

Changing Our Maps

Isaiah 56:6-7, Matthew 5:9

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And the foreigners who join themselves to the Holy One, to minister to this One, to love my Holy Name, and to be servants, all who keep the Sabbath, and do not profane it, and hold fast my covenant— these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples. *Isaiah 56:6-7*

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. *Matthew 5:9*

Who read maps in your family? Do you have memories of summer vacations or trips with the map unfolded in the front seat and discussing who would be the navigator to find the best route?

When Jeffrey and I moved from Wisconsin to Elk Grove, CA in 1995, we drove across the country. Jackson was 10 months old at the time. We drove because we wanted to see dear friends along the way, but it was quite a challenge. The maps showed us the main route to take from Wisconsin to Iowa to Nebraska and through Colorado and Utah and Nevada. Maps don't tell you how long it is going to take or how windy the roads are or the distance to the next gas station. Remember long before GPS and Google maps.

I love maps. I like seeing the big picture when we are driving or traveling. My dad loved maps too. He had those Thomas Guide maps for the freeways and streets in Orange County and Los Angeles. He was an excellent navigator, but I also remember him saying when we arrived in a new town and were trying to find a point of interest – “It feels right.”

What I realize as I look back is that I assumed maps were always factual. They were non-biased documents about the layout of a town, streets, boundaries of cities, counties, states and countries. Of course that is not true. Maps are political documents. It depends who makes them and for whom they are made. Maps can reflect or change our perception in some comical and some very serious ways.

Maps can shape our perceptions of who we are and how we see the world.

Here is a map by Saul Steinberg – view of the United States from Manhattan. I am guessing that feels fairly accurate for many in New York. (1)

Here is map of how some Californians see the United States. I have to admit there is some truth for me at different times in my life. (2)

And then there are world maps. The more we learn, the more there is to learn about how maps have changed, borders have changed. We begin to see that we look at maps and nations and peoples from a particular perspective. And how that may change as we deepen our connection the Holy One and to all creation and cosmos.

This map is one that changed my perspective. The Peters Projection Map. The map shows all areas – whether countries, continents or oceans – according to their actual size. Accurate comparisons become possible. All North-South lines run vertically on this map. Thus, geographic points can be seen in their correct geographical relationship. By setting forth all countries in their true size and location, this map allows each one its actual position in the world. In this complex and interdependent world, all people deserve the most accurate possible portrayal of their place in the world. The Peters Projection Map is that. (3)

The Gall–Peters projection initially passed unnoticed when presented by Gall in 1855. It achieved more widespread attention after Arno Peters reintroduced it in 1973. He promoted it as a superior alternative to the commonly used Mercator projection, on the basis that the Mercator projection greatly distorts the relative sizes of regions on a map. In particular, he criticized that the Mercator projection causes wealthy Europe and North America to appear very large relative to poorer Africa and South America. These arguments swayed many socially concerned groups to adopt the Gall–Peters projection, including the National Council of Churches. (4)

Now look at this map. If you immediately thought, “It’s upside down,” then I invite you to think again. Can a map of the world really be upside down? We know the world cannot be upside down, as there is no ‘up’ in space. (5)

As it turns out, the map is actually just another way of picturing the world, one that is just as accurate, real, and as natural as the ones most of us are routinely familiar with.

Maps are inventions, and as a result are subject to the assumptions, beliefs, and desires of those who make them, not to mention the practical limitations of depicting a three-dimensional sphere in two dimensions. And we learn that maps are affected invisible forces like custom, social agreement, self-interest, or power.

But what if we look at the world and one another with different lenses? As we hear the words of the prophets like Isaiah, of Jesus, of the early followers of Jesus’ ways, how might our inner maps change? On this World Communion & Peacemaking Sunday, what might that mean?

Isaiah 56:1-8 radically expands the boundaries for being included among God’s people. Written at a late stage in the development of the book of Isaiah, the text synthesizes claims in the book about human action and divine action. And reflecting ongoing disagreement about how the post-exilic Jewish community should define itself, it invites us to consider the lines we draw that exclude or include persons in our communities. (6)

Isaiah 56 marks the beginning of the final major division of Isaiah (chapters 56-66, "Third Isaiah"). This book makes an important theological claim about the relationship between human and divine action. On the one hand, God acts for good in the world even when humans fail to do what's right. God delivers the exiles from Babylon despite their moral shortcomings. On the other hand, the expectation for divine action should motivate efforts to establish a more righteous social order.

As Judean exiles began returning to Jerusalem in the late fifth century BCE, the boundaries of the worshipping community had to be renegotiated, especially after the rebuilding of the temple. Some voices argued for defining the community narrowly among ethnic lines. The post-exilic Jewish community was small and vulnerable. Strict enforcement of boundaries might aid communal survival.

However, Isaiah 56:3-8 offers a more expansive vision of the makeup of God's people. Two classes of people who were previously excluded from the community are now welcomed into it: foreigners and eunuchs. Isaiah's inclusion of these marginalized groups isn't just a token nod to diversity. Their envisioned participation in the worshiping community is full and robust. God doesn't wait for devout foreigners to find their way to the temple (the "if you build it, they will come" approach). Rather, God "will bring (them) to my holy mountain." Their prayers and sacrifices will be accepted, and their worship will be "joyful" (verse 7). In the final verse of the passage, God promises to continue bringing new people into the community (verse 8). Theologically, it reflects the persistent trajectory across scripture to expand the boundaries of God's people in ever more inclusive ways. (7)

I read a verse from Sermon on the Mount, teachings of Jesus about lifting up the poor and pursuing peace *shalom* for all people. All who are doing this are children of God. Later in Matthew (15:21-28), Jesus encounters a deeply faithful foreign woman, a Samaritan. Their long conversation suggests those who are his followers should rethink their narrow conceptions of the boundaries of God's people.

Although there is clearly tribalism in the biblical narratives, another thread that is strong is that the Holy One keeps expanding boundaries, addressing stereotypes, and calling people to rethink – who is the insider and who is the outsider? Clean and unclean? Acceptable and unacceptable? How are these boundaries shifting? All are welcome to the table. Change your maps if they are keeping you from experiencing this abundant grace.

Close with a story. In Normandy during World War Two, there were two GIs who took their dead comrade to be buried in a cemetery. They knew he was Christian. They went to the cemetery and asked the Roman Catholic priest for permission to bury him inside the walls of the cemetery. The priest said, "Well, the rule is that you've got to be Roman Catholic; you've got to be a member of the parish. I just can't allow it. I wish I could, but I just can't allow it."

And they begged him. They said, "It would mean so much to us to bury our friend inside the fence." "I'm so sorry," the priest said. "I just can't allow it, but bury him outside the fence, just anywhere outside the fence." The two GIs reluctantly dug the grave, said a prayer and buried their comrade.

They finished after nightfall. The next morning, the entire unit was ordered to move on, and the group raced back to the little church for one final goodbye to their friend. When they arrived, they couldn't find the grave site. And they walked all up and down the fence, and they couldn't find where they'd dug the grave. They knew they'd dug it. They walked all around the cemetery, all around that fence, and they couldn't find it.

They went in to see the priest. "Father, we were the ones who came yesterday. Forgive us for bothering you, but we asked for permission to bury our comrade inside the fence, and you said 'Bury him outside,' and we did, but we can't find the grave. Do you know what might have happened to it?"

And the priest said, "Oh, yes. I know what happened. I was so upset about your visit yesterday that I spent half the night worrying about what I said to you. And I spent the other half of the night moving the fence." (8)

The Holy One moves fences and colors outside the lines and invites all to the table to be fed. May we be willing to move fences, may we work for peace, and may we be willing to change our maps. Amen.

- 1) Saul Steinberg, "View of the World from 9th Ave,"
<https://medium.com/everything-water/saul-steinberg-s-view-of-california-s-drought-c488e5d796b8>
- 2) <https://www.redbubble.com/i/poster/How-Californians-see-America-funny-map-by-SolidEarthArt/113402934.LVTDI>
- 3) Peters Projection Map <https://www.oxfordcartographers.com/our-maps/peters-projection-map/>
- 4) Peters Projection Map –same link
- 5) Carl Jennings, "What's Wrong With This Picture," 11/2/21 Medium.com
<https://medium.com/illumination/whats-wrong-with-this-picture-91bd19956088>
- 6) J. Blake Couey, "Isaiah 56:1-8," workingpreacher.com
<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/reviced-common-lectionary/ordinary-20/commentary-on-isaiah-561-6-8>
- 7) Couey
- 8) Thomas Tewell, "Coloring Outside the Lines," Covenant Network of Presbyterians, 11.3.2000
<https://covnetpres.org/2000/11/03/coloring-outside-the-lines/>