



making God's love visible in downtown Memphis

The 10th Sunday After Pentecost, Luke 12.49-56

August 18, 2019

The Rev. Scott Walters

There's a little blue dot on my phone that tells me where I am. It's a matter of faith for me, but I'm told the blue dot knows where my phone is with the help of global positioning satellites and trigonometry. Somehow the phone knows how far it is from this satellite, and also from that satellite, and it learns that the satellites are so far apart from each other, so it must be right here at the corner of Second and Adams, in Memphis, Tennessee on planet Earth.

This is all very mysterious to me. Only having lived in Memphis for two years now, occasionally I still find myself relying on that little dot to tell me where I am and how to get where I need to be. But it occurs to me that a much lower tech form of global positioning took place every Sunday evening in my Grandmother's living room when I was a child.

My parents and brother, aunt, uncle, and cousins would make our official visit to Grandma at this time. And no matter what the particular topics of conversation had been for the evening, eventually a place in town would be mentioned that needed to be located by someone in the group, and the positioning would begin.

"It's three doors down from the Smiths. No. Not Cecil Smith. Joe and Tarver Smith. Yes. Joe and Tarver do have a daughter named Tarver Jo, which can be confusing. She lives next door. Down the hill from the Nitz's, other side of the street from Mabel Oisen."

Dr. Oisen directed the university choir and had been gone for some time, but the house was still hers for the purposes of these conversations.

As reference points were added, at least the perception grew with us kids that the location in question was being zeroed in on by the grownups. Sometimes Dad would finish the process with an item of trivia and a reference to something he'd purchased at a yard sale nearby. "It's not far from where Rogene Weathers lived. I bought my favorite hammer and some spare handles from him. Did you know they found plastic bags full of dryer lint in his attic when he died?"

Of course, what this constellation of saints and mythical figures was really locating was each of us. In some mysterious way, at the intersection of all these lives sat one particular tow-headed kid in industrial looking glasses.

It may be because we all locate ourselves in this world according to other lives and stories—those of families, neighbors, neighbors of family, friends of neighbors, and so on—that Jesus's talk of disrupting families is so unsettling and confusing. Without reference to relationships like these, who am I? And if I am somehow still someone, how do I find me?

"Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth?" he says. "No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided."

This Jesus sure doesn't sound very Christian at times, does he? In all the talk about family values—from left, right, or center—nobody sounds like Jesus. When was the last time you heard anyone say he was going to make things better by turning family members against one another? Why in the world might Jesus say such a thing?

More personally, why would he do such a thing on a Sunday when I'm supposed to introduce the theme for Christian Formation for the fall: "Being Reconciled"? Throw me a bone, Jesus! Or at least stay on message. We're told he will "guide our feet in the way of peace" at the beginning of Luke and he says, "Peace be with you" at the end. But not here. Not in chapter 12. How do we make sense of this?

Well, let's begin by considering the world Jesus lived in. People in the Roman Empire located themselves in the world in much the same way we did back in Grandma's living room. The pater familias was the head of the network of relationships that made up a household—which included husband, wife, and children, but also slaves, even tradespeople in the family business and more. For better or for worse, a person located herself, a person learned who she was by learning what it meant to enter this world at a particular intersection of these relationships. Which also meant that if you didn't have them, you were not quite a person.

Jewish culture had its own family structures. Torah dictated different roles and responsibilities for men and women, for sons and daughters (firstborn and then the rest), for neighbors, servants, foreigners, even cattle.

Our world has them too, of course. Ardelle was sitting beside me on the porch swing yesterday after giving this sermon's first draft a read. By the way, if you were to see one of these sermons before Ardelle gets to them you'd probably hire bodyguards for her. But she was reading the Daily Memphian on her phone and found family structures there. It was in Bill Dries's piece about Ford Canale giving up coaching golf at Christian Brothers High to run for city council, getting into politics like his grandfather, John Ford Canale, did.

Of course, since I'm a priest and Ford is also an undertaker, we've met several times, usually over a casket. In fact, his uncle Sturla lives just up the street from us and walks with his wife to Ecco for dinner pretty regularly, and...

See how it works? Barely two years in Memphis and the coordinates in our global positioning identity satellites are being established once again.

Maybe the relevant point is that in Jesus's day and in ours, people understand their place in the world by describing all these other relationships. And in predicting the way families would be ruptured, at the very least, Jesus seemed to be saying that in a time that was coming, people were going to need a different, perhaps a more expansive way of understanding their identities than that of family.

"I have a baptism with which to be baptized," he said, "and what stress I am under until it is completed!" It seems this baptism would show Jesus his real place in the world. A full expression of who he was meant to be.

But this baptism, of course, was not a polite ceremony with family, friends, and a handful of holy water. The baptism was his death and resurrection. And from the beginning, Christians like those for whom Luke was written, have seen baptism as the event that tells us who and where and whose we truly are in the deepest of ways.

What we can forget or ignore is that baptism begins with death. But death is a prerequisite for resurrection. In baptism the relationships that tell us who we are, are reconfigured, and an old way of locating ourselves in the world must die. We're baptized into something called the Body of Christ.

As Jesus told Nicodemus over in John, we're born the first time of flesh. Born into Grandma's living room, you might say. And this birth is necessary, but incomplete. We must be born of spirit as well. Born into this Body of Christ that includes, or hopes to include, the whole world. It's a body composed of many gifts, some living, some latent. But it's a body that we may only be able to see ourselves as members of when we're willing to let ultimate attachment to other sources of our identity die, even sources as good and necessary as family.

You see, the problem with families is that they're hard to get into and impossible to get out of. This is also their gift; that's a topic for another sermon. But if the mission of the church really is reconciliation... If our mission is to

restore all people to unity with one another and with God through Christ, as our prayer book says, then small, incomplete notions of unity like family and friendship and country may need to die back so that something more expansive, something more universal can take their place. Something like the Body of Christ. Something like the Kingdom of God.

And it may just be that it's only in seeing ourselves as part of this Body that is reaching to include every last one of God's children that we are freed to be the child or parent or spouse or friend or citizen we're called to be in this world. Maybe the family itself is just one more instance of fruitfulness that comes only out of death. A grain of wheat that must fall to the ground and die, so that it can be resurrected into the form God has in mind.

I wouldn't trade those evenings in Grandma's living room. I wouldn't trade any of the people in the room either. Well, most days I wouldn't. Even the global positioning that was telling me something about who I am was not a problem unless I learned to trust it too much. Unless I believed that what makes a human a human is anything other than the relentless reconciling love of of the God who made every last one of us.

Family can be a gift. But only if family is not a god. And Jesus will tear down whatever walls we raise to separate ourselves from one another. Even the ones around the people who brought you into this world. Jesus will tear them down if that's what being reconciled with all those beloved strangers outside our walls requires.