

In Which Hand?

By Fritz Ritsch

June 5, 2022

Genesis 11: 1-9

John 14:8-17, 25-27

"On his right hand, Billy'd tattooed the word 'love', on his left hand was the word 'fear'/And in which hand he held his fate was never clear."

Bruce Springsteen, b. 1949, "Cautious Man"

I am excited to be here at Moscow First Pres and grateful for this opportunity to serve as your interim while Norman is away. I hope you'll forgive me, though, if I start by talking about something less than pleasant. This is my first sermon since the shootings at Robb Elementary in Uvalde, TX, and I have to admit I am still shaken up by it. In fact, it feels like—maybe I'm wrong on this—but a lot of people still feel shaken by this, more than has been normal for past mass shootings. Maybe it's the accumulation of things. It immediately follows the terrible race-based shooting that left 10 dead and three wounded at a supermarket in Buffalo, NY and another race-based shooting at a Taiwanese Presbyterian Church in Laguna Beach, CA. Since then there've been several additional, smaller shootings in various locations for various reasons throughout the country. And of course, all that on top of the tensions we all know too well that have accumulated over the last two and a half and more years.

What seems to have accumulated most is grief, frustration and anger. What it seems to be morphing into is *fear*. Frankly, to be brutally honest, when people become more concerned about protecting guns than protecting lives, that is an almost perfect metaphor for a nation ruled by fear.

Today is Pentecost, the day we Christians celebrate and remember the coming of God's Holy Spirit, God's living active presence, into our hearts as believers, into our community as a church, and into the world that God has created and redeemed through Christ Jesus. Interestingly, all our scriptures today deal directly or indirectly with fear—and its opposite in God's realm, which we'll talk about in a moment. Paul says, "For you did not receive a

spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption.” Jesus says, “Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”

Of course, as always with any random scripture quoting, words are cheap: whiskey costs money. Platitudes are fine, but how do they ease our concerns? Probably all of us feel our fears are justified. But having a good reason to be fearful is one thing. Letting fear rule you is quite another. And the Bible has a story or two about that and one of them is our Hebrew Bible scripture for today.

The story of the Tower of Babel is familiar and even controversial, because it looks as if it is about God disrupting a wonderful human attempt at peace, love and understanding and living in harmony by causing discord and division just because God is jealous. There’s a bit more to it than that.

The very first question most scholars have struggled over is why were the humans building a gigantic tower to the sky in the first place? All sorts of possible answers have been thrown out there, but this is an almost perfect example of people missing the forest for the trees. If we read Genesis as if it is a consistent narrative from beginning to end, like any good story, the answer is right in front of us. Question: What happened immediately before the building of the Tower of Babel? Answer: The Flood! The flood that wiped out all living creatures except those saved in Noah’s ark. So when there are enough humans to do it, they say to one another, we don’t want a flood to get us again! How do we protect against that? Well, do what you do at a hurricane-prone beach: you put your house on stilts! Or in this case, build a gigantic city at the top of a huge tower. That way, if the flood waters of chaos rise again, we’re protected.

Their assumption is that God’s promise that God will never allow the flood waters of chaos to destroy humanity again is a lie or at least untrustworthy. So they have formed community together—which seems good—because of their shared fear. And the problem with building a community based on shared fear is that, once fear gets its toe in the door, it is a cancer that metastasizes in unpredictable and unlikely ways in unpredictable and unusual places. So the Babel School Board meets and the crowd erupts over whether teaching that Cain killed Abel is just a way to make the children of Cain feel bad about themselves. Some Babelians believe that other Babelians are against everything that Babel stands for

and they start wearing both their short sword and their long sword with their axe slung over their backs when they go to the co-op or pick up their kids from school.

See, they're afraid of the flood, the apocalypse, the ultimate end of everything—but the longer the flood doesn't come, the more they start discovering other things to be afraid of, and the thing they become most afraid of is *each other*. They begin to speak “different languages”—which means that when one Babelian says the word “freedom” it doesn't mean the same thing as when another Babelian says “freedom,” or when one person talks about rights they mean something entirely different from the way someone else talks about rights, and when one talks about “fairness, justice and equity,” it is from an entirely different context from someone else talking about “fairness, justice and equity.” They don't have to be speaking English, Farsi, and Swahili all at the same time in order not to be speaking the same language. And so the word *Babel* becomes synonymous with a cacophony of misunderstanding that leads ultimately to a community falling apart.

And it is worth noting that the story of the Tower of Babel is a conscious, intentional metaphor on the part of the original writers of the Hebrew Bible. When they were writing, they were a conquered people, their land under siege and their Temple destroyed, their people exiled and scattered throughout the lands of their conquerors, the Babylonian Empire. Babel, Babylon. To exiled, conquered Jews the Babylonian Empire is an empire formed and ruled by fear, always roiled by the tensions that are inevitably just under the surface in any community where people live under enforced rule. It is only a matter of time, the writers believe, before Babylon the Empire of Fear will be torn apart by internal forces. And they were right, because that's exactly what happened.

Contrast this to the message of Pentecost. We haven't read the Acts 2 Pentecost story today but it's a familiar one. God sends tongues of fire down from heaven that enable a crowd full of people who speak different languages to understand and hear each other and especially to hear the Gospel as Peter preaches to the crowd. God has acted in a way that is consciously and intentionally a reversal of the Babel story: Where human fear caused division and misunderstanding, the coming of the Holy Spirit brings unity and shared understanding, even empathy. And in our Gospel reading for today, Jesus makes the powerful point that the community of

the Holy Spirit is a community of love. "If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and God will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever," the Holy Spirit. Love is the foundation of this community of God's Spirit. And as I John 4:18 says, "Perfect love casts out all fear." In contrast to Babel or the Babylonian Empire, God's holy reign on earth, what Jesus calls the Kingdom of Heaven, is an empire that **invites** people, rather than conquering them; that **cherishes and protects**, rather than oppressing and subjugating; and requires of its people that **they understand, listen to, support, forgive, and embrace one another**, rather than divide or suspect or hurt one another.

Most of all, what unites those in God's gracious reign is that they **trust God**. They trust God not to destroy, not to undermine; they trust that God means it when God says, the flood isn't going to come. They trust God and love one another because they know God loves them, and so they love God in response.

The community built by God's Spirit, the community of God's reign on earth, is a community based on love, and as we read in I John 4: 18, "**perfect love casts out all fear.**"

But perfect fear can also cast out all love. And many of us consciously and unconsciously have spent the pandemic perfecting our fear. The time has come to perfect our love.

One thing I want to draw our immediate attention to is the way that all of us, no matter what our perspective, have perfected our fear of the Return of the Flood—our fear of the coming apocalypse. As surely as White Supremacists have perfected their fear of white genocide, Liberals and Progressives have perfected their fear of *The Handmaid's Tale* becoming a reality. Again, I'm not saying some fears are without merit—well, actually I am saying that the white supremacist fears are completely loony-tunes, but anyway. **What I am saying, though, is that we must not let fear rule us.** We believe in the God of love and therefore in the power of love to unite, to heal, to make whole. Our tendency to think in apocalyptic terms leads us to demonize those who disagree with us. We stop seeing them as humans deserving of respect, empathy, and sympathy. We start becoming thought police, like Tom Cruise in *Minority Report*—those people over there think bad thoughts about me and my folks, so they must intend to harm me, so I'd better preemptively harm them! What is Christian about

that? What is loving about imagining that your neighbor who proudly sports the person you didn't vote for's sign in their yard is somehow less equal, less valued, less human than you? Why do we assume evil intent of those with whom we disagree?

Now, one may say, even if I choose not to assume the worst about my neighbor, how can I stop them assuming the worst about me? That's where the complicated strategies of love come in. We are called to love, even when we aren't loved. We are called to seek reconciliation, even if the other side doesn't want to reconcile. We are called to forgive, even if someone wrongs us an infinity of times. We do this not because we're patsies. We do these things because we trust the God who promises that contrary to what our fear tells us, **it is love, love alone, that can stave off the apocalypse.**

Because any apocalypse that comes at this point will not be by God's hand. It'll be of our own making. Think about it: our fear of the apocalypse makes us think happiness is a warm gun. The more we cling to our guns, the more gun violence rises; the more gun violence rises, the more we cling to our guns. And so we create the apocalypse we're trying so hard to stave off.

Which points us to the hard truth we all need to recognize: **moderation and compromise are the only way to get out of the mess we're in.** *All sides hate moderation and compromise. They represent an affront to the purity of our beliefs. But look at it another way: compromise represents a willingness to make a sacrifice for the common good. For us as Christians compromise is the uncomfortable recognition that our pure, uncompromising theological and political certainty may in fact be an affront to God, who is far smarter than we are and who we will never even vaguely fit into our perfect and perfectly human theological boxes. God calls us to love, and while love itself is hard to understand or define, we understand it best in terms of relationships between real flesh and blood human beings, not in the battle of abstract ideas. Compromise is inevitable if people want to live together in any sort of peace.*

So everyone, and all our politicians, please, for the sake of our children, for the sake of our future as a nation, recognize first that your opposite number is not an abstraction, not a demon in human form, but a human being Christ calls us to love; and then recognize that love inevitably

calls us to search to find common ground, even if it means we have to put aside dearly cherished beliefs.

Bruce Springsteen has a song that's gone through my mind a lot recently, "Cautious Man." "On his right hand, Billy'd tattooed the word 'love', on his left hand was the word 'fear' / And in which hand he held his fate was never clear." This is the point we have arrived at. Shall we give in to our fear of the flood? Or shall we dare to love, and let perfect love cast out all fear?

Which hand will we choose?