

Genesis 11:1-9

Psalm 133

Acts 2:1-21

This morning will be a very short sermon. I'm going to get right to the point, offer you something to pray about and reflect upon, and later in the year we will revisit this again.

I'll start off by saying that I don't believe in coincidences. Things don't just happen, they happen for a reason. Today is Pentecost Sunday, and the traditional readings for Pentecost Sunday have to do with languages.

In the tower of Babel story the multiplicity of languages caused confusion and separation. People divided into tribes, they were no longer able to work together, they scattered and what they were building together was abandoned.

In our Pentecost reading everything is reversed. In this story people were speaking in different tongues, but instead of separating them, the languages brought them together. Egyptians were speaking Hebrew, Medians speaking Greek, Libyans speaking Aramaic, and somehow this mosaic of tongues brought unity to a crowd of otherwise disparate people.

In Babel many languages divided the people and prevented them from building their edifice. At Pentecost many languages united people and built up the kingdom of God.

Hold those thoughts, and we'll come back to them after exploring the other part of the uncoincidence. Our General Assembly was held this week, the conference of our national church that gives oversight and direction to our denomination.

There were of course many items on the agenda, but the one that most folks were paying special attention to was the question of same sex marriage. This conversation has been going on for some time, and this past week it was hoped that a decision would finally be made.

By the end of the assembly two recommendations were passed. The first reads:

1. That congregations and presbyteries may call and ordain as elders and elect as ruling elders LGBTQI persons (married or single) with the provision that liberty of conscience and action regarding participation in ordinations, inductions and installations be granted to ministers and ruling elders.

What this means is that sexual orientation does not disqualify anyone from leadership within the church – either as ministers or Session members. There is no restriction to who a congregation may call.

The sentence about liberty of conscience means that those who disagree with the call don't have to attend the ordination. They will have to work alongside of LGBT ministers or elders, but they can skip the ceremony if they feel strongly about it.

The second recommendation was:

2. That the PCC holds two parallel definitions of marriage and recognizes that faithful Holy Spirit-filled Christ-centred God-honouring people can understand marriage as a covenant relationship between a man and a woman or as a covenant relationship between two persons. That congregations, sessions, ruling and teaching elders be granted liberty of conscience and action on marriage and ordination.

This states that same sex marriages have a place within the Presbyterian Church in Canada. There are two definitions of marriage proposed – they are parallel, meaning they are considered to be equal. Not a greater and a lesser definition, but two equal definitions. Man and a woman, or two persons. Whichever view you hold, you are still considered Spirit filled and God honoring. Parallel definitions.

The liberty of conscience phrase appears again, meaning that nobody will be forced to officiate or participate in a marriage against their will.

This is what General Assembly came up with as a way to accommodate two groups that on this issue have very different beliefs. Neither of these recommendations are church law as of yet, at this point they are recommendations that are being sent to congregations like us, and Presbyteries. In church language we call them remittances.

We will have an opportunity to talk about this together, and decide if we support what this General Assembly has proposed. Next summer, General Assembly will meet again to consider the input from all the churches across Canada and decide if this becomes the official position of the Presbyterian Church in Canada.

So we have a little ways to go yet – it's not carved in stone, but as of right now there is a clear direction towards making space at the table for our LGBTQ brothers and sisters, and by this time next year this may be church law.

If these remits do get enacted the end result will be that individual congregations within the PCC will have the ability to perform same sex marriages and call LGBT leaders as they see fit.

So far, so good. Last week there was one option, and that was the traditional one. This week we have been presented with two options – the traditional and the liberal. Where there was one voice, now there are two. The intention is that these two voices will live together in the same denomination. For anyone who is plugged in and paying attention, it is painfully obvious that so far this is not happening very well.

Granted, we are only a few days out from General Assembly so emotions are still running high and many people are being more reactive than proactive, but what I'm witnessing is that some people think that there is only room for one voice at God's table.

There are those who think that the current proposal is too permissive and should not be allowed. On the other side are those who feel that it is not enough to permit same sex unions, rather that participation should be mandatory.

If we engage in this kind of behaviour we are declaring that there should only be one voice – our own. It's not enough to be allowed to administer our churches as we see fit, we also need to tell everyone else what is right for their context.

This is divisive, and more than that – arrogant. It assumes that we are right. But here's the part that many of us fail to understand - no matter how self-evident our truth appears to us, those on the other side are equally convinced that they are the righteous ones. They're not evil, they too think they are standing for what is good.

If that is how we find ourselves, then I suggest that we step back and look at the issue in a different way. This battle, for that is what it has become, has thus far been treated as a zero sum game in which there is a winner and a loser, a right and a wrong. It's an all or nothing deal.

General Assembly has proposed a way to step out of the arena of conflict and offer an arena of coexistence. Maybe we don't have to be right or wrong, maybe we can agree to deal with this topic independently while we continue to focus on the greater things that draw us together. Maybe we don't have to prove to the other that they are wrong, but we can just be responsible for doing what we feel is right, and leave it at that.

There are now two voices within our church; a polyphonic definition of marriage. This is where Assembly feels that God has led them.

To return to our scriptures, we find two instances where God has introduced a multiplicity of voices into a group of people. In one instance it tore the people apart. In the other it brought them together. Right now we have a choice. We stand at a crossroads.

God has introduced a multiplicity of voices into the Presbyterian Church in Canada. We can try to use one voice to drown out the other, or we can make room for both. We can fragment our denomination, or we can grow stronger together.

For Linda I'll quote Ai Weiwei – 'We profit from accepting difference, from tolerance and understanding.' Now if when you heard this you immediately thought of the other person, you've missed the point. We profit when **we** accept difference and seek understanding.

We don't have to change the other to fit our desire. Trying to change others only results in frustration and failure. Then we get angry and bitter that they don't see things our way.

I'll remind you of the words of Paul – one who struggled at first with accepting people who seemed to him to have barbarous beliefs. 'Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice.' (Eph. 4:31)

Let all the anger, the self-righteousness, the indignant blustering go. Let's take some time, and let the Spirit work within us and give us wisdom.

One of the highlights of the Assembly for me was the speech given by Dr. Sheila Watt-Cloutier who received the Cutting Edge of Ministry award. She is an Inuit Educator and she made some comments about hunting that will stay with me for some time. She explained that the long hours waiting that are a major component of hunting teach young people patience, and how to act with courage at the appropriate time. And that these two things together enable us to resist impulsivity.

Impulsivity is what causes us to engage in behaviours that harm others, and harm ourselves. In this age of instant communication the impulse is to fire out our opinions, and more often than not it serves to inflame rather than educate or convince.

Let's be like that young hunter and learn to sit patiently, observing, reflecting, so that when the right moment comes we have the courage to act appropriately. That moment is coming – as a congregation

we will be responding to General Assembly's remits – until then let's seek wisdom and decide whether we will let the plurality of voices within the church tear us apart as at Babel, or bring us together as on Pentecost Day. We've got a shot at doing something great here; I pray that we find a way to move forward together without casting anyone aside.

Psalm 133 seems a fitting closing.

How very good and pleasant it is
when kindred live together in unity!

It is like the precious oil on the head,
running down upon the beard,
on the beard of Aaron,
running down over the collar of his robes.

It is like the dew of Hermon,
which falls on the mountains of Zion.
For there the Lord ordained his blessing,
life forevermore.

Amen.