

“A Line in the Sand”

Matthew 2:1-12

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1/1/12

Early in December I made a pilgrimage to the Greenlake Conference Center for the Annual Meeting of the WI Council of Churches. Because I have been attending these meetings for 5 or 6 years now and I have gotten to know a number of other regular attendees, some of which come from the west central part of the state. This year a group of 4 of us carpoled to the conference, a decision that all of us were glad to have made.

The conversations down and back never stopped. We talked and listened to parts of each other’s stories – where we came from, where we’ve been, what we think of where we are. It was good to get to know each other better, long car trips are good for that.

But the 4 of us are all church people and we were going to a church meeting, so of course we talked a lot about the churches we serve and the state of the church around Wisconsin.

On the trip home we recapped the meeting, what was helpful and what wasn’t. At one point we talked about the decline in the WI Council of Churches budget and the fact that the biggest drop in the budget was the result of lower contributions from the ELCA synods. The Lutheran pastors in the van said the ELCA gave less because of the many Lutheran churches that left the ELCA as a consequence of the denomination’s vote to ordain people whose sexual orientation was toward their same gender. While the churches served by the two Lutheran clergy in our van were not struggling with the decision of the denomination, the fact that other ELCA congregations were, was heartbreaking for our fellow travelers. One of them commented that for some ELCA churches the acceptance of homosexuality was a “line in the sand” matter. For so many people in the church who had grown up being taught about who God saves and who God condemns, what behaviors are acceptable and what ones are sinful, what parts of the Bible to take literally and what parts don’t matter so much, to these people homosexuality is clearly a line that cannot be crossed.

After this Lutheran pastor spoke about the line in the sand drawn by others, he wondered out loud about what his own lines were. What were the things that as a Christian he simply could never accept. His question prompted a long conversation, but not so much about the lines that couldn't be crossed. Our conversation focused on all the lines that Jesus did cross and tried to erase. While much of the teachings that come out of the church seem to focus on where we shouldn't go and what lines we shouldn't or can't cross, the gospel shouts about the lines that should be wiped away when they create barriers to living according to the great commandments of loving God and loving our neighbor as our self.

Take, for instance, our gospel passage for this morning. It is the account of the Magi from the east journeying to pay homage to a new born king.

In one respect it is not a strange story for the time and place of Jesus' birth. It was typical for there to be stories about dignitaries visiting important people at the time of their birth. Such events speak of a person's destiny, their influence that is recognized even by the stars and the planets. What is astonishing about the visit of the magi is that they recognize the messiah when Jesus' own people did not. The Magi bring expensive gifts, whereas in his own country he barely finds a place to be born. The Magi, the lowly shepherds, obscure parents are barrier breaking, line crossing elements of the Christmas story.

It is impossible not to recognize from the very beginning of his life that Jesus came to break barriers, to go where he wasn't supposed to, to reach out and be in the company of people that the world shunned, rejected, oppressed. For us the story of Jesus' birth has become quaint, even magical, but we do great harm to Christmas if we don't lift up the power and disturbing proclamation of Jesus' birth – and one of the most disturbing elements of the birth is that it challenges the conventions of the world.

Today we begin a new year and I want to offer some Christian theological direction for this year and beyond. Some of you may find in this direction a confirmation of what you already believe, others may find it new, still others might find it worth arguing with – all of these can be honest responses worth exploring, but no matter what your response I hope it causes you to feel pushed to cross some lines you didn't think you would cross.

Perhaps the greatest and most persistent criticism of the Christian faith is its insistence that only those who confess Jesus as God's only son will be saved. Much of the world finds the exclusivity claims made by many Christians to be absurd, globally destructive and deeply flawed. Even within the Christian community what constitutes a legitimate confession of faith is debated – if a baptism isn't done according to the right formula it may be deemed unacceptable, if the Bible is not read according to a particular interpretation it is blasphemous, if certain political candidates are not supported people can be excluded from the Lord's Supper.

The most cited rationale for Christian exclusivity are passages found in the gospel of John such as, "I am the way, the truth and the light, no one comes to the father but by me." This and many other uniquely Johannine verses are spoken to people being oppressed and excluded from their religious and political world. In their original context these are meant to be words of comfort to the downtrodden they were meant to assure people of God's love when the world said that God had abandoned them.

How amazing it is in our day when these same words are used to do just the opposite of what they meant originally – instead of comfort they are spoken as a threat, instead of proclaiming God's love they are spoken as words of exclusion.

Our children's questions about how God can condemn people who offer love, kindness and compassion are deeply important questions. We say God loves everybody and then we say, God only loves those who call love by the right name.

The world criticizes our Christian exclusivity most essentially because Christians have used it as a justification for treating non-Christians with disdain. We fear and hate Muslims, at least in part because they challenge the superiority of Christianity. Native peoples around the world have been decimated by Christians, at least in part because they were said to be heathens who didn't know Jesus. It is not hard to point out the abuse of non-Christians by Christians, and I would say it is not hard to see how this same hegemony has bled over into our American nationalism and treatment of classes of people within our nation. The old guard, the established elite and successful, the advantaged and self-congratulating seek protections against the poor, the needy, the young, the foreign. Because they are not us, we are justified in keeping what belongs to us.

But here is the theological direction that I believe is central to the gospel – “God saves all people, period.” There is no child, man or woman, Muslim, Jew, wicken, pagan, humanist, Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, gay, straight, old or young that fall outside the full love of the creator. It was this proclamation that Jesus came to offer, reveal and live. Jesus came to make clear the heart and grace of God which requires no contingencies or prerequisites.

In their book, “If Grace is True,” Philip Gulley and James Mulholland ask, “Why is it so hard for us to believe in God’s unending graciousness?” They go on to say “If grace is true, it is true for everyone. The removal of obstacles that keep us from experiencing the extravagant grace of God ought to be the primary purpose of the church.”

Gulley and Mulholland have crossed a line, they have spoken the words of universalism which the Christian community has summarily rejected over and over and over again. If grace is true for everyone then we don’t know what to do with or call Jesus. We have decided that Jesus can only be the son of God, the Messiah and of value to us if his message can only be heard from him. But even in John’s gospel Jesus says that he came not to reveal himself, he came to reveal God. Embracing Jesus as God in human form is meant to turn our eyes and hearts toward the fullness of God’s desire, and I believe Jesus celebrates every means by which God’s desires are pointed to and lived out. I also believe that it breaks God’s heart when we claim that loving Jesus justifies destructive thoughts and actions toward those who do not share our same faith confession.

The birth of Jesus was not meant for drawing lines in the sand, it was meant to erase them. Gulley and Mulholland say that the purpose of the church is to erase them too. We claim to be the body of Christ, the living manifestation of God’s presence in the world, and even though it requires much from us, like Christ we are called to proclaim God’s extravagant grace for everyone. To do this will mean no less than the transformation of the world.