

Here There Be Dragons
Genesis 12:1-8; Hebrews 11:8-16
The Rev. Dr. Kenneth W. Gottman
March 15, 2020

PROLOGUE

On so many levels we seem to be in a state of free fall—wondering if we'll survive the fall, and if we do, how and where we shall land.

Politically, we, as a nation, are as divided as at any time since the Civil War. This week, news of the Coronavirus has spread panic around the globe and across all financial markets.

And the religious landscape is equally baffling and troubling. The Millennial generation, born between 1981 and 2000, now ranges in age from 20 to 39. They are 81.3 million strong, the largest generation in US history. They comprise 25% of our population and, guess what! A quarter of them claim no religious affiliation whatsoever. They are not all atheists by any means. They just don't practice religion.

To compound our quandary, the United Methodist Church, the second-largest Protestant

denomination in the country, is on the verge of splitting this May in Minneapolis over the issue of the place of gays in the life of the church. How that will impact our Missouri Conference and this very congregation is as yet unknown.

Further, Methodists are conflicted about US immigration policy. The General Board of Church and Society of the United Methodist Church has condemned the separation of Latino families at our southern border as inhumane. Many United Methodists vehemently disagree, and some of them are former members of this congregation.

Finally, our Salem congregation is in transition. We are aging, dying, shrinking, and awaiting the appointment of a new pastor. That is why Paul Fuhrmann, chair of our Staff Parish Relations Committee, convened a 4-week Wednesday evening study on "Transitions," led by the Rev. Jackie McCall, V.A. Chaplain at Jefferson Barracks. If you missed the first session last Wednesday, you can join the next three. Dinner from 5:30 to 6:15 and study from 6:15 to 6:45 p.m.

Until the late 15th Century, the earth was largely unexplored. A seismic paradigm shift occurred in 1492, when Christopher Columbus stumbled across the Americas on his way to the East Indies. He found what he was not seeking, when he discovered that something more immense than Asia lay athwart his route to the Orient.

Early maps of the New World were incredibly crude. Early explorers regularly marched off the map. Cartographers labeled those unexplored regions, simply, *terra incognita*, unknown territory. Nautical explorers sailing into unknown waters read on their maps, "Here there be dragons." They confronted the monstrous unknown.

Today I can check the GPS app on my mobile phone and call up a detailed map of virtually any place on earth. Increasingly, we have turned away from paper maps, because they become so quickly outdated. This was brought home to me recently when my Donna declared war on one of my man cave bookshelves—a

repository of scores of yellowing and outdated AAA maps. In town, Donna drives; but on the road she is the navigator. This continues to be a source of embarrassment to me, since I have repeatedly demonstrated my ability to get us hopelessly lost in dense city or open country while trying to read a map!

I was glad, a number of years ago, when automakers started putting compasses in motor vehicles. Here's what Stephen R. Covey wrote in his 1992 book, *Principle-Centered Leadership*.

In today's world, what's needed is a compass. A compass consists of a magnetic needle swinging freely and pointing to magnetic north. It's also a mariner's instrument for directing or ascertaining the course of ships at sea, as well as an instrument for drawing circles and taking measurements. The word compass may also refer to the reach, extent, limit, or boundary of a space or time; a course, circuit, or range; an intent, purpose, or design; an understanding or comprehension.

He says a compass is better than a map in today's world. Why?

- *The compass orients people to the coordinates and indicates a course or direction even in forests, deserts, seas, and open, unsettled terrain.*
- *As the territory changes, the map becomes obsolete; in times of rapid change, a map may be dated and inaccurate before it is printed.*
- *Inaccurate maps are a source of great frustration for people who are trying to find their way or navigate territory.*
- *The map provides description, but the compass provides more vision and direction.*
- *An accurate map is a good management tool, but a compass is a leadership and empowerment tool.*

Obviously, Mr. Covey is not just talking about maps and compasses. He is using them as metaphors to talk about something more important.

Mr. Covey again: *My recommendation is that you exchange your map for a compass and ... (learn) to navigate by a compass calibrated to a set of fixed, true north principles and natural laws. Why? Because with an inaccurate map, you would be lost in a city. What if someone said, "Work harder." ? Now you're lost twice as fast. Now someone says, "Think positively." Now you don't care about being lost. The problem has nothing to do with industry (effort) or attitude. It has everything to do with an inaccurate map The solution is to change from management by maps (values) to leadership by compass (natural principles).*

Today, a little more than 500 years since Columbus sailed the ocean blue, we have sailed off bravely into a new world, also uncharted, more complex and at least as dangerous as the one faced by those intrepid early explorers. We can exclaim with D. H. Lawrence that we are:

Touching the unknown, the real unknown, the unknown unknown

*Cortes, Pizarro, Columbus, Cabot,
they are nothing, nothing!
(We) are the first comer(s)!
(We) are the discoverer(s)!
(We have found the other world!*

Here there be dragons, denizens of the deep blue sea. Where there is great opportunity there is also often great danger. As you know, the Chinese written character for "crisis" means opportunity and danger. If we now know our place on earth in relation to every other place, humankind still does not know its place even in the galaxy, much less the universe.

A moral map of values may be more or less "valuable," but a spiritual compass of discernment is essential. And if in the present storm we can find no pole star that tells us where true north is, we do have a compass that shows us magnetic north, which is accurate enough to steer by, even in the darkest night.

The old maps of what it means to be the church are historical relics. A bewildering array of new ones is so confusing that we should rather chart

our course by the Spirit's compass, which means flying by the seat of our pants, by intuition and moxie (courage, pluck, audacity). Let it be an adventure!

This somehow put me in mind of John Masefield's poem, "Sea Fever."

*I must go down to the seas again, to the lonely
sea and the sky,
And all I ask is a tall ship and a star to steer her
by;
And the wheel's kick and the wind's song and
the white sails shaking,
And a grey mist on the sea's face, and a grey
dawn breaking.*

*I must go down to the seas again, for the call of
the running tide
Is a wild call and a clear call that may not be
denied;
And all I ask is a windy day with the white
clouds flying,
And the flung spray and the blown spume, and
the sea-gulls crying.*

I must go down to the seas again, to the

*vagrant gypsy life,
To the gull's way and the whale's way where
the wind's like a whetted knife;
And all I ask is a merry yarn from a laughing
fellow-rover,
And quiet sleep and a sweet dream when the
long trick's over.*

So I say to us all that we are embarked on an exploration of a new world—a faith journey which no one in our time has made before. And no GPS app on any mobile phone yet invented can tell us how to get there. We are not accidental tourists but pilgrims with Abram and Sarai, with our early Congregational sisters and brothers who sailed to the North American shore, who went out not knowing where they were to go, trusting the voice that called them. Likewise, we may not always know where we are or whither we are bound; we may not always know our destination; but we do know our destiny as sons and daughters of the Most High.

In ancient times the sea was thought to be the abode of dragons, the home of watery chaos

and demonic evil. Thus, when a storm blows up while Jesus and his friends are crossing the Galilean lake, the disciples are terrified of death by dragons. When the gospel writer tells of Jesus calming the storm on the Sea of Galilee, he means to say that although we are all in the same boat, Jesus' presence in the boat assures us that the storms of life need hold no terror for us, even if the waves are fierce and Jesus is asleep and the boat seems in danger of foundering.

The boat is a symbol of the church. The ark-like craft may handle clumsily, but it can carry the freight and will weather the storm if Jesus Christ is at the helm. Here there be dragons; here also the Master of wind and wave.

Let the words of the gospel hymn be our prayer.

*Jesus, Savior, pilot me
Over life's tempestuous sea;
Unknown waves before me roll,
Hiding rocks and treach'rous shoal;
Chart and compass come from Thee,
Jesus, Savior, pilot me.*

