

Series: Habits of Grace
Sermon: Culture-Making
Scripture: Genesis 11: 1-9

We believe ultimately you are what you love, and that your affections are shaped by what you habitually do. Jim: “You don’t need your opinions changed; you need your heart changed.” Habits of grace are disciplines that whisper to us that we’re loved no matter what we’ve done or failed to do. Today we look at the habit of grace called culture-making. Maybe you’re wondering, how can culture be habitual? We typically think of culture in connection only to the new and novel, the *avant garde*, but, as Robert Louis Wilken contends, “*If Christian culture is to be renewed, habits are more vital than revivals, rituals more edifying than spiritual highs, the creed more penetrating than theological insight.*” - RLW, “Christ as Culture” FT, 4/04.

Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. ² And as people migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. ³ And they said to one another, “Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly.” And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar.⁴ Then they said, “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 dispersed over the face of the whole earth.”⁵ And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of man had built. ⁶ And the Lord said, “Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do. And nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. ⁷ Come, let us go down and there confuse their language, so that they may not understand one another’s speech.”⁸ So the Lord dispersed them from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. ⁹ Therefore its name was called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth. And from there the Lord dispersed them over the face of all the earth.

[PRAYER]: Father, we know all our flesh and glory fade and fall like grass and flowers, but your Word endures forever. So, find us here where the frailty of humanity meets the fulness of divinity in Christ Jesus our Lord. And send your Spirit to anoint us for holy work in every good endeavor.

INTRO: We usually think of culture making as something a few strange, hairless, creatures called influencers do on screens, or maybe as a thing for the church to combat as it tries to creep its way into our good Christian homes. It’s Halloween and Justin Bieber. But what if I told you culture itself is actually a basic function of all human activity. Genesis ^{1:28} *God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion...”* The cultural mandate.

That the human cultural impulse is in fact a divine mandate means all of our work is spiritual. It’s not just the secular majority of your time that pays for the spiritual icing on your life. “*Our task is not to somehow inject God into our work but to join God in the work he is already doing in and through our vocational lives.*” — **Tish Harrison Warren, Liturgy of the Ordinary.**

Hopefully today we can begin to see that “culture” is not the Church’s enemy, nor is it just the domain of a few elite people, but that it’s intrinsically tied to what it means for all of us to be embodied, habit-formed and habit-forming creatures in the everyday of life. There is a culture in your family, at your place of work, or school, and you are a significant contributor to it. And everything you make of this life you have is part of God’s divine plan and subject to His lordship.

- I. A Cultural Mandate
- II. A Towering Mistake
- III. A Family on Missio
- I. A Cultural Mandate**

Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. ² And as people migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. ³ And they said to one another, “Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly.” And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar.⁴ Then they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower...”

“Culture is what humans make of the world” — Andy Crouch, Culture Making

- Innovative: “What can I make out of all this? What am I making the world stuff into?”
 - Minecraft – digital Lego worlds - they build out of raw materials, combine/inherit
 - Operating out of an “oughtness.” – What is our idea of thriving?
- Interpretive: “what do you make of this? What sense does this make of the world around me? What’s important here?”
 - Example: Cars don’t just let us get across town – they also imply that we should be able to inhabit a wider range of space than our mere bodies permit.
 - Everything we make, from city plans to grocery lists, from poetry to TPS reports, says something about the way the world is and the way it ought to be.
 - Progress is not morally neutral, because tools are always a means to something.

Means: tools; artifacts

- Brick and bitumen are the height of technology in this era. Making sturdy shelter anywhere.
 - We shape our practices, and then our practices shape us and those around us.
 - Things that mediate for us. But toward what end?

Ends: What did the artifacts they were making say about the world this ought to become?

- The tower in the plain in the east –
 - The east is about Eden - trying to get back to a reunited heaven and earth.
 - The plain in Shinar (Babylon) versus the mountain of eden (rivers flowed down)

Affirmation: to reunite heaven and earth and have all humanity dwell there in unity - Innovation and ambition is a good thing, when it’s in harmony with a faithful interpretation of our purpose.

“The biggest cultural mistake we can indulge in is to yearn for technological solutions to our deepest cultural problems.” — Andy Crouch, Culture Making

Nearly all cults and dystopian nightmares begin as a beautiful vision of a restoration of humanity to peace. We run into trouble when we use technologies to mediate our wounds by coping rather than healing. God already had a plan for their healing and it involved both the human instinct to make culture, but also their willingness to surrender to his commission than they scatter and fill the earth.

And what’s hinted at in their project about how they are interpreting the world with this innovation becomes super clear when we hear their dialogue with one another.

II. A Towering Mistake

⁴ Then they said, “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 dispersed over the face of the whole earth.”⁵ And the Lord came down to see the city and the

tower, which the children of man had built. 6 And the Lord said, "Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do. And nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them."

You have to imagine that when Moses told the former Egyptian slaves about the building of the Tower of Babel they were like, "Ugh, bricks." Like a foreshadowing of how horrible this is.

Their cultural project rejected:

- Their maker's voice – multiply and fill the earth
 - They said to one another. There is no regard for conversation with God.
 - The theme of language here hints at the interpretive function of culture-making.
 - What does this artifact form us to say about God's world?

- Their own limitations – who can ascend the hill?
 - HA: The tower with its head in heaven is so far from God he has to come down in order to see it.
 - Dominion - rule over it – its desire is to rule over you – Desire – initiative toward satisfaction
 - Do you rule over your tools and talents and technologies, or do they rule over you?
 - Nothing they desire will be impossible for them
 - It looks like they were trying to go back to eden, or to circumvent – but we're moving toward a garden city.

- Their neighbors' humanity – monolithic and homogenous
 - Babel shows us that although we often blame differences for our social tensions, it's really the thing we have in common that's our problem. In this case it wasn't what they were fighting about, but what they agreed on that got them into trouble.
 - We habitually try to make a name for ourselves by directing technologies toward homogeneity.
 - The utopian project becomes a homogenization – the particular is sacrificed for the universal
 - Humans need to be contributors. We can't do that if everything is global and mediated. Heaven is Local.

What have we said to one another here in Suburbia? Let us make a name for ourselves by...

The Tower of Babel was not merely a monument to the rebellion of man, but a means to perpetuate it. Its destruction was an act of mercy.

Engaging *the* culture? Niebuhr's categories. Critique, consume, copy, condemn - No: creating.

It's just a competing version of the same mistake. Culture is not one towering, ubiquitous, monolith.

III. A Family on Mission

7 Come, let us go down and there confuse their language, so that they may not understand one another's speech." 8 So the Lord dispersed them from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. 9 Therefore its name was called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth. And from there the Lord dispersed them over the face of all the earth.

“The revolution will not be televised.” – Gil Scott-Heron

They want to make a name for themselves, but the name by which they are known is chaos and confusion. Cast down off the mountain again, back east of eden.

Abram - Genesis 12 – a family on mission – Culture is made in the particular. When we treat “the culture” like a monolith, we repeat the sin of babel.

But *He* will make Abram’s name great. *He* makes him fruitful. *He* gives him dominion.

- Babel didn’t want to be scattered; Abram was willing to go into the unknown.
- Babel didn’t want to wait for God’s provision; Abram had to receive miraculous healing.
- Babel didn’t want God to make a name for them, Abram was given a new name.
- Babel didn’t want to talk with God, Abraham talked with and believed God.
- Babel didn’t want to tolerate differences, Abraham learned how to set a table for the lonely

What do all those acts make of the world?

Faithful presence: we keep, create, and cultivate, on a family level, in conversation with God. Embodying Christ in the everyday, leaving a wake of holy artifacts. Making something of the world – shaping the things that shape us – dinnertime, sabbath practices, conversations with God, “I don’t have young ones in my home” – Then get into someone else’s home. Normalize bonus family. Get involved.

Morning Sun BBQ – someone decided to build a pit – I learned about hospitality, community, feasting, rites of passage, had a healthy working picture of the good life.

“So, do you want to make culture? Find a community, a small group who can lovingly fuel your dreams and puncture your illusions. Find friends and form a family who are willing to see grace at work in one another's lives, who can discern together which gifts and which crosses each has been called to bear. Find people who have a holy respect for power and a holy willingness to spend their power alongside the powerless. Find some partners in the wild and wonderful world beyond church doors. And then, together, make something of the world.”

— **Andy Crouch, Culture Making**

Jesus could have used wheat and grapes to institute his new sacrament – maybe the most important cultural artifact in history - but he used bread and wine – human flourishes on divine gifts. That innovation was an interpretation as well: It was in part Jesus’ affirmation of the human desire to take the raw material of this world and make something of it. It was also a way of saying that in order to remake humanity, he was willing to unmake himself.