

## **THE GEOGRAPHY OF GOSPEL: Coastlands**

Luke 6:27-39

The geography of Israel is, as we remember, various. It would seem that creation has written with remarkable variety across the earth---again the meaning of ‘geography’---even in that land that several call ‘holy’. There are rivers and mountains, lakes and deserts, broad valleys and narrow canyons, plains and hills and cliffs and even beaches. The geography Israel also includes coastlands, areas where bodies of water intersect with acres of land. Coastlands are prominent on every continent and essential to all islands.

In the land where Jesus walked, the seacoast is an important part of the geography, so important that the Hebrew language refers to the “west” as “seaward” The sea provides food caught by those who live along the coast. Its winds cool and its weather brings forth needed rain. In Israel, the flatlands along the coast provide opportunities for agriculture even as the land rises into the Shephelah, the gentle foothills of the Judean mountains.

The seacoast also welcomes trade and provides travel routes. Joseph’s family undoubtedly follows the coast from Israel down to Egypt as his sons seek food during the famine. But with all its benefits, the seacoast might also welcome invading forces who will come to dominate the land. So it is in the time of Jesus. Though great Roman roads had been built in some of the empire, Romans garrisons arrive in Israel more frequently by ship, using and then building harbors to welcome both leaders and forces to this part of empire. There is a measure of vulnerability that occurs with a seacoast, even as this land is highly valued for all that it offers.

Jesus preaches in a variety of settings. Matthew recounts a long sermon set on a hillside along the Sea of Galilee. Luke remembers Jesus teaching on a more level ground. We can recall words spoken in the temple, in a field, in a synagogue, in a home, on a mountaintop, in the wilderness, along the road, and even from and in a boat on the sea. The words of Jesus are not restricted to any singular place, rather they flow across the land to water the soul of all and to flood justice to every part of the world. According to Luke, the plain is the setting for teaching similar to that of Matthew. The plain might have been the wide valley bisecting the traditional land of Israel or, as was suggested last week, along the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Or it might have taken place in the level land along the coast though we do not hear much of Jesus’ travel to the coastland, except, perhaps in his conversation with the Syro-Phoenician woman who seeks to heal a possessed daughter.

Nevertheless, wherever it might be sighted, level land may offer opportunities for people to gather. Not only ease of travel but also the density of population might suggest that crowds would be possible. But then, the number of hearers is not nearly as important as the teaching itself.

As with Matthew, there are short, almost proverb-like statements that are followed by longer, often more developed explorations of spiritual truths. Such as combination of expression attempts to reach many even as the jingle in the midst of a commercial does in our own time. Short phrases remain more memorable than convoluted statements based upon philosophical reasoning. “Love one another” can be engraved on a plaque but its meaning in practice might require several pages of text to be fully understood. Interpretation....

Thus at the conclusion of a collection of beatitudes and in Luke, “woeattitudes”, we encounter longer considerations, the first of these being the nature and extent of this “loving one another.” We would first notice that such love is bound up in a number of activities directed toward those who might be counted “enemies”. In addition to the act of loving, disciples are called to do good, bless, and pray. The object of these activities might provide a small survey of those who might be labeled “enemy”, those who “hate you”, curse you” and “abuse you.” The activity of love is to be directed to those who “strike you”, “take” from you, and “beg from you.” creating a much larger population who could be easily counted enemy. Vulnerability might bring forth fear or it could grow generosity.

At this time, in Saint Louis, Missouri, our General Conference is meeting to decide, in its words, “The Way Forward” More than 800 laypersons and clergy have gathered in that Midwestern city to consider how we can create unity in the midst of differences. The presenting problem or identified patient to use nomenclature of both the medical and psychological fields is the church’s relationship to a small part of the total community. Responses to the activity of this group ranges from death to full acceptance. Because we expect to be a global church, remembering that John Wesley proclaimed ‘the world is our parish”, we sometimes stumble over alternate histories, traditions, and politics that threaten to divide people into camps, perhaps enemy camps. We can wonder if there is grace sufficient to overcome threat of division.

Coming together in conference has created a vulnerability that may result in splitting the denomination again. We remember that the Methodist movement has a history, one shared with all of Christianity. Since the split between Peter and Paul in the days of the apostles, the church has divided on the basis of politics, organization, and even occasionally theology so that there are now many different denominations throughout the world. The Methodist Church has also split along lines of power and practice, spirituality and doctrine, splintering into more than fifty denominations that count Wesley in their heritage. Some suggest that although we might lament the dividing, the church has grown stronger because it does embrace variety.

Those gathering in St. Louis have made themselves vulnerable to the grief caused in any split. Some of the language used in preconference conversation has suggested that points of view differ because there are enemies among us. How might we act lovingly in such an instance. Appropriately, the conference began with worship and prayer with every

expectation that the love of God may overwhelm our fear of enemy, this love received and this love offered. As we move beyond the urge to prevail, dominate, win, we may find ourselves open and even prepared to love actively. Perhaps humility will be central to such love.

Let us not believe that any one church or any part of the church expresses absolute truth. Perhaps it is the case that we, in the words of the Apostle Paul, “all sin and fall short of the glory of God.” At the very least it might be admitted that although we all seek truth, it seems absolutely true that we shall be unable to formulate it. This love is to be discovered and practiced not created and controlled. This sort of love often surprises both the lover and the beloved, causing all to grow in this same love of God. It is a sacrificing, serving love that trusts God to be its source. We do know that the conference will end no later than Tuesday evening. We do not know how it will conclude its business and how we shall move forward as Christ’s followers, Wesley’s people. Let us continue to pray for the Spirit to energize the grace of everyone and move all to peace.

Indeed, prayer has been the conference’s first activity. Within the context of the hymn “I surrender all” the conference was called to prayer and the activity of prayer lasted the whole day as people wandered from one prayer center to another, one experience to one more.

Early this morning, remembering that there is a two-hour time difference between St. Louis and Glendale, the conference gathered under the leadership of our bishops to join in worship and prayer. One of the curious aspects of the role of bishops is that none of them is allowed to vote on any of the issues that come before General Conference. These men and women from throughout the world are present to lead and preside but not to decide. It is up to those who have been elected to determine the results of conferencing together.

Methodists have always been known to be a singing people and thus worship began this morning at the good Wesleyan arising hour of 5:00 p.m. with song. Bishop Robert Hoshibata of the Desert Southwest Annual Conference served as song leader for hymns including “Lift High the Cross”, “Shine, Jesus, Shine”, “Akekho Ofana Naye” and “Siyahamba” as bishops processed into the auditorium. The call to worship was led by Native Americans who invited all to “walk more peacefully” even as we would “love our neighbors as ourselves.” A reading from Ephesians included verses exhorting all to lead a life worthy of the gospel with a life filled with “humility, gentleness, and patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” [Ephesians 4:2-3] Bishop Kenneth Carter, as president of the Council of Bishops, offered the message invited all to tell their story and to realize that God has a story as well, recognizing that God is still teaching this story to all and that this story calls us to be in mission. Carter reminds us that if we will watch and listen, we will find this story, this God.

Knowing that we are not of one mind as United Methodist, Bishop Carter invited, urged us to “love people who do not love [us]back” as we gather in submission to the cross of Christ. He recalled that Wesley asserted that there is divine evidence in what God has promised, God is able to perform. For with God all things are possible. Bishop Carter reminded listeners of part of the Rule of Taizé: Never resign yourself to the scandal of the separation of Christ of those who so readily profess love of neighbor yet remain divided.” And asked “Have we made every effort” to listen and watch? He concluded his preaching, referring again to an old hymn, declaring simply, “God is able.”

The anthem stated “You are the face of God I hold in my heart, you are part of me, part of my family, to me you are the very face of God. After a prayer that invited all to breathe and to extend hands in blessing, hands that contain no weapons, no threats but rather seek peace and make peace as we surrender our lives to purposes greater than our own, the service was finished with the singing of “This little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine” and in true technological tradition, many raised their cellphones with flashlight blazing.

We are called to love, not because it will be rewarded by others but because love is of God. This love is offered to us in full measure. What will we do with it? God stands at the coast of our lives, the margins, knowing full well that there will be blessing and there will be woe. But God is with us and God is able. Thanks be to God. Amen.