

Marching Off the Map

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Acts 15:1-22

Back in the days when much of the world was yet unexplored, map makers portrayed uncharted regions with dragons and monsters. Those symbols effectively conveyed the ancients' fear of the unknown.

In the early years of the first century, a Roman commander was caught up in a battle that carried him to the edge of territory marked by a dragon. Not knowing whether to forge ahead in pursuit of the enemy, or to drop back in retreat, he dispatched a runner to Rome with an urgent message: "Please send new orders. We have marched off the map!"

"Marching off the map." That's what happens when a past we have known turns into a future we did not see coming. And we are left wondering if we will be devoured by dragons and monsters, or if the living God will be waiting to meet us in the great unknown, just beyond the border of our comfort zone.

When was the last time you "marched off the map?" Was it when the hurricane of divorce swept away the house of cards that was your marriage? You grew up believing divorce was wrong, that the Bible said it was wrong. Yet here you were, with a divorce you neither wanted nor expected, changing forever the terrain of your life. And you had to decide what kind of Jesus you believed in: one wagging his finger at you or offering his handkerchief.

Maybe you marched off the map when your daughter or granddaughter announced she was moving in with her boyfriend. And you were left wondering how to balance your unconditional love for her on the one hand, with the sanctity of marriage on the other.

Sometimes churches march off the map, such as when they start ordaining women as deacons and ministers in violation of local custom and long-standing tradition. Or when a congregation decides to ditch its traditional worship service to "go contemporary," as the saying goes. How do the God-fearing, Bible-believing members of that congregation balance innovation and tradition? How can they know what changes are God-breathed and God-blessed and what changes are not?

As usual, we can find immense help in facing such challenges by opening our Bibles. For there in Acts chapter 15, we meet a bunch of folk just like us. They love God, believe the Bible, and strive to follow Jesus, but now they are faced with cataclysmic change that pushes them off the map. Paul and Barnabas--and other free spirits like them--are bringing scores of new Gentile converts into the church. These are not God-fearing Gentiles, spiritual seekers who worshiped in the synagogues of their Jewish neighbors. These are bonafide pagans with no knowledge of the Hebrew scriptures and little respect for Jewish values. Word has it Paul is telling these new believers that trusting in Jesus is enough, that the old rules no longer apply, that solely through the grace of God in Jesus Christ, one can be saved, transformed, made new. "Just who does he think he is, dispensing with the centuries old rite of circumcision that since Abraham has been the sacred sign--engraved into one's very being--of belonging to people of God?!" The book of Acts tells us there was "no small dissension and debate" on this matter, which is a nice, polite, Bible-way of saying they were having one heck of a fuss!

Now the issue before those early believers is hardly a hot button issue for us, namely, "Did Gentile believers need to become Jews before they became Christians?" Twenty centuries later, we know what was decided: circumcision would continue as a marker of Jewish identity, but would not be required of Gentile believers. But the question of *how* they resolved the matter is of critical importance, because it's not enough simply to be open to change. No, the question before a faithful church, whether in the first century or the twenty-first century, is "How do we assess what changes are of God and what changes are not?"

Well, what's the first thing they did? In making this decision about marching off the map, they beat a path straight back to Jesus. The ruckus started up in Antioch, on the frontier of the church's mission. But when the Christians in Antioch couldn't resolve the matter, they sent a delegation down to the mother church in Jerusalem. Why was this consultation so important? Because the apostles were in the Jerusalem church and they knew best what Jesus said and did. And in assessing calls for change, that's essential information: "What did Jesus *say*?" and "What did Jesus *do*?"

Bambi and I are in the process of training a new puppy, a beautiful golden retriever named "Gracie". As she explores her world, extending her territory and "marching off the map" of the known and familiar, she keeps doubling back to me. She keeps returning to where I sit in the floor or yard, giving me a lick or a nuzzle, because I am her care-giver and master. Touching base with me gives her the security to keep venturing out.

That's what Christians do when facing a tough decision. They keep doubling-back to the Master. They keep returning to the question, "What did Jesus *say*?" and "What did Jesus *do*?"

So when we circle back to Jesus on this question of welcoming un-circumcised pagans into the church--or whoever falls outside your comfort zone--what do we see? We see Jesus caring little for rituals of purity and rules about who's in and who's out. In fact, most every time we see Jesus in action, he is pushing the boundaries of God's love clear off the map.

Consider but one example: Jesus' healing of a crippled woman on the Sabbath as reported in Luke 13:10-17. In the book, *Engaging the Powers*, Walter Wink shows how in this single, brief encounter, Jesus transgressed six hallowed traditions about welcoming those popular religion deemed unacceptable.

First, he addresses the woman in public, something simply not done by respectable Jewish men of his day. Then he calls her to the center of the synagogue, where the teaching occurred, long a sanctuary of male privilege. Next he touched her, a wanton violation of the holiness code that forbade touching the sick and thereby contaminating oneself with their infirmity. Fourth, Jesus calls this woman a "daughter of Abraham," a term never heard before and apparently coined by him. It was believed women belonged to the covenant community through the men in their lives, their fathers and sons, husbands and brothers. To call this woman a *daughter* of Abraham--and not a *son*--was to make her a full-fledged member of God's covenant people, second-to-none. The church preserved this radical touch in baptism, baptizing both men *and* women, while the previous rite of belonging--circumcision--was only for men.

Fifth, Jesus performs this healing on the Sabbath, challenging the belief such healings were "work" and hence, forbidden. And finally, Jesus disputes the commonly held belief that sickness is God's punishment for sin, attributing the woman's condition to Satan.

In this remarkable encounter, Jesus shatters every taboo in sight. Then he ends with a biting broadside aimed at the snippy synagogue leaders: "You hypocrites! . . . Ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan bound for 18 long years, be set free ... on the Sabbath day?"

That's the problem with Jesus. He's not particular about who gets invited to the party. To him, "Everybody's Welcome" is not just a cliché on the church sign. To him, "Everybody's Welcome"--*really* welcome--is the stunning manifesto of the Kingdom of God. We're not privy to much of the debate at what came to be known as the Council of Jerusalem, but surely those pushing for full inclusion of the Gentiles had the weight of Jesus' teaching and example on their side.

There was another factor pushing the early church off the map of tried and true tradition and that was new experiences of grace. In fact, it was Peter's report about a new experience of grace that turned the tide at the conference. Prior to Peter's very personal sharing, we read that "The apostles and the elders met together . . . and there was *much debate*." But after Peter shared how his own mind and heart had been

changed by an encounter recorded in Acts chapter 10, the whole tone of the meeting changed. Suddenly, believers on both sides of the issue were listening to one another instead of merely sparring with one another.

In confronting any contentious issue be it the Christian response to poverty, abortion, homosexuality, or whatever, it helps to put a face on the issue. It helps to know and love someone struggling with what you are talking about. Christians, like most folks, are far less mean and petty when talking about people than when talking about issues.

Peter tells how quite against his wishes, the Holy Spirit kept pushing and prodding him toward the house of the God-fearing Gentile, Cornelius. After Peter preached the gospel to Cornelius and those gathered in his house, the Holy Spirit fell upon them and they were spiritually reborn. Thus, Peter reports to the conference, “And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us; and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us. . . . (Therefore), we believe we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.” Simply put, that’s what it takes to be a Christian. No circumcision or other ceremonial law is required.

Paul and Barnabas then weighed in with their own reports about how the radical grace of God, showered upon the world in Jesus Christ, was turning once Godless, immoral pagans into the joyous, obedient children of God.

After Peter, Paul, and Barnabas put a face on the issue before the Council, James--the Lord’s brother--rose to speak. Once an unbeliever, James was pushed off the map by an encounter with the risen Christ. Now once more this very traditional man was surprised by God. “My brothers,” he said to the Council, “Simon has reported how God looked favorably on the Gentiles, to take from among them a people for his name. This agrees with the words of the prophets.”

Then he proceeds to quote a passage from Amos that foretold the welcoming of the Gentiles into God’s great family: “And I will rebuild the dwelling of David . . . so that all other peoples may seek the Lord, even all the Gentiles over whom my name has been called.”

In citing this passage, James demonstrates another principle of a church confronted by change: What we believe to be new experiences of grace must be tested against the witness of scripture. Our experience alone is not a sufficient basis for an informed judgement. No, that experience must be tested against the larger witness of the people of God, both in scripture and throughout history.

In many of the contemporary debates in the life of the church, we see those on the right proof-texting the Bible while those on the left largely ignore it. Neither is the response of a faithful church. The Bible is God’s Word to us, the primal witness to

God's saving acts in the life of Israel and supremely in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is the height of arrogance and folly to think we can go our merry way without sound biblical guidance.

A little boy heard an announcement about an upcoming revival at church. With great excitement, he later invited a friend to the *re-Bible!*

That's what we need in the life of the church, again and again: a *re-Bible!* We need to do what James did, what the Council did, in the 15th chapter of Acts. We need to read and re-read the Bible in light of Jesus. The light of Jesus' life and love is the searchlight with which we pour over the scriptures. After all, that text in Amos was not some new addition to holy writ. It had been sitting there, a ticking time bomb for 800 years, just waiting to blow up misconceptions limiting the radical love of God.

So what led James to cite Amos rather than Leviticus at the Council at Jerusalem? Jesus, my friends, Jesus! Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and in consultation with brothers and sisters in the family of God, he saw that Jesus meant to extend God's welcoming embrace to all the world. That didn't mean the laws in Leviticus suddenly ceased to be true, but the ceremonial laws found there were meant for Jews, not Gentiles. Thus, the judgement of James--later confirmed by the Council--was that "We should not trouble these Gentiles who are turning to God."

And then one last but essential touch: the Gentiles' newfound freedom was limited by love. Despite being set free from the strictures of Jewish ritual and custom, Gentile believers were not free to do as they pleased. Instead, they were asked to abstain from eating meat offered to idols and other behaviors particularly offensive to their Jewish neighbors. In other words, they were not free to trample on the sensitivities of their brothers and sisters in the family of God.

That is the final test of Christian conduct: is this attitude or action loving? Is it like Jesus?

Several years ago, a doctor published a moving personal testimony in a medical journal. Upon finishing a prestigious residency, he sallied forth to establish a thriving medical practice. Then one day he came upon a wheelchair outside the door of a pediatric examining room. The newly christened doctor knew that wheelchair meant trouble because his skills probably could not fix what waited behind that door.

He took a deep breath, stepped around the wheelchair, opened the door, and met John. A referral from a colleague, John was 14, had cerebral palsy, and was painfully deformed. Abandoned by his parents at an early age, John had few friends, lived in a foster home, and now he had cancer. During the next year, John's care became an increasing ordeal for both him and his doctor. Many hospitalizations were required to control his pain and slow the ravages of his illness, but John never complained and showed uncommon courage. Finally, after a particularly tough day,

John grabbed his doctor's arm and said, "I'm sorry to be such a burden to you." That night he died.

Hear now the doctor's confession: "I've never forgotten John and the lesson he taught me. He taught me that there was more to me than I gave myself credit for being. He taught me that giving my best is to become my best. He taught me that life is full of opportunities to become more. And to think . . . I almost missed it!"

The God who meets us in Jesus Christ ever beckons us out of our comfort zones. So if you like to play it safe and never step over the wheelchair or bend the rules, then let me encourage you to give wide berth to Jesus. Because if you come to know and love and follow him, I can promise you this: Again and again, his brand of radical grace will push you kicking and screaming, clear off the map.

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