

Pentecost 2 Sermon
29 May, 2005
Matthew 7: 21-19

Finding a Way to Use the Maps

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This morning I am not going to preach a sermon. Hopefully, that's good news. I'm going to do something more like a riff on Deuteronomy and Matthew. A riff, if you are not a jazz buff, is an improvisational arc on a theme or themes, not a composed piece for performance.

The Deuteronomy text has God demanding a choice between receiving blessing for obedience or a curse for disobedience. This is the conclusion of a long list of commandments and warnings about dire things that will happen to the Israelites if they do not make the choice God wants them to make. So, they are not really free to make a freely given choice.

All of us who grew up under heavy handed parenting that used threat of physical understand this dynamic. We know well what it is to do what one is supposed to do, far, as disagreeable as that may be, the alternative is even worse. However, this gets turned upside down in the experience of some of us here. Coming out for many of us meant choosing to accept a curse, that is, positioning ourselves to be visible targets of those who condemn us in God's name. The promise is that if we stay in the closet we will receive their blessing, that is, the approval for not acting like we are what we are but pretending we are something else to make everyone else comfortable. So right away we see that

this blessing and cursing thing can cut two ways, depending on who holds the power.

The reading from Matthew is at the conclusion of a collection of sayings of Jesus called the Sermon on the Mount. These sayings all have antecedents in the Hebrew Scriptures, because the intention of this Gospel is to present Jesus as a continuation and extension of Jewish faith. As Moses is credited with giving the Law in Deuteronomy, Jesus gives the “new law,” the Sermon on the Mount. The place of Israel’s law was an issue for the Apostle Paul, and it continues to be a major issue in the religious/political struggle of our own time with the religious right. However, that’s not what’s I want to deal with in my riff with you this morning.

Maria von Franz, one of Carl Jung’s inner circle, observed that when we were young, many of us were told to be good, as if a command to do it would make it happen. What did happen was that we learned how to act as though we were good in order to gain the approval of parents, family members, teachers, priests and pastors or other persons important to us or the family. But the problem is that it didn’t make us good. The more we try to look like what we are supposed to be, the greater the distance between what and who we know we actually are. Again, it is a process not unlike that of being in the closet, living two unconnected lives, one hidden from view and inner, and one public and maintained by appearance. That distance between the outside and the inside is the source of distress, dis-ease, guilt, and other things destructive.

Those of us who have learned to read between the lines of our own culture in order to survive and find our way, can transfer this skill to help us understand how these texts have been used and how we can find value in them.

Ancient cultures in the Mediterranean basin and Tigris and Euphrates basin were embodiments of masculine value of the authority in hierarchical power embedded in ideas of kingship with its accompanying militarism. This idea permeates the Scriptures we have received the way a drop of ink in a glass of water diffuses itself throughout the water. So, God in the Hebrew Scriptures is the predominantly a Warrior King demanding obedience and punishing disobedience with ruthlessness. We might add that the Hebrew Warrior God was much more successful than Aries or Mars could ever have hoped to be, because when the records are read, he had the highest body count of any of them.

So, how can we find a way to use these documents so permeated with hierarchical power and find in them a way to point to freedom and integrity and meaning?

You have a two sided handout of maps. One from the century prior to the time of Jesus by the Greek philosopher Posidonius maps the known world as it was understood. On the reverse side is half of a map of the world printed in 1482 but repeating the map drawn by Ptolemy in the Second Century of the CE with some fanciful and creative additions. It was during the second Century that Orthodox Catholic party began its assault on Christians they considered heretics, repressing Gospels and Epistles that were disagreeable, and editing the ones we know now as the New Testament or “Christian” Scriptures to more clearly reflect their point of view.

Compare these maps to what we actually know about the world and the territories they mapped, and ask yourself: Would you literally follow these maps to find a way to plan your trip to Umbria or Paris or even Rome? I don't think so. When you look at them it is clear that have an idea about some part of the world, but most of the world is missing, especially the part we happen to live in. The Mediterranean area is there in a recognizable but inaccurate way.

So, doesn't this give us a way to consider that those who wrote and edited the writings that are the Bible may have had this same kind of dynamic at work: These writings are far from anything we would accept as historically or literally accurate by modern standards, anymore than we would these maps. What we know about the Christians who were suppressed and whose writings were destroyed has come from the discovery of Gospels and Epistles that were long buried and hidden. From those documents we learn about perhaps the earliest Christians and their writers were never intended to describe the external territory, but instead to map the journey of the individual soul with God. WE even get this in the writings of Paul when he deals with the Hebrew Scriptures, you know, Hagar is the Law, Sarah the Promise, and all that which strikes our ears so strange, because it does not take the text at the surface as being what the text is for.

Looking at these Posidonius' map as a "model" we can see how it can happen that those who insist that the Bible is literally true in all matters, including science and geography and morals, have justified some of the worst things that humans have done to each other: slavery and segregation, burning of people at the stake, stripping the environment, holy wars against heretics and heathen, relegation of women to second class status, violent correction of children, subjugation of native populations, punitive civil justice systems, refusal to accept the scientific evidence of the earth, the world and the cosmos, and at present, the war against sexual diversity. When I was in Florida earlier this year I saw a bumper sticker, "The Bible says it, I believe it, that settles it!" That's scary.

Some have reacted to this literalistic approach by trying to distill the biblical text into its essence by removing all unscientific things. Whether the work of the demythologizers or

the Jesus Seminar. Such a quest has been completely unsuccessful because it is trying to make the Scriptures map something they don't map.

Martin Luther is both helpful and obstructive. He found in the Scriptures a message that alleviated his Augustinian sense of total sinfulness, and used that to undermine a hierarchical Church obsessed with power and authority. For him the Bible was a map to find grace in and through Jesus the Christ, and he was more than ready to throw away everything else in the Bible that seemed to contradict that central message. Unfortunately, he could not have known that he replaced one pope for another, for many protestants have elevated their interpretations of the Bible into the position of paper pope usurping the place and role of the living God. This is at the heart of the struggle with the religious right.

So, how might we approach the Scriptures? Using the metaphor of map, we might be able to find a fresh way to use the Scriptures if we consider it a collection of maps from different times and cultures in the ancient world reflecting how they understood who they were, who God was, how God and humans inter relate, what is the meaning of life and death, and how do we act towards one another and the earth that is our home?

The power of maps was driven to me this week, when Tuesday morning I got off the Muni and notice a gray haired couple looking quite touristy looking at the neighbor map in the Powell St. Station. I asked if I could help. The man walked away, but the woman said, "We don't know where we are." Unless one can orient where one is in relationship to the map, a map makes no sense. With my finger, I put it on the place of the map that was the Powell St. Station. "Oh, that's where we are," she said, "Thanks," and away they

went.

Unless we know where we are in relationship to the maps that are in the Bible, we can't figure out where we are in relationship to those ancient stories and sayings, and how to make sense of them in our own journey to wholeness, integrity, responsibility. The map we need is to find the way the stories in the Bible, including especially that of Jesus, are stories of each of us, of our discovery that God's Spirit lives in us, what the Apostle Paul mentions so frequently in Galatians and Philippians and Ephesians, the Christ in us. The essence of who we are, that is what we need and must find in these stories and words.

I also would like to suggest that instead of demythologizing, we need to remythologize. We need to learn how to read these maps, not as literal descriptions, but symbols to open us to the territory, our own lives with all their ambiguities and conflicts and polarities. We cannot be whole unless, as Joshua reminded us last week, we integrate those things when are polarities within. This is the map whose symbol is the Incarnation, that is, the joining together of the divine and the human, spiritual and physical in Jesus and in each of us.

In the Gospel of Thomas, one suppressed by those orthodox literalists of the second and third centuries. Jesus says, "I come from the One who is Openness...when my disciples are open, they are filled with light. When they are divided within, they are filled with darkness." (Logion 61)

So, here we are. If we were to try to sort this out for us today, I think the writer of the Gospel would say: Have you checked your map lately? Do you know where you are going? Are you on the route that you want to be? Are you lost or not sure?

If we are looking for a map to wholeness, then we need an orientation to how to use the maps in the Bible: heaven and hell are not alternate destinations, like SF or LA, but part of the experience of the ongoing journey of our lives, like driving in and out of rain, snow or sun. Blessings and curse, we also know meet us along the way. In fact, the curses which assign us to hell by the religious and political right wing are directed at the very thing we have learned is a blessing of God. And how many have found a blessing turned into a curse through misuse and pride. Rock and sand, we know well inside us when we feel we are on either or one foot on each at the same time. Sunshine or storm, yes we know our lives pass through both. Wise and foolish. Well, perhaps that one is simple: I am wise and anyone who disagrees with me is foolish, or dumb. Nah! Kidding! Those, too, we know often well from hindsight that what at first seemed so wise actually wasn't, and the reverse true also.

Instead of these polarities that divide us, when we open ourselves to wholeness by embracing the polarities, we radically shift our 'destination' and the route we are on. In fact, our life is about how we journey, how we travel. That's the destination. It is living in the 'real' world with God and in God in the concrete actual situations of our lives.

So, along the journey we need to stop for refreshment, nourishment. Using our metaphor, the Table is the place we come for the grace we need to continue this remarkable journey. The roadside inn is open this morning, for this kind of journeying takes a lot of grace, whatever is one's way. But, we are not just on the way, in fact, the Way is our day by day lives. This is because the Way is the actually territory in which we live our lives,

all the stuff of our hopes and disappointments, our dreams and our struggles, our gifts and our vulnerabilities, our destructiveness and our creativity, the struggles we have had to work through and the challenges that lie ahead. It's real life, all our lives are about.

We can only be whole we allow all that we are to be enfolded and accepted and integrated. So that the story of Jesus as we read it becomes a way we can read our own story to wholeness and integrity, to living with hostility in a difficulty world, to living with joy in a world with beauty and love. From map to territory.