

## LIVING AT THE PACE OF CHANGE

a sermon delivered by

**Intern Minister Anne Bancroft**

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Opening Words for the service:

The Buddha says: *Do not underestimate good, thinking it will not affect you. Dripping water can fill a pitcher, drop by drop; one who is wise is filled with good, even if one accumulates it little by little.*

### Reading #1 - **Genesis 11:1-9**

<sup>1</sup> Now the whole earth had one language and the same words.

<sup>2</sup> And as they migrated eastward, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there.

<sup>3</sup> 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.

<sup>4</sup> 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; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth."

<sup>5</sup> The LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built.

<sup>6</sup> And the LORD said, "Look, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them.

<sup>7</sup> Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another's speech."

<sup>8</sup> So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city.

<sup>9</sup> Therefore it was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth; and from there the LORD scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.

Reading #2 - Reflection from John M. Hull, Emeritus Professor of Religious Education at the University of Birmingham – on competition and spiritual development:

"Because it is becoming easier to fall out of the middle class, middle class parents are becoming more anxious about the success of their children, and children are forced into more and more competition with each other for success."

## SERMON

So . . . let's talk about first things first. How many of you will be watching the Superbowl tonight? OK – now, I always hesitate to break things down along gender lines, but I suspect we have a bit of a skew here. And it may be that your assumption is that I'm going to fall into the "football is bad" category – but I want you to know that the picture on the cover of your Order of Service is me, with my brother, Brad. I watched a lot of football growing up, and I have to confess I like it. When Tom Brady won the Superbowl with the New England Patriots nine years ago with kicker, Adam Vinaterra's last minute field goal off a Brady drive down the field, I was a crazy woman. For Christmas, in 2003, my oldest daughter made me a calendar – and every month had a different perspective of Tom Brady! (except August, of course, which was a picture of my husband, because that's the month we got married.) I think, maybe, in my enthusiasm, I managed to overlook the fact that Brady's big break, in 2001, was actually a result of stepping in for first string quarterback, Drew Bledsoe, who had been hit so hard by a Jets' linebaker that he was bleeding internally.

There you have it. I like football – and I know it's not all good. Now, for those of you considering a quick exit because you are not football fans, I promise I'm not going to talk about football all morning – but it makes a handy example for a conversation about competition, and about how we're living with the surprisingly slow pace of change. Professional football gives us a really good example of a very complicated topic. Because even though we know it's all about the business; and even though we know professional football players are wrecked by this game; and we know head injuries alone make frightening news, it still captures many of our imaginations. The New York Times Op-ed this past Friday reminded us that we've known about concussion data for 80 years, and yet . . . football is still big stuff. Some of us are even convinced we see in it an athleticism and a stoicism that instills in us – especially as side-line observers, mind you – a kind of pride for our team. AND even though we're not sure it's a great idea, we still let our children and our youth "play" it, if that's the right word.

Now, perhaps it's not football that instills this emotion in you, that gets you pumped up for your side – perhaps it's a less aggressive sport, like golf, or tennis – though I don't think we should be deceived into thinking that either of those sports aren't filled with their own emotional and physical costs.

Whether it's football, or soccer, or no sport at all - it could be the competition for excellence in academics or, might I suggest, finance – we appear to be, in some fundamental way, competitive beings. There's something about competition that motivates us. It moves us to try to want something bigger, or better, or faster, or smarter than we would otherwise have or be.

I don't think that's an altogether bad thing. I think there IS such a thing as healthy competition. Games can be fun and when we're involved in competition – well, as opposed to just watching it, that is - it pushes us to improve and hone our skills and abilities. Debates – which are competing words and ideas - can be productive!

Competition can instill in us a little get-up-and-go, where we might otherwise be complacent.

The question is: when does competition become a negative? When does competition become divisive? When does competition work against the idea of our enjoying a human inclination as ONE people, and separate us by our quest to be, or have *our* people be, The One, the Number One? And how come, even when we recognize that competition is detrimental, damaging to us physically, emotionally, spiritually – how come it takes us so long to change?

Well, now let's see – when does competition become a negative? Well, certainly when we don't play fair. When our children were small, they used to play Monopoly – and inevitably our oldest daughter would win, which totally impressed her younger sister, who thought Elizabeth was probably the most amazing Monopoly player in town. It turns out, our oldest daughter and son were in cahoots, and were stealing money from the bank on a regular basis so that Lilly would always end up last. This is not an example of healthy competition.

Winning at the expense of another's trust: shame on my children!

My husband and I worried a lot when our children were small about how to encourage or discourage their competitive behavior. Competition is certainly driven by reward, and parental love is a pretty big commodity! Our children and youth will do a lot to win our approval, and it's a very important resource for us to respect and be mindful of. How hard we push our children to "play the game," to perform or achieve, can have an enormous impact on their lives.

I wondered, when I was getting this sermon ready, why it is we push them as we do? If we do? What is it we want for them, or are afraid of for them, that we take them here, there and everywhere in an effort to support their abilities to excel? What do we think winning assures them of? Popularity? Safety? Financial security? Happiness?

You know – it's amazing how we all come into the world with different inclinations towards competition, too. I actually thought I might have been putting my oldest child at risk to encourage her competitive nature, because she was born pretty strong and feisty. She was a dedicated worker, but I wanted her to know I loved her regardless of her achievement. And yet, there she was – the high achiever, top of her classes, the accomplished gymnast, the Monopoly miser! By the end of middle school when she still hadn't gotten a grade other than A, I asked her if she was worried about the first time she might get a B? I couldn't imagine her winning streak would last forever, and how would she deal with losing, or failure? And she said, very astutely, that she would only really be disappointed if she got a B because she hadn't tried her hardest. If she did all she could, and then got a B, well . . . that would not be a problem. Be still my heart. She was not only brilliant, but wise (aside from the Monopoly thing). I was a little concerned, but I guess in the long-run, really, I shouldn't have wasted that time. By her sophomore year, she got a C in math because, like, her teacher was such a jerk . . . and, her junior year in English, the teacher called my husband to say she was sorry to hear about our separation,

but Elizabeth still needed to get her paper turned in! We weren't separated. I don't know – maybe I should have pushed that competitive edge a little harder!!

But really – why? What are we afraid of if our children are not the best and the brightest?? If they don't get the highest score or the best grade? We liberal-minded, work to be ONE-world folk? What is our goal for them?

I thought maybe I'd look at some cultural trends to figure that out. In the 1950's, some of you may remember a shift in our culture. It was a post-war phenomenon, I think. There was no need for the same degree of military expenditure, but the country needed to produce something if the economy was going to continue to grow. We had a lot of people, and they needed jobs. A really good strategy was developed around the idea of "planned obsolescence." Goods could be produced that had an intentional shelf-life planned into them – a short life, so that consumers would have to buy new products after a short period of time – therefore, more money in the economy. And we've gotten better and better at this concept. Remember there used to be a Maytag Repair Man? He's gone. I'm not sure where he lives now, because if something goes wrong with your appliance these days, you have to replace the whole thing.

And then, just in case people didn't replace things quickly enough, we also developed the idea of "perceived obsolescence" – which is the idea that we THINK we need to replace things because they're not cool anymore! Something we own is not the latest and greatest, and we put a lot of value on that.

I was trying to do a decade identification thing the other day – trying to figure out when we got so caught up in having the right brand or label, because I don't remember that from my childhood. Was it the 60's? the 70's? So I called my mom, who was a runway model for many, many years. She was quick! She talked about a switch in the 70's, and according to her the first "must have" was Gucci – you had to have a G on your shoes or your bag. It wasn't long before Calvin Klein, and Ralph Lauren got big – and then the Gap, of course, and more recently Abercrombie & Fitch, J.Crew. Tiffany's is practically a household word around here – hello?!

When, exactly, did we start using the phrase "shopping therapy?" Can you imagine anyone 100 years ago talking about shopping therapy?? Where would they have gone?

Lest some of you feel a bit sanctimonious here, if competition for the right clothes isn't your thing, how about cars? This is quite a geographic area to scope out a little auto competition! AND, not just for the fast and furious. Even those of us who are trying to be environmentally responsible now get to compete. Not that I care, mind you, but my new Volkswagen TDI won 2009 Green Car of the Year!

I know – many among us have chosen not to engage in this consumer game, which is great. Many of us wear whatever we've owned for 10, 20 or 30 years, and drive the car we bought in 1980, but the problem is we live in a culture that is still replete with it, and even if we, as adults, have figured out how to manage the emotional impact of living outside what is now the consumer norm, our children and youth are still smack dab in the

middle of it. Even the ones who are bold and strong enough to live counter-culture choices have to cope with the competition of holding course. It's hard!

And frankly, even if they avoid the competition of clothing and cars, the new challenge to keep up is clearly in the tech world. Cell phones that just make calls are kind of old, you know. If all your phone does is make calls, you need a new one. You need to be able to at least text. It really would be better if you had an i-phone or blackberry because then, of course, you can get your e-mails right away – check your facebook page – twitter a bit.

And related to that, make no mistake, is the new non-negotiable competition for **time**. Not time to make change, necessarily – just time.

So . . . let's talk about Babel for a minute. Jennifer sent me a pretty funny link with a debate about how you pronounce it – speaking of competition. It's Bay-bul. No, you idiot, it's Babble. What is wrong with all of you, it's Bah-bul! However you pronounce it, it was a good concept, that tower – everyone working together, speaking the same language – which means they all understood each other - building, one assumes non-competitively - a tower to heaven. Excellent idea. And they were making great progress until they got knocked down and dispersed and given different languages. Were they too close to God? Too close to something resembling ONE-ness? How are we to understand that?

We COULD move again in that direction, you know. If we could try to get beyond our differences, if we could make an effort to hear each other's language in a way that has little to do with whether you're speaking Spanish or French or anything else. We COULD build something good and heavenly again. But I think it has something to do with setting a priority on the collective ONE, as opposed to the individual ONE, using our naturally competitive inclinations towards the good of the whole rather than the success or achievement and any particular individual.

We did a great game with our Coming of Age groups in Newton, called the red/green game. You break up a large group into groups of 4 or 5 people, and give each small group two cards – one red, one green. And you tell them they have to vote as a group – with either card. If all the groups hold up green cards, everyone gets the same amount of reward – modest, but equal. If all the groups hold up green, with one exception, then the green teams get a certain amount, but the red team gets more. The catch is, if every team votes red, no one gets anything. But what you learn is that when it comes to collecting assets based on small-group voting, the good of the whole often goes right out the window. The good of your few – your ONE - often becomes the motivating factor. Competition, combined with some kind of asset reward, is troublesome!

We used this game to help our youth understand the struggle we all face, at various points along the way, between choosing what is good for the individual or the individual's group v. what is good for the whole. It's a question of balance between the idea of One, meaning me and maybe my small gathering of friends that I like to have around me, and the idea of One, meaning "we're all in this together."

You'd think we were beginning to understand, as a global community, that in terms of our earth's future, we are indeed all in this together. And we do see occasional hopeful signs. It's been wonderful seeing how many different countries have offered aid to Haiti in the aftermath of the earthquake – really, a testament to the possibility of world cooperation – all people competing against Mother Nature's destruction, competing against time to save lives. On the other hand, there weren't really any things to argue about there, right? Disarmament, world peace, eradicating hunger – just for example - is a whole other conversation.

If we ask ourselves, who is in my One Group – how would you answer? How many languages does your One Group include? And let's be creative with the idea of language – because I think it really refers to our ability to understand each other across our differences – how much diversity is there in your group? How many different ethnicities does your One include? How many different socioeconomic levels are represented in your One? How many different generations are in your One group? How many different varieties of physical or mental abilities? How many different sexual orientations?

At the end of the day, here's my concern – that the pace of change we're living with with respect to becoming One World is incredibly slow – it's too slow. Despite the fact that time is our most elusive commodity, that we run around like chickens with our heads cut off trying to keep up with all the technological changes that impact our day to day, the pace at which we are effectively building a global community remains painstakingly measured, and I suspect it's a luxury we don't have.

The National Football League should not need 80 years to correct the rules to make football less dangerous – but the people who have allowed that are the same people who have put up with so many other things we know should be different by now. It's us. We have. We observers. We side-liners, who have not demanded anything better or faster. We need to stop competing for ourselves alone, or our own little group, and start competing for the global good. We need to teach our children how to compete together for humanity's gain rather than compete with each other for the best shoes, or the best grade or the best school– and, frankly, the best way to teach them that is by example.

I read in a minister's chat list the other day that sermons should do the following: make 'em laugh, make 'em cry, tell 'em that they're gonna die. And the author added that she tried to tell her truth in at least one part of the whole.

So, here's my truth for this congregation: you have an amazing opportunity to expand your One group right here at home by focusing on becoming a truly multi-generational, multicultural environment. If I leave you with one thought today, it would be that you challenge yourselves to be ONE congregation. Start building ONE world by building it here. It was so great to see your vote two weeks ago in favoring of hiring a Youth and Youth Adult Coordinator – it was a broad-based support for your children and youth. You've got great systems in place for taking care of and dispersing your financial assets; now, take some time to focus on building and growing your human assets – bring your children and youth together with all of you who are here today and build your own heavenly tower. Figure out what language you're all speaking and sing it with one voice.

The biblical writers who gave us the story of a dispersed population had no idea what challenges we would be facing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. They were simply trying to figure out their own world. But we have to take on the challenge of competing with that dispersion because it's not serving us anymore. Start here. Build a bigger, broader ONE here, and don't wait. Start filling the pitcher of your wisdom drop by drop today!

So may it be, and Amen.