

Forgive Us: Christian Supremacy

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Preacher: Heidi Mills

- [0 : 00] Good morning. I'm Heidi. I am the co-director of community here at the table. Would you pray with me? Dear Lord, I thank you for bringing us into this space.
- I lift up all that is in this room right now, Lord. I know there are people who are on a high right now where they just had an amazing week.
- Great things are happening in their lives. They are celebrating. But I also know that there are people in this room that are in the depths of despair, Lord. That there are people listening to this who are wondering where to turn, where to go next.
- And I just bring all of this before you, Lord. May we find rest and comfort in who you are and the life you are calling us to, full of peace and comfort.
- I thank you for bringing us here today. And I just pray that you will work through my words today. In Jesus' name, amen. I would like to begin by telling you a story.
- [1 : 09] Countless years ago, there was a group of people who all shared the same language in the same words. In the time after the flood, when the earth had dried up and people were heeding God's command to be fruitful and multiply, they gathered together in comfort and ease.
- They rested in the assurance that they did not have to labor to understand or to be understood. But their feet itched with the longing for adventure.
- And so they set off eastward to new horizons. And they traveled for many days and weeks and months until their legs itched with the longing for rest.
- And they came across a land called Shinar. And this was a wide, flat plain brimming with promise full of milk and honey. And they thought, we can make a place here.
- We can settle here. We can raise our families here. And the people began to explore this land. And they found that it was rich with natural resources.
- [2 : 21] The mud squelched between their toes. And they found that when the hot sun beat down on it for countless days, that it would harden.
- And they wondered, maybe we could build with this gift of the earth. Come, let us make bricks and burn them thoroughly, they said. And so they did.
- And they also explored the pits near their settlement. And they discovered this sticky substance called bitumen. And it got everywhere on their hands, on their clothes.
- And they thought, this is good to bind our bricks together to create tall buildings. And the people grew excited. See what they could do with this new invention.
- And so they declared, come. Let us make buildings and cities and construct a tower that goes all the way up to the heavens. We will be able to reach God.
- [3 : 19] We will make ourselves famous. And we won't have to worry about being separated ever again. And so they conscripted people among them to build their buildings, in their homes, in that tall tower.
- Every day, people worked with their hands under the blazing sun. Their skin burned under its rays. And their hands bled and cracked from their labor.

And the tower rose taller and taller and taller. Until one day, they hoped it would reach right up to the sun. And then God came down and decided to see what his people were up to.

And they saw that it was not good. Look, the Lord declared. They have the same language and see what they are doing with it. If they can do this, then this is only the beginning.

Nothing that they proposed to do will be impossible for them. So let us go down and scatter their languages so that they will not be able to continue this work.

[4 : 26] And so the Lord divided their languages. And all of a sudden, the people could no longer continue this work. Because when they tried to speak to one another, they could not understand.

And they could not bear it. So they decided to go their separate ways. And the Lord called this place Babel. For there the Lord created all the languages of the earth.

Many of us have probably heard this story before. The story of the Tower of Babel is found in Genesis chapter 11, verses 1 through 9.

And I would encourage you to maybe pull up the text on your phone if you have a physical Bible. Because I will be referencing it in more specific detail. But I chose to tell the story rather than read it outright.

Because that's how the original audiences would have heard it. They probably listened to the story sitting around their homes, around a fire, enjoying a good meal.

[5 : 33] In this oral storytelling tradition, there was freedom to embellish, to add details, and inhabit the story in a way that often isn't possible just reading the words on the page.

The first 11 chapters of Genesis are about the origin of things. So growing up, this story was interpreted to be about the origin of languages.

And the hubris of trying to be like God. And I am less interested today in whether this story accurately depicts the origin of languages. Because I know linguistic scholars among us would probably disagree.

I am more interested in what this story reveals about our very own human tendencies. And the warning that we can take from this story as we discuss the kinds of ideologies we are stealing away from as a church.

And this story would have taken on additional depths of meaning for its earliest audiences too. When the ancient Israelites living in Babylonian exile heard this story, it would have brought to mind the ancient Babylonian ziggurat.

[6 : 45] A picture of it will be on the screen. And this was a massive temple that was supposed to have its top in the heavens. And these temples were meant to make it easier to worship God because they were physically going up to where God lived.

And the ancient Israelites, as we see in books like Daniel and other places, would have been constantly wary about the need to assimilate to the dominant culture, the dominant religion.

Because if they didn't, there was fear of being persecuted and maybe even killed. So this story is about language, but it's also about the tendency to build structures of supremacy.

And in our time and place, this story has had a little bit of a resurgence. And I'll admit that I'm fascinated by the Tower of Babel.

Part of that is because I read a book a couple of years ago now called Babel by R.F. Kuang. And it's one of my absolute favorite books of all time. And in this book, a young boy is growing up in 1800s China.

- [7 : 53] And he is forcibly taken from his home after his mother dies of the plague. And he's enrolled in this prestigious institution of translation at Oxford, which is called Babel.
- And our main character, Robin, is forced to assimilate English culture. He even leaves behind his name. He just decides to go by the name Robin. But he urged to use his skills in Chinese to support the work of the institution.
- So basically, this is a historical fantasy book. And I don't want to get too into the weeds about it. I definitely could. But basically, magic is inscribed with silver bars.
- So on one side of the bar, there might be an English word for secret. And on the other side, there might be the German word for secret. And there was a meaning lost between them. And whatever that difference of meaning is, is manifested physically.
- So the difference between those two words for secret can know kind of like a hiding place. So it would physically create some kind of like shelter or refuge if you are trying to hide from someone.
- [8 : 58] So Robin is forced to use his mother tongue to develop technologies that only benefit English society. But meanwhile, his home country of China is exploited for its natural resources.
- And this book points out how language has often been used as a tool of oppression, where minorities are forced to adopt a dominant language and their native language is suppressed or used to amass power.
- So I'd highly recommend checking it out. I haven't done justice to it. It's incredible. But reading this book made me realize that we often reproduce the Tower of Babel in different cultures, times, and places.
- And this leads me to the topic of the sermon, which is Christian supremacy. And I am not going to lie.
- I was very intimidated when I learned that I was going to be preaching about Christian supremacy. Becky, who's preaching in the evening, and I were joking during our planning meeting that we should just get up here, say Christian supremacy is bad, and then sit back down.
- [10 : 06] And that would have made this entire last week of my life a whole lot less stressful. But Christian supremacy is essential for us to name.
- We have to be talking about how Christian supremacy is a contemporary Tower of Babel that needs to be dismantled, even in a multi-theological church like ours.
- But first, we have to define what Christian supremacy even is. I am far more familiar with the topic of Christian nationalism, which we're going to be talking about in a few weeks.
- But Christian supremacy is much broader. Put simply, it's the system of beliefs, practices, laws, and customs that position Christianity as the one true religion with all the answers.
- Christian supremacy permeates every aspect of our culture, from the words we use to the way our government is structured. And it's intimately tied to other forms of oppression, like white supremacy, sexism, and homophobia.
- [11 : 15] And talking about Christian supremacy in this church is especially hard because I feel like, in many ways, we've moved beyond the basics of this conversation.
- I think many of us have deconstructed and reconstructed our faith to the point where we wouldn't necessarily argue today that Christianity has all the right answers.
- And many of us inhabit multi-theological and multi-faith spaces already. But it is still essential for us to confront the ways that our own practices of faith can directly or indirectly lead to the oppression of others, especially those of different faiths or no faith at all.

So I want to unpack this a little bit more. In Genesis chapter 11, verse 1, we read, Now the whole earth had one language and the same words.

Naming Christian supremacy urges us to consider the language we use. Throughout my life, I've been comforted by sharing the same words with my community.

[12 : 24] During my childhood, I became fluent in Christianese. I could rattle off definitions for complex words like atonement and sin.

I knew all about baptism and communion and Easter and Pentecost and Advent and Lent. I inhabited this world and I knew exactly what to say. I was eloquent at how to be in the world and not of the world, including but not limited to my then beliefs about evolution and creationism, my perspective about homosexuality, and my determination to evangelize as many people as possible.

And I was steeped in the language of us versus them. As Christians, I believed that we were the saved and needed to go out and rescue the lost. And I never gave much thought to other religions, except to prove how Christians were right and everybody else had it completely wrong.

And it also went beyond verbal language. There were entire structures underlying my life that gave me such meaning, like going to church every Sunday or spending my quiet time every morning with God.

I learned the language of being a good Christian person, and everybody around me shared that same language. And there are other languages that are probably equally as familiar to some of us, such as the liturgy of a Catholic Mass or the lyrics to our favorite worship song.

[13 : 54] Being able to talk about transubstantiation or discuss the theological implications of the latest CCM or gospel song are all ways that we share a similar language.

Language is such a powerful method of belonging. If we can speak the same language, if we know all the right words to say, then we fit in.

But the questions, unfortunately, then become, who is excluded because they don't share that same language? And what is lost when we focus so much on being the same that we neglect to celebrate the differences between us?

When we become accustomed to sharing the same language, we often fail to see the importance of learning a different one. Christian supremacy upholds those languages, customs, and frameworks of belonging that make the fluent among us feel like we belong, and those who are not fluent feel like they are always on the margins.

But perhaps there is more to God's design for us than sharing the same language. In this story, sharing a common language also creates a specific relationship with power.

[15 : 11] When the people settled in Shinar, they discovered how to make bricks and constructed cities and towers that protected them from the outside world. And as verse 4 declares, the people wanted to create a name for themselves.

But constructing this tower came with a price. The idea of making bricks would have made the earliest audiences think also about their experience with slavery in Egypt when they were forced to bake bricks for the empire and they didn't have the straw to do it with.

This story urges us to consider who was building that tower, who benefits and who doesn't. Even within a culture with the same language, there was likely an equality between those who were forced to build and those who were not.

Naming Christian supremacy requires us to confront our own relationship with power. The people thought that they were constructing the tower to draw closer to God, but in reality they were accumulating more power for themselves.

And on one level, I can understand where they were coming from because they were likely fearful of what might happen if they were separated. There is security and conformity and there is safety in numbers.

[16 : 32] But as God rightly says in verse 6, if the people can do this, then what is the line? Where are the limits? We have seen in our nation how the alliance between Christianity and power has had devastating consequences and in many ways there has yet to be a reckoning.

And one particular way that we see this deadly alliance is in the relationship between Christianity and white supremacy. One prominent Hindu scholar, Kiyati Josi, has spent her career studying Christian supremacy.

In her book, *White Christian Privilege*, she writes, Whiteness and Christianity became not so much conflated as coexistent, like two sides of a wide ribbon.

And as the ribbon twists through American history, we sometimes see the religion side, Christian superiority, while at other times we see the race side, white superiority. And whichever side we see, the other side is there too.

As a church, we've already started talking about some of this. We have wrestled with the fact that our country was built upon the genocide of Native Americans and how one of the ways this was justified was through Christian faith.

[17 : 51] And the same also goes for the ways that Christianity has been used to uphold the enslavement of black people. Brick by brick, so often faith has been used to enslave, to subjugate, and to harm.

And the tower of Christian supremacy looms over our nation. And rightly, many of us today, sitting here or listening to this after, have moved beyond this idea that Christianity is the one true religion and we make God pleased with us by forcing our own particular brand of religion on everybody else.

But, just like white people can strive to be anti-racist, while still benefiting from structures of white supremacy, Christians, even progressive ones, can still benefit from the layers of Christian privilege embedded in our country.

In a checklist of Christian privilege created by Sam Killerman, he lists some of the ways Christian privilege might show up in our lives. First, I can expect to have time off work to celebrate religious holidays.

Two, holidays celebrating my faith are so widely supported that I can often forget they are limited to my faith. For example, I can wish someone a Merry Christmas or a Happy Easter without considering their faith.

[19 : 12] Three, politicians responsible for my governance are primarily members of my faith. And this doesn't mean that politicians have the same ideas about our faith as we do, just that they identify the same way.

Four, I can reasonably assume that anyone I encounter will have a decent understanding of my beliefs. Five, I will not be penalized, socially or otherwise, for not knowing other people's religious customs.

Six, my faith is accepted and supported at my workplace. Seven, I can go into any career I want without it being associated with or explained by my faith.

Nine, I mean eight, sorry. I am rarely or never asked to speak on behalf of all members of my faith. Nine, without special effort, my children will have a multitude of teachers or friends who share my faith.

And ten, it is easily accessible for me or my children to be educated from kindergarten through postgrad at institutions of my faith. There are 24 other items on this list, and I'd be happy to share it with you if you're interested.

[20 : 25] And I share this list because it challenges me, first and foremost, to see the ways that I benefit from Christian privilege. For example, I am surrounded by Christian friends, and I work at a Christian workplace where my spiritual practices are constantly affirmed.

I am even encouraged to go to the services at my work where we have Ash Wednesday services and Good Friday services. And without special effort, really, I can go days without talking to anyone who doesn't share my faith.

So I don't want this list to lead us into a guilt or shame-based mindset, but rather I wanted to encourage us to consider the ways our Christian faith does afford us certain advantages as we move through this nation.

And if we benefit, then there are likely others who do not. For example, there are certain places where Muslim women feel uncomfortable wearing the hijab because it's seen as a sign of oppression rather than an illustration of their faith.

And Jews, Muslims, and people of other faiths are experiencing an uptick in hate crimes across our country, and they're frequently discriminated against both in law and in practice.

[21 : 43] And we have to name how the tangible and intangible benefits of Christian supremacy can cause harm to our neighbors. But naming and considering the harm is only the first step, as Pastor Tanetta talked about in her sermon last week.

Once we've considered the realities of Christian supremacy, we can begin to make meaningful changes to help dismantle that tower. I love the story of the Tower of Babel because of what it reveals about God's design.

God deliberately creates all the languages of the earth. In my mind, this is not a punishment, but such a powerful picture of how God creates and celebrates diversity.

Though the tower gets reproduced in countless different ways throughout history, there's always the potential to turn around to make a different choice. We can't deny that we are scattered, but we can choose what to do in the midst of a scattered people.

We are currently in the season of Lent, which is all about the life of Jesus as he journeys toward the cross. Jesus came down to earth as a baby, and he lived amidst a scattered people under the shadow of empire.

[23 : 02] And Jesus himself faced that temptation toward supremacy after his baptism in the Jordan River. At the beginning of Matthew 4, the devil or the adversary brings Jesus up to a high mountain and tempts him with all the kingdoms of the earth.

He says that all this could be yours if you fall down and worship me. But Jesus denies this temptation, and he leaves the mountain, and he goes down in the midst of a scattered people.

He begins healing them and listening to their stories and turning their lives around. He doesn't try building another empire. He doesn't try constructing a tower.

Instead, he meets people where they are, and he loves them, blessing the lesser things of the world and washing feet. Jesus did not come to be served, but rather to serve.

And here at the table, we are a multi-theological church that celebrates the many ways we can seek God. But we are enchanted by the way of Jesus.

[24 : 09] And the great paradox of our faith is that we follow Jesus not by forcing everyone to fall in line with their correct beliefs about Jesus, but by being proximate with people and seeking to love our neighbors as ourselves.

In the shadow of the tower of Christian supremacy and the reality of a scattered earth, we find great joy in learning a new language and seeing the beauty of different stories.

As we move toward repair of the harm caused by Christian supremacy, we're invited into a deeper relationship with God and with others around us. This repair might look like seeking out relationships with people of different faiths or no faith at all if we haven't already.

In her book, Josie talks about how the smallest things, like wishing our happy Diwali in October, means more to her than the generic happy holidays we say in December. We show our care to one another by learning the languages of other faiths and knowing when and how to reach out to people in celebration or commemoration.

And this repair might also look like advocacy. One way we can dismantle white Christian supremacy is by advocating for laws and policies that ensure religious freedom for all and not just for us.

[25 : 31] What might it look like for us to partner with other faiths as they challenge discriminatory laws about their religion? And what might it look like to purposefully join other faiths in the work that they are doing to make the world a more just place for all people?

We can also read the Koran or the Talmud alongside the Bible. We can join our Jewish friends and family for additional Shabbat meal or encourage our Muslim friends during Ramadan.

We can learn more about Buddhist meditation. There are endless ways that we can view our scattered languages, not as a barrier toward connection, but a method toward deeper and more authentic relationships with others.

And at a multi-theological church like The Table, I think there is such endless potential in how we can dismantle the tower of Christian supremacy and move toward relationships with other faiths.

It begins with a relentless curiosity about the stories of other people, especially those who may be different from us. And it continues with the daily practices of our lives that allow us to see clearly how God shows up in the face of friends, families, and neighbors.

[26 : 43] And there is great joy in this invitation because there is no shortage of stories to learn. So this week, I invite us all to go out and learn a new story.

Would you pray with me? Dear Lord, I thank you that you do not call us to build towers of supremacy that separate us from others.

I thank you that you always call us to go down, to be amidst people, to love people as Jesus did. I pray that we will inhabit this invitation this week, Lord, that we will be relentlessly curious about other people, learning how they view the world, and seeing the beauty and strength in that, Lord.

I pray that any tendency of fear, that, oh, maybe we don't have all the right answers, would be taken away, Lord. And instead, we can rest in the fact that we can't box you in, that there are endless ways that we can see you in the world, that other people see you.

And I pray that we will rest in that, Lord, that you are all around us, and there's nothing we can do to separate ourselves from you. In Jesus' name, amen.

[28 : 03] Amen.