

[Genesis 9:1] Then God blessed Noah and his sons, saying to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth."

1. "So, are you a progressive church or a conservative church?" Sigh. I know that when someone starts off asking me that question, I'm going to have a lot of explaining to do. Those words have become so politically charged that I can't avoid the political attachments when talking about them in a religious context. To *progress* simply means to move forward. To *conserve* simply means to keep what you have. But there's nothing simple about talking about those words today, is there? I'm already getting wordy with answering a simple question: Are you a progressive church or a conservative church? I'll give the simple answer now, and spend the rest of the sermon defending my point: We are *both* because we are a Bible-believing church.
2. People want to divorce God's Word from what they are doing. That's why it's so important to recognize that words like *progressive* and *conservative* in a political context don't always line up with the context of a Christian congregation. Just because someone wants to "move forward" with a ministry plan does not automatically make that person politically progressive. Just because someone wants to "keep what you have" with a ministry plan does not automatically make that person politically conservative. What's enlightening about our Old Testament Lesson on this Pentecost Sunday is that God expected His Old Testament believers to be *both*.
3. God expected Noah and his sons after the flood to fill the earth. That is, they were to progress from where they were, moving forward. Improvement was mandated: there was a world to subdue! At the same time, they were to guard God's Word given to them. They were to conserve it, keeping it close to their hearts. God's Word to His people was clear: they were to keep it!
4. The people in our reading failed to do both. They ignored God's Word and listened to their own voice. So much for being conservative the way God wanted. They failed. Moreover, they did not fill the earth. So much for being progressive like God wanted. They failed. {Read verses 1-4.}
5. The people successfully divorced God's clear Word from what they were doing. People were trusting in their own power. People were doing things contrary to God's will. People were certain their way was good. So, how does that work out for us? Let's be real about our power. People don't have the power to fix our real problem: we die. Let's be real about our will. By nature, people don't want to put someone else's needs first: we serve self. Let's be real about what we call good. We know that what people declare to be good isn't always so: we have enough political history to show us that, going back to Babel. So, what would God do about this? {Read verses 5-9.}
6. A key word in verse 6 is begun. {Reread verse 6.} Humanity at large was on a path of failing to conserve God's Word. Humanity at large was on a path of failing to progress as He commanded. God dealt with our sin by not letting people divorce themselves from His Word. He did it by not only making sure that our words were confused. He also did it by making sure His Word would always endure. That is why Pentecost is called the undoing of the Tower of Babel. Acts 2 tells us, we hear them declaring the

wonders of God in our own tongues! Babel keeps us from looking to ourselves for the definitive word. We have to look to God. We look to His Word.

7. That brings us to our answer of whether our church is a progressive church or a conservative church. Anytime someone asks me what the "Lutherans" teach or what the "Wisconsin Synod" teaches, I always try to redirect to the Word. The *Word* teaches. The Word was to be conserved by God's people as they progressed into the world. So, that's what we reflect. We are a church of the Word, which means that we go back to the Word. The Word is what tells us the wonders of God. The Word tells us God keeps us from divorcing ourselves from what He has said. The Word is what tells us that Jesus wondrously came for us for the times we have not let God's Word shape our thinking. We can make our own little Towers of Babel no matter what side of the political aisle we are on. We do it whenever we have a better idea than what God clearly says in His Word. Then we're not conserving His Word. We do it whenever we decide to act in a way not in line with His Word. Then we're progressing away from the Word. The wonder of God is that Jesus gave His perfect life for us all when we have done so.
8. The people on the Plain of Shinar were unified in our Old Testament Lesson. What's sad is that they were unified in rebellion against God. And God, in His grace, did not allow them to stay in that place nor did He allow them to return to such a place. Our nation's founding fathers were geniuses in that they recognized the world as it is and people for who they are. Democracy recognizes people who speak the *same* language are plenty polarized! That's why it's so laborious answering the question about being a progressive or a conservative church.
9. The makers of the Tower of Babel were unified in rejecting conserving God's Word *and* unified in rejecting progressing into the world as God wanted them to do. We get to hear the inner dialog of the Trinity as God deals with people who were unified in rejecting Him. {Reread verses 6-7.} The people were forced to look outside themselves. Where does unity come from? It does not come from coalescing under human endeavor, be it labeled progressive or be it labeled conservative. Every group would build its tower if it could. True unity, the kind that God wants, comes from being united around God's Word.
10. God's Word goes to the world in every language. The marvels of what God has done is for all people. Unity based on human endeavor will always have sin at its root since the fall. So God breaks up that type of unity and draws our attention away from the idolatry of human endeavor. Our eyes are drawn to the wonders of God. We conserve the Word He has given to us. It is the Word of salvation from sin. It is the Word that makes sense of this world we live in. And we progress in that Word, sharing it with this mixed-up world that God mixed up so people don't together summarily destroy themselves by divorcing themselves from what God says.
11. Are we a progressive church or a conservative church? I reject such towers, erected to our own self-destructive dichotomy. We are a church of the Word. Progress means keeping God's Word. Amen.