

## **“Beautiful, like a rainbow”**

*Appreciating diversity on Black History Observance Sunday*

**February 22, 2009**

*Text: Genesis 11:1-9, 1 Corinthians 12:4-11*

### I.

I love rainbows! Don't you? I'll bet you do. In fact, I don't think I've ever heard someone say, *I don't like rainbows*.

What I like about rainbows are two things. To begin with, they're natural. They appear right out there ... up in the sky ... natural. They're part of nature, not human made. That's pretty cool, don't you think? Secondly, they're beautiful. All the colors blended together—red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo and violet.

Without all of the different colors, there's no rainbow. In a sense, therefore, all the colors work together to create the beauty we see arching across the rain-filled sky.

As we learned in our Children's Celebration earlier, with the box of crayons, each of the crayons is unique. But when they're blended together, each crayon fulfills its role in creating a beautiful picture. The grass is green, the barn is red, the sky is blue, the flowers are yellow and violet ... whatever it is.

### II.

In our Black History Month Observance, we're celebrating diversity; how each culture, each ethnic group, is unique; how each person—black, white, yellow, red, brown—whatever skin color God gave us—is unique.

If the created order is indeed a reflection of our Creator God—clearly—God loves diversity. From the animal world to the plant world to the human world; pick a world, diversity abounds. Not that we always like it when it applies to us; because the truth is, we tend to stick to our own kind. Although there are always exceptions, we're inclined to prefer the company of folks like us.

However, having said that, God seems to have other designs. In our *Tower of Babel* reading from Genesis 11, God goes to great ends to promote diversity.

The *Tower of Babel* is one of those timeless stories in the Hebrew Scriptures, along with *the fall* in the garden of Eden and *the flood*.

In the story, apparently all the people of the earth are gathered in the same realm. They speak one language and they're determined to arrogate as much power as they can to themselves. With that in mind, they decide to build a tower that will reach the heavens

and provide a special connection for them to the divine.

Meanwhile, God becomes curious about all this prideful activity and decides to come down to further check things out. Right away, God is not pleased with what God finds.

*Look, God says, they are one people, and they all have one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do ...*

So God says, *Whoa, let's go down and confuse their language so they won't understand one another's speech.* And God does this and soon the people begin to scatter all over the face of the earth. No more *Tower of Babel*; no more exclusivist ONE people, ONE language to the ends of the earth.

### III.

God seems to know something about diversity that we humans don't instinctively grasp—namely, that it's good for us and that too much of ourselves can work against God's purposes.

If history is a good teacher, and it is, we've learned over and over how our ventures into diversity have helped us ... expanded our knowledge, enlarged our world. American culture is a rich blending of ethnic cultures, languages, spirituality and on and on.

While our differences are many, these differences can make us all better. Every culture and ethnic group has something to teach us and we have something to teach them. And the final picture, like the rainbow, is greater than the sum of its parts.

The value of diversity was exemplified when **Martin Luther King Jr.** visited India in 1959 to study the work of Gandhi, whose ideas on nonviolent resistance influenced King deeply and became one of the core principles and values of the civil rights movement in the sixties.

To further appreciate the value of diversity, we can't help noting, again, the richly diverse story of President Barack Obama.

A black, African father from Kenya; a white, Anglo mother from Kansas. As a child, he spent four years in Indonesia, the most populous Muslim nation in the world.

He has a half sister, Maya Soetoro-Ng, (same mother, Indonesian father). She's a 36-year old teacher who describes herself as *half white, half Asian ...a hybrid*. She's Buddhist, married to a Chinese Canadian, the mother of a two-year old, and a woman who is so routinely identified as a Latina that she learned Spanish.

Talk about diversity, our president has diversity in abundance. And of course, the larger point: such diversity all serves to make us better.

It's this diversity that, at our best, makes our nation and our planet ***Beautiful, like a rainbow***.

And of course, with the completeness of that rainbow in mind, our observance today of Black History Month must not hesitate to celebrate the tremendous contributions of our African American brothers and sisters who, over the centuries, have so deeply enriched the common life of our great nation.

Unfortunately, although revisions are being made, our history books do not always give a full rendering of these countless contributions.

#### IV.

What this all attests to, of course, is the premise of ***Beautiful, like a rainbow*** to begin with: that every human being is special, utterly unique ... a child of God, created in the divine image of God, with something unique and special to offer.

This builds on the theme of **1 Corinthians 12** where the Apostle Paul was emphasizing the wonderful diversity of gifts among the believers in the early church; and how they each have their place, and how one gift is not better than another and they all serve the common good.

The point is: diversity is good, even a blessing; but only as it serves a larger purpose. ***Beautiful, like a rainbow***. The rainbow is the larger purpose, a rainbow of ethnic groups and cultures and religions all working together.

*There are a variety of gifts, but the same Spirit ...there are a variety of services, but the same God.* And going on—and this is the guiding principle: *To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.*

The common good is the key. That's what we are to be about. And at our best, that's what our diversity can feed and nurture.

*To one believer is given the gift of wisdom ...  
To another, the gift of healing ...  
To another, the working of miracles ...*

*To another, prophecy,  
To another, the discernment of the spirits  
To another, tongues ... and to another, still, the interpretation of tongues.*

But they are all activated by the same Spirit in accord with God's purposes. And all of the gifts, while important, are subordinate to love.

## V.

Much of our observance today is in a sense a debt of gratitude for those who have gone before us ...

People of faith—many of whom had every reason to renounce faith—still, clung to the hope that one day God’s purposes would rise up ...

- in the voices of prophets ...
- in the sacrifices of common workers ...
- in the tireless dedication of mothers, many of them single parents ...
- on the sweaty brow of fathers who, although often estranged, still, paid their dues.

We have to be thankful today for those upon whose shoulders we stand.

For us, they sacrificed ... sometimes with injustice at every juncture along the way and a cringing fear around every corner.

For us, they labored ... often times working two, three or four jobs to help feed the family and make ends meet.

For us, they did not surrender ... holding fast to their personal sense of human dignity, honor and integrity as children of a gracious God.

For us, they held on to belief ... that our lives *do* have an ultimate purpose and that the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of Moses and the prophets, and the God of Jesus, in whom love makes all things knew ... that this God walked with them every step of the way.

***Beautiful, like a rainbow*** is a biblically inspired vision for life. It’s a vision where all the diversity we embody works together to lift up the *common good*.

Always—that’s God’s undimmed purpose ... and, as Christians, our unwavering hope.

**All praise be unto God! Amen!**

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