

OFF THE MAP

May 19, 2019

The Rev. Dr. Howard Chapman
First Presbyterian Church of Marion, Iowa
Text: Acts 11:1-18

SCRIPTURE

Acts 11:1-18

Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, saying, "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?" Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, "I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. There was something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners; and it came close to me. As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. I also heard a voice saying to me, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.' But I replied, 'By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' But a second time the voice answered from heaven, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.' This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, 'Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.' And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?" When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, "Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life."

The Word of the Lord...

Thanks be to God!

SERMON

Sometime in the next week or two will mark the 45th anniversary of the first time I set foot in the state of Iowa. I had just finished my sophomore year at a small Christian college in upstate New York. The previous summer my family had moved from New York to southern California. They had wanted me to move with them, but there was a certain young lady at that college who had captured my heart, so I wasn't going anywhere. But my dad did find me a pretty decent summer job, so sometime around the end of May or the first of June in 1974, I drove across the country with two college buddies in a beat up old Mercury station wagon. We came across on Interstate 80, right through the middle of Iowa.

The father of one of my buddies was a member of AAA, the American Automobile Association. So to help us navigate this trek from Rochester, NY to Glendale, CA, he got us a Trip Tik. I had never seen one before and thought it was great. Some of you remember the old AAA Trip Tiks, don't you? For those of you who don't know what I am talking about, these were little booklets, custom made for your trip, with a small section of the map on each page. The folks at AAA would mark each page with the route you needed to take, and stamp various comments, like where there was road construction or a detour. On the back side of these pages, local hotels, campgrounds, gas stations, restaurants and various tourist attractions would be listed. You were also given a big stack of those paper maps that are impossible to fold back up the same way once you unfold them. I am sure you all remember those.

I suppose you can still go to AAA and order a Trip Tik if you want one, but not too many people do that anymore. No, it is high tech all the way with various Global Positioning System or GPS devices. Most new cars have them built right into the dashboard. They are truly wonderful things. You enter in your destination

and after a few seconds of calculation you are instructed where to go and when to turn step by step, for your entire trip. It even tells you what time you can expect to arrive, so with a quick phone call along the way, supper will be hot and on the table when you get there.

But no system is perfect. A few years ago, Judy and I were down in Florida, using GPS to get us back to the airport for our flight home. We followed the instructions until the road we were on ended abruptly looking into a cow pasture. We could see the airport about a half a mile off beyond the field, but there was no way we could go any further. It was not too much of a problem. We turned around, went down another road, and soon we found our way to the airport. However, every year the rangers at Death Valley National Monument rescue a number of people who have relied too heavily on their GPS devices. The satellite transmissions are not the problem. They will tell you exactly where you are. But the GPS data base sometimes uses information that is more than 50 years old. In that time some of the roads have deteriorated into rough tracks that are impossible to travel if you do not have 4-wheel-drive, while others have simply vanished beneath the shifting desert sands. As a result, drivers can travel for hours before learning that a road that looks fine on their GPS screen peters out in the middle of nowhere. When they turn around to retrace their route they run out of gas. With temperatures in Death Valley regularly topping 110 degrees, a mistake like that can be deadly.

What the rangers advise is to take along the latest paper map, and always to keep the bigger picture in mind. The GPS screen is very helpful in a local immediate area, but doesn't show alternate routes or how the terrain will change in the miles ahead. The rangers also urge you to have back up supplies and also to use some plain old common sense. Pay attention to what is actually happening in front of you rather than assuming whatever navigational system you are using is accurate.

Our scripture lesson for this morning is from the book of Acts, which reads like a travelogue for first-century Christianity. If you decide to read through the whole book, it is helpful to actually study a map to understand where everything takes place. Often you can find those maps in the back of your Bible. But today's text is a bit like a spiritual GPS calling for the early church to "recalculate" just where they are heading. It is at a pivotal point as these early Christians try to figure things out. They are struggling with issues of identity and of just what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ.

The events described in our text take place probably a year or two after the resurrection, when Peter had become the leader of the church. He had left the city of Jerusalem and was hanging out in the coastal city of Joppa. It is there that something radical and revolutionary takes place.

Peter sees an unusual vision that inspires him to interact with a Roman army officer, named Cornelius. In the previous chapter Cornelius is described as "a devout man, who feared God." Peter shares with him the good news of Jesus, but then Peter does something that was absolutely shocking. He entered into the home of Cornelius, a Gentile, a non-Jew, sat down with his family and friends and shared a meal with them. Now, to a devout Jew, this was unthinkable. It was highly likely the food offered was not kosher, so to willingly eat such a meal was a flagrant violation of the law of Moses.

When Peter returns to Jerusalem, he faces harsh criticism for his actions. Up to this point, everyone thought they knew what was going on and what they were supposed to be doing. They simply needed to convince all true and faithful Jews that Jesus was the Messiah, God's Anointed One. At some point, in the very near future, Jesus would return from heaven, overthrow the Roman oppressors, set up his kingdom here on earth, and everything would be just perfect. It all seemed very clear and everything was mapped out for them.

But now Peter was heading off in a different direction. Actually, this was more than that. He was heading off the map. They had no coordinates, nothing to navigate with, no way to get their bearings. You see, for more than a thousand years they had been using their own GPS to find their way; that is the Genesis to Prophets Scripture device. And it had been very effective with detailed instructions. Keeping the Jewish laws was more than just a matter of obeying the rules. It offered God's people a way of understanding who they were and how

they fit into the world as they saw it. Yet, here was Peter completely disregarding everything they thought was absolutely necessary to function. What was he thinking? It was very disturbing and they did not know what to make of it all. So some were angry and critical with what he had done.

Now maps are useful for traveling and figuring out where you are and where you want to go, but maps are also necessary to define borders and boundaries. As I was working on this sermon, I could not help but think about what is currently going on in our country. This story is about crossing a border and someone going to a place where others think he should not go. It is also a story about people being deeply divided on over what they believe is a very critical issue. We all know about that, don't we?

They say our country is more divided than it has been at any time since the Civil War. One study has shown that 1 out of 6 people say that currently they are not speaking to a family member or close friend over issues surrounding the 2016 election. And yet, something like 92% of the population hate this polarization and would like it to end. Our text for this morning is an ancient story, but it seems very relevant to what is happening today.

I mentioned that the rangers in Death Valley urge travelers to pay attention to the reality in front of them, rather than relying too heavily on whatever navigational system they might be using. That is what Peter was trying to do, trying to get as big and as complete a picture as possible. The reality he was experiencing was that God was showing him something that did not match up with the rigid rules about what you could eat and who you could eat with. So Peter stops looking at the one page on his spiritual Trip Tik; his perspective shifts beyond the little screen on his GPS. He begins to see how God's plan for the whole world is unfolding just like a huge paper map, and as it unfolds he realizes it is impossible to go back to the way it once was. The Holy Spirit has brought Peter, a Jew, into the house of Cornelius, a Gentile. Each left the path they were on to discover a new route heading in the direction God wanted them to go.

Now, Peter's reaction to the criticism he faced when he returned to Jerusalem is very interesting. I don't know about you, but my first instinct when I am criticized is to become very defensive, if not counterattack. But that is not what Peter does. It says that he began to "explain it to them, step by step." In the Greek it is literally something like, "Starting at the beginning, Peter organized what happened in an orderly way..." Peter could have been angry and defensive. He could have been extremely critical of his critics. But that is not what he did. His attitude was not "They are so completely wrong and I know I am absolutely right." Rather his approach was "They don't understand and I can help them."

While Peter's critics were angry with him, they were also his brothers and sisters in Christ. They had been through a lot together. So he was able to respond with compassion and patience. Slowly and deliberately he explains what had happened, and how God was at work each step along the way. He concludes by saying, "If then God gave (these Gentiles) the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?"

Now, how can you argue with that? Peter essentially is saying, "This wasn't my idea. I just got caught up in something beyond my control. It blew me off the map. I wasn't even in the driver's seat. God just took me to where God decided I needed to be. What else could I possibly do?" And the text says he silenced his critics, and they praised God, saying, "Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life."

It is a great story with all sorts of lessons, but as I was working on it this week I came across a little one-minute video with snippets of a conversation with Arthur Brooks. I posted it on my FaceBook page if you want to see it. I had never heard of Arthur Brooks before so I did a little research on him. He was actually a professional classical French horn player, before he went on to get a doctorate in political analysis. He now writes opinion pieces for the Washington Post and is president of a think tank in Washington called the American Enterprise Institute.

I know I would not agree with everything that Dr. Brooks believes and proposes, but in March his latest book came out that is entitled *Love Your Enemies; How Decent People Can Save America*. (Love your enemies... hmm... I think I know where he got that idea.) Now, I have not read this book, but from various interviews and articles, it seems that Dr. Brooks says the basic problem in our country is not anger or hostility. Rather, it is a culture of contempt. He defines contempt as the “utter conviction of the worthlessness of the other person.” He says that this attitude is pervasive throughout our society but especially on social media. So with all the issues that divide us, abortion, immigration, climate change, same sex marriage, racism, gun rights, on and on, more and more the tendency is have contempt for anyone who has a different opinion. If you don’t see things the way I do, then you are worthless. Dr. Brooks says that as long as we continue in this culture of contempt we will find no solutions to any of these problems. Rather, we will become more and more polarized and divided.

So, what does he propose? Well, if the root of the problem is regarding the other person as worthless, you begin by seeing the worth in that person. Dr. Brooks calls it practicing warm-heartedness. You deliberately work at finding the value in the other person and looking for common ground, exploring what you can agree with. He says that all of us, regardless of our political position, we all share two common values, compassion and fairness. We all have compassion, caring about those who are suffering and having a difficult time. And we all have a sense of justice, of fairness, that everyone has certain inalienable rights. So we can take these values that we share and work together for the common good.

A lot of what Arthur Brooks was talking about resonates with this story from Acts. There was a lot of contempt going on. These early Christians regarded the Gentiles as having little worth. They did not matter. They then treated Peter with contempt for wandering off into uncharted territory. Fortunately, Peter did not respond in the same way. He responded with warm-heartedness, understanding that they were simply lost and bewildered by what was going on. He was willing to be patient and compassionate, listening to their concerns, and helping them to get to the place where they needed to be.

My friends, in about ten weeks I will no longer be your pastor and there will be a lot of changes in this church. Over the next year or two there may be times when you will feel lost, when you will feel like you have wandered off the map. When that happens, it will be easy to be critical, to criticize the leaders, the Session, the pastor. Emotions will run high, and some might be angry and some might be very defensive. I don’t know if there is a way to avoid all that. But I would urge you, as strongly as I possibly can, do not allow yourself to regard anyone else with contempt. You may intensely disagree, be vehemently opposed to what someone is doing, but that person still has tremendous worth. That person is still your sister or brother in Christ. You must still treat that person with patience and compassion.

This text from Acts is one of the lectionary readings for this Sunday. The gospel reading for this week is John 13:31-35. It is there that we find Jesus saying this, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” Those are ancient words, but they are important and relevant for us today. They must be our guide. No matter how things might change, no matter how much we might disagree with one another, we must continue to love one another as Christ has loved us. If we do that, we will always find our way. Thanks be to God. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.