting is doing this work in community, where other people might call you on stuff, or heaven forbid, disagree with you. Where life with God gets rich and provocative is when you dig deeply into a tradition that you did not invent all for yourself.*

*Thank you for sharing, spiritual-but-not-religious sunset person. You are now comfortably in the norm for self-centered American culture, right smack in the bland majority of people who find ancient religions dull but find themselves uniquely fascinating. Can I switch seats now and sit next to someone who has been shaped by a mighty cloud of witnesses instead? Can I spend my time talking to someone brave enough to encounter God in a real human community? Because when this flight gets choppy, that's who I want by my side, holding my hand, saying a prayer and simply putting up with me, just like we try to do in church.*

This is what we do here, with our different opinions and our various backgrounds and our widely varying understanding of what it means to follow Jesus. We hold hands, we say prayers, and we put up with each other. And we love each other, because we are the church.