



Bishop's Reflection

CALLED TO NEW FRONTIERS

BY THE RT. REV. PAUL-GORDON CHANDLER

“I live my life in widening circles,” said Rainer Maria Rilke, the 20th century Austrian poet, novelist and mystic, in one of his poems. A thousand years ago, the world known to Western civilization centered on the Mediterranean Sea. It extended to China in the East, the Baltic Sea to the North, and Saharan Africa and India to the South. To the West lay the vast and dreaded “green sea of darkness,” the Atlantic, and farther south smoldered a semi-mythical terra incognita - Africa. Societies lived in ignorance of one another. The French did not know of the Inca. The Songhai, the royal tribe of West Africa, had no inkling of the Inuit. The unknown and the forbidden were thought to be the same. Therefore, the explorer or pioneer stood apart as someone with a touch of madness.

However, with the return of Magellan’s ship in 1522 from its circumnavigation of the globe, came the confirmation that the oceans were interconnected. And by 1800 most of the seas had been explored and roughly mapped. Within the early 19th century, most of the world was finally linked due to technological advances. History has increasingly led us to new frontiers and into relationships with those different than ourselves, what sociologists call “The Great Convergence.”

Perhaps more than anything else, Jesus was known to enter new frontiers – geographically, culturally and spiritually. Over and over again we see him heading into new territory on the map – such as north into Sidon and Tyre (Lebanon today), or into Samaria. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus often used the example of someone from another culture and religious tradition to expand his listener’s horizons – from the Syro-Phoenician woman (Lebanese), to highlighting the historical examples of “those of Nineveh” (Iraqis), of Naaman, the military commander from Syria, and even of those associated with the “Queen of the South or Sheba” (Ethiopia).



“East Meets West” marker in Farson, WY

However, most notably, Jesus pushed the boundaries of the Jewish religious tradition at that time, in order to enable his listeners to understand what true faith was really all about.

Jesus crossed these frontiers to expand his listener's spiritual horizons, for more often than not, it is in unfamiliar "territory" that we more fully enter into that deeper dimension with God. All throughout history, those who lived on the fractal edge have ended up as forerunners of spiritual renewal. I am reminded of the profound words of Paul Tillich, the renowned 20th century German theologian who taught at Union Seminary in New York City. He titled his short autobiographical book, *On the Boundary*. In this influential work, reflecting on his spiritual journey, Tillich wrote:

"The boundary is the best place for acquiring knowledge... The boundary might be the fitting symbol for the whole of my personal and intellectual development... The boundary between native land and alien country is not merely an external boundary... It is also the boundary between two inner forces, two possibilities of human existence."

It is a very common human tendency to live with a "boundary way" of thinking – where physical, cultural and spiritual borders are built and even protected. Boundary-thinking often leads to circles or lines being drawn on the maps of our hearts and minds. However, Jesus was all about drawing God's bigger circles around our smaller circles, by demonstrating for us that God's love knows no boundaries. The very nature of God's heart supersedes all borders, and therefore

leads us into new frontiers. I love the way the early 20th century Lebanese-American poet Kahlil Gibran, who came from a Christian tradition, expresses his vision of a borderless worldview. He wrote, "Should you sit upon a cloud you would not see the boundary line between one country and another, nor the boundary stone between a farm and a farm. It is a pity you cannot sit upon a cloud."

We need to take the message of Christ to "new frontiers," through an ongoing exploration of spiritual discovery that engages the frontiers of our hearts, minds and communities.

It is all too easy to set boundaries, even on God. Yet in God's eyes, there are no borders. The beauty of Jesus is that he illustrates for us God's perspective, showing us how to overcome all barriers between us, breaking down societal, cultural, religious and ethnic borders, and leading us out into new frontiers. Although there is almost an instinctual sense to establish "borders," the journey of faith with God is about opening up the

alternative, and pushing the perimeters of those lines off the map, toward seeing things more and more with God's eyes.

With Jesus as our model – we are called to step over the lines that our world has drawn and embrace the "boundary-less way of God," and venture into new frontiers. Building on our pioneering frontier history, I profoundly believe that our calling as the Episcopal Church in Wyoming is to see the message of Christ taken to "new frontiers," through an ongoing exploration of spiritual discovery that engages the frontiers of our hearts, minds and communities. The promise we carry with us as we do so, is that it is God who waits for us on the other side of those lines.

Take hope,
+ Paul-Gordon