

Genesis 11: 1-9

Neighbors Around the World

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The Congregational Church of Needham

This month our worship theme is Neighbor. The Bible says more about living with your neighbors than it does about prayer or worship. The bible places such an emphasis on neighborly love that from the earliest days of faith people learned that loving God was tied inextricably to loving your neighbor. From the oldest Hebrew stories people learned that that God expected them to take care of their neighbors. Part of being your loyalty to God was your respect and care for your neighbor. For centuries Jews were taught that they must love the Lord your God with all your heart soul and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself. This notion of neighborliness permeates our society. Our cherished value of neighbor drives the State Farm insurance advertizing campaign – Like a good neighbor, State Farm is there.

As a minister in this community for almost 15 years I have seen such wonderful examples of people who knew how to be a good neighbor – people watching children, sharing concerns or advice, pitching in when people were sick, showing genuine kindness when neighbors were ill or suffering. I have seen people who give themselves sacrificially to their neighbors, and stretched to share burdens that seemed to heavy for one family to carry alone.

But these days we are being asked to go beyond the State Farm image of neighborliness, and consider what it means to be a neighbor in a multi-cultural, multi-dimensional, trans-national world that is emerging all around us. Today many of you do business in China and India. You have colleagues from all over the world. We have medical care or business interactions all the time with people are not native English speakers.

The Bible is such an old text that it is hard to imagine that it would have so much wisdom for just such a time as this – the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. What is the Bible tell us about being neighbors today?

**In the first place, human diversity is always a gift. The Bible is a story of co-existence.**

The Bible is set in the cultural cross-roads between the Egyptian Empire to the south of Israel, and an array of aggressive empires to the north. All the stories in the Old and New Testament are set against this backdrop of a diverse multicultural community.

As the Bible story unfolds it describes a world of diversity. The Hebrew slaves have to negotiate with the Egyptians. They have to settle down among the Canaanites, and learn to get along with their neighbors the Hitites, the Midianites, the Jubusites. In fact, one of the things we often forget is that the land, which the Hebrews called the Promised Land, was not empty territory waiting to be inhabited. It was already full of people so the migration into Canaan was not so much a process of conquering territory as it was assimilating with people in the region. It was a story of integrating with folks who were different and learning to co-exist. Yet this was all part of the promise – that the chosen people would learn to live with others.

The Bible stories debate whether to be xenophobic or whether to build a multi-cultural society. The people wrestle with the demands of how to be true to their own faith while living in a place where so many other faiths and cultures are being expressed all around them. In fact the very issues that we wonder about today – were right in the news in Israel during Bible times. We worry about how to get along with our Muslim or Hindu neighbors and whether to elect a Mormon president. Those questions are among the biggest topics in our Bible.

In the end the Bible celebrates the variety of cultures, languages and even different faiths. That is why we find little gems like the story of Ruth. She was a Moabite who fell in love with an Israeli. Her husband was living in Moab, but when he died Ruth wanted to move to Israel to find

another husband. She did not want to stay in Moab. The Bible lifts up Ruth as an example of an outsider, and a stranger who has every bit as much faith as the people of Israel. The Bible says don't worry about strangers. They are children of the same God and even though they are different, they may become a blessing to you.

This summer I had the opportunity to meet Eboo Patel. Patel is an American Muslim whose family came from India. A Fulbright Scholar, he has started the Interfaith Youth Corps, based in Chicago. In his autobiography, Acts of Faith, Patel writes about being embarrassed, stressed and confused about how to negotiate being a Muslim in the Middle West. A young man familiar with prejudice, yet a gifted leader, Eboo Patel has dedicated his life to changing the world one teenager at a time. So his contribution is to organize experiences for youth which expose them to other teens and young adults from a variety of cultures religions and back grounds. His model builds communities where people of every faith, every nationality and culture come together for a common purpose. Recognized for his work with youth in Chicago, Patel was asked to serve on President Obama's Faith Council. The President said in his speech at the prayer breakfast where they began their project – "The particular faith that motivates each of us can promote a greater good for all of us." (p. 184 – Acts of Faith)

**The Bible says we need each other. That is a contemporary message today just as it was all those centuries ago.** In the 9<sup>th</sup> century before Jesus lives there was a prophet named Elijah who travelled throughout the land. On his trips he often had to go through neighborhoods of people who were not Israeli. On one of these trips a Shunnamite woman recognized that he was a man of God. She prevailed upon her husband suggesting that they build a room for Elijah, so that he could stay in their home as he made his trips through the countryside. The fact that the Bible even mentions this demonstrates the value God places on interdependence.

In another story a general in the Syrian army had leprosy and learned from his maid, an Israeli girl, herself stolen in a border raid, that the prophet Elisha had great powers to cure leprosy. So the great and powerful man humbled himself to ask for healing from the Israelite prophet. The story shows there is no isolation in this world of ours.

The Wise Men came from Persia or India; yet they were wiser than the Israelites, and recognized the birth of Jesus Christ was a life-changing gift from God. Jesus talks to a Samaritan woman at a well, and she understands the meaning and mission of his life better than his own disciples.

**Finally, we have a chance in our time to get this right.** Today's scripture passage tells a story that I never like and don't pretend to understand. Long ago in the deep reaches of pre-history the first people of the earth wanted to build a tower so that they could reach up to God. They got closer and closer to the sky when God came to see what was going on. For some reason the people were getting too close for God's tastes so God invented different languages, and suddenly the people could not communicate so they had to abandon the project. Now I can only assume that there was something about the pride of the people that set God's teeth on edge. The idea that they could be on God's level was preposterous.

But in many ways it feels like we have come full circle. In our world today language does not divide like it used to. Many people manage to traverse that chasm- find a way to travel, or explore or communicate through music, fashion, culture, art or through the internet. It seems we are coming into a time of world community which we have not known in ages. Most of us are humbled by the challenges of it all. Someone in California can put a video on the internet which sparks rioting in 20 countries throughout the Middle East.

We all hear the stories about interfaith conflict but often we miss the stories about interfaith grace. I recommend this book- [My Neighbor's Faith](#). One story tells of a community choir

in Southern California. Singers grew close over the weeks of practice, but never knew all that much about each other. One day at the snack break during a long rehearsal two friends sat down to talk a man named Will asked his friend Pravrajika what she did for a living. She laughed at the disclosure she was about to make. "I am a Hindu nun." They all wore jeans to the rehearsals so he never suspected her normal garb was saffron robes. He smiled – "You know we have more in common than I thought. I am a surgeon but also an Evangelical Christian. On my vacations I go to India to operate on people who cannot afford surgery. "

The Bible also says that the three major world religions which have been at war for so long- Christians, Jews and Muslims all descend from the same man- Abraham. Set in holy scripture is the inherent sense that we are all children from the same family.

Gwendolyn Brooks was an African American poet born in Kansas City but who moved to the south side of Chicago. A prolific poet she won the Pulitzer Prize for her work. She talks about way we are connected across the lines that would divide us. "We are each other's harvest.: we are each other's business: we are each other's magnitude and bond. "

In his inaugural address President Obama said, "For we know that our patchwork heritage is a strength and not a weakness. For we are a nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus and non-believers...We cannot help but believe that the old hatreds will someday pass; that the lines of tribe shall soon dissolve that as the world grows smaller our common humanity shall reveal itself, and that America must play its role in ushering in a new era of peace." (p. 183)