

Sermon 6/19/11

“Different Paths”

First Sunday after Pentecost / Mike Hickcox

Scripture: Genesis 1:1-2;4a, Psalm 8, 2 Corinthians 13:11-13, Matthew 28:16-20

I have three illustrations to introduce today’s message. Each story is different. Each leads toward the same point. But each one starts in a different place and takes a different route. And here’s the spoiler: Today’s message is this: There are different ways to get to the point, just as there are different ways to get to the truth, and there are different ways to get to God.

1. “GOD BLESS AMERICA”

God Bless America is a great sentiment. I’m all for that. I want God to bless America. But without context, you don’t know just what’s happening when you hear this. What is the context here for “God bless America”?

Is it a prayer? It could well be a prayer.

Or is it the last three words of a presidential speech? It was April 30, 1973 when Richard Nixon spoke to the nation from the Oval Office trying to manage the Watergate scandal. He ended the speech with “God bless America, and God bless each and every one of you.” Following Nixon, neither Gerald Ford nor Jimmy Carter decided to use that close to their speeches - but then Ronald Reagan did. “God bless America” was his standard sign-off. And presidents have ended their speeches that way ever since.

On the other hand, maybe God Bless America is a bumper sticker. I’m confident that every one of us here has pulled up behind a car sporting a bumper sticker that says “God Bless America”.

As a prayer, it’s good. I want God to bless America, to bless my town, my family, my home, and my life. As the “amen” on a presidential speech, it’s expected. But when it’s a bumper sticker: God bless America – does it end there? What is missing is this: everyone else in the world.

I'm not the only one sensitive to that. (Thus the bumper stickers we sometimes see that say "God bless the whole world" – just to make a point that all are included.)

Here's the image to keep in mind from my bumper-sticker musings – something may be good – very good – yet it may still be only part of the picture. There is a larger picture. And the larger picture may be true also. God bless America. God bless France. God bless Afghanistan ...all good by themselves. Each does not make the others false. One thing may be true and very good, and yet still be only one part of the larger picture.

2. NEGATIVE SPACE

"Negative space" sounds like it could be an astronomical term – somewhere in the world of black holes, worm holes, and anti-matter. But the negative space I'm talking about is in the world of art and of visual design. Artists in our midst know what I'm talking about. Our daughter, who is now in lighting design, has done her share of drawing and painting, and has told us about the value of negative space.

Here's a definition:

Negative space, in art, is the space around and between the subject(s) of an image. Negative space may be most evident when the space around a subject, and not the subject itself, forms an interesting or artistically relevant shape, and such space is occasionally used to artistic effect as the "real" subject of an image.

For those here in the room, here are some clear examples of negative space in visual design.

This is the logo for the [Girl Scouts of America](#). It's a fairly simple visual, drawn in just one color, with a white background. In this image, you find the profiles of three women – two of them are actually the absence of image in the first one – the negative space actually forms images inside the primary image.

The second logo is for the [Kolner Zoo](#), in Cologne, Germany – the 3rd oldest zoo in the world. But the logo of the Kolner Zoo is very modern. In a single color on a white

background, it shows a profile of an elephant. The space between its hind feet and its front feet is a white space that also serves as the profile of a rhinoceros. The space between the front feet and the head-and-trunk serves as a profile of a giraffe.

The third example is an image of ... what? What do you see in this design? (Let people answer.) Typically, people tend to see the images in black before they see the images in white. (We're accustomed to white being the background.) In the version on the left, people tend to see the black image of the two faces looking directly at each other. In the version on the right, people tend to first see the black vase. Both images are the same, but the black and the white are reversed.

What is right, and what is wrong? Neither is wrong.

These are rather blatant uses of negative space in design. What can we take away from this? Sometimes we look at what is before us and one path to reality becomes clear to us. That path works for us. A different path may be clear for someone else.

3. GPS – Global Positioning System

My birthday was about a month ago. My wife, Alys, surprised me by presenting me with a Garmin GPS unit for my car. It's one of those pieces of new technology that is a wonderful combination of practicality and grown-up toy. It's that little screen that shows you a map of where you are, and guides you, step-by-step, turn-by-turn, to where you want to go. These little receivers pick up signals from satellites in the sky above to pinpoint our location and movements.

A couple of days after my birthday, I drove Alys to the Kemper Street Train Station in Lynchburg so she could ride the train to Portland, Maine and spend a couple of weeks with her mother. It was a Tuesday, and I was going to drive from the train station to work at Society of St. Andrew in Big Island. Leaving the station, I did my usual mental programming – thinking of the road connections I know – this road goes to here, that road goes to there. I would have made it to work, but I would have zigzagged. Then, the little voice in my GPS, who I call Mrs. Garvin, spoke to me. Mrs. Garvin said "Turn right on Kemper Street, then turn right on Park Street."

That's really all it took. One right and an immediate slight right and that took me all the way out to Lakeside and then onto Forest and my choice of ways to get up to Big Island.

I thought, "Wow – that was easy!" I would have made it much more complicated than that. And I realized that Mrs. Garmin, unlike me, sees the big picture. I'm thinking about the road connections I know and putting together a route from my limited perspective. Mrs. Garmin, my GPS, first looks at the full picture, then know the best, shortest, most-direct route to take. The reality is that many routes will work. But from the place I happened to be ... Kemper Street Train Station ... one route is most efficient.

Again, the image I want you to keep in your mind – that one thing may be very good, and yet still be only one part of the larger picture. If one is right, that doesn't make the others wrong. Which route is right depends on where you are now, and what means you have to get where you need to go.

Why did I introduce this concept with three different examples? - because every one of us starts in a different place. For each of us, a different route may be most efficient. Even in explaining this point, none of these examples does it all. Each provides a little understanding the others don't.

Consider today's lectionary readings...

Genesis – The Beginning, The Creation

"In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." "God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light." "There was evening, and there was morning – the first day." If we were to continue on in Genesis, we would read about the advent of the plants, and the animals, and the humans.

The point is that God created it all – one big, amazing world.

What you will never find is that God created the boundaries.

God created no boundary between the U.S. and Mexico.

God created no boundary between North Korea and South Korea.

God created no boundary between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

God created no boundary between Sunni and Kurd.

What God created is one world – and no matter how much we are limited by boundaries and by the roads we know; despite our lack of a theological GPS – we – all of us in all nations and of all tribes, and of all faiths – we all live in one singular world.

2 Corinthians – “Finally, brothers and sisters, rejoice! Strive for full restoration, encourage one another, be of one mind, live in peace, and the God of love and peace will be with you.”

I don’t even need to say anything about that verse... I’m just going to read it again: “Finally, brothers and sisters, rejoice! Strive for full restoration, encourage one another, be of one mind, live in peace, and the God of love and peace will be with you.”

And then Matthew – The Great Commission – “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.”

Many people claim this verse means Christians are required to approach all persons all over the Earth and make them Christians. I think that approach misses the big picture. To insist on only one road to God is to focus on the routes we already know. It is to see the elephant and never notice the giraffe. It is to see the profiles in white, and miss the ones in black.

Christ never told his followers to create a religion and make up the rules, and then tell everyone they needed to follow that set of rules. “Teach them to obey everything I commanded you.” did not mean to insist on hanging a cross in the front of every place of worship. It meant to lead everyone to God. Christ commanded them to love one another. Christ told them to follow the rules that society creates, but to follow God above all.

The scripture readings for today are familiar ones that sustain our faith – because it is our faith. This is the faith that brings us together and into a living relationship with God. Are these scriptures the whole picture? Are we capable of seeing the entire map? Do we see and understand all the negative spaces? Do we understand the parts we don’t see or haven’t heard? Or do other people of faith also know paths to God, and see the truth in places we are not even aware of?

(Society of St. Andrew)

Here's a close-to-home perspective for me: I'm communication director at the Society of St. Andrew, at the national office in Big Island – about half an hour from here. Society of St. Andrew is a national gleaning organization that started in Big Island, and now has gleaning offices in many states, gleans in a couple of dozen states, and delivers food – at no cost – to feeding agencies in all 48 contiguous states.

While working with Will Cardwell on the existing collection of sermons of this church ... listings and audio copies that go back as far back as 1970 ... I've found two sermons delivered in this chapel by Ray Buchanan. Ray is one of the two pastors who, with their families, began Society of St. Andrew back in 1979. Ray delivered a sermon here in 1981, talking about their intentional community, involved in living responsibly with the environment, concerned about hunger, and educating people about the needs of hungry people.

In 1983, he was back in this chapel, and he talked about their brand-new enterprise of actually collecting food from potato farmers on the Eastern Shore – hundreds of thousand of pounds of potatoes – and finding ways to distribute the food to feeding agencies around the state. Since then, Society of St. Andrew had delivered more than 650-million-pounds of all kinds of fruit and vegetables to food pantries, soup kitchens, senior citizen homes, Native American agencies, and other facilities that feed the poor and hungry – never at any cost to the agencies or the recipients.

The other founder of the organization, Ken Horne, has played his guitar at the Lodge of the Fisherman many times over the years.

This past Friday morning, at 5 am, Alys and I were in Parking Lot A at the Roanoke Civic Center, where almost 40-thousand-pounds of sweet potatoes were dumped onto the parking lot, and about 250 people attending the United Methodist Annual Conference at the Civic Center came and put the potatoes into 10-pound bags. By 7:15 am, 4-thousand bags of potatoes had been loaded into pickup trucks, trailers, box trucks, and a tractor-trailer. The loads were taken to a dozen agencies in Virginia and West Virginia. People in need are eating those potatoes this week.

One of the programs of Society of St. Andrew is what we did Friday – drops of potatoes and other crops, divided up and brought to the needy. The bigger program involves 30-thousand volunteers every year, gleaning millions of pounds of food that are then distributed to feeding agencies. Volunteers come from faith groups: churches, synagogues, and mosques. They also come from colleges and universities, schools, civic organizations, scouts, even senior citizen homes.

The hands of the volunteers in the fields, picking the crops for others, are sometimes Christian hands, sometimes Jewish, sometimes Muslim or Baha'i, sometimes agnostic or atheist – all those hands get dirty and sweaty, picking apples, oranges, beets, squash, strawberries, blueberries, or potatoes ... picking and packing so that others may eat. Volunteers of all faiths pick the food - hungry people eat nutritious food - and those that receive it don't ask the faith of the person whose hands picked the food for them.

(RCC)

For two years, I served as president of the Religion Communicators Council – that's a national organization of people who work in communications or public relations for religion organizations. It is truly an interfaith group. My vice-president was my friend Annutama Dasa. Annutama is the International Communication Director for the International Society of Krishna Consciousness... more commonly known as the Hare Krishnas.

Annutama looks remarkably like David Edwards, but with two lines on his forehead, a little pony tail, a saffron robe held tight by a cord, and always with a cell phone and a laptop.

One of our annual meetings was in Indianapolis. It was there I had lunch one day with Dr. Sayyid Syeed, the Secretary General of the Islamic Society of North America. The structure of Islam in the U.S. is a lot like the Southern Baptists. Mosques can affiliate with different groups of their choice, and the largest of the Muslim groups in the U.S. is the Islamic Society of North America. The organization is more than 40 years old, but in the 1990's they were looking for a place to establish a national office. They chose a plot of land in Plainfield, Indiana because it would be less than a day's drive to a majority of the mosques they represent.

Dr. Sayeed told me this story:

They bought the land and they put up a sign saying this was slated to be the new home of the Islamic Society. One day, Dr. Sayeed rode out there with some others to show them the spot, and the sign had been knocked down. He figured the wind had blown it over. They had the sign re-installed. A couple of weeks later, he rode out there, and the sign was down again, but this time, the posts were broken and there were muddy footprints all over the sign. He knew it wasn't the wind that time.

That was the beginning of a long ordeal, with lots of people opposing the use of that land for an Islamic religious group. They continued on with the process; they created the plans; they got the permits; and they had the office building constructed. Despite continuing opposition, they hired a staff, many from the community, and they opened the office.

The office was open for a couple of years already when 911 happened. Planes hit the twin towers, and the Pentagon, and a field in Pennsylvania that morning. Anti-Islamic energy boiled over in this country by mid-day.

The police chief in Plainfield, Indiana called Dr. Sayeed on the phone and suggested they evacuate the building for their own safety. Dr. Sayeed said they couldn't do that. They were getting constant phone calls from people – either venting anger at them – or with real questions. He said they needed to stay there to answer the calls. The police chief realized the staff was intent on staying in the building, but he was concerned, so he sent over two officers to stand by and watch for any sign of trouble.

In the early afternoon, one of the officers called in with concern. From where he was, he could see a crowd of people forming in the distance. Soon they started walking down the road toward the Islamic center. He went to Dr. Sayeed and said the staff needed to get ready to evacuate, and he would call the station for backup.

Dr. Sayeed asked, "What's in their hands?" The officer couldn't tell; the crowd was still too far away. Dr. Sayeed said, "Wait until you can see what's in their hands." The officer waited and watched. Finally, he went back to Sr. Sayeed and said, "I can see now – they're carrying flowers." Dr. Sayeed said, "Let them come."

The crowd was a large group of townspeople from Plainfield, Indiana. When they arrived at the building, they said they knew some people would be angry and irrational – and they

wanted to be sure the people at the Islamic center would be safe. They wanted to stand with them.

Dr. Syeed saw what no one else did – the possibility of another end to this story, different from the end that many were afraid of. Where some envisioned weapons in the hands of the approaching crowd, Dr. Sayeed envisioned flowers – and they were flowers.

What is the road to God?

Might it not depend on where you are now? Might it not depend on the resources you have? Might it not depend on what kind of a route you are willing to take?

Here's a bumper sticker for you: God is Too Big to Fit in One Religion –

Some people believe that one, particular, specific human expression of faith can see the whole picture... all the images and all the negative spaces... and all the roads that lead to God.

I don't believe that. I believe the world is way too big for us to see and understand it all. And yet, the creator is bigger. And I believe God can create paths.

As I said at the beginning:

There are different ways to get to the point, just as there are different ways to get to the truth, and there are different ways to get to God.

The most direct route to God just might be found where different groups, with different visions, stop building roadblocks, and learn how to build their bridges together.