

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

June 5, 2022

The sin of Empire

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Sisters and brothers, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

What was the sin of the Tower of Babel? The easy answer is that it was the desire of humanity to reach the heavens...hubris and self-idolatry. Perhaps the desire was even more than reaching the heavens, perhaps those early peoples wanted to try to challenge God above. But I think there's a deeper answer, a deeper sin at work which was in play even before the first pavers and stones were laid in that grand edifice. One that leads to hubris and self-idolatry. This sin is one we still live out in a myriad of different ways today.

This basic, fundamental, and powerfully tempting sin is the sin of Empire. We human beings tend to want to group together in ever larger groups. But we don't often leave it at just that, do we? It's never just about banding together, eventually the sin of Empire leads to the desire for homogeny. And what does that desire cause? The creation of in-groups and out-groups. And if you are a part of the in-group, you generally want nothing more than for the in-group to dominate the out-group. And this is what makes Empire a sin, in the history of humanity it never occurs without domination.

Remember the Rohr quote I used last week? The second part of it went like this: "We cannot hate, compete, compare, or **dominate** one another and still expect the new community of Christ to unfold. Our assurance that this is the Gospel is that God in Christ does none of these things to us."¹ God in Christ never dominates us! So why do we so often seek to dominate others? To do so is anti-Christ and anti-Gospel.

The story of the Tower of Babel is the story of the very first Empire and God's response to it. Imagine being one of the people gathered there at Babel. Do you suspect that you would have been given an option as to whether or not you worked on the Tower? I highly doubt it! My study of history and my

¹ Rohr, Richard. "When Charity Is Not Love." Essay. In *Grace in Action*, page 5. New York, NY: Crossroad, 1994. (*emphasis mine*)

experience of human nature leads me to suspect that building the tower would have become a means of enforced homogeneity. "Help us build the tower or be forced out into the dangerous wilderness," I can imagine the leaders of Babel threatening. Serve our fledgling Empire, be like us, or risk death to be your own person.

So God responds by confusing human language and culture and thereby slowing the rise of Empire. It did not put an end to Empire, did it though? As often seems to happen, humanity takes a gift from God and turns it into a weapon instead. We took the gift of diversity from God, that was meant to keep us from the sin of Empire and homogeneity, and we twisted it into a means of bolstering Empire and domination instead. Rather than learning to value diversity we have learned to use our differences as reasons to seek hegemony, the dominating of one culture over others.

We can see this sin manifest today in some truly alarming ways. Christian Nationalism is on the rise here in America and it is clearly based on the sin of Empire. Despite being very privileged, some Christians in America seem to delight in play-acting at being a persecuted group. This play-acting allows them to pursue hegemony over other cultures and religions out of some bizarre defensiveness. The thinking seems to be, "I better force my interpretation of Christian values on others before they attempt to force their values on me." It's sick and twisted, and at its heart, it's all about Empire and domination, control and hegemony.

Need some examples? Well, some Christians today seem to think the rights of a gay couple to get married somehow means that Christianity is under attack. Or that the family of a transgender youth seeking supportive medical care somehow threatens the Gospel! Neither of these beliefs are true. The only claim that Christianity can make regarding these differences is that we are called to love one another. That's it, period, end of statement.

As a matter of fact, nowhere in the teachings of Christ can I find the instruction that Christians are to dominate others into faith. Nor can I find anywhere the idea that cultural values are at the heart of faith. Rather, I can find numerous examples of Christ rebelling against cultural norms that opposed loving God and loving neighbor (e.g. the breaking of Sabbath rules, interacting with lepers and other marginalized people, centering children and women within the early community of faith). Forced Christian hegemony has been tried plenty of times, Charlemagne was exceptional at converting pagans to Christianity in the 9th century for instance. But I'm not at all

confident that faith inspired by the sword is the sort of faith Christ is calling us to foster.

When it comes to Empire we even see Jesus teaching us to pray against it. What do you think it means when we pray “your kingdom come, your will be done?” It means we know our kingdoms, empires, and wills are all terrible and generally opposed to the Way of Christ. And so we need God’s kingdom to come and God’s will to be done, rather than our own. We recognize the failings of Empire to foster love, grace, justice, and peace. We need God’s kingdom, God’s empire; the peaceable realm where love is at the core of who we are and how we act. The Lord’s Prayer is anti-Empire, and Christians should be too.

One of our members will be affirming their faith today, using words that were likely used when the rest of us were baptized and confirmed (if you grew up Lutheran that is). Words of affirmation that include these lines: “to serve all people, following the example of Jesus, and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth.”² “Serving all people” means we cannot pursue the domination of hegemony or empire. And “striving for justice and peace in all the earth” means setting aside differences and working towards the loving unity that enables true justice and peace.

The story of Pentecost is another of God’s responses to the sin of Empire; though the gift given this time is far harder for us to twist and corrupt. At Pentecost God gives humanity the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit that can overcome our divisions and show us how to live together in the sort of unity and community that also celebrates diversity. Through the Holy Spirit we have the gift of the Gospel proclaimed in a variety of tongues. God in Christ shows us that we can be “completely one” without falling into the sin of Empire if our focus is on the good news of the abundant and unconditional love of God.

Focusing on the love of God means focusing on the self-expression of that love, Jesus Christ. Loving Jesus results in our keeping his commands. What commands? Love God, love one another. It’s all very circular, isn’t it? By seeking to keep Christ’s commands we are loving Christ and by loving Christ we will naturally keep his commands. And in the midst of this circle of being loved and loving, there is no room or possibility for domination. The kingdom of God has no room for the sin of Empire!

² “Affirmation in the Presence of the Assembly.” Evangelical Lutheran Worship, 2006. p. 236

Pentecost is the celebration of the freeing of those first disciples, and the freeing of the church. We no longer need to be concerned with domination and Empire, homogeneity and hegemony. Instead we have been freed by the Holy Spirit to pursue the commands of Christ. We have been let loose on a world full of domination and Empire to proclaim the reign of God above all other powers. We have been freed to love prodigally and prolifically, no matter any differences. We have been freed from sin, including the sin of Empire, and we have been freed for love, love of God which is also love of neighbor.

May the mighty be cast down from their thrones and empires and the lowly be lifted up! Lifted up to full participation in the community of Christ. Lifted up as having dignity and worth, having been made in God's image. Lifted up and loved as God loves. Amen.