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 Texts: Genesis 11: 1-9; I Corinthians 12: 7-14  
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“Here”

One of the people from whom I’ve drawn inspiration over the past few years is the musician David Byrne. He was the lead singer for the group Talking Heads, and he’s had a remarkable solo career for the past couple of decades. Byrne is unabashedly curious about the world – which is a good model for preachers but for people of faith as well. Musically speaking, that curiosity has led him to branch out in some fascinating directions – he’s spent a considerable amount of time learning about the music of Latin America and of Africa too, churning out CDs and playlists that are wonderful to hear. He also has a habit of riding his bike through cities that he’s playing in. He wants to know the physical spaces, the geography, of those sites, but you can sense that he’s also trying to make contact on those rides - with people, with culture, and with the natural landscape he’s been dropped into. And there’s this: he was a longtime friend of Robert Farris Thompson, my own hero and occasional spiritual and theological guide. Byrne has a show on Broadway right now that I think we probably ought to go out of our way to see together. It’s called *American Utopia*, and it actually works to further some of the themes I shared with you two weeks ago, on our tour of Robert Farris Thompson’s spiritual and aesthetic vision. A filmed version exists, but nothing beats a live performance.

It’s the opening scene of *American Utopia* that will launch our meditations this morning. It’s a song entitled “Here.” As the curtain rises, Byrne sits alone on stage, behind a folding table. On the table is a plastic model of a human brain. As the music begins, he proceeds to take us on a tour of the various parts of the brain, showing different quadrants that perform different functions. Pointing to one section, he sings, “Here is a region of abundant details.” He moves his finger, pointing out another section. “Here is a region that is seldom used.” He moves on to another section, and then another. “Here is a region of great confusion, and here is an area that’s extremely precise.” For me, the song culminates in a couplet: “Here is an area that needs attention,” Byrne sings. And then pointing to the seam that joins the two halves of the brain together, he sings, “here is the connection, to the opposite side.”

The song is doing things on multiple levels. It’s first of all a way of capturing the biological mystery of the human brain. Because truly, how do all those parts, those regions, cohere? But then on a second level, it’s a way of describing a truth about each of our lives – that there are aspects not only of our minds, but of our very personalities, that are asking to be connected within the greater whole. The song suggests that somehow there’s an inner mechanism that wishes to connect all those different parts, and to get them speaking to one another, even if sometimes that can’t be achieved. Those of us who live in our heads might need to connect to our emotions just a little more, and vice versa. Some skill sets that we possess have been elevated, while others have atrophied. Some ways of using our senses have been enhanced, while some other ways have been discarded. We all contain regions within us that are in search of connection. There’s something within us that’s performing that organizing and integrative work already, allowing us to form coherent personalities. But that something – let’s call it Spirit - wishes for more.

But the song works on a third level as well. The very language that Byrne uses – that of regions, or areas – suggests that he might just as well be talking about a map, or a globe. Prior to seeing the film, I actually thought it was a map that he was referring to. Indeed, if you placed a globe in that opening scene, the song would work equally well, but in a somewhat different way. In that version, parts of the world that are detailed, or seldom used, or confused, or needing attention, somehow seek ways out of and around their alienation from one another. They would each seek, and presumably find, that connection to the opposite side. There too, a something exists within the world that performs a kind of connective or integrative function, which produces contact, and thereafter culture. Call that what you will, but I choose to name it Spirit. Everything that follows in Byrne’s show is a way of working out the premise, on all of those levels, of that connective, binding thread that somehow, mysteriously, holds things together, rather than allowing the world to fall apart.

“Here” serves as a kind of thesis statement for *American Utopia*, but right now it also serves as my own thesis statement for the day. We each live within various zones of the “here” – in our personal lives, in our cultural lives, but also in our faith, and in the life of this very community – and I think at some level, we’re all in search of that connection to the opposite side.

That’s what the Bible and theology are describing in the use of the word “Spirit.” It’s that integrative function inside of us and around us that animates people, nature, and culture, alike, joining all those various “heres” into a complex and functional whole. I want to take a little time to explore that theme with you, because it has implications for many of the realities we’re confronting in our world today. But it also has a great deal to do with some emerging directions for our community.

The best way to get into those themes are through the stories of Babel, and the resolution of Babel in the story of Pentecost. In essence, what David Byrne is doing in that opening moment, “Here,” and throughout his show, is a reframing of both Babel and Pentecost, working through the implications of both alienation and reunion. Consider Babel for a moment. Babel is a story about fragmentary pieces – people, cultures, languages, regions – that can no longer connect with one another. They’re like all those parts of the brain that cannot figure out how to communicate. Where once, according to the story, there had been a single, unitary monoculture, and a single, unitary monolanguage, by the story’s end, everything has fallen apart. It’s a punishment imposed by Yahweh. That singularity of culture made humans arrogant, believing they could build a tower, storm the heavens, and become as gods. And so Yahweh confuses the human ability to communicate, and collaborate. The result is a scene of isolation, and alienation, setting the stage for many of the struggles that follow in the biblical narrative.

We know a little bit about Babel. The recent standoff over Russia and Ukraine conveys the ongoing reality of Babel in the world. So does the sharp divide within many of our communities, between competing narratives about the very nature of what’s real. But we could say the same about the inability, at times, of parents and children to understand one another. We could say the same for friends who drift apart. We could say it for communities that have ceased to function well together. We could say it for personalities which begin to fall apart under the strain of trauma or stress. Babel is the alienation of aspects or pieces that fit within a greater whole. It is a “here” that no longer finds it possible to cross to the opposite side.

From a different vantage, however, Babel might also be construed as a mercy. In scattering the peoples, in making them unintelligible to one another, difference itself is introduced into the world. The judgment indicates that, apparently, difference is precisely what God wants for the world. That poses an obvious burden, but it also introduces into the story of

creation a wondrous and holy variety, a texture of languages and peoples that is, at times, nothing short of a gift. The judgment at Babel might even be construed as good news for the likes of you and me, for instead of existing along a flat plane of sameness, we're given leave to think and act differently from one another. Because of Babel, there's no need to expect or insist that we must all think or believe the same things, act the same way, dress in the same fashion, or even worship in the same way. All that sainted difference is, apparently, what God wants – or so the writer of Genesis would have us understand. Still, the burden remains – how to live amidst those differences without destroying one another, on one hand, or retreating into spheres of isolation on the other?

In the biblical narrative Spirit is the connective tissue that facilitates the connection to the opposite side. It's expressed powerfully in the Pentecost story, where understanding is restored across languages and cultures. Differences aren't reduced to sameness. Instead, a kind of unity within difference takes shape. Pentecost is a story that helps us to trust and believe that there is indeed a power within us that is capable of overcoming all that alienation and enmity. It helps us to trust that those many sectarian divides can be overcome with a little, or maybe a lot of work. If we know instances of Babel from our experience, we've also encountered moments of Spirit, what Paul Tillich called "fragmentary moments of non-ambiguity." Spirit exists wherever mutual understanding is found. It exists in the intimate conversations shared in households. It exists when neighbors get to know one another, and when people break bread together. It exists where diplomacy takes precedence over warfare. It exists wherever people from across different cultural divides learn to affirm and support one another in their basic, ordinary humanity.

I've come to believe that Spirit is the reality that we in progressive communities of faith need to emphasize and trust more and more. Spirit opens toward diverse expressions of the divine in varied times and spaces – you see, Spirit unifies. It allows for flexibility regarding the particulars of creed or doctrine, including the possibility that one might forgo creeds altogether – Spirit overcomes such distinctions. It moves to get us out of our heads, for Spirit connects us to the rhythms and movements of our own bodies, helping us to feel marvelously alive – Spirit is ecstatic. And it expresses a concern for social well-being and reconciliation, for it is Spirit itself that gives us the courage to withstand assaults upon the dignity and personhood of human beings – for Spirit is justice. Spirit is the connective thread within our humanity. It is our connection to the opposite side.

This has all been pretty theoretical, but let me bring it all to bear on the life of our community. I believe that we are one of those "heres" in David Byrne's tour of the brain, or of the globe. Here, in Old Lyme, we function as a kind of node within a much larger whole. At times, like those regions of the brain, we can become very isolated if we're not careful. But Spirit, which is the fullness and plenitude of faith, calls us out of that isolation, begging us to connect more fully with peoples and cultures and places beyond ourselves. This congregation has done exemplary work in that regard for decades now. Paul Verryn's presence with us today is living proof of that – our connection to the opposite side! Our other partnerships – in Haiti and Palestine, in the Cheyenne River Reservation and in newer endeavors, as in Mexico – also testify to that will to connect. It's one of the things I love most about this place. What I'd like to do in the remaining time is to share a few of the growing edges that I sense in that ongoing work, places of Spirit and connection.

For me, the biggest revelation of the past two years has been the extent to which our history as a town and as a faith community was formed as a node – a "here" in a wider circum-Atlantic world. We tend to imagine our Atlantic connections moving exclusively back and forth

between Britain and North America, or perhaps between Europe and North America. But a more careful examination shows that it was a much wider Atlantic circuit that made us who we are. We came to thrive as a community, in large part, because of the ways we were joined to the Caribbean by trade. And of course that trade had everything to do with a far different Atlantic passage, between Africa and the New World. Many of those kidnapped Africans wound up living in this community as enslaved people, and many more were scattered around the New England coastline and then in communities in various river towns as well. Not a few of those enslaved people wound up being baptized within this community, and worshiping here as well. We have always been a part of that massive circum-Atlantic world. It's shaped everything about who we've been, and who we've become.

One could argue that it would have been better if everyone in the early modern period had simply remained in their own "here." That would have left the Indigenous communities throughout the Americas untouched by genocide. It would have left Africans untouched by a forced migration and enslavement. It would have meant that the English and other Europeans wouldn't have left home to colonize the rest of the world and to steal all those resources. But that's not what happened, and we live in a world defined by the consequences of those actions. Centuries later, there is still lasting mistrust and enmity, and sometimes open struggle, between the descendants of those communities. There are heroic efforts to counter that mistrust, and I'm proud to say that members of this community have often been a part of that. But it remains true that too often, we remain isolated and cut off from all those other "heres." Some might wish to argue that, given all the history behind us, that's just as well – we risk more damage by insisting on contact. Perhaps that's true in some cases. But I think there's a connective thread between us – Spirit - that invites not only contact, but transformation of our respective lives and communities. That conviction lies behind all of our many partnerships. It's something we'll need to continue to trust.

There are several ways that I'd like to respond to the prompting of the Spirit. I'll share one of those responses today. Two weeks ago I spoke about how the many African diasporic religions have been misunderstood by Christians, and how, quite often, Christian churches have been responsible for disseminating misinformation about those ritual expressions. It winds up being labeled devil worship, or witchcraft, or demonic possession, or a cult, when in reality these are ancient practices with deep roots of wisdom. They are each of them shelters, containing enormous beauty and cultural vitality. Not only that, they've helped to keep people alive through years of horrific persecution. I would have us learn something more about these expressions, and then to begin reaching out to communities in which those African and African diasporic practices are still maintained.

To that end, I've begun to arrange for a series of online lectures that will take place over the next several weeks. The first will take place next Sunday at 4:00 in the afternoon. Liza McAlister is a friend who teaches in the religious studies department at Wesleyan, and she's done a lot of work on Haiti. She'll be in conversation with Jean Daniel Lafontant. Jean-Daniel is a houngan, a priest, within the vodou tradition, and he operates the Nah-Ri-Veh Temple in downtown Port-au-Prince. I've been a guest in that temple, and over the years I've learned much from both Jean-Daniel and Liza. One of the interesting things to know about vodou temples is that they're essentially what we would call community centers. Several families live together in community, and they offer mutual support to one another, and to the community around them as well, helping to provide food and education, as well as religious services. Tragically, Nah-Ri-Veh suffered a devastating fire this past fall, and Jean-Daniel has been leading efforts to rebuild

that community. Together, Liza and Jean-Daniel will help us to understand what vodou actually is, which is a ritual system of prayer designed to strengthen and support a people who are under enormous pressure. I hope you'll tune in next Sunday for that presentation. And at some point, when the way is clear, I'd love for some of you to meet the people at Nah-Ri-Veh, who are lovely. This is a maligned spiritual system that deserves our understanding, and perhaps our ongoing support as well. In future weeks, we'll have several other opportunities to learn about other African derived expressions of faith. I don't know any other churches that are doing this kind of thing. It's a testament to the spiritual vision that's been in play, "here," for a long time now.

Because this is the day of our annual meeting, I'll close with the words about the Spirit that Paul wrote to the Corinthian community. It's yet another way of reframing the Babel narrative, another way of forging connections across varied regions. In fact, we might even imagine him on a stage somewhere, holding a map of the world, which doubles as a mind, which triples as a human community. Here, he would say, is a region of wisdom. And here, he would gesture, is a region that knows how to heal. He would then point to another part, and say, here is an area that practices discernment, and pointing to another part, he would tell us that here is a region that speaks in tongues, which is the practice of communicating across chasms. At last, pointing to the threads tying them all together, he would tell us that all these are activated by one and the same Spirit, which is for the common good.

I believe that same Spirit binds us. But I also sense it drawing us toward some new insights and relationships, connecting us, as David Byrne puts it, to the opposite side.