

Exploring the frontiers of faith in Jesus

Matthew 5:1-8

October 21, 2007

Exploring the frontiers of faith in Jesus ...

That's the tagline in the header of our church website. And the same phrase was also featured in the television ad we ran during the year of our 150th anniversary celebration. We invited folks to join us here at First Congregational United Church of Christ saying: *Together we can explore the frontiers of faith in Jesus!*

It's an interesting expression: *Exploring the frontiers of faith in Jesus ...* I thought it up!

What is the frontier? The frontiers are the places at the edges, at the limits, of what we know, the places that are far from the places that feel safe and are familiar to us. Exploring the frontiers means being ready to venture into unfamiliar territory and to face courageously any challenges or unexpected threats we might find there.

So what are the frontiers of faith? The frontiers of faith are the hard questions few of us dare to ask, the dark corners of our souls few of us are willing to examine, the kind of absolute commitments few of us are willing to make. Exploring the frontiers of faith means being ready to venture outside our comfort zones, to leave behind what feels safe and familiar, to ask ourselves what it means, what it really means, to live out our faith in the world in a genuine way. Exploring the frontiers of faith means being ready to listen, really listen, to the words and the message of the Bible, because the Bible routinely takes us to the frontiers!

But why go there? Why explore the frontier at all? After all, it's a dangerous and risky place, isn't it?

Why do we explore frontiers? Why do we constantly challenge the limits of human knowledge and push the limits of human endurance and seek out new and undiscovered corners of this universe in which we live? Because we are curious, because we are ambitious, because we want to know more about how things work and about how things are, because we want to know more about ourselves and our place in the universe, because we want to access resources that can improve the quality of our lives.

But, most of all, don't we explore frontiers just for the joy of seeing what has never been seen before? Mostly we explore frontiers for the sense of awe and wonder and delight that makes us feel so much more fully alive! And mostly we explore the frontiers of faith for the wonders and the delights and the joy that await us there.

The book of Job takes us to the frontiers of faith. What the people of Israel knew, what the people of Israel believed, was that God punishes wicked people and rewards righteous people. That was familiar territory. Job was righteous ... but Job suffered. It was an entirely unfamiliar and forbidding place to be. It was a most hard and most terrible frontier to explore. Job lost almost everything that was dear to him -- family, possessions, health -- almost everything but his life itself.

And Job got no help or comfort from his friends. And Job got no help and no answers from God ... only this: *Were you there?*

Were you there when I made the world? ... Have you ever in all your life commanded a day to dawn? ... Can you shout orders to the clouds and make them drench you with rain? ... Does a hawk learn from you how to fly?

The only answer Job gets from God is ... God himself. But that's enough. God is enough. On that frontier Job meets a God so much more complex, so much more awesome, so much more real, than the God he had known, the God who nicely followed all the familiar rules. And so Job cries out to God: *In the past I knew only what others had told me, but now I have seen you with my own eyes!*

The command to love takes us to the frontiers of faith, not love as we usually think of it, but love as God does it.

This is what love is: it is not that we have loved God, but that God loved us and sent his Son to be the means by which our sins are forgiven.

God so loved the world that he gave his Son to the world.

God is love, love that sacrifices ... everything, love that gives up ... everything, love that keeps on going and keeps on loving, through the pain, through the hurt, through the rejection, forever. And God commands us to love the same way, to love our neighbors and our enemies, to love with actions not just with words, to show especial love for widows and orphans and aliens, for all those who are left alone on the frontiers of human society.

This too is a hard frontier to explore! Love is a risky business, a demanding business, an exhausting business that oftentimes yields no visible results. It is so much easier to stay in the familiar places, just to love those who love us back.

But when you do explore that frontier, you will find something extraordinary: *love is eternal*. There are other wonderful gifts and exceptional talents and effective strategies, but they are all temporary and incomplete. But love lasts forever and is already what it one day will be: *What we see now is like a dim image in a mirror, then we shall see face-to-face.*

Blessed are the pure in heart ... Now that's the frontier! I can say that with authority, because this is a place -- the place of being pure in heart -- I know nothing about! Do you?

Up to now, Jesus has been talking to me on that hillside. I know about being poor in spirit. I know about mourning. I know about humility and being hungry and thirsty for righteousness. I even know about showing mercy. But I know nothing about being pure in heart! My heart is a mixed bag of emotions and desires and hopes and regrets. And unless I am an alien being transplanted from some other world, or unless what I feel and experience in my heart is different from every other human being, I imagine that you know what I'm talking about. I imagine that being pure in heart is unfamiliar territory to you too.

What is purity of heart? Soren Kierkegaard said purity of heart is to will one thing ... to will one thing, to want one thing, to desire one thing, to live for one thing, to choose one thing. But I will many things, want many things, choose many things.

Don't we all? We want to have our cake and eat it too! We want to love God with all our heart, but be free at the same time to pursue all kinds of other desires and goals and pleasures. Our hearts are divided -- between jobs and family, between duty and pleasure, between faithfulness and temptation, between trust in God and trust in me!

Is there anyone who is pure in heart? But why would Jesus give this blessing, if there were no one to give it to? Why would Jesus say, *Blessed are the pure in heart*, if being pure in heart is an impossibility?

Let's suppose you try. Suppose you try to will one thing, to choose one thing, to live for one thing, to be one thing. At home and at work, at school and in church. When you're with your family, when you're with your neighbors, when you're with total strangers. With your spouse, with your children, with your sister, with your enemy. When you're discussing politics, when you're discussing business, when you're discussing football. And when you are all alone, still trying to will one thing.

Suppose you try. Suppose you keep on trying, keep on trying after each time you fail to will one thing, keep on praying to God to help you be able to will one thing. I cannot say what will happen because I have not been there. But Jesus says: *Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God!*

I've not been there, but I'd like to explore that frontier ... if you'll go with me!