



ALL SAINTS CHURCH
Pasadena, California

Recalculating

A sermon preached by The Reverend Susan Russell
Sunday, July 18, 2010

May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts, be always acceptable to you, O Lord, our strength, our courage, and our freedom. Amen.

Well, I am back from a month-long trip to Europe, something Louise and I call “Louise and Susan’s Excellent European Adventure.” And we were *very* prepared. We had a three-ring binder notebook full of tabs and plastic inserts and maps and hotel reservations and E-mails from those of you who sent us your Paris lists – if you’re out there, thank you; they were fabulous. We had guide books, we had sunscreen, and we had all the things you buy at Rite Aid just in case. [Laughter]

So I am going to begin this sermon about journey from another text that didn’t make it into the lectionary today. It’s the Gospel According to Rick Steves. [Laughter] It’s from his guidebook to Paris.¹

Our Earth is home to six and a half billion equally precious people. It’s humbling to travel and find that people don’t have the “American Dream” – they have their own dreams. Europeans like us, but, with all due respect, they wouldn’t trade passports.

Thoughtful travel engages us with the world.... By broadening perspectives, travel teaches us new ways to measure quality of life, destroying ethnocentricity, and helping us enjoy and appreciate other cultures. Rather than fear the diversity of the planet, we should celebrate it. The world is a cultural yarn shop, and travelers are weaving the ultimate tapestry with the strands of different cultures they knit into their own characters.²

Here endeth the reading. [Laughter]

You can hear that at All Saints Church. Don’t you hear, “Weaving the human race into the human family”? It’s totally there.

So we had Rick Steves in one hand, and – the other essential ingredient for a successful European adventure, if it’s going to be excellent – in the other hand we had *The GPS*. Our GPS was very patient. She never panicked. She never raised her voice. She never freaked out when the road signs suddenly changed from Italian to German and then back to Italian. She never said, “How many times do I have to tell you?” She never said, “I cannot believe you missed that turn.” And she certainly never said, “No! No! the *other* left!” Instead, no matter how clueless or far afield we got, her patient, persistent refrain was, “Recalculating.” [Laughter]

I think it is fair to say it took us a little while to trust her. The story I’m going to tell right now is about when that moment happened. It was as we were arriving at our hotel on Lake Como, in Italy – which is absolutely as fabulous as everyone says it is, and you can totally see why George Clooney wants to hang out there. So we were moving along, we were following the GPS, we were wending out way up the side of the lake.

I'm looking at the map, and Louise is looking at the map, and looking at the map and looking at the GPS, and she's saying, "This can't be right. We're going to end up in the middle of the lake. Our hotel is on the other side of the lake. There's no way this could be right."

So we're going along with no small amount of tension in the car, and suddenly our patient, wise, persistent GPS says, "In 500 meters, board the ferry." [Laughter] Who knew there was a ferry? Well, the GPS did, and we never doubted her again.

And now, because this is a sermon, and not a travelogue, here comes the theological part. The way the GPS guided Louise and me on our Excellent European Adventure is how I believe the Holy Spirit guides each and every one of us on our Excellent Earthly Adventures as followers of Jesus. She is patient, she is persistent. No matter how clueless we are or far afield we go, her patient, persistent refrain is, "Recalculating."

And it is, my brothers and sisters, an ancient refrain. Look at the lessons we have been given for today. Abraham sitting by his tent in the heat of the day – and boy do we know what that feels like this week! – thinking he knew what his life looked like, and then these guys show up. The next thing you know they're telling him his 80-year-old wife, Sarah, in the tent, would have a child. That sounds like recalculating to me.

Martha was doing everything the roadmap for her life told her was expected of her – exercising hospitality; getting all the tasks done; being resentful of her sister Mary, who was not following the same road map as Martha, sitting at the feet of Jesus instead. And what did Jesus say when she went to him and ratted out her sister for not helping out with the dishes? "Martha, Martha, Mary has chosen the better part." It's time for you to recalculate, girlfriend. (And then I'd like to think that he signed her up for a cooperative process training workshop to help her get a handle on that triangulation thing. But maybe that's a different sermon.)

Scripture is full of stories of our spiritual ancestors who responded to God's call to recalculate, and found their lives going where no roadmap would lead them. Moses woke up one morning thinking he was tending sheep for a living, and ended up leading his people out of captivity in Egypt. Mary was minding her own business growing up in Nazareth when the angel of the Lord appeared and recalculated her life's journey. Paul was on the diamond lane to Damascus when, pow! Recalculating.

We heard last week about Amos, the prophet who said that God told him that he was giving him a plumb line – which is a great metaphor, I'm sure, if you know what a plumb line is. So what I am wondering this morning is if a better 21st century metaphor for what God gave Amos might be, not a plumb line, but a satellite signal -- hooking you up to the God of love and justice and compassion, plugging in your spiritual GPS. Because, like a GPS connected to the satellite that keeps it on course as long as it is plugged in, we are connected to the love of God who will keep us on course if we stay plugged in and keep our lives in alignment with God's justice, with God's love, and with God's compassion.

What keeps us in that alignment, what keeps our spiritual GPS connected to that satellite, is community. It is where we come, here, to remember that we are loved and called to walk in love, to be fed a fuelled and go back out into the world and witness to that love. "Do this in remembrance of me" – we will say in just a few minutes, when we gather around this table to share the bread and wine made holy. "In remembrance of," to remember – as the rector says, to reverse our amnesia – that we are loved by God and called to go and to return, to plug in our GPS.

Here is a quote from Joan Chittister, from *Wisdom Distilled from the Daily*³, about what community means to her:

In community we work out our connectedness to God, to one another and to ourselves. It is in community where we find out who we are....

Alone, I am what I am, but in community I have the chance to become everything that I can be. And so, stability bonds me to this group of people and to these relationships so that resting in the security of each other we can afford to stumble and search, knowing that we will be caught if we fall and we will be led where we cannot see by those who have been there before us.⁴

Led where we cannot see, caught if we fall, encouraged to recalculate. That sounds like a spiritual GPS to me. And when we journey through life with our spiritual GPS plugged in, we travel with the sure and certain knowledge that there is no such thing as a wrong turn that cannot be recalculated – eventually. I’m remembering one ride Louise and I took through a roundabout three times, until we finally realized, “Oh, *that’s* the fourth exit.” And off we went, and our patient GPS shifted from “Recalculating” to the happy message, “Continue toward destination.” Our God is not a god of dead end streets and of “Oh well, you missed the turns.” Our God is the god who calls us again and again, over and over, to recalculate our journey until we do get it right, until we are going in the right direction, until we are moving forward in alignment with God’s love.

Once I got started thinking about this – and I have to confess, I’ve been thinking about this ever since we almost ended up in Lake Como – I started thinking about my own spiritual journey, about all the times I’ve been called to recalculate. I remember not just those times when I was clever and faithful and got in right; I remember those times when I felt like I was stuck in some going-nowhere roundabout, missing the obvious exit over and over and over again, until I finally got it. Then, like the GPS in our Peugeot, I heard the voice in my head shift from “Recalculate” to “Proceed to destination.”

Here’s the bottom line, my brothers and sisters. Our destination is already programmed in. As our friend, the Bishop of New Hampshire, reminds us, no matter what, we’re going to Heaven. The God of all love, who created us in love and then called us to walk in love with each other, will at the end of this journey gather us back into that love. So the question isn’t where we’re going; the question is, what kind of journey are we going to make to get there? Can we stay plugged into the GPS of God’s values of love, peace, justice and compassion? Will we listen when it is time to recalculate in order to stay on course and avoid the pitfalls and potholes the world and culture can throw our way? Can we challenge not only ourselves but our institutions to recalculate when we, or they, get off course?

Let’s take, just for example, the Episcopal Church. [Laughter] It’s been doing a lot of recalculating lately, and to good effect. And, although we have a long way to go to arrive at our destination, we are moving forward. I want to celebrate a couple of those incremental victories right now. Pointing out a couple of anniversaries this week: a year ago yesterday our General Convention finally found the exit out of the roundabout that we’d been going around and around for lo these many years, and passed a resolution – CO56 – commending the Episcopal Church to create resources for those congregations and dioceses who want theological and liturgical resources for the blessing of same-sex relationships. We’re still continuing toward that destination, but we’re out of that roundabout, and I think that deserves a “Thanks be to God!”

Another anniversary was 19 years ago last week, at the General Convention in Phoenix in 1991, two deputies stood up on the floor of the Convention as the discussion was focused on human sexuality, and said, “You’re not talking about an issue, you are talking about us. They “came out” on the floor of the House of Deputies, which in 2010, with gay bishops and clergy and same-sex unions and marriage may not seem like such a big deal. But in 1991 it was a huge deal.

So anytime I get impatient about how far we are not, I think about how far we have come in those 19 years, and how much recalculating has had to be done on behalf of this church and its leadership in order to get us there.

Meanwhile, while we celebrate the consecration of two new bishops here in Los Angeles, the Church of England is in quite a swivet over ... wait for it ... women bishops. A London Telegraph headline last week called it, “The Church’s Darkest Hour.” [Laughter] And I thought, “Really? This is the *darkest* hour?” And then, in another part of the kingdom, the Pope has added the ordination of women to the same category of “grave crimes” that included the abuse of children. So here’s my story about that (some of you have heard it, so bear with me):

Twenty years ago a bishop in this church, a very Anglo-Catholic guy, nice person and good bishop, said to me that I had great gifts for ministry but I could never be a priest because I was “ontologically incapable of being an efficacious bearer of a sacerdotal presence.” [Laughter] OK? I’ll unpack it for you. “Ontologically” – the essence of my being – was incapable of “bearing a sacerdotal presence,” which means presiding at the altar, because I was not a man.

Now, we can laugh at that, and I hope that we do, but if you’ve read Thomas Aquinas you’d know why he would think that. In the thirteenth century Thomas Aquinas, who was very smart for his time, wrote this wonderful book called the *Summa Theologica*, and in it he explained why we have women. It’s because something went wrong at the time of conception, maybe an ill south wind blowing, he suggested, and the perfect human, who would be the man – no pressure, guys – somehow failed in conception, and so you end up with women.

OK, so here’s the point. From our twenty-first century perspective that is so incredibly laughable that we can hardly believe he could have said it. I’m imagining a hundred or a thousand years from now, and people looking back at what we think we know, and having the same sort of laugh at our expense. It makes as much sense to base twenty-first century theology on thirteenth century biology as it will a thousand years from now to not take advantage of the learning and the recalculating that will happen along the way.

Some of the Church has recalculated their theology that was based on thirteenth century biology; the rest still seems to be searching for the satellite on that one. So, while “there are miles to go before we rest” on these and many other issues, the journey continues, with all of the challenges and all of the joys. And I want to end this morning with one of those joys.

Sometimes during the summers we have baptisms at our noonday Eucharist. Last week I had the privilege of presiding at one of those. It was a typical family with all the typical comings and goings, and I did the preparations, and in the process had a conversation with the godparents about what we were going to be doing in the sacrament. Their two small children were milling about while we were talking – as small children are want to do – and I thought they were paying no attention whatsoever as I talked to their parents.

I talked about how baptism isn’t magic; we’re not taking a pagan baby and turning her into God’s child. She’s already God’s child; we’re just going to celebrate it. We’re going to be bringing her into the community of faith, and you will be serving as godparents, and we talked about extended family, and about turning the human race into the human family. All of a sudden the 3-year-old came and stood by me and said, “So does that make me a godbrother?” And I thought, he’s got some GPS thing going on, whether anyone knows it or not.

So when we gathered in the chapel, and I held that tiny baby in my hand, and I made the sign of the Cross on her forehead and I said, “You are sealed by the Holy Spirit, and marked as Christ’s own forever,” I thought, “I just programmed her spiritual GPS!”

This tiny, 8-pound, 6-week bundle disappearing into the christening gown one of her daddies wore 30-something years ago, was, in that baptismal sacrament, connected to this community committed to help her work out her connectedness to God, to find out who she really is – a place where she can stumble and search, to recalculate, knowing that she will be caught if she falls, that she will be led where she cannot see by those who have gone there before.

Nobody said it better than Verna Dozier⁵:

We trust that if we live today by the light that is given us, knowing that it is only finite and partial, we will know more and different things than we know today, and we can be open to the new possibility we cannot even imagine today.

That is the Excellent Adventure we are called on as we journey together in community with our spiritual GPSes aligned with God’s love, God’s justice, and God’s compassion, recalculating as we go.

Thanks be to God! Alleluia! Amen.

The following notes have been added by the transcriber:

¹ Rick Steves, Steve Smith and Gene Openshaw, *Rick Steves’ Paris 2010* (Avalon Travel Publishing, 2009) paperback 684 pages

² Steves, p. 17

³ Joan Chittister, *Wisdom Distilled from the Daily: Living the Rule of St. Benedict Today* (HarperOne, 1991) paperback, 224 pages

⁴ Chittister, pp. 48 and 49

⁵ Read Bart Barnes’ obituary, “Verna J. Dozier; D.C. Teacher, Episcopal Theologian,” published in the *Washington Post* on September 3, 2006, available online at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/09/02/AR2006090200911.html>, to learn more about this remarkable person.