

Separation of powers (Genesis 11:1-9)

In a mainline church, the pastor tends to have limited unilateral power.

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The separation of powers: turns out even before the Founding Fathers thought of it, the Lord God did.

I'd never read the Tower of Babel as a story of God safeguarding us from ourselves. I'd always read it as God seeing a possible competitor in us, our approach of the heavens amounting to a turf war.

It's not a charitable view of God.

There is another way to read all this, which Marilynne Robinson shows in *Reading Genesis*, her booklength essay written in conversation with this book. Here she meets a God who regards his creatures with delight, awe, regret, and faithfulness. Recognizing the power in the human being, and moreover the power latent in human cooperation, God evermore sees how terribly it can all go wrong. From the interpersonal violence of Cain to the culture-wide violence suffered in Sodom, God puts stops where he can—and yet there is a persistent urge within and among humans.

Nevertheless, God remains faithful.

This fabled scattering of languages is one such stop. Not punishment on God's part imposed upon people, not egotism or vanity or petulance, the point is to safeguard us from ourselves and one another.

I recently read Tim Alberta's *The Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory: American Evangelicals in the Age of Extremism*, a worthy read. The journalist tells of an evangelical pastor who encounters theological works he'd never read before, books you're more likely to find on the shelves in mainline pastors' studies. Taken by this new theological depth, he tells his congregation they'll be going in a new direction. Seeing the American idolatry that many of his peer congregations are succumbing to, he's found new skids to stop the slide.

While I applaud this theological deepening and this avoidance of an increasingly dangerous heresy, the mode of this pastor's move struck me. The fact that a pastor can declare he'll be taking the congregation in a new direction without any discussion, any collective discernment, is a problem. It's authoritarianism—if on a smaller scale, as a mode as much as an ideology.

In a mainline church, the pastor tends to have much less unilateral power. In my denomination, the United Church of Christ, and in my two congregations, which are both of the New England Congregational tradition, whatever power I have on any given day is conferred to me by the consent of the congregation. Whether it's the hymn choices, the color of the carpeting, or the allocation of my time, I exercise my judgment in conversation with congregants each and all. And I wouldn't have it any other way. Frustrating as it is sometimes, this separation of powers is always a good idea.

The current presidential administration in our country seems to want it altogether otherwise. With any luck, we the people will have none of that. Regardless of whether his policies seem agreeable to us (they aren't to me), his mode of consolidating power is anathema to the American way.

A conversation about this among clergy colleagues came around to this question: Whence the resistance? Where and when would it begin to show itself?

One pastor spoke up. "It's us," he said. "It's the mainline church."

We who've been showing up every week for a challenging word from the gospel; we who've been quietly, faithfully, obdurately showing up to occupy sanctuaries where

the American flag finds but awkward place because the cross of Christ is raised high; we who are pastor and congregation together discerning how to continue in our courageous, joyful, often cacophonous walk from life to Life: we are the resistance.

God hasn't punished us in this separation of powers. God hasn't acted self-servingly in scrambling our otherwise domination. God has given us a chance, an opportunity, to build in such a way that requires patient cooperation, which history shows again and again to bear better fruit, more truly approaching the heavens for it making something more akin to heaven here on earth.