

MARCHING OFF THE MAP

Acts 11:1-18

I remember well the very first time I used a GPS to plan a trip to Vermont. I was traveling with 2 church members the day after the 2004 Charge Conference and the atmosphere in Shirley's Honda Odyssey was quite electric. We were on our way to a weeklong stay at a Trapp Family timeshare in Stowe Vermont – a gift to me from the Virginia Conference Lay Leader. Armed with turn by turn printed directions from MapQuest, as well as the most recent Rand McNally road atlas, I was quite prepared for our adventure. Even though I had found MapQuest to be quite reliable, I always made sure I had a road atlas – if for no other reason than checking out some new route which might save us many miles hence fewer hours in the van.

I had learned to use a map at a very young age as Papa insisted we become well-versed in navigating our way to and from various destinations. Of course, back then, all we had were gas station road maps which were always nearly impossible to refold. Now they are virtually obsolete and rarely found in service stations unless buried somewhere in the back with used oil filters, fan belts and tires. My navigation skills proved to be quite handy especially during the many solo trips I took in my very first car; my trusty 1971 Clementine Orange VW.

Paper maps may seem to be going the way of the cassette tape and the black-and-white TV. How many of you confess to still using road maps, or have them stored somewhere in your home? But are we there yet? Will paper maps someday be something we only see in museums? Well, not so fast, says Joel Minster, chief cartographer for Rand McNally, the nation's largest mapmaker: "I don't think paper maps are going anywhere, but people may be using them differently, more as a companion to the online or digital map." In fact, the paper map may be the only truly reliable full-time form of navigation. Despite the ease and convenience of technology; batteries go dead, a spilled coffee can fry a GPS unit, or you may be in a place where the signal is weak, not to mention the fact that the GPS is sometimes just dead wrong.

Homiletics Senior Writer Bob Kaylor reports that people using GPSes to find his church always wind up on the back side of the property, acres away from the church, where there is no road to get there from the GPS destination. He has a map to the church printed on the back of his business card and tells people that the map is always the best way to find it. (*Homiletics* online, 2013)

The other reason why maps aren't going anywhere is that they provide one thing that GPS and online directions – despite their colors, detail and satellite imagery – cannot: *context*. While a GPS can tell you where you are and what's immediately in front of you, it can't show you all the alternate routes, the possible shortcuts, the way to get around that traffic jam. It won't lay out the whole trip for you in one panoramic view. "Paper maps offer big-picture geometry," says Debra Turner, vice president of marketing for Compass Maps. "They can show you four or five counties, and not just the neighborhood you're driving in." Where a GPS chirps "Recalculating!" when you veer off the route, a paper map will quietly show you all the possible ways to get there that you may never have considered. (*Homiletics* online, 2013)

The brand-new Odyssey was “loaded” with all the bells and whistles available at that time which included a Global Positioning System/GPS. I was confident I had no need of this new-fangled gimmick, but Shirley insisted on programming it. From the onset, I found the somewhat disembodied voice rather annoying as it insisted on sending me in directions I did not want to go. I discovered, however, that Harold (the name we had given to the ‘voice’) was very accommodating and would quickly adjust to my chosen route. For 700+ miles we carried on a bit of a contentious relationship as Harold tried to convince me “his” way was correct, while I, just as stubbornly, insisted on my tried and true path.

How like our Scripture lesson this morning from the Book of Acts. As our text opens we find that Peter has returned to Jerusalem after visiting in Joppa, and he is chastised by circumcised believers for eating with the uncircumcised. I looked up the map of ancient Israel and noted that Joppa is along the Mediterranean Sea while Jerusalem is inland. I was not joking when I told you of my love of looking at maps!! Ironically, I am terrible at geography when it comes to Trivial Pursuit questions!!

While Peter is in Joppa he has the most unusual dream where he is shown an array of foods Jews are forbidden to eat. When the voice of God orders him to eat, Peter’s response is classic, “*Absolutely not, Lord! Nothing impure or unclean has ever entered my mouth!*” God’s response is one that seems pretty simple but is filled with meaning: “*Never consider unclean what God has made pure.*” This happened three times then everything was pulled back up into heaven. Here is Peter again with things happening in threes!! Clearly this is a significant occurrence for him. All of this is to prepare Peter for his meeting with Cornelius – a Gentile who had heard about Jesus and the Way and wanted to learn more. You know the rest of the story as Cornelius and his household was saved.

This story is so important to the early church that it is told in chapter 10 and retold in chapter 11 – the section I just shared. No issue was more debated by the early Christians or more important to them than whether their faith was intended for only the Jews or should it also be made available to the Gentiles while allowing them to remain Gentiles. (Feasting on the Word, year C, volume 2, 451). This is such an amazing scripture, for it speaks loud and clear how you and I are to reach out to the unchurched. For me the message is that we are to share the Good News of Jesus Christ without requiring people to change! When I was weighing the pros and cons of making a true commitment to Christ, I struggled with the idea that I was going to completely have to change my life. But God does not require this of anyone. And since I have realized this from my own personal experiences supported by the Biblical text, I know I am called to witness to the unsaved and unchurched. I am also called to save the unsaved church! As Jesus says in the Gospel message for today from John 13:34, “*I give you a new commandment: Love each other, just as I have loved you, so you must love each other. This is how everyone will know that you are my disciples, when you love each other.*”

Peter goes to meet with Cornelius and realizes that God has given him the same gift God had given to Jewish believers and asks the question, “*Who was I that I could hinder God?*” I am sure Peter was amazed with this new understanding of what God has called him to do! Think about it.

It is right in John 3:17, *“If God so loved the world that Jesus came not to condemn the whole world but to save it, who are you and I to try to limit the mission of God to redeem humankind?”* (Feasting, 454) Every time you or I or the church excludes someone from full participation in the redeeming efforts of God, Peter’s question should trouble us and the church.

When I first realized that I did not need to change in order to become a Christian, this huge weight was lifted from my shoulders. Many years later when I realized that it was not up to me to get people to change their life, and or lifestyles it was equally freeing. It is the work and job of the Holy Spirit to convict believers that change is needed, NOT me, nor you. You have heard me share numerous times how God continues to mold and shape me into the person I am meant to be, so change is ongoing in my life. It is change, however, that comes about as I am convicted that change is needed – not by someone hitting me over the head with a two by four.

Since I was a college student 45 years ago this month, God has been bringing me to build friendships with men and women who are gay. At first it terrified me – this little Catholic “goody two shoes” sheltered girl had never before met or known a gay person. I seemed to be a magnet for people who live alternate lifestyles. It wasn’t until many years later when I served as a chaplain intern at UVA that I began to gain some understanding about this. Possibly and probably because I know what it is not to belong because of my hearing I am more accepting and understanding of others who do not fit societies’ mold. I have been told by many that I am easy and comfortable to talk to. I hope this never changes - especially now when there is so much dissension and division among the larger church.

When I was in my first appointment some of you may recall there was an uproar about a gay man seeking membership in one of our United Methodist Churches. He had been fully involved with the congregation for some time, sang in the choir and was active in the ministry of the church. It came to the pastor’s attention, however, that this man was gay and was in a committed relationship, so the pastor refused to accept him into the membership of the church. The pastor was acting completely within the standards set by the Book of Discipline. He was following the letter of the law. He was also taken to task by our resident Bishop, removed from his pulpit and the shock waves from this were felt across the entire connectional system. Meetings were called in each district led by the District Superintendents. I was serving on what was then the Portsmouth District. The meeting I attended was filled to the brim with comments from other pastors in support of the Pastor and condemning the actions of the Bishop.

Some of the comments were, “He will be breaking the vows of membership!” This particular statement bothered me deeply and I listened with my spirit growing more and more ill at ease. Finally, I could be still no longer. Once recognized by my D.S., I asked the question, “If we are talking about members breaking their vows, please tell me what I am to do with all the members who do not tithe? What about numbers of divorced and remarried people who have broken their marriage vows? What about all the single couples in the church who are living together without being married? And please tell me, what am I to do with a head usher who is a charter member of the KKK???” Absolute. Dead. Silence. Followed. All of these scenarios were present in my

two-point charge – my very first appointment, and my D.S. recognized the truth of my statement, and finally said, “Our churches would be pretty empty, wouldn’t they?” Exactly.

It was in those moments that I firmly committed myself and my ministry to truly welcoming all who entered the doors of the church. It is not my job to change people. That is solely the job of the Holy Spirit. It IS my job to remain true to the Biblical texts which I do to the best of my ability, and to serve as a mediator between God and anyone God chooses to send to me. How can anyone be open to becoming all that God intends for them to be if they are not first allowed to establish a relationship with God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and be nurtured in a community of faith?

You have become accustomed to my bringing each Sunday’s message to a close with a story. Unfortunately, I have no such story to share this morning that I have not already shared. I did find the following statement though which I think pretty much sums up the message from Acts 11:1-18. Through his dreams and visions, Peter is being taught to ‘offer Christ to all.’ Peter is being challenged to cast aside some of the concrete teachings of his time – that the Messiah had come only for the Jews. As Gentiles, we love this message. But...what if we were to take this message to our churches today? What if God were trying to show us a new way? What if we are truly being led by Christ to open wide the doors of Marquis to every and any person God chooses to send to us? What if some of these people are homosexuals? What if some of these people are a different color? What if some of these people come from non-Christian churches? The statement I stumbled across in my research?

...So the church becomes the place where a nice, pleasant, bland person stands in front of other nice, pleasant, bland people urging them to be nicer, more pleasant and more bland. Jesus didn’t die to create nice, pleasant, bland people. He died so that sinners would find grace and forgiveness, and, in the joy and exuberance of their discovery, would find it impossible to keep quiet about it.

It’s worth noting that Jesus didn’t condemn bad people. He condemned stiff people. We condemn the bad ones and affirm the stiff ones. Whether it was a prostitute or a tax collector or an outcast, Jesus reached out to them. It was a motley crew of riffraff that followed him around, and it never embarrassed him or made him feel uncomfortable. It still doesn’t. But he’s still angry at the stiff ones...

I believe that one of the reasons the world isn’t attracted to our religion and to our churches is because they think what we have is only for good people. These words are indeed worth pondering!!