

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Jesus - for the Other

(Studies of Jesus)

Gospel Geography

(selected passages from Matthew)

Study #4

Introduction: The message of our maps...

Maps are my friends. Maps are your friends, too.

I have watched in awe as some of you are able to navigate city streets and to even avoid traffic tie-ups with your phone mapping apps. I'm not very good at doing that. But in settings where there's no cell reception, a paper map is hard to beat, and I do love my paper maps.

In whatever form you find them - paper or digital - maps give us great guidance. They keep us from getting lost. They tell us where we are. They help us get to where we want to go.

But maps are more than utilitarian tools. Maps are also indicators of interest.

If you check the mapping history on your phone, you'll be able to see where you most frequently travel. Multiple trips to Krispy Kreme or to a good friend's house indicate interest. I own maps of various backpacking sites, again, indicating, interest.

We can tell a lot about someone's interests by what they talk about, by how they spend their time and money, *and* by where they go. Geography reveals something about what we value.

Today, we are exploring the Gospel of Matthew, geographically.

Review...

Matthew was the one out of the four gospels written with a primarily Jewish audience in mind.

And, over the last three weeks, we have seen that Jesus was for the Jew AND for the non-Jew. We have seen, by the twelve apostles He chose, that He doesn't look for the "together" person, but that He happily chooses, changes, and then uses flawed people. And, we have seen that He has a special place in His heart for the least, the last, and the lost, for the poor, the oppressed and afflicted, and for the outsider.

Today, we're going to explore one more aspect in which Jesus is for "the other."

First, though, I'm going to present a brief, thirty-thousand foot overview of His three-year ministry, as we might typically describe it.

Jesus, With the Home Crowd

Teaching and Disciple-Making

His ministry consisted of traveling north and south throughout Israel, teaching about God and His kingdom.

He preached sermons in synagogues (Matthew 4:12ff) and on hills overlooking the Sea of Galilee (Matthew 5-7). He taught plainly, explaining God's way by use of Old Testament scripture. And He sometimes spoke less plainly (especially in Matthew 13) as He taught in parables.

Sometimes He taught large crowds. Often, and especially as the cross loomed closer, He spoke to His closest followers.

He called and then sent out and then trained and then commissioned twelve Jewish men who would proclaim the message of the gospel after His death.

Miracling

Jesus also performed acts of power as He moved through Galilee and Judea. He healed lepers of their uncleanness and cast out demons from the oppressed. He healed paralytics, the blind and the deaf. He even raised some from the dead!

He showed His power over nature by calming storms on the Sea of Galilee. He multiplied fish and loaves to feed thousands.

Contending

Another prominent feature of Jesus' ministry involved contending with those who opposed Him - and the opposition increased as time went on.

Throughout the region of Galilee, Jesus encountered resistance from the Jewish leadership, especially the leaders of local synagogues. Whole cities discounted His miracles and disbelieved His miracles.

When He went back to His hometown of Nazareth, He marveled at their unbelief. He said, ***[Matthew 13:57]...“A prophet is not without honor except in his hometown and in his own household.”***

And then, when He traveled to Judea, in the south, the Pharisees and Sadducees tried to tip Him up - and failed every time.

Summary: No one could make a case that Jesus ignored His own people and place. Jesus was very active on His home turf of Israel. He proclaimed and He served. He loved and He trained and He called to account.

We sense the call of God to do exactly the same thing here at Northwest. We are to tend the home fires.

That is why we have Sunday School classes for kids and a youth ministry for Middle and High Schoolers. We want to press Jesus into the lives of these who are still in their formative years.

We have Adult Bible Fellowships and Care Groups to foster relationships under the Lordship of Jesus as we pray and study and share life.

Chris Laughlin has been teaching a women's Bible study on Thursdays and I'm in discussion with some guys about launching a ministry for men.

Our worship services are designed to help every person who comes take a spiritual next step. Encuentro is here to serve those whose mother tongue is Spanish.

We offer counsel and food to those who are in need. We pray for, visit, and seek to encourage those who are battling illness.

Northwest's "Israel", our "Galilee and Judea" is Northwest. And we try hard to serve our Israel well.

But, we are called to more than our Israel. God wants us to do much, much more than serve ourselves. When we look at Jesus we see that serving Galilee and Judea wasn't all that He did. Not by a long shot.

It's not as well known, but it is as clear as could be that several times Jesus went outside the geographical borders of Israel during His three years of ministry and modeled a heart for the geographically and culturally "far, far away."

Shortly after giving the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus healed the servant of a Roman centurion, Simon Peter's mother-in-law, and a whole host of others who were oppressed by evil spirits or were sick with disease.

This all happened in Capernaum, the village by the Sea of Galilee that served as home base for Jesus' ministry.

After all the healings, He gave orders to the disciples to get into the boat. He wanted to sail away with them to the other side.

On the trip over, they encountered a storm. Jesus calmed that storm with a stern rebuke and the sea became perfectly calm.

When they arrived at the other side, they were met by another stormy scene. Jesus calmed this storm, too.

Jesus, Far, Far Away

GADARA: Serving the Oppressed (8:28-34)

[8:28] When He came to the other side into the country of the Gadarenes, two men who were demon-possessed met Him as they were coming out of the tombs. They were so extremely violent that no one could pass by that way.

This is the incident of the two men (Mark mentions one; Matthew lets us know that there were two) who were possessed by a great number of demons.¹

The demons within the men wanted nothing to do with Jesus, knowing full well who He was.² So they asked Him to send them out of the men and into a herd of swine grazing nearby.

Jesus allowed it and Matthew records what happened next.

[32]...And they came out and went into the swine, and the whole herd rushed down the steep bank into the sea and perished in the waters. [33] The herdsmen ran away, and went to the city and reported everything, including what had happened to the demoniacs. [34] And behold, the whole city came out to meet Jesus; and when they saw Him, they implored Him to leave their region.

This is a powerful story on many levels. We see Jesus' authority over evil forces. The exchange between Jesus and the demons is almost surreal.

¹ It is not unusual for the Bible to deal with people who are possessed and tormented by demons. Jesus dealt with people who were oppressed by the devil on a number of occasions, gave His disciples authority over demons, and was tempted, personally by the devil (Matthew 4)

² Isn't it interesting that the disciples on the boat wondered, "Who is this Guy?" (8:27) while the demon immediately knew Who it was dealing with?

But I'm focusing right now on geography. I want us to see where Jesus was the Gadarenes begged Him to leave their "region." Their region was not Israel.

Gadara³ was a village a few miles away from the southeast shore of the Sea of Galilee. Gadara was not under the rule of Herod and the people who lived there were Gentiles.

Jesus intentionally left Israel to go to Gadara. He went there on purpose. He traveled to a different culture. To go to a different culture can be an unnerving experience.

Over the years that I have served as a pastor here, the church has blessed me greatly by giving me freedom to travel to serve the Lord, cross-culturally, in geographically far-away places. In coming to Northwest, you have come to a church that wants to make impact for Jesus in places where we are not.

On a trip that Todd Havekost and I took to Russia in 1999, we traveled by plane from San Antonio to Atlanta. Then, by plane from Atlanta to Zurich, Switzerland. Then, from Zurich to Moscow. Then, by an overnight train ride to Kazan. And then we took a bus trip from Kazan to Nizhnekamsk, Tatarstan.

Each leg of that trip took us one step farther away from the familiar. Texas to Georgia to Switzerland to Moscow to Tatarstan. It was quite the journey. But then, God has always been all about cross-cultural journeys. Just think of the journey Jesus took.

He traveled from heaven to earth. From eternal glory to a Bethlehem stables. Then, He grew up Jewish in Israel. And one day He traveled across the Sea of Galilee to Gadara where He was met by two guys with demons. He crossed geographical boundaries and cultural boundaries because He cared.

A few months later, Jesus left the land of Israel, this time traveling north. Matthew says that He "**withdrew**" to the district of Tyre and Sidon.⁴

³ Or, the region of the Gerasenes - so Matthew.

When word spread that He had arrived, a mother with a desperate need sought Him out.

THE DISTRICT OF TYRE AND SIDON: Helping a Foreigner (15:21-28)

[22] And a Canaanite woman from that region came out and began to cry out, saying, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is cruelly demon-possessed."

That's a tragic situation. And the dialogue between Jesus and this woman is fascinating. He seems to only reluctantly help after she pestered Him.

If you'll back away from the individual comments, though, I think you'll see that He intended to help her from the beginning.

But notice. Jesus was not in Israel when He was speaking to her. He was in the political territory of Phoenicia, probably thirty to fifty miles away from the Israeli border.

Notice, too, that she was a Canaanite, a people group of corrupt morals and a violent religion that had plagued the Jews for centuries. But Jesus went to where she was and had a heart to help with her personal earthquake.

The story ends with this, ***[28]... "O woman, your faith is great; it shall be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed at once.*** But this story could not have ended with that.

That mother must have broken out with praise and worship of God for what He had done for her daughter. Her neighbors probably joined her in worship. I wonder what language they spoke? It probably wasn't Jesus' familiar Aramaic. Maybe it was some ancient Canaanite tongue, or the language of Phoenicia.

I can tell you that among the richest experiences I have ever had have been times of joining others in worship as they sing praise to God in their heart language.

Some of you have tasted this and you know how beautiful it is. It's going on every Sunday here as Encuentro meets at the upper end of the building.

I've listened to a tribe in the jungles of Guyana, South America worship in a language I'd never heard.⁵ I've heard Russians pour out their hearts to God in their native tongue. I've listened to the variations of Spanish worship in Nicaragua, Mexico, and Uruguay, and to Germans in Seeheim, near Darmstadt. And then there are the worship services in Kenya, where the songs are sometimes in Swahili, and even better, in the tribal languages.

And I have wondered this week if Jesus went to Tyre and Sidon, in part just to listen to this mother praise Him in her heart language.

One day, around the throne of God in heaven, there will be those from every tribe, tongue, people and nation praising God in the language they know best. We'll all hear it.

The very next event Matthew records keeps Jesus out of Israel, as He goes back to what is now familiar, but non-Jewish, territory.

Tracing His route, we see that Jesus went east and south from Tyre, around the northern end of the Sea of Galilee, and then south.

THE DECAPOLIS: Feeding Four Thousand (15:29-38)

[15:29] Departing from there, Jesus went along by the Sea of Galilee, and having gone up on the mountain, He was sitting there.

⁴ The particular word used here (*αναχρηστω*) hints that at least part of the reason for the trip north was to take a break from the constant pressure and opposition He was receiving from His fellow Jews.

⁵ The church sent me on a two-week trip to Guyana, South America in 1986, to teach at the Guyana Bible College where my seminary buddy, Jim Egan, was Director. Guyana perennially competes with Haiti for title, "poorest country in the Western Hemisphere."

[30] And large crowds came to Him, bringing with them those who were lame, crippled, blind, mute, and many others, and they laid them down at His feet; and He healed them. [31] So the crowd marveled as they saw the mute speaking, the crippled restored, and the lame walking, and the blind seeing; and they glorified the God of Israel.

That last phrase, ***“they glorified the God of Israel”*** is a hint that these people weren’t Jews. They lived in the same region as the two men from Gadara from whom Jesus had cast out the demons. The region was known as The Decapolis.⁶

During the week or two of travel from Tyre to this mountain-top Jesus was outside of Israel. He was in Gentile territory the entire time where there were herds of swine, temples to other gods, and non-Jewish culture.

And Jesus wasn’t in The Decapolis because of a mapping problem. He hadn’t taken a wrong turn. He meant to go there. He wanted to be with these people. He stayed there on the mountain with thousands of Gentiles, teaching them just like He taught the thousands of Jews on another mountain not long before.⁷

And when this crowd got hungry, He did for them exactly what He had done for that other crowd, multiplying fish and loaves so that there was enough for everybody to eat - with leftovers left over.

We continue following Jesus’ journeys and find Him arriving back in Israel for a brief (confrontational) exchange with the Pharisees and Sadducees. (16:1-4)

⁶ Greek for “ten cities” referring to the approximately ten towns of relatively decent size in the area in the first century.

⁷ Some have questioned whether there were really two feedings. Among some, there is the belief that there was only one feeding, but that it was reported in various forms. While granting, though, that there are similarities, there are also clear differences. Plus, Jesus reminded His disciples of the TWO feedings (Matthew 16:10). There seems to me to be no doubt that Jesus performed two miraculous feedings.

Then, rather than stick around in Galilee for a while, He took His disciples north, again.

That’s a lot of traveling. And those who travel a lot know that travel is wearying. The romance of travel wears off pretty quickly.

I don’t want us to miss that Jesus willingly endured the inconveniences of travel to reach out geographically. Cross-cultural travel to geographically remote regions is, among other things, fraught with inconvenience.

Along these lines, I was reminded of my trip to visit Paul and Laura Lere in 1991. At that time they lived among the Totonac Indians in southern Mexico in a village called San Andreas.⁸

I went to visit the Leres with another man from Northwest. Rick Yates was a physician who would spend his time serving people in the villages around the missionary compound. I had a bit of a crisis of purpose, having gone to Mexico without a defined job to do.

A job quickly emerged when, on the second day in San Andreas Paul’s Ford Bronco developed a “heart murmur” - three bent pushrods - that required a trip to the Ford dealership.

Getting to the parts store and back took two full days of travel over rough, mountainous roads. Buying the parts meant dealing with a dealer who overcharged (we knew it; he knew that we knew it). Installing the new pushrods involved a few hours of greasy work for Paul (who is an excellent mechanic) and for me.

And what struck me as powerfully as anything about the experience was the cursed inconvenience of the whole ordeal.

I go to the parts store to get what I need when I need them. That mindset just breeds resentment in the setting Paul and Laura had chosen for themselves.

⁸ The Indian name for San Andreas is a mouthful: *Tlayehualancingo*.

These two hard-working, get 'er done, Christians had chosen to serve Jesus in a place where nothing ever went quite right and where the basics of life were just hard.

Jesus could have stayed in Israel. He could have avoided the messiness of travel. But He willingly left familiar surroundings - His culture. His love compelled him to go.

We keep watching as Jesus now takes His disciples even farther north than Tyre, into the district of Caesarea Philippi.

CAESAREA PHILIPPI: Making the Great Confession (16:13-20)

[16:13] Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, He was asking His disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" [14] And they said, "Some say John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; but still others, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets." [15] He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" [16] Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

I include this incident, for one, because it's a great summary, on Peter's part, of what Jesus is all about and who He really is. But I also mention it because this Great Confession didn't happen in the Jewish state of Israel. This is the land of Gentiles.

And of all the events that you might have expected to happen in Israel, this clear confession that Jesus is the Jewish Messiah - the Son of God! - you might expect THIS to happen in Israel.

And if not this, then surely what happens next.

Jesus stayed in this north-of-Israel land for a week or so. Six days after Peter aced the "*Who is Jesus?*" test, the Lord took him along with the brothers, James and John, up the tallest mountain in the area, probably the frequently snow-capped, ten thousand feet in elevation, Mount Hermon.⁹

⁹ While scholars admit to uncertainty as to where the Transfiguration occurred (because "high mountain" is non-descript), many, including Thomas Constable and A.T. Robertson, believe that the Mount of Transfiguration was Mount Hermon, the

MOUNT HERMON: Transfigured (17:1-13)

[17:1] Six days later Jesus took with Him Peter and James and John his brother, and led them up on a high mountain by themselves. [2] And He was transfigured before them; and His face shone like the sun, and His garments became as white as light. [3] And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Him.

We refer to this event as "the transfiguration" for obvious reasons.¹⁰

It was a watershed event for Jesus, as it steeled Him for the soon-to-come ordeal of His rejection and crucifixion. And it was critical for the disciples to see Jesus in His glory prior to the suffering He would soon endure.

It is stunning that this miraculous revelation of Jesus took place in the region of Caesarea Philippi. Jesus honored non-Jewish geography by gracing it with the transfiguration and with Peter's confession.

Summary: Northwest Community Church has been given a mission to serve the Decapolis and Phoenicia, the Caesarea Philippi and the Tyre and Sidon of our day.

And frankly, some of that is local.

We offer the use of our building to groups that don't have anything to do with the ministries of our church just to be friendly and to open relational doors.

Our food pantry serves the food insecure who live in surrounding neighborhoods and we sometimes help with medications or utilities, too. Just to say we care, in Jesus' Name.

tallest mountain in the region, outside of Israel, near Caesarea Philippi where events just recorded had taken place.

¹⁰ The Greek word is "metamorphow", obviously, from which we get our English word "metamorphosis."

English as a Second Language classes have opened doors to lots of new friends from lots of different nations. There is talk now about expanding to more classes and even holding classes this summer.

For over two decades we have partnered with Campus Life / Youth for Christ and the ministry of LeRoy Jacobson, who befriends Middle and High Schoolers and introduces them to a God who loves them. (And if you want to be encouraged, ask LeRoy to tell you about the recent Campus Life Spring Break retreat...)

And we maintain treasured ministry partnerships with folks who serve cross-culturally AND outside of our geographic area.

- Duane and Sharon Miller are currently in San Antonio, serving Muslims in Jesus' Name. They will soon be in Madrid, Spain, doing the same thing;
- Chuck and Stacey Sneesby serve the Hindu people in Varanasi, India;
- Jonathan and Trista Miller are in Sweden, working at a Christian camp that introduces Swedes to Christ;
- Paul and Laura Lere equip Christian ministry teams worldwide with interpersonal and relational skills;
- We support one couple who serve the Berber people in Morocco;
- Dean Chollar with Crossway, serves mostly in Latin America and Africa through evangelism and pastor-equipping, orphan and widow support, and by providing clean water;
- (and soon, very soon!) Ken and Denise Case - along with Bryce, Benjamin, and Brooke - will be serving in Jesus' Name in Thailand!

And then, as you've already heard, we're planning a week-long trip to South America this summer to serve with Manuel Abarca's father, who is a church-planting pastor in southern Chile. If you are interested in finding out more about this trip, come to the informational meeting after church next Sunday.

This is all great. I thank God for each one of these partners and for every initiative that has been taken. And - we can do more.

We can do more to serve our Galilee and Judea, our "us." And we can do more to serve the Decapolis and Phoenicia, the Tyre and Sidon and Caesarea Philippi, the Gadara of our day, "the other."

Conclusion:

I started off this morning talking about maps. Maps have great utilitarian value - and they indicate what we value.

Jesus' geographical reach showed His heart for the world. So, to better reflect Jesus' heart, I'm going to ask that you imagine expanding your geographical reach, for Jesus' sake and for the sake of those who need Him.

Some years ago Pastor Bill Hybels wrote a book titled, Walk Across the Room. His message was that a journey of a few steps - across a room or across the street - might be all it would take to shine Jesus into someone's life.

It might mean, you, joining the group that's going to Chile this summer. Or, you could investigate how to serve the least, the last, and the lost here in San Antonio. You could look for groups of people who have never heard the name "Jesus" (we refer to them as "unreached people groups") and learn how to support, pray for, and take Jesus to them. (Go to www.joshuaproject.net).

If your heart is to beat fast for the things that make God's heart beat fast, it will show in your geography. And what's more, by expanding your reach, you can play a part in bringing those from every tribe, tongue, people and nation to God's throne, where they will praise and worship Him in glory!

Would you take a spiritual next step this week to increase your geographical Gospel reach so that someone who hasn't heard will hear?

***Commissioning of the Case family for their service to Thailand.