

Jacobi Anne Martin from Mississippi posted the following story on her Facebook page.

As I was sitting there minding my own business, THIS man would not stop staring at me. Finally, I asked him "Can I help you?" He then proceeded to tell me that I didn't belong in this country. That it's because of people like me that our country is being ruined. At first I didn't realize what he was trying to say. But then he said Mexicans are ruining our economy. I said "Dude, I'm not even Mexican or Hispanic at all." Then he said, "Well then you Muslims are terrorists and we don't feel safe with you all around. Y'all need to go back to Afghanistan." I just laughed in his face which seemed to make him more angry." And then I politely said, "Sir, just because you are "Caucasian" does not make you any better than me or anyone else." And then I told him not to judge anyone by the color of their skin or appearance. Because I'm A Proud Native American. And you, sir, are the only type of immigrant that is ruining our country!

I realize that you cannot believe everything you see on the Internet or Facebook. Maybe this story is not true. However, this scenario has been repeated many times in many places. It seems like we are becoming more intolerable of differences. We as a nation and as a world are having a difficult time with diversity, with people who are different than us, whether it be skin color, sex, age, gender, language, nationality, religion. We don't want the children who were born in our nation, but who are the children of undocumented parents, to drive or to be able to be licensed or certified for their skills. We want to limit the number of Muslims we allow into our nation. We want to keep transgendered people out of our restrooms. We don't want people of a different color buying a house in our neighborhood. And we want everyone to speak English. When a person can speak three languages, we call them tri-lingual; when they speak two languages they are bi-lingual, when they can speak only one language, we call them Americans.

Babel was a place where all the people spoke one language. The traditional understanding of this passage is that it describes human arrogance in attempting to build a tower reaching to the sky. God's punishment of the perpetrators was confusing their language and dispersing them so that they could attempt such a project again. There is another way to understand this passage. When God declares that the people might make a name for themselves, it wasn't their arrogance. This is a phrase found in other places in the Bible and it implies establishing an identity that will endure. God did not give them different languages to confuse them. Rather, this passage is perhaps interpreted more accurately as to mix their languages. In other words, the people's desire to stay together and preserve a single culture is held up against God's intention to disperse them and to diversify their languages and their cultures. Dispersion was not punishment for their arrogance. Rather it was God's will for the people. The story of Babel deals with the origins of cultural differences. Babel is not bad. It is God's desire.

Add to that the story of Pentecost. It occurs during the Jewish feast of Weeks. That meant there were a lot of people in Jerusalem that day. We also know that there were a lot of immigrants that lived in Jerusalem, who emigrated there from all areas of the Roman Empire. All of these immigrants would have spoken Greek, for that was the language of the Roman military and of commerce. They were also multilingual, speaking the languages of their native lands.

Notice here that the audience recognized the different languages that were being spoken. "Each one [in the crowd] heard them speaking in the native language of each." It was not some kind of incomprehensible words or ecstatic voicing of incomprehensible sounds. Each heard in their own native language. There was no one demanding, "Hey,

we speak Greek here, so learn the language.” They heard in their own language, and understood what was being said. This passage is NOT a reversal of Babel. They did not go back to all speaking the same language. The early church was to bear witness to the ends of the earth in the languages of the people of the world. Quite often Pentecost is seen as the birthday of the church. On this day Christianity became a religion with a divine sanction to multilingualism and to translation. What this passage is saying is that Christians are not to demand that their audience speak English, but Christians are encouraged to learn the languages of others so that we can tell the story of Jesus! The church must speak different languages to be able to share the good news of Jesus Christ to the ends of the earth.

Such diversity is in our community. The students and families within the English Language Learner program of Lincoln Public Schools represent 115 different countries and 96 different languages. That is here, Lincoln, Nebraska, out in the middle of what many consider nowhere. "Churches across the country will be dealing with this kind of situation," says Bryce Little, executive of Southern California's San Gabriel Presbytery. "And if we want to continue our Reformed heritage, we have to adapt." Without openness in our congregations to other cultures, Little believes, the Presbyterian Church will continue to shrink. The multicultural congregation is the congregation of the future because we do live in a Babel world, in god's world.

We have a choice to make. We can allow diversity to continue to divide us, to make others less than who they are. We can allow Babel to demean and denigrate those not like us. Babel is what makes injustice thrive. Babel is what makes a distinction between the rich and poor. Babel is what makes people think they can own other

people. Babel is what makes people think they can condemn other people. Babel is what makes enemies. Babel is what makes wars to happen.

Or we can celebrate Babel, celebrate the diversity of the human race that God created. We can enjoy the variety of foods, the various celebrations. When we lived near SouthePointe Pavilions, we had a Vietnamese family next door. They were refugees from Vietnam, part of the boat people. The people of the cul-de-sac were invited to their daughter's wedding. The wedding was at the Vietnamese Roman Catholic Church here in Lincoln. The ceremony included a lot of Vietnamese cultural rites. We all then went to the dinner and we really enjoyed the Vietnamese food. Although when they brought out the duck, the duck head was in the middle of the plate. Eating duck meat with the eyes looking at you is a bit creepy. Seriously, I really enjoyed observing and participating in the cultural practices. We also had a refuge family fr4om Afghanistan right across the street, and observing and participating in their cultural activities, and eating their food was also a treat.

Diversity adds spice to life. Believe me, if the world was made up of people like me, this would be a boring place! God created a diverse world. Diversity should be a source for celebrating life, not a reason to deny the humanity of others.

Blessing and glory and wisdom
and thanksgiving and honor
and power and might be to our God
forever and ever. **Amen.**