



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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WORLD COMMUNION SUNDAY

We Are Not Alone Genesis 11:1-9; Matthew 5:1-16

Have you ever wondered how the story of the Tower of Babel came about? I have. I know that its purpose is to explain how and why people are scattered all over the earth, speak different languages, and do not all look alike. I know that the Middle East is strategically situated so that major trade routes have crisscrossed it for millennia. As a result, it was once known as the crossroads of the world.

I wonder if one day a young girl watched yet another caravan pass by her village, laden with spices and treasures from other lands, and accompanied by people who did not look like her and who spoke in languages she could not understand. She had been taught that there was one God who had created the earth and all of its people. Why are we so different, she wondered.

“Why do the people on these caravans not look like us and say things that we cannot understand?” she asked her grandmother who always had an answer for her many questions. And her grandmother, known for weaving wise and intriguing stories, told her that once upon a time all people were alike and they set about to build a tower to reach the heavens so they could be also be like God. But God, fearing what they might do, confused their language, sending them in different directions to inhabit the earth.

The story of Babel is brilliant but dark. It describes human ingenuity and ambition. It also reveals divine anxiety and a plan to thwart human attempts to become God-like. It explains how humans became spread all over the earth and why we speak so many different languages. It is a wonderful story . . . however it came about.

There is also a bit of sadness in the story because it also exposes the fact that while we share a common beginning and source in God, we are not united, even in our common humanity. In one way or another, we all know what it is like to be scattered, to have to leave what is familiar and comfortable for something that is different and unfamiliar. We know how circumstances in life can make us feel different and alone.

Michael Massimino knows that lonely feeling. Michael is a former astronaut. In 2009, he was part of the space shuttle Atlantis crew on a mission to repair the Hubble Telescope. We all know that the Hubble Telescope is used by scientists to peer far into the universe to learn more about this place where we live. One of the most important features of the Hubble is an instrument that is able to detect the atmospheres of far off planets, ones that could be more earth-like and might support life. Unfortunately, the power supply to this instrument had blown and there was no way do a remote repair because of the security features that had been put in place to make certain it survived the space flight.

Michael's team prepared five years for this flight and his spacewalk to fix this instrument. They created more than a hundred new tools for the job. They practiced incessantly what he would do in order to make the repair. The challenge was that this power supply was behind an access panel that had 117 tiny screws which were all glued in. Before you could even get to the access panel, however, you had to remove a handrail that covered it. Hundreds of people worked on this project that cost millions of dollars. And eager scientists where anxiously waiting for the telescope to be repaired. A lot was dependent on the success of this fix.

On the day of the repair, Michael and his co-worker suited up and stepped into space. They made their way over and under parts of the telescope until they reached the location of the problem. Michael began removing the handle which was secured with four screws. Three of the screws came out fine, but when he tried the fourth one, he realized it was stripped and would not budge. Instantly, he knew was no way he could get to the access panel and replace this power supply. All of those years planning and practicing, all of the money spent on this mission, all of the studies waiting to be done by eager scientists were for naught, he thought. He would go down in history as the man who broke the Hubble. His co-workers would be upset and frustrated and his children would be embarrassed. The astronaut beside him was trained to hand him tools, but he was a rookie and not an engineer. None of the other astronauts could come out to help him and certainly no one on earth could make a service call 350 million miles out. As he looked into space at the earth far away, he felt a "deep loneliness" and detachment from everyone and everything he held dear. Then it got dark and cold as their orbit blocked the sun. It was a darkness such as he had never known here on earth.

For more than an hour he moved back and forth between his work site and the shuttle tool boxes as he and his fellow astronauts along with Mission

Control scrambled to find a solution. His frustration and despair grew stronger. Finally, he was instructed to return to the toolbox and get a pair of vice grips and some tape. Feeling lower than he ever had in his life, he retrieved the items but dared not look into the shuttle window where his best friend and fellow astronaut stood gesturing at him. When he finally did glance up, his buddy was signaling that everything was going to be okay and that he just needed to hang in until it was finished.

What they wanted him to do was to yank the handrail off the telescope. It carried some risks, but there were no other options. Wrapping it in tape to prevent any debris from escaping, Michael gave it a good, quick pull and the handrail came right off. He proceeded to attack those 117 small screws and, in time, the repair was made. The unit was turned on, it worked, and everyone cheered. Mission accomplished. At about the same time, their orbit brought them back into the light of the sun, a light in space that is brighter and purer than anything we know on earth.

After the shuttle returned to earth, Michael and his family drove back home where neighbors were waiting with food and festivities to celebrate his work. He learned how teams of engineers were frantically working to come up with a plan while everything he tried in space failed. He realized that at the moment he felt so lonely and hopeless, his family and friends were sending their love and support in his direction. Other astronauts and engineers were testing every plausible fix so that the mission could go forward. When he felt so alone, he actually had more support than at any other time in his life.¹

Perhaps it was because he knew firsthand what it is like to be away from all that is familiar and comfortable that Jesus wanted us to know that we are never alone, no matter how far we get scattered. Listen to the opening words from his Sermon on the Mount:

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

¹Michael J. Massimino, “A View of the Earth,” *The Moth Radio Hour* (September 25, 2018); available online at: <https://themoth.org/stories/a-view-of-the-earth>.

“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

“You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.

“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

Matthew 5:1-16

Looking at all of those people on the hillside, people who had gathered from all over the region, people who had experienced everything there is to know in life, he sensed that some of them felt very alone, even in the middle of a big crowd. So he said, “Blessed are you—happy are you—who are poor and sad and humble and hungry and thirsty and merciful and peaceful and persecuted and reviled.” Those people glanced around, wondering if anyone knew that Jesus was talking to them. They saw other heads nodding and other eyes glancing and other lips quivering. “Blessed and happy are all of you,” Jesus said, “because you are not alone. We are right here with you and you are with us! Together we bring the warmth and light of God’s love to the world.”

On this Worldwide Communion Sunday, we are reminded that we are not alone. Believers behind us and in front of us, beside us, and scattered all over this earth are with us. Though we may look different and sound different, we all bear a resemblance to our heavenly Father and we speak the same language of love—a language taught us by Jesus who took our loneliness with him to the cross and the tomb and emerged in a garden teeming with life, arms open wide in welcome and support. God’s love shines from people the world over so we know that we are not alone! Amen. Thanks be to God!

October 7, 2018

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

We admit that we are sometimes confused, O God, by the gifts and skills that you give us and the potential for good and for evil that they possess. We know that only good gifts come from your generous hands so we must assume that the evil that sometimes emerges from what seems good is of our doing. We believe that you created us for good and do not understand how our goodness is corrupted. We cannot deny our sometimes evil intentions, but often falter and fail when trying to return to the good you created us to be.

We suppose that this mix of intentions, this mass of possibilities, and this need to explore good and evil are part of the wonder of who we are. If so, we do ask that you continue to guide us and help us to strengthen our resolve to do what is good and to resist what is evil. And when we fail, we pray that your forgiveness will remain steadfast when we repent.

We also admit that we are weary, O God. The storms that have overtaken our coast and towns inland as well as the storms that have overtaken our nation's process of judicial selection have left us battered and depleted. We are a mix of emotions and not all of them noble and good. Help us, we pray, to recover from the flood waters which caused such destruction of property and life and from the flood of rhetoric and manipulation that have caused destruction of trust, cooperation, and a striving for the truth. Heal us and help us, O God, and lead us to help one another, we pray.

We are grateful for the ingenuity and drive that you instill within us and rejoice when we apply these gifts to the greater good. Use us to bring healing and wholeness to one another. Spread help and hope through our love and care. And encourage a sense of unity and respect which will enable us to open our hearts and our lives to one another.

For the gifts of place that are our homes and language by which we share our thoughts and desires, we are grateful, O God. Now that we are scattered, bring us together, we pray, through our trust in you which is our true strength and wisdom. These things and all things we pray in the name of Christ. Amen.