

Finding Your Way - Put Down the Map!

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Read Luke 9:51-62

Take a moment to try and remember the exact moment when you learned to read a map. I recall the precise second I learned to read a map. My father was in the Airforce which meant we moved constantly. Because we never had much money, we went on those gruelling cross country car camping vacations as a family. I don't know if we were on vacation or travelling to our next home. I just remember that my mother, who is a very smart lady has never been able to read maps and Dad in frustration said "Phyllis, for goodness sake, give the map to Linda. Linda! Read this map and tell me how to get to the next city!" I was playing dinkies with my brother in the back seat. I do not believe I have ever felt as pure a panic as I did at that moment. I think I was ten years old. Somehow I managed to do it and after that I kind of became the family car vacation map person. I was always very interested in maps after that. Orienteering was the only thing I actually was any good at when I had a summer job in the Army Reserve in my nineteenth year. They put us in the middle of the woods in Newfoundland and gave a group of us a contour map, a compass and some water. We were expected to find our way out within a couple of hours. It was exhilarating to make the connections between those lines on the map and the contours of the land.

This map reading skill came in very handy after I received chemotherapy for breast cancer nine years ago. The kind of drug I received damaged the part of my brain that makes certain kinds of spatial connections. After I was finished chemo I couldn't go anywhere without being lost. I would intellectually know that I had been in a certain place hundreds of times, but I could not recognize it. I still can not recognize Martha's house from the outside although I have been there a dozen or so times. When I was ordained and then settled in Lower Musquodoboit I had a big problem. I needed to find my way around the maze of country roads to visit people. Carl got me a topographical map of the area, complete with houses. It was wonderful. I used it so much, it was getting very tattered. One day, I was in some one's driveway pouring over the map, trying by connecting the gradation of the hills and the direction compared to magnetic north to where I thought I was. There was a knock on my car window. A man said, "I think you are the new minister." I responded that I was and then he asked if he could help me. I explained very carefully what I was doing and how my analysis was going. He asked who I wanted to visit and when I said the name, he just silently pointed at the house at the end of the driveway I was sitting on. After we finished laughing, we had a wonderful conversation. I realized then, that I had buried my head so far into the map that I was missing the connection with the people I had been called to serve. After that, I stopped to ask people for directions, sometimes knocking on people's doors. I was almost always met with a warm reception; dogs were only set on me once. Rural people know about the Christian practice of hospitality. My problem was internal and spiritual. I needed to get used to being lost. As soon as I allowed myself to be comfortable being

regularly lost, it was amazing how many people I connected to and how beautiful the scenery became. If life is not about the destination but about the journey, then we need to lose the maps and let God provide direction and connection.

Jesus doesn't ever seem to need a map. Funny thing about that. Our passage from Luke today begins, "When the days drew near for him to be taken up - he set his face to go to Jerusalem." (9:51) Jerusalem seems to be like magnetic North on a compass to Jesus. It is not the geographical place you understand and it is not the fact that it was the capital of the country. Jerusalem was where he must go to because it was the place where his cross would be. It was where the big choices would be made by him, by the people who loved him and by the religious and political authorities.

Today's reading is from a section that is peculiar to Luke. You will not find this story in any of the other gospels. For the writer of Luke the metaphor of travelling or journeying is the motif that frames it. Jerusalem might be the destination of Jesus, but it is all about the journey for the writer of Luke. Over the next four months we will hear scripture readings from Luke that will follow Jesus on this journey toward Jerusalem. In the days of biblical literalism scholars bent over backwards trying to figure out the logistics of this journey. Big maps were created with arrows and criss crossing lines. At the Atlantic School of Theology there was a giant three dimensional map of Israel I discovered in the basement of the old library upon which someone had tried to do this kind of thing. Scholars tried to make Jesus' tracks fit in space and time but none of it makes sense at certain points. Jesus criss crosses back and forth and there are inconsistencies of places and times. It is enough to drive a cartographer crazy.

Thankfully, we have come to see in these last 20 years or so, the impoverishment that such literalism places on us. Marcus Borg whom I had the pleasure of listening to at the Atlantic Seminar in Theological Education this year (Bible Hill, June 2007) suggested that we might put the following note in our church bulletins.

"Being Christian involves being shaped by the language of the Christian tradition, including the Bible as the foundation of the tradition. Some in this church may understand Christian and biblical language quite literally and factually. Others understand it symbolically and metaphorically. What we share is a common passion for the more-than-literal meaning of the stories and teachings that shape us."

This statement brilliantly frames how most of us preach, teach and engage with this critical book as modern Christians. The truth and reality of God is bigger than the literal words. If the bible is our spiritual map, then only seeing the literal words is like concentrating on the contour lines on a topographical map and not looking up to see the gentle or steep incline we are walking on or totally missing the beauty of the mountainous terrain we are hiking over. We have to put down our obsession with the map in order to be in relationship with the story. We have to put down the worship of the map to see beyond the technical lines of the words.

So, in our story today Jesus, mapless has nonetheless his face set toward Jerusalem. Saying Jesus has set his face toward Jerusalem is like saying he's is getting on with it. He is choosing to live through to his purpose; he has made the big decision to open himself up to the journey and the vulnerability that will require. He has chosen to walk in radical, inclusive love,

to challenge the status quo and therefore make people upset and angry even unto forcing his death.

The writer of Luke would have been very familiar with the Old Testament (Hebrew Scriptures) since it would have been his map. The writer would be echoing, if not quoting Isaiah 50:7 “I therefore I have set my face like flint and I know that I shall not be put to shame: he who vindicates me is near.” Jesus knows he is going to face stiff, strong opposition for his teachings, his views, his plans and his faithfulness. He will face rage for saying to his followers, to the established religion, to the political authorities, “Stop trying to build a better, more accurate map of how to live. You have begun to worship the maps. In trying to design yet a better map to begin the journey - you prevent yourselves from being in the moment of the journey you prevent yourselves from being in real relationship with each other and more, importantly, with God.” Well, people never like to hear that about their maps.

For the writer of Luke, Jesus entire life’s journey has two parts, kind of an Act One and an Act Two. Act One begins with Jesus’ baptism. The baptism of Jesus is an event that according to Fred Craddock that is bathed in prayer. God speaks, actually *speaks* giving Jesus, his disciples and all listeners, (including us) - divine sanction and support. In essence God is testifying. Thus affirmed and empowered Jesus embarks on his teaching, preaching, transformational journey. In Act One, Jesus’ journey was marked by rejection. Jesus returns to his own home town and enrages the good townsfolk by his interpretation of scripture. They can’t believe the carpenter’s son would presume to tell them that the way they have looked at their map might be incomplete.

Act Two, this section that we begin today over the next 4 months, begins with Jesus setting his face toward Jerusalem. It too is preceded by a similar event bathed in prayer and in which God speaks out loud to human ears: the Transfiguration. The Transfiguration of Jesus takes place on a mountain top where Jesus is “transformed” by an encounter with God, Moses and Elijah. It is a power filled moment in which God speaks to Jesus and all gathered there providing sanction, support and divine testifying. In Act Two Jesus would like to begin his journey by visiting the Samaritans but is subject to their rejection.

It is interesting that Jesus even wanted to visit the Samaritans. It was not an idle thought on his part. In fact, he carefully planned to go there, sending messengers ahead to arrange for places to stay. This is a radical venture for Jesus, Samaritans being considered heretics by the standards of the day. They held firm to the belief that the centre of worship was on Mount Gerizim. In fact, there are still remnant peoples today who continue to believe this. Samaritans considered themselves to be faithful Jews and identified all of those considering the Jerusalem temple to be the centre of worship to be in error. By planning to visit Samaritans, including them in his mission and by accepting, even requesting hospitality, Jesus is indicating that God includes all in God’s love and salvation. This is definitely an off the map thing. Jesus has already ministered and included in discipleship, Jews and Gentiles, social, ritual and political outcasts and now Samaritans are also included. What next?

Then the unthinkable happens - the Samaritans reject the offer to provide Jesus with hospitality. Pilgrim hospitality is an important ancient requirement of every faithful Jew and Christian. When someone is on a faith journey to connect in a deeper way with God - it is a responsibility to put them up and to care for them. However, the Samaritans thought they were sinning if they offered to put up Jesus and the disciples because they were adamant that the centre

of worship is NOT in Jerusalem. They believe that Jesus and his disciples have the wrong map and they don't want to encourage that behaviour. The disciples are outraged. How dare they? They deign to come and meet with the Samaritans when no other self respecting holy man and his followers would. They have offered the Samaritans the opportunity to give hospitality and the request is rejected. The disciples are really put out by that. They think the Samaritans are just darned lucky that Jesus even wanted to come in the first place. Incensed, the disciples remember a piece of scripture. One of the very few pieces of scripture in which fire rains down from heaven. They say to Jesus, "Just let us, just this once rain down fire on them. Can we please? Can we just do it once. Just once."

Jesus is incredulous. He just finished telling them in chapter 9 that when they go on their missions to take nothing with them, telling them that there is value in depending on people's hospitality and generosity. He advised that when they were refused hospitality, they were just to shake the dust off their feet and move on then to the next place. It is a Christian practice and an important responsibility to not only give hospitality but also the receive it. In North America hospitality is a difficult concept. In our own church with the advancing trip preparations to Guatemala I have observed the anxiety of parents rise. This is to be expected and has happened in all other trips that I have inquired about. I think it is very difficult for North Americans who are used to being in control to allow their children to go to a place in which their children will be depending on the hospitality of others, particularly others who are poor by material standards. This requires a vulnerability we are not used to. Asking for and accepting hospitality will be an important part of the trip. It is a Christian responsibility to offer hospitality, to receive hospitality and to graciously accept when hospitality is refused. The truth is the Samaritans were perfectly within their rights to refuse hospitality to Jesus and his followers and even had a conscientious reason for doing so.

The disciples, in wanting to call down fire and brimstone are doing what we all do. We sure love to hang on to those texts in scripture that excuse the worst of our behaviours and impulses: an eye for an eye, those texts of fire and brimstone and sword filled passages describing bloody warfare. It is like those passages comprise our mental scriptural default position. The minutes we walk out the church doors we forget that the vast majority of texts underpin and expand upon the guiding compass of the entirety of Scripture which, as pointed out by Jesus, is that we are to love our God with all our hearts and all our minds and all your souls and love our neighbours as ourselves, (Luke 10:27-28) What does that look like? Well, in today's scripture reading it would look like offering hospitality, receiving hospitality and graciously accepting when hospitality is asked for and then refused.

In response to the disiciple's request, Jesus says in effect that the disciples will have to make up their minds. As is said in Newfoundland, they will have to fish or cut bait. There will be hard choices to be made. Jesus doesn't say that you will have to choose between a good thing and a bad thing, between a thing sanctioned and upheld by God and a thing not sanctioned and upheld by God. He said the hardest most difficult thing about becoming a disciple of Christ will be deciding between two good things: two good directions, two good destinations.

Jesus, as usual, gives examples. He says a guy will say to Jesus "I will follow you" and Jesus' response is to tell the man, in essence, that there is no map. The journey will take you to places you have no idea of, he says. Physically and spiritually, you will never arrive. Foxes have a permanent home. Jesus however and those who will follow him, will have no where to

lay their heads. This is tough because we all like to point to a map and say, “There we have made our destination for today. We have arrived.” Jesus indicates that arriving at a destination is not a bad thing. “But you, my followers,” he seems to say, “will never have arrived until I return.”

In the next example, another man says “Lord I will follow you, but let me bury my father. Surely this must be a good, honouring your mother and father and all that. However, Jesus says “You have to choose, the journey is now - it begins now.” Another guy says let me say good by to my family. This is a good thing right? Jesus is all about taking compassionate care of your family right? It is a good thing, Jesus is saying, but the urgency of the journey requires an immediate choice. Choose and be quick about it.

Fred Craddock who is arguably North America’s best preacher and is a specialist of the gospel of Luke says,

“Jesus never said to choose him over the devil but to choose him, to choose God, to choose to live faithfully over the blind loyalty to the family, blind loyalty to the clan. Those who have done so have been freed from possessions and the worship of family and have found the necessary distance to truly love their families.” (Interpretation: Luke, Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990).

This is a hard teaching and most of us have no map for this kind of journey. Those of us who do counselling know that sometimes when folks have been brought up within families in which dysfunction and damaging behaviour have been passed down through generations new maps must be made and new boundaries drawn. Sometimes distance needs to be created in order for spiritual and mental health to happen. In families in which addictions are a problem this can be very difficult. It means saying “I am letting go of the map my family has drawn for me. I am making my own journey.” This takes great courage to move in those new kinds of directions and is often met with anger or even rage on the part of those within the family. Calling down fire on those who break cycles of abuse by those still living within the cycles is common. However if a person can travel that new road, it can provide modeling for others within the family and sometimes can break the cycle of dysfunction. Making a decision to live in new, healthy ways provides a kind of scouting of new territory for others in the family. Choosing the healthier journey is often the most difficult direction because if you have lived in an unhealthy system for any length of time, all of the signposts say, “You must go down this one way street.”

In this new century, in these new post Christian times, we don’t have maps for most things anymore. This is not a bad thing. Sometimes we come to worship the map. This scripture passage tells us that if we put the map down, God sets the direction and our soul is the internal compass. Sometimes this involves hard choices about the direction we set our lives on. Sometimes it means choosing directions that are counter culture and perhaps even counter culture to our families or our friends. If you put down your very tightly held map, where would God be leading you? If we as churches, as communities, put down our very tightly held maps, where would God lead us? I suspect, if we do put down our maps, like the disciples, the unfamiliarity of the territory and the vulnerability that it requires will make us mad at each other from time to time. That’s okay. Just as long as we don’t call down fire and brimstone on one another we can get through just about anything. Let us put down the maps in our lives and see where the journey

takes us. Let's set our faces toward Jerusalem, just trust in the journey and rely on the hospitality of those strangers and those we consider "strange." We will face some crosses, to be sure but then, let us trust and rely on the resurrection - it will probably happen along the way.

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