

Opening Tables and Doors and Arms

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
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- Deuteronomy 32:45-52; 34:1-5 (Good News Translation)⁴⁵When Moses had finished giving God's teachings to the people, ⁴⁶he said, "Be sure to obey all these commands that I have given you today. Repeat them to your children, so that they may faithfully obey all of God's teachings. ⁴⁷These teachings are not empty words; they are your very life. Obey them and you will live long in that land across the Jordan that you are about to occupy." ⁴⁸That same day the LORD said to Moses, ⁴⁹"Go to the Abarim Mountains in the land of Moab opposite the city of Jericho; climb Mount Nebo and look at the land of Canaan that I am about to give the people of Israel. ⁵⁰You will die on that mountain as your brother Aaron died on Mount Hor, ⁵¹because both of you were unfaithful to me in the presence of the people of Israel. When you were at the waters of Meribah, near the town of Kadesh in the wilderness of Zin, you dishonored me in the presence of the people. ⁵²You will look at the land from a distance, but you will not enter the land that I am giving the people of Israel." ...¹ Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the top of Mount Pisgah east of Jericho, and there the Lord showed him the whole land: the territory of Gilead as far north as the town of Dan; ²the entire territory of Naphtali; the territories of Ephraim and Manasseh; the territory of Judah as far west as the Mediterranean Sea; ³the southern part of Judah; and the plain that reaches from Zoar to Jericho, the city of palm trees. ⁴Then the Lord said to Moses, "This is the land that I promised Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob I would give to their descendants. I have let you see it, but I will not let you go there." ⁵So Moses, the Lord's servant, died there in the land of Moab, as the Lord had said he would.
- 1 Corinthians 11:17-26 (Good News Translation) ¹⁷In the following instructions, however, I do not praise you, because your meetings for worship actually do more harm than good. ¹⁸In the first place, I have been told that there are opposing groups in your meetings; and this I believe is partly true. (¹⁹No doubt there must be divisions among you so that the ones who are in the right may be clearly seen.) ²⁰When you meet together as a group, it is not the Lord's Supper that you eat. ²¹For as you eat, you each go ahead with your own meal, so that some are hungry while others get drunk. ²²Don't you have your own homes in which to eat and drink? Or would you rather despise the church of God and put to shame the people who are in need? What do you expect me to say to you about this? Shall I praise you? Of course I don't! ²³For I received from the Lord the teaching that I passed on to you: that the Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took a piece of bread, ²⁴gave thanks to God, broke it, and said, "This is my body, which is for you. Do this in memory of me." ²⁵In the same way, after the supper he took the cup and said, "This cup is God's new covenant, sealed with my blood. Whenever you drink it, do so in memory of me." ²⁶This means that every time you eat this bread and drink from this cup you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: We are called to open the gate, to acknowledge the stranger in our midst, and to welcome them into our lives.

This past Wednesday night my body returned from the Holy Land, and because of the jet lag from crossing seven time zones, sometime around Friday or Saturday the rest of me caught up. I was there with Marion Good, Dave Hensel and his wife Sharon, former RRPC member Dana Straub, and two women from a church in suburban Detroit, Michigan which I used to serve. The seven of us were paired with twenty-three United Methodists from Florida and Pennsylvania and Ontario, Canada for the duration of our tour.

A number of you have toured the Holy Land with me in the past, so you know that most of the time you are touring "holy sites." Holy sites are places that commemorate various biblical events. These sites don't have plaques authenticating them as the precise location of the events—it's not like "the multiplication of loaves and fishes occurred on this very spot." We don't have that kind of definitive proof. The proof we *do* have is a long, long history of these sites being revered as far back as the third century A.D.—some even earlier—revered first by the locals and then by Christian pilgrims.

What you find at most holy sites is that a church has been built upon it to mark the spot and to protect the spot from being developed into, say, a stable or a mobile phone store. It's common to find that the church you see was built in the 17th or 18th century atop the ruins of a church built by the Crusaders in the 12th century, which in turn was built atop the ruins of a Byzantine church constructed in the 5th or 6th century, which was built where a common house had been converted into a simple "house church" in the 1st or 2nd or 3rd century. A tour of the Holy Land takes in numerous holy sites in Jordan and Israel and Palestine.

It might not occur to you that it's not only Americans who tour the holy sites of the Middle East. You encounter Christian pilgrims and tourists from all over the world in the Holy Land. We rubbed elbows with groups from Japan, Poland, Mexico, France, S. Korea, Nigeria, Sweden, India among others. Many of the holy sites are crowded, a little hectic, but usually people are respectful and patient – they know they'll make it through the line eventually.

Earlier this week we visited a site in Israel called Ein Karem which is regarded as the home of Zechariah and Elizabeth and thus the birthplace of John the Baptist. A Roman Catholic church of St. John the Baptist had been built upon the cave revered as their home (in antiquity it was common for people to live in the numerous caves found everywhere in the area). Our visit to Ein Karem came at the end of a busy day of touring that had begun in Bethlehem. Our professional tour guide was among the most experienced I had ever encountered on my five tours of Israel. He knew that the Church of St. John the Baptist admitted its last visitors at 4:45 p.m., and he knew that if traffic allowed, we could get there by 4:30, which we did. Our group of thirty walked up the hill to the plaza in front of the church... only to find the gate locked – at 4:30 p.m.! There was another group also locked out – a tour group of Christians from Russia.

Our guide spoke through the gate to the church custodian, asking why he was closed early and wouldn't he unlock the gate since we had arrived well in advance of closing time. But apparently the custodian simply refused. In a stage whisper our guide said to our group, "Follow me," and he led us up a side alley and to a side gate leading to the church courtyard... but it was also locked. Meanwhile, our guide knew the personal cellphone number of the priest and was talking to him, friend to friend, explaining our predicament. Before too long, the custodian begrudgingly came over, unlocked our side gate and allowed us to proceed into the church where we found the shrine to the birthplace of John the Baptist in a grotto to the left of the main altar.

Members of our group were descending the handful of steps leading to the grotto, taking photographs, reading the explanatory signs, when suddenly the group of Russian Christians pushed their way right through us, casting us aside and making their way down the steps into the cave. Apparently the custodian had gone on to unlock the main gate, too.

The passage from 1 Corinthians Chapter 11 features Paul "calling the Christians on the carpet," so to speak, for what he had heard was rude, inhospitable behavior when they celebrated the Lord's Supper: they weren't waiting for others to arrive, they'd just start right in; they might drink more than their share of the wine to the point that they were actually getting drunk. Paul tells them, "You're not displaying the manner of living Jesus intends."

That was our experience at the Church of St. John the Baptist at Ein Karem.

But now I want to tell you about an experience we had on Mt. Nebo in the Kingdom of Jordan.

As you heard in the Old Testament reading, Mt. Nebo is the place from which God showed Moses the Promised Land... the land to which Moses had been leading the Israelites for forty years. But God had told Moses, "You yourself will not enter the Promised Land."

From the top of Mt. Nebo you have a great view down into the Jordan Valley. You see the Jordan River, the city of Jericho, the Dead Sea, and because we had a particularly clear day we could see across the valley to the Judean mountains and the city of Bethlehem, with Jerusalem beyond that.

Today, atop Mt. Nebo there is a Roman Catholic church that has been restored by the Franciscans since my last visit five years ago. They put in about US\$5 million to restore the building and grounds and facilities to accommodate all the tourists and pilgrims that visit every day. The current Roman Catholic church was built atop the ruins of a large Byzantine church from the 6th century which had been built on the ruins of a much smaller Byzantine chapel from the 5th century. All that was built atop the ruins of a monastery built by Egyptian monks in the 3rd or 4th century.

After you've taken in the view of the Jordan Valley you want to go into the church to see the mosaics on the walls and on the floors that have been unearthed and preserved from the Byzantine church and chapel of the 5th and 6th centuries. They are in very good condition and their artistry is stunning. Simple pews fill the middle of the modern church. You can sit there and look at the mosaics. As we entered the church we were reminded to be quiet because a service was underway. In the front of the church, a group of Roman Catholics from the Philippines was standing around the altar where their priest was saying a mass in English. There was a short, ornamental wrought-iron fence separating the raised chancel and altar from the rest of the church. They were on the other side of that little fence.

Dave Hensel and his wife Sharon were traveling with me. Dave is very active at this church, of course. Sharon is a devout Roman Catholic active at St. John Nepomucene Church in Newburgh Heights. When she saw that a mass was underway Sharon had a seat on the front pew about fifteen feet away from that little wrought-iron fence. Even though she wasn't part of the Filipino group and was separated from them by that little fence, I noticed that she was participating: voicing the responses, saying the prayers, standing or kneeling at the appropriate times.

When it came time for the Philippine Christians to receive the Eucharist, one of the people in that group had noticed Sharon sitting there outside their circle, on the other side of the fence, sitting by herself participating in the mass. The woman caught Sharon's eye, gestured for Sharon to come forward, and then reached down and opened the gate in the little wrought-iron fence, welcoming Sharon into the midst of the group where she received the consecrated Host from the priest. They didn't know her, and yet they did: Sharon was a sister-in-Christ.

It was quite a different experience from what we had experienced at the Church of St. John the Baptist.

That experience prompted me to think of our Lord's Table as something akin to a so-called "training table" where college and professional athletes gather to be nourished in order to be able to make the most of what they are being asked to do. Our Lord's Table is a training table where we can be prepared for our task of representing Jesus to the world: being respectful; being welcoming; recognizing that people come from many different backgrounds and can hold various viewpoints and have various expectations.

If you think about, time and again Jesus showed us how God wants us to live. Jesus deliberately broke through society's artificial barriers that cause us to think in terms of "we versus them." Jesus sought instead to focus on the importance of "us" – the importance of inclusivity. For instance, Jesus showed respect for women by actually talking to them, and listening to them, and that wasn't done in his culture. He was willing to associate with people who were despised by society because of their occupation or their physical or mental health condition or their ethnic heritage.

Jesus was clear: he doesn't want us to be like anxious, thoughtless religious pilgrims pushing our way through life, ignoring the people around us. Jesus wants us to "open the gate," to notice the other, to welcome them into our lives.