

**SERMON**  
**The Collective Human Spirit”**  
**“Disciples Together, Faith Family”**  
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**May 9, 2010**  
**St. John’s Chapel UCC**

Genesis 11: 1-9

Acts 16: 9-15

**John 14: 23-29**

<sup>23</sup>Jesus answered him, “Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and **make our home with them**. Whoever does not love me does not keep my words; and the word that you hear is not mine, but is from the Father who sent me.

“I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. You heard me say to you, ‘I am going away, and I am coming to you.’ If you loved me, you would rejoice that I going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I. And now I have told you this before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe.

## SERMON

A central message of Jesus has always been that we can have as intimate a relationship with God as the one he knew. He is the firstborn, the elder brother, and we are his sisters and brother, heirs with him, to an utterly new world. As awesome as that may be, even more astounding is when one senses the nearness of God within a community. I am alive with the possibilities of this for myself and for the people I pass in hospital hallways, the man at the cash register, the passengers stuck with me at Springfield's lengthy stop lights, and for everyone who crosses my path. I want to whisper in their ears the good news of what their **divinity united can unleash in this world**...though I don't for fear they might lock me up.

When the community, not the individual, experiences a profound understanding of life's purpose and fulfillment as taught by Jesus, **the collective human spirit, equally united, can be a powerful force**. When the spirit does so move in a community, barriers seem to fall by the wayside. Communication comes easy and goes deep where once words got in the way, and led to misunderstandings. But when a community is really sensing...is the nearness of God. It is as though a new language has been fashioned.

This was once true for the people of Babel until they decided that **instead of hosting God...they would be gods**. The story of the Tower of Babel is another of the Genesis accounts told as a reflection on "wonderings." They wondered, "How did it happen that there are so many languages that people cannot understand each other?", for differences of language are a source of trouble, division, strangeness, suspicions, and hostility. "How did it happen that we became a people of such **great diversity** that communication is difficult, if not impossible?"

Unlike us moderns, the Hebrew people did not set out to answer this question based on hard factual information. Maybe they even knew, as we now know, that different languages

developed over long periods of time as various groups of the human race went through separate phases of existence. But this was not the type knowing in which they were interested. They were in search of **some greater truth that concerned their soul**. To answer this wondering of the soul, they told stories laced with symbolism that pointed to profound insights into the **universal human condition**.

The story of the Tower of Babel, like the Adam and Eve story, is the story of every man and woman and **their tendency to break with radical unity in order to play god**. The story opens with what would appear to be a perfect world. “The whole earth had one language and few words.” The problem of diverse people unable to understand one another was non-existent.

Then they said to one another, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and **let us make a name for ourselves**, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.”

“Let us make a name for ourselves.”

In T. S. Eliot’s play “The Cocktail Party,” Sir Reilly, a psychiatrist of sorts, profoundly wise, poetic, and slightly mystical, is in conversation with Edward Chamberlayne, the attorney who has ended his affair with Celia Copplestone, says to Reilly: “...I am obsessed by the thought of my own insignificance.” To that, Reilly replies: “Precisely. And I could make you **feel important**, and you would imagine it a marvelous cure; and you would go on, doing such amount of mischief as lay within your power – until you came to grief. Half of the harm that is done in this world is due to people who want to feel important. They do not mean to do harm – but the harm does not interest them. Or they do not see it, or they justify it. Because they are **absorbed in the endless struggle to think well of themselves**.”

The story of Babel is a story about **what can happen** when individual people who ‘are absorbed in the endless struggle to think well of themselves’ are united. The story tell us that what happens is total chaos. Their deep bond of unity is severed. They are scattered, distanced from each other.

“Let us build a city, and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven; and they began to build with brick and slime.” This is a picture of every man and every woman, of humanities age old story. We have thought that by their own devices the could reach the pinnacle of needy importance and sit triumphantly on the top of the world, and play god.

The children of Babel were thirsty for everlasting fame. So they built the first recorded skyscraper. Interestingly enough, the people want “to make a name for themselves,” so that, they would not be scattered across the face of the earth. The real motivator that lies behind our desire, to make ourselves bigger than we are is our longing for approval, intimacy--love. We are so fearful of being locked out of the banquet for important people, of being alone, of losing the people we depend on, of losing the community we love, the attention we think we need, the approval we cannot live without. Somehow we get it in our heads that the way to have people think well of us, the way to maintain approval and community is by making ourselves somebody.

In today’s gospel we are told that Jesus promises those who love him (**who are those who keep his word**) that he and God will come to **them** and **make their home** with them in the form of the Holy Spirit. When the spirit so moves in community barriers fall by the wayside. Communication comes easy and deep. The collective human spirit equally united in a family like structure--where God and Jesus make their home can do for us what fame, making a name for ourselves, never can.

Such a community formed after Jesus' death and resurrection. Many scholars say it existed for some 200 plus years. The collective human spirit equally united as one family where God and Jesus make their home. Their story is in the books of Acts. Read it sometime.

Today we arrive in their story after Paul has joined the family and is out traveling—forming other such families. In a vision Paul saw a man insistent that he go to Macedonia. So off Paul goes with his traveling companions convinced God has called him to preach the gospel, the good news, to these people.

Once there they remained in the city. Until the Sabbath when they went looking for a place of prayer. Down by the riverside they came upon a group of women. They spoke with them and to discover that one, Lydia, had heard them speak. As they talked their hearts were opened to hear the good news Paul spoke. Lydia and her household of women were all baptized—and a new family was formed. This one headed by a woman.

According to the Acts of Apostles, the church was meant to function as a family united, as a collective human spirit, in letting God and Jesus through the Holy Spirit make home with them. The use of parental titles by the church attests to this. Priests were called fathers. Later Protestants did away with this title, but still deferred to the pastor or minister as a father figure in their lives.

Knowing this sermon would be heard on Mother's Day, I couldn't help but wonder who fulfills the role of mother. And the lectionary gave me Lydia, who played the role of minister, pastor, hostess—mother to the church family that formed in the district of Macedonia. For in the early church for some 200 years the collective human spirit was equally united. "For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith." (Galatians 3:26) "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female, for all of you

are one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3: 28) There is no room in the family of Jesus Christ for inequality. We are in the business of helping each member of our family overcome the struggle to think well of ourselves.

When I was serving at associate minister at Park Avenue Christian Church in New York City, the senior minister called me into his office one day. He reported to me that there had been complaints that I passed the peace with the same people every Sunday. He was right. I did. So did he! I had followed suit in only trying to get to the people on the first few rows. And church people being church people, tended to sit in the same place each Sunday.

I did not point out to him that he was doing the same thing. I simply told him I would be more thoughtful in trying to reach more people. The next Sunday I high-tailed it to the back of that cathedral, while the senior minister still exchanged peace with the people on the first few rows. This discrepancy went unnoticed by most. By and large they were just happy that I was spreading myself thinner. Except for this one woman, who was a psychologist in Manhattan. She noticed and explained to me the reason why there would be complaints that I was exchanging the peace with the same people, and no complaints about the senior minister doing the same. She said, unconsciously people defer to a male minister as a father and a woman minister as a mother. Fathers are not expected to be as available, while mothers are expected to be all things, to all her children, all the time—totally available. Who needs sleep!?

The numerous subtleties of inequality engrained in the human mind over the centuries are hard to overcome. Yet, we owe it to our mothers to try. And we owe it to ourselves, for there cannot be a collective human spirit, *equally united*, until equality exists for all. Until that day, the powerful force of a people united as a family...where God and Jesus make their home...cannot be unleashed on the world.