



Broad Street Presbyterian Church

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“Center of the World”

Ezekiel 5:5, Acts 15:6-18

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Yesterday, June 29, marked a noteworthy annual, but typically overlooked festival in the calendar of the church year. I am guessing it would be unfamiliar to most of us gathered here. Unless you checked out the Vatican website, or listened locally to 820 Catholic radio, or wandered into mass somewhere—it probably slid by without notice. Every year, June 29 marks the feast day of St. Peter AND St. Paul—those two pioneers, and larger-than-life figures of early Christian faith. They share the same saint’s day in the church calendar. Last week in the 11 a.m. education hour I had the opportunity to speak a little about my fairly recent book on world maps, with the somewhat off-putting title, *Christianity Beyond Christendom: the Global Christian Experience on medieval mappaemundi and early modern world maps*. One of these medieval world maps, what scholars call a *mappamundi* or cloth of the world, included a really unique feature. This map was from an 8th century commentary on the book of Revelation, and it placed the heads of the apostles directly on the map. I have included a segment of this map—called the Osma Beatus (after its location and the writer of the commentary)—on the bulletin cover this morning. If you look at it, it is a rather strange kind of map, and the heads look almost like a cartoon characters. These apostolic busts are assigned to either the most important scenes of their ministry, or most often, to where they died. On this image or map, you can see that near the lower left corner—in the city of Rome or Roma—we have the heads of Peter and Paul. On the larger map, other apostles appear scattered about the world, linked to various cities—but only one city, Rome, has two apostles. Why would that be? Because medieval Christians and this mapmaker wanted to leave no doubt—Rome is THE center of the world. This morning I want to look at our Biblical texts, and perhaps include a little geography, as we consider the center of the world; the center of the world, this planet we inhabit, the center of our worlds, as individuals.

Our scripture reading from Acts 15 this morning also locates Peter and Paul in the same place, at the same time. Except in our reading, they are not in Rome, but in Jerusalem, for an event that is called the very first church council. According to the text—the apostles were there with the elders, or presbyters. On most medieval world maps, Jerusalem appeared at their very center, like a bull’s-eye on a target or a dartboard. Some ancient mapmakers took the passage I read from Ezek. 5 very literally. For them Jerusalem was at the center of the earth, surrounded by all the other nations. Later in Ezekiel the prophet refers to Jerusalem as the “navel” of the world, to emphasize Jerusalem as the center. On our bulletin cover map, James the apostle is located there, and he is also mentioned in the Acts 15 text we read.

Probably most of us would not think about Jerusalem or Rome as the center of the world. For geographers today, one approach to the world’s center is the so-called prime meridian: the line that extends from the North Pole to the South Pole and divides the East from the West. The line cuts right through the heart of the Naval Observatory in Greenwich England, just outside of London. You can literally stand on this line and jump from the eastern to western hemisphere. Greenwich Mean Time (GMT) sets the standard for our clocks; and the system of longitude and latitude from the prime-meridian guides all of our GPS devices, even though I find GPS devices often frustrating and inaccurate. I prefer maps.

On the other side of the vast Atlantic Ocean, we may think rather differently. For many, if not most people living in the United States of America, we tend to think of our nation as the center of the world. Certainly, we

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have our capitals—for politicians, Washington DC; and for the culture, perhaps New York City—but in the opinion of many the USA, America, is the best, the greatest, the most desirable of all nations. And this week we celebrate July 4th.

And, we could get more local, how about our state, our community? I first moved to Ohio in 1987, and the state advertising slogan, that was three years old at the time, was: Ohio, the heart of it all!! And then there is our city, Columbus, the capital, right in the center of the state.

Although we may think about geographical centers on occasion, most of us see the “center of our world” in a rather different fashion; less abstract, more concrete and personal. I know I have had different “centers” over the course of my lifetime: doing well in school or sports; establishing my family and raising my children; my work; my church; and if I am honest right now—it’s probably my three grandchildren. Two weeks ago was Father’s Day, and I was with all three of them. They (well their mothers) gave me a really fun present, a pair of socks with all their pictures and I am wearing them this morning. If you want, I may pull up my pant leg after worship to show you.

Generally, we see having a center in our lives as a good thing, something to be both desired and admired. A center means balance, equilibrium, stability. We often respect people who are “centered”—we may say they have a moral center, or even better, a moral compass; in other words they have a sense of deeply committed integrity that gives meaning and purpose to life.

On the other hand—being too centered can be a bad thing. We usually mistrust and perhaps avoid people who are too occupied with themselves, we call them self-centered or narcissistic. A nation or group of people that is self-absorbed, and ignorant or oblivious to the cultures and needs of others we describe as ethnocentric. If we are an ethnocentric people we make judgments about others based on OUR interests, or OUR sense of right and wrong. As a historian, I have coined a phrase that I call “temprocentric”—or thinking that we are at the pinnacle of human history, and that our collective past needs to be evaluated and judged through the narrow lens of our present. This too is problematic.

With this in mind, let’s return to our passage this morning from Acts 15. In this early Christian gathering, this council, these people of the Jesus Way were struggling to find a center. They had a geographical center of a sort—Jerusalem, still the city of the temple, of Jewish rite and ritual. Some of the earliest ministry of Jesus took place in Jerusalem; it was the scene of his last days and his execution, the crucifixion. More importantly, it was the place of empty tomb, of the resurrection and the scene of Pentecost—which we just celebrated a few weeks ago. Here in Jerusalem, on Pentecost, God’s Spirit was poured out and evident in the flames of fire that according to the tradition, touched all who were present.

But the old geography was no longer holding up—the movement was expanding, to Antioch in Syria, to the cities of “Asia” or Turkey, and eventually to Rome itself. Again, my medieval mapmaker attempted to capture that expansion of Christianity to the entire world known at the time with his scattered heads of the various apostles. More challenging than changing territory was the message was moving outside of the comfort zones of familiar ritual and tradition. The message, the gospel, was penetrating the world of the outsiders, the aliens, the Gentiles. Peter, Paul, Barnabas and others all gave testimony about how their message had taken root among these Gentile outsiders; the center of faith and tradition was changing, rapidly. And because of these changes—here was their question—were these outsiders, aliens, Gentiles required to conform to the old ways, to the traditional rituals, circumcision in particular? And the answer—from Peter, from Paul, from Barnabas, even from James was a strong and profound NO! God’s message was intended for all, conformity to tradition, in this instance, Jewish tradition, was not a requirement; ALL means ALL. Hear the words of the Apostle Peter, “God has made no distinction between them and us... we will be saved by the grace of our lord Jesus, just as they will.” No distinction, no separation, all benefit from the same grace of God! Moreover, God had given them—

these Gentile outsiders—the Holy Spirit, just as God did to the apostles and their associates, the insiders. Same God, same grace in Jesus, same gift of the Holy Spirit—this and this alone was sufficient as the center of their faith, the center of their world.

So too for us—the world of our time and place is constantly expanding. Not in a geographical sense, for there are few if any lost corners left to discover or explore. But certainly technology and travel have expanded our vision and direct encounter with others outside of our immediate sphere. We have Facebook contacts scattered across the globe; WhatsApp conversations with family and friends living in every corner of the earth; our children and young people study in programs in distant and different cultures. These encounters and experiences change our centers, and challenge us to recalibrate or recalculate—like a GPS device trying to catch up when we are in a different new location. We cannot afford to be a self-centered people or ethnocentric. It does not fit our expansive world, and God has a bigger vision for our world, a more inclusive center, and that was a lesson to these early apostles. Same God, same grace in Jesus, same gift of the Holy Spirit.

I want to conclude this morning with some thoughts from my experiences among the Navajo peoples of Arizona and New Mexico. I have been to Navajo land, or their “reservation,” on several occasions, to meet with them and to study their culture, especially at the Navajo college in Tsaile, just outside of the spectacular Canyon De Chelly. The Navajo or the Diné (the people) find their center in a unique fashion. For them, Navajo life and experience is centered in the land of the four mountains: to the East, the White Mountain, Blanca Peak; to the South, the Turquoise Taylor Mountain; to the West, the Golden San Francisco peaks; and to the North, the Black Hesperus Mountain in the San Juan Range. This is the land of their ancestors, it is the center of their world, and it gives their life meaning and purpose. For a time in the 1860s they were forced off this land by the US government. In this Navajo version of the trail of tears, what they call the Long Walk, they were forcibly moved to a camp at Bosque Redondo, but they were allowed to return. And so the Navajo seek to live their lives, peacefully, productively, within the shadows of the four mountains. There are no strict borders or boundaries, but a sense of place that gives them a center. I wonder about this for me—I have no geographical center, a California kid, raised by two Iowa farm people who moved west to raise their family, and then I moved east to raise mine. My ancestors came from scattered parts of Europe at different times, so what centers my world? What centers your world?

I do know this... we share this other story, this faith story with ancestry from the book of Acts. In a bigger world, in an expanding world—they claimed a center in a God bigger than any one culture or nation, in the grace experienced in Jesus, and in the witness of the Holy Spirit. May it center our world as well.