

“Range and Territory”
Mark 9:33-41; Ezra 3:10-13
Sermon for the Presbytery of Western North Carolina

Ezra 3:10-13

¹⁰When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the Lord, the priests in their vestments were stationed to praise the Lord with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, according to the directions of King David of Israel; ¹¹and they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the Lord, “For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel.” And all the people responded with a great shout when they praised the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid.

¹²But many of the priests and Levites and heads of families, old people who had seen the first house on its foundations, wept with a loud voice when they saw this house, though many shouted aloud for joy, ¹³so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people’s weeping, for the people shouted so loudly that the sound was heard far away.

Mark 9:33-41

³³Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the way?” ³⁴But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. ³⁵He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” ³⁶Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, ³⁷“Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

³⁸John said to him, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.”

³⁹But Jesus said, “Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. ⁴⁰Whoever is not against us is for us. ⁴¹For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.”

The Sermon

When David Letterman retired last year, a lot of media outlets went over the timeline of his career, and most agreed there had been a real turning point in his life when he'd had to miss several months of hosting the Late Show due to a complicated heart surgery.

A lot of people remember Letterman's bandleader and sidekick Paul Schaffer. Not as many people know that Paul Schaffer is a devout Orthodox Jew.

Paul Schaffer said in his memoirs that the first thing he did when he found out that Dave needed a quadruple bypass was to call the chief rabbi of the state of Israel to ask for a *mi shabeirach*, a special prayer for healing, for Dave.

The rabbi said, "Is he Jewish?"

And Paul said, "No, but he's in show business."

And the rabbi said, "Close enough!"ⁱ

Some years ago I had a short sabbatical, during which time I attended as many worship services I could get to, some in interfaith circumstances, and a lot in different kinds of churches. I especially craved as much holy communion as I could get.

One thing I experienced over and over was going as a guest to other churches who celebrated communion, and hearing them say or reading in their literature the prohibition that if you're not part of that specific faith family, you're not supposed to take communion.

That theme continued all the way to the very last day of the sabbatical, when I came across those words in an Orthodox church and I thought, you know, I am kind of sick and tired of reading that message among my sibling disciples in their houses of worship. Communion was not going to be part of that service anyway, but something in print made it clear that if it had been, it would not have been available to me.

And I remembered with gratitude, on that final sabbatical day, a short retreat in which the list of participants was 70 middle aged Catholic women from Connecticut, one priest, and a Presbyterian minister who stuck out like a sore thumb but was warmly embraced anyway.

On the last night, they were going to celebrate the mass, so I grabbed a quick moment with the priest to ask if he would prefer that I not put him in an awkward position by coming forward to receive the sacrament. (Professional courtesy.)

A look came across his face that kind of said, “We’re going to make this work,” and after about half a second of consideration, he said, “Do you believe that Christ is in some sense present in the bread and wine?”

I said, “Absolutely.”

And that was it. I was firmly instructed to take communion with everybody else.

“Is he Catholic?” No, but he believes that Christ is spiritually present in the bread and wine. *Close enough!*

A long time ago, I stumbled onto a clarification of terms that has shaped my religious thinking ever since. The terms are these: when you are talking about the area that an animal will roam, there is its *range*, and its *territory*.

An animal’s *range* is the total area that it will travel. It may be just going out to explore, or to look for food, or a mate, or watch for potential rivals. No matter what for, the farthest extent of the area that an animal will travel of its own will is called its range.

An animal’s *territory* is closer in; it’s the area it will defend. They mark their territory, and patrol it, and if some other animal violates that territory—as in, “forgive us our trespasses”—you will get, at the very least, a growl to tell you to back off, because the next thing that happens is going to be a lot worse.

An animal’s *range* is the total area that it will travel. An animal’s *territory* is the area it will defend.

What are the parameters of the range that you are willing to roam as a follower of Christ? As a spiritual seeker?

How far out, or for that matter how far inward, are you willing to follow where Jesus leads?

“Teacher,” the disciples said, “we saw somebody casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.”

And Jesus said, in Eugene Peterson's translation,

“Don't stop him.

“No one can use my name to do something good and powerful,
and in the next breath cut me down.

“If he's not an enemy, he's an ally. Anyone by just giving you a cup of water in my name is on our side. Count on it that God will notice.”ⁱⁱ

What are the boundaries which you mark and defend as your territory?

And: what are the boundaries of the Church—and what it means to be Church—that you will defend against trespassers with a growl or, if necessary, an attack?

What are the inviolable bounds of the Church's territory that you believe the Church must protect from interlopers?

And when Jesus says, “Whoever welcomes a child like this welcomes me,” and “Whoever is not against us is for us,” is he endorsing, or correcting, your assessment of what the Church's territorial boundaries ought to be?

God has brought us to a historical point where much about the way the Church understands what it means to be Church is and will continue to become radically different—though we don't yet even know how.

We are now, as we have been before, an Ezra 3 Church.

Ezra 3 takes place after the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BCE and the razing of the Temple; after the Jews had been scattered, the best and brightest shipped off to Babylon; after Cyrus the Persian defeated Babylon and allowed the Jews to return home and, eventually, to rebuild the Temple.

So everyone gathered around to celebrate when the foundation of the new house of the Lord was laid. And all the people responded with a great shout when they praised the Lord.

But many of the priests and Levites and heads of families, old people who had seen the first house on its foundations, wept with a loud voice when they saw this house,

though many shouted aloud for joy, so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people's weeping

There are still those who remember the Mainline American Protestant Church as wind in the sails of a mighty ship, and are daily working to honor that past by carrying it into the present.

And there are those who were born in Exile, who are looking to the foundations of what was before to build something new, for whom the question of whether or not it looks like it did several decades ago is irrelevant.

And together we make a sound that is as ambiguous within our company as it is to those who are far away—so that “the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people's weeping, for the people shouted so loudly that the sound was heard far away.”

And now, in our time, just as it was before: if we believe God's promises, we don't have to be afraid of this historical crossroads for the church.

At this moment, the Church in all its expressions is called to learn how to reach out and be inspired by seekers who are expanding the limits of their range, and will need at the very least to reevaluate everything it understands about its territory.

Anxious disciples came to Jesus to warn him that someone from outside the recognized parameters of the church family was acting in the name of Jesus, and he said, “Do not stop him. Whoever is not against us is for us.”

It is time for the Church to let go of its imaginary hold on and control over those who are inspired and enthused to do Jesus-like ministry.

This is tough for people, like me, who were raised on “decently and in order,” and who in fact have often seen the messy and ambiguous results, or worse, when “decently and in order” has not been practiced the way we were trained to make sure it was practiced.

That makes us anxious.

Maybe we ought to be anxious, if “decently and in order” has become for us a code phrase for “command and control.”

We, the Church of Jesus Christ, are a people gathered around trust in God who, generation after generation, has led God's covenant people through desert and wilderness to salvation.

Authenticity of our message, and integrity in who we are, require and demand that we learn to entrust the Church back to God, following the Holy Spirit who leads us into a wider range than may be comfortable for our old and deeply held prejudices, and re-examining how we define our territory and why we think God needs us to defend it.

I've been coming to Montreat and having powerful, personal, spiritual encounters and experiences since the first youth group I brought up here in 1995. I brought youth groups up here for 20 years after that, and also came to Worship & Music Conferences and our family just came up from time to time just to be here.

Every year, every time, there was always something special about coming through that Montreat gate. It meant you kind of crossed a welcoming threshold into a special place of deep spiritual enrichment.

So imagine my surprise to learn that, historically, it was not seen and experienced by everyone as a welcoming threshold, wide open to all, but for some, it felt more like a checkpoint.

I have just been with dear colleagues traveling in a country dotted with checkpoints. They are not welcoming thresholds. They are designed to give one people command and control, and for another people, at best—*at best*— they make life difficult, burdensome, complicated and, daily, humiliating. Often they make life untenable, unmanageable, and impossible.

It is important to know and grapple with our history, and to identify the injustices embedded within it and deconstruct as much as it takes to root out those embedded imbalances.

As long as my thresholds into the Church are your checkpoints, I am claiming too much territory as my own—and need to ask God to give me the strength, vision and courage to reexamine the boundaries of my range.

Jesus taught the disciples—and God has shown us—that it takes less than a generation to transform a checkpoint into a threshold.

What if we could throw our church doors wide open, wider than we are accustomed, wider than we have imagined; until they are so wide that they are no longer identifiable as doors at all,

so that we can spend less energy trying to defend territory that was never ours to cordon off anyway,

and more time and energy exploring the range that leads us ever further and deeper and wider and higher?

What if our church doors are open as wide as Jesus' arms were when he reached out for you and for me?

And what if we share with everyone who is thirsty the same cup of water that gives us life—

even we who are still exploring the outer reaches of our range, even we who still struggle with our anxieties about the territory we defend?

Maybe the question isn't, how far out is your range, or what are the boundary points of your territory.

How deep is our trust? How true is your faith?

How much of this world, and how many of its people, are encompassed in God's love?

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ⁱPaul Schaffer, *We'll Be Here for the Rest of Our Lives*. New York: Anchor, 2009; pp. 296-297.

ⁱⁱEugene Peterson's translation of Mark 9:39-41 in the MSG Bible (*The Message*).