

# Off the Map

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell



1 Kings 17:1-16; Matthew 15:21-28

Her name was Jill – at least that’s the name I’m giving her. She was a classmate of mine in Mrs. DeWahle’s sixth grade class at Gordon Elementary School on the east side of Detroit. Now I submit to you that probably every sixth grade class in American and perhaps the world has its resident outcast. The class untouchable. Jill had that dubious distinction for Mrs. DeWahle’s class at Gordon Elementary. At least when it came to us boys. Jill was pariah. Now, there was nothing wrong, of course, with Jill. She was, God rest her soul, a perfectly fine human being. But to at least us boys - Jill had several strikes against her. For some of us the first strike was that she was a girl. Many sixth grade boys are at best ambivalent about the presence of girls in the world - so that was a strike against Jill - she was a girl. The second strike was that was tall. She hit her growth spurt early and sort of towered over us boys who had not yet matured (and perhaps still haven’t). Her size, I suspect, intimidated us. Strike number two. Third strike was her name. I won’t tell you her last name but it sounded to us like “rattlesnake”. Of course when I think of the name now, it sounds very little like “rattlesnake” - but it was close enough for us – Jill Rattlesnake we called her. Strike three. And there were more. She had glasses. She wasn’t the best in gym class. And she was always coming to school late. Of course, it never dawned on us that the reason her mom brought her to school late all the time was that Jill probably didn’t want to come to school because she wasn’t welcome there - school was a hostile place. And when she did come to school late all of us boys would cringe to see where she would hang her coat on the coat rack because the deal was that if your coat got touched by Jill’s coat then you were infected. Oh yes, we were an enlightened group of sixth graders, let me tell you.

Imagine then our reaction when during sixth grade camp there was scheduled a dance for all the sixth grade classes, and some of the girls and Mrs. DeWahle approached us boys and asked if one of us would during the dance ask Jill to dance. What, are you crazy? You want us to dance with Jill? It’s bad enough you want us to dance at all, but with Jill? Sorry. The gender, social and pre-adolescence divide is far too wide. You might as well ask us to leap over the Grand Canyon at its widest point. In our little sixth grade minds and hearts there was absolutely no reason to cross that great divide. I wish I could tell you there was a happy ending to this story, but there isn’t. During the dance Jill remained in the corner never to step onto the floor. There are just some places that an 11 year old boy will never go.

It has been said that prior to the voyage of Christopher Columbus the maps of the world drawn by the Europeans took the flat world only so far and then showed it fading off into an unknown infinity. And at the edge of the ocean’s frontier were written these words: “Beyond this point there be dragons.”

Beyond this point there be dragons. I suppose that’s what we thought at that sixth grade dance, beyond the edge of the dance floor- there be dragons.

But maybe that’s what we think of anybody or anything that appears to be off our map. We all have this map, don’t we - call it our comfort zone - that shows all the comfortable places we have charted out for ourselves - all the familiar faces - all the trails and paths we have already trod – all the common customs and people who look alike. We draw out the boundaries on our map and etch those words if not in ink at least in our minds- Beyond this point there be dragons.

As I said earlier I grew up on the east side of Detroit and for many of us, especially during the riots, the map stopped at 8 Mile Road. Eight Mile Road in many respects was the end of the road in that racially segregated part of metropolitan Detroit. Beyond this point there be dragons.

So for the people of Israel if there was a map that charted their cultural and nationalist comfort zone it would have been a map that stretched up north of Jerusalem and into and through the Galilee region where Jesus grew up. For some even Galilee was pretty close to being off the map - those were the backwoods people to the big city Jerusalem people. When Jesus arrived on the scene in Jerusalem pretty early in his ministry, Nathanael wondered out loud, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” They just weren’t sure but that they were a little bit unfamiliar and foreign up there. But north of Galilee and west over to the coast of the Mediterranean there

people a widow in the region of Sidon, from the town of Zarephath. Elijah, the prophet of Israel – God sends to as non-Israel as a place can be – Zarephath, to a person as potentially unhelpful as one can be – a poor widow with not even enough food to feed herself and her son. Quite a plan. And yet is in this off the map place – this region outside the comfort zone – this point beyond which there be dragons – that Elijah and the poor widow discover something – and what they discover is that they need each other. Elijah invites the woman into a radical and faithful generosity – and she discovers in her generosity – in her giving away - that every day she has as much as she needs. In her

“**Miraculous things happen when strangers trust each other. Miracles happen when we get radically generous with our daily bread.”**

laid the region of Tyre and Sidon. And if there is such thing as code words in Biblical mapdom - Tyre and Sidon is another way of saying “off the map”. Beyond this point, there be dragons. These are where the Canaanites lived. These are where the non-Jews lived. These are where, to many, the barbarians lived. You can go lots of places in this world, but you don’t want to go there. Up in Tyre and Sidon you lock your car door and you don’t stop to ask for directions and you certainly don’t go there unless you’re trying to get somewhere else.

So it is to this region that Elijah the prophet is sent by God. There is a great famine in the land and nobody has anything to eat – so God sends Elijah first to the east across the Jordan to be fed by ravens, but then to the land of dragons. To the place of the unfamiliar. To way outside the comfort zone. He sends him to of all

generosity – she discovers she has as much as she needs. She keeps looking into her jar of meal and her jar of oil and she can’t see any more than just enough food for the day. But she takes her daily bread and she shares it with the strange prophet from Israel and the next day she looks into the jar of meal and the jar of oil and lo and behold there’s still enough for the day. She discovers that the generous life always leaves enough to live on. And Elijah discovers in this mutual arrangement -- that he can trust his life to a dragon. He can trust his life to a dragon. Something miraculous happens when two strangers trust each other. Amazing what can happen when you get yourself off the map.

So Matthew tells us this interesting story of Jesus making his way to the land of Tyre and Sidon – he sets sail off the map and into the region of dragons – and

sure enough he meets one. He meets this screaming desperate widow mother who comes to the prophet from Israel and yells to him, “Have mercy upon me, Son of David, my daughter is tormented by a demon.” Now she is a Canaanite remember? She is one of the undesirables. She is Jill Rattlesnake in the corner of the dance floor. She just wants someone to care a bit. To show a little mercy. To pull her onto the dance floor. To make her think that her life counts, that her daughter counts. She doesn’t care about Israel. She doesn’t care about prophets. She just cares about her little girl. And so we’re shocked aren’t we when this story doesn’t go the way we think it’s going to go. We just expect Jesus to do his thing – say the word, wave his hand and make it all better for this dragon woman. But hold your horses – for this is the high priest of God who is tempted in every way as we are – or so says the Hebrews writer – and Jesus is off the map, in the land of strangers – and he’s not quite sure that his life has anything to do with hers.

Isn’t that the amazing temptation – to think that when it comes to those folks off the map where dragons be --- that your life and my life have nothing to do with them? Hey man, you’re on your own. Like to help, but I got my own problems In fact, I’m not sure I can even trust you if I did try to help. Maybe you’ll take advantage of me. Maybe you’re a terrorist. Maybe it will put my friends at risk.

It takes Jesus some time for Jesus to get the point, maybe there was a reason why he was led off the map to start with. Jesus knew his Old Testament. What did he expect when he made his way to the land of Elijah and the widow? There was bound to be the request for generosity. Lord, be generous with yourself. Don’t just give to your kind. Be radical Jesus with your grace and power. Lord, even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the Master’s table. And then Jesus gets a hold of himself – and looks into the Jill Rattlesnake’s eyes and says – “Oh my gosh, you’re human like the rest of us. And maybe I can believe as much in you as you do in me. Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her little girl got better.

Miraculous things happen when strangers trust each other. Miracles happen when we get radically generous with our daily bread.

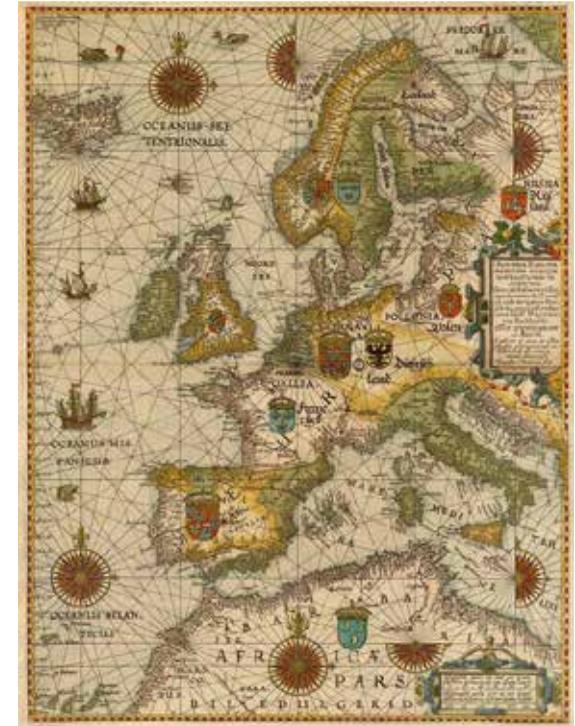
It was their daily bread that the local mosque wanted to share with us this past summer. Our friends up at the Islamic Society of Sarasota sent us an invitation to join them in one of their nightly Ramadan feasts – when they break their daily fast at sundown. So a few of us went where some might feel a little bit off the map. It felt that way as we passed by the flashing lights of police cars at the boundary there to protect our Muslim friends. Past those we were graciously invited into their place of worship – their hall of prayer and we watched and we listened as they prayed in a language we did not understand. But then came the common language – food. And talk about food. Wonderfully delicious food. And great conversation and a new friend or two. These were our neighbors. These were not dragons. Miracles happen when we trust each other with our daily bread.

When I was a youth director eons ago I served a church on the other side of Detroit who did the radical thing of adopting a Cambodian family – refugees from the aftermath of the Vietnam War. Oh boy it was really uncomfortable for awhile. A lot of barriers. A lot of language to figure out. A lot of trauma to heal. Their two kids were in our youth group and some saw them as dragons and some saw them as friends. Somehow our jars of meal and jars of oil never ran out. And they got to where they could take care of themselves. And dad started a business and contributed to the economy and employed some Americans. It seemed to miraculously work out.

I thought of them when I read of a Presbyterian Church up in New Jersey that just took in a Syrian refugee family. Dragons some wonder them to be. Folks from way off the map. Tempting – just like Jesus – to keep them away. Dogs not worthy of the crumbs. But then to look into Jill Rattlesnake’s eyes and discover, “Oh my gosh, you’re human like the rest of us. And maybe I can believe as much in you as you do in me. Let it be done for you as you wish.”

You remember E.B. White’s timeless classic *Charlotte’s Web*? That great story of life in a barn with Wilbur the pig who for years is cared for and protected by the young girl Fern – but as Fern grows older her interests take her further and further away from Wilbur ... only for Wilbur to discover this little community inside the barn – Templeton, the gluttonous rat, the disdainful lamb, the goose and the sheep and, of course, Charlotte the grey spider. But Christmas is coming and Wilbur because he’s a pig will be butchered. But what’s that to a rat, a goose, a spider? Good thing we’re not a pig. It’s a million miles from a spider’s web to a pig trough. Far off the map. But on the fateful morning when old man Zuckerman comes for Wilbur to make of him Christmas dinner - what does he see written in Charlotte’s web woven by the spider but the words, “Some pig.” Some pig. It’s enough to make old Zuckerman think twice and spare the pig. Some miracle I say when one of God’s creatures sees that maybe my life has something to do with your life.

So somewhere off your map and my map – is a miracle to be found. A chance at some radical generosity. Some hospitality to a stranger. A dragon to befriend. A chance to see in that jar of meal and that jar of oil, that there will always be enough for another day.



# Off the Map

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Dr. Stephen D. McConnell  
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Church of the Palms

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3224 Bee Ridge Rd, Sarasota FL 34239 • (941) 924-1323