

ORIENTING THE MAP

About two weeks ago, Barbara and I went down to First Presbyterian Church in Jackson, Alabama, where I previously preached, to celebrate their 150th anniversary. While I was in Jackson, every Wednesday, I had a standing meeting. I would go to the Rotary club meeting at the Mexican Restaurant, which was called Nolasco's. One Wednesday I arrived to lunch to find something lying on the table. It was a sheet of paper labeled as an IQ test. I want to share with you a few questions that were on this IQ test.

The first question was, "Why can't a man who is living in Winston-Salem North Carolina be buried west of the Mississippi River?" Because he is still alive! You can't bury someone who is still alive.

Alright, second question. If you had a match and you entered a room that had a kerosene lamp, an oil stove and a wood-burning heater, which would you light first? The match! You have to light the match first, before you can light the others.

I have one more for you. If you're standing at the North Pole, and you walk thirty feet south, and you turn 90° to the left, which direction are you facing? South! You're only thirty feet away from the North Pole. At some point, you get so close to the North Pole that East and West no longer have any meaning. Every direction you look except towards the North Pole is South.

While you may think this is a funny way to begin a sermon, in today's passage Jesus is about to begin his public ministry. He's gathered his disciples around, and now it is time to begin. So, what does he say first? How does he lay a foundation? He climbs up on a mountain, and starts to speak. Before we go to that mountain and listen, let me ask you a question. How much do you know about the world? What does your template of the world look like?

I expect that much of what we know goes back to what we were taught by our parents. Our parents gave us a number of pieces of advice. "Get a good job. Get an education. Raise a family. Mind your own business. Be a law-abiding citizen. Don't fight city hall. Make sure you eat all your vegetables. Come home at a decent hour. The list goes on and on....

That's my list. Yours may be a little different from mine. The point is we all have a list. When it comes to some of these rules, I agree. Others I question. The point is we've all internalized these ideas, and many more, to help us navigate the world around us. Chances are your first reaction to any given situation is going to be to tend to follow this list of rules that you have- this list of mores that you've internalized- whether you agree with them or not- because that's what you know! I'm the same way! I'm not judging anyone, that's just the way it is.

In his best-selling book, The Road Less Traveled, Psychiatrist M. Scott Peck talks about what he calls "map-making". He writes, "Our view of Reality is like a map with which to negotiate the terrain of life. If the map is true and accurate, we will generally know where we

are, and if we have decided where to go, we will generally know how to get there. If the map is false and inaccurate, we will generally be lost.”

I wonder how many of you have actually worked with maps? These days, we don't even use maps. We turn on the GPS, and the GPS says, “Turn Here,” “Go There,” “Go Off Over Here,” “Your Turn is in four miles,” or whatever. It used to say, “Recalculating,” but mine doesn't say that anymore. For most of us, the extent of experience we have with maps is with road maps.

Road Maps are great, because they're easy. The routes are well-marked and the roads are numbered. Therefore, it's pretty easy to find your way if you're on a road. Funny enough, even then we sometimes still get lost. I wonder, though, how many of you have ever been lost in the woods. There's no lost, like being lost in the woods.

When I was a teenager, I was heavily involved in Scouting. We were hiking a trail known as the Warpath Ridge. It was an overnight hike. Warpath Ridge is not very far from here actually, it begins on the top of Monte Sano mountain, and it goes eastward in the general direction of Scottsboro for about twenty miles. Because we were Boy Scouts there was a patch that we could earn, and it involved using our compass to get it.

As we were hiking this trail, we were supposed to get a compass bearing from the top of this hill on a fire tower. The trouble was, we couldn't find the fire tower. It turned out that there was a good reason for that. The fire tower had recently been torn down. In the course of us wandering around, looking for this fire tower, we wandered off the path. We lost the trail!

I reasoned that we should be able to follow the ridge line and eventually it would lead us back to the trail. As it turned out, my reasoning was pretty good. What I didn't count on was it would take us two hours to find the trail. That said, we did eventually find it and found our way.

When you're out in the wilderness, having a map isn't enough. It needs to be a really good map. If you're hiking in the woods, I have a suggestion for you. The US Geological Survey makes what they call topographical maps. They show lines of elevation so you can tell where you are. However, the thing about those maps is that you have to get the map to match what your eyes see. Your eyes have to see what the map is trying to show you. Like a lot of maps, this map has a legend on it that points north. So, you must which way North is from the point you are standing. It's harder than it sounds, even on a sunny day in flat, open terrain.

The process I've just described is called orienting the map. Here is the way I was taught to do it in the Boy Scouts. You lay the map out on the ground and lay your compass on top of it. You find north with your compass, and you hold the compass steady while you rotate the map beneath it until the North on your map is lined up with the North on your compass.

That gets you pretty close, but there's a problem. Everyone knows that the northernmost point on the Earth is the North Pole. It's the point from which every direction you

look towards the horizon is south. True North is represented by a line running from any point on Earth to the North Pole. The problem is your compass doesn't point at the North Pole- not the true North Pole anyway. It points to the magnetic North Pole, which is not in the same place. In fact, the magnetic North Pole moves around. The last time I heard anything about it, it was located somewhere in the middle of Hudson Bay in Canada, hundreds of miles from the true North Pole. So, that means that there is some variance in your map. In fact, in the US that may be as much as fifteen degrees difference. That's a lot!

Good topographical maps allow for that. They have what they call magnetic declination lines, which allow you to adjust your map from magnetic north to true north with the aid of your compass.

That's probably way more than you ever wanted to know about topographical maps. Some of you may not have any need to learn this. Here's what I want to point out. Each of us has a map. Eat your vegetables. Take a number. Don't walk on the grass, etc. Scott Peck says many of us have maps, and that's true. What Jesus is trying to say here is, the map you have here is not so bad, but it's not oriented properly. It's kind of turned in the wrong direction.

For example, Jesus says blessed are the poor in spirit. That's not what the world tells us. The world tells us that the rich in spirit are the ones we should look to for moral guidance. We should be looking at people like Mother Theresa. Well, that's not a bad person to look to, but that's not who Jesus said we should look to. Jesus says the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to the poor in spirit.

Jesus also says blessed are those who mourn. How many of us feel blessed when we mourn? That doesn't seem to make much sense. Jesus says they will be comforted. Jesus is telling us, "Turn Your Map around! You've got to think differently."

Blessed are the gentle. We look up to great generals, political statesmen, captains of industry, and professional athletes, and we tend not to respect the gentle. We tend not to respect those who are kind. Surely, we don't believe that they are the ones who will inherit the Earth. Yet, that's exactly what Jesus says.

Jesus says, "Blessed are the merciful." It doesn't look to me as if we cherish mercy much in our society. It looks to me as if we want to get even. It looks to me as if we're very judgmental. And so forth, and so on....

Jesus is offering us these sayings as a compass. It's to help us orient our map, so that it points in the direction of salvation. Yet, as good as these sayings are, they're not enough. If we see the Beatitudes as our compass, we must realize that we can't get to the true north with a compass alone. Therefore, we must see Jesus as the true north. We must also understand that the grace of Jesus Christ, working through our faith, inspired by the Holy Spirit, acts as the magnetic declination lines, which adjust our map the final degrees taking us to true north where the triune God sits on the heavenly throne.

Look at these Beatitudes! Turn your map around! Let your faith be inspired by the Holy Spirit and given by God's grace lead you North! Let them lead you home!

Earlier this week I was forwarded a message by Barbara. Somebody had written, and this is a paraphrase, "When we get to heaven God is probably not going to care about our theology and whether or not we got that right. But God is probably not going to be so forgiving on loving your neighbor, and showing mercy, and showing kindness, and doing justice part." I couldn't agree more. Let the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and the love of Christ guide you into being the disciple that God is calling you to be.