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Sunday Sermon: “There Be Dragons There”

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I've always had a certain fascination with maps. One day a few years ago, finding a location seven miles away took almost two hours of frustration using MapQuest, so I stopped and bought a map at a 7-11 and drove right to it.

My earliest recollection of maps was as a child when I was shown them by my maternal grandfather, who spent his life at sea as a Norwegian sailor and whaler and, during the war, captained Liberty ships across the North Atlantic between New York and Murmansk. When I was a small boy, he would show me his navigational maps and especially the channels for getting into and out of New York Harbor. We could see the ships entering the harbor on these channels from his house in Great Kills, Staten Island. Later, he taught me to find the stars using some charts of the heavens. We'd stand in the fields on a dark, clear night and he'd point out the constellations. Then he would try to describe to me how they looked in the southern hemisphere.

Maps were part of my life when I flew aircraft, and I developed a certain appreciation of their importance and their evolution. We had maps and charts that helped us make approaches to land at air fields. Other maps were general airways that would lead us on the many jet routes that crisscross the world from one electronic navigational aid to another. And, lastly, we had maps that went into great detail about the terrain and manmade features.

In fact, one of my duties before I went up to fly was to update the chart I was using to reflect any feature that changed or was built after the map was produced and needed to be annotated on paper. This was important, especially with the growth of objects like microwave or cell phone towers. In 1998, a Navy plane caused an accident when it severed a cable to a cable car near an Italian ski resort. That resulted in the loss of the lives of all 20 of the cable car passengers and caused an international incident. The plane's vertical stabilizer or tail cut through the one-foot steel cable at 500 miles per hour as if it were a steak knife through warm butter.

The underlying cause was that the map did not have the annotation of the ski resort cable car through the valley that the Navy crew was flying. We need maps that reflect reality.

Part of my historic interest with maps goes back to my time in England. That is where I started collecting maps. Maps have a certain importance in the founding of the new world and in the making and defining of our modern world. Certainly in the last decade we have all seen sections of the world map change. But to understand humankind's conquest of this planet, you need to understand something about how the mind of our species saw maps. There is a very good exhibit of the evolution of mapmaking in the British museum. It has displays of modern maps whose scale isn't distorted by our northern European bias and goes back to some of the first maps ever produced. Some early maps that show the pre-Columbian world indicate the world as it was known in flat world thinking.

Many of the older maps show areas at the extremes with water monsters and the phrase, *hic sunt dragones*, "There be dragons here;" the places where humankind feared to go. There be dragons here. The ends of the earth where mariners would disappear, never to be seen again. Here be dragons. Places where they believed the earth ended and where ships fell off the edge. There be dragons there.

Just as our ancestors feared the unknown reaches of their world, there are many places where modernity should say, "Here be dragons." The individual human psyche and our corporate psyche contain certain energies that try to destroy us, either by their action or by the fear of their action.

One of these shadow dragons is the dragon of personal and spiritual Grandiosity. Henrik Ibsen, the great Norwegian playwright (and I don't get to identify many great Norwegians), wrote, "This longing to commit a madness stays with us through our lives. Who has not, when standing with someone by an abyss or high up on a tower, had a sudden impulse to push the other over?

"And how is it that we hurt those we love although we know the remorse will follow? Our whole being is nothing but a fight against the dark forces within ourselves. To live is to war with troll in heart and soul." One of Ibsen's dark forces was Grandiosity, his dragons if you will.

Politicians like ex-Governor Sanford of South Carolina, who went on a walk-about with his girlfriend, or former presidential candidate John Edwards, who challenged

the media to find something on him, and they did. Take Massachusetts Attorney General Martha Coakley, who “couldn’t lose” Ted Kennedy’s Senate seat but did, and athletes like the football player Michael Vick or Tiger Woods, captains of commerce like Enron’s late Ken Lay or the presumptive candidate for president ranting against the media; all display some of this dragon energy of Grandiosity. I even suggest there might be some among us with this energy of Grandiosity.

Now Grandiosity is the unconscious belief that they, as individuals, are better or smarter or more privileged than other people and that the same rules do not apply to them.

This energy will work to destroy the individual. Most healthy religion teaches against Grandiosity in favor of humility. The old Hebrew Proverb that calls us, “To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” expresses biblical wisdom about Grandiosity. Proverbs tells us, “Pride ends in a fall, while humility brings honor.” These ancient words describe what the dragon of Grandiosity does.

Grandiosity is god energy. The text of the Tower of Babel looks at that god energy mythically. A meaning of the word Babel is “gate of god.” One interpretation of the story is that city people were becoming more god-like as they separated themselves from the land and it is part of the divine mission to keep humanity humble by thwarting Grandiosity.

In the eyes of nomadic farmers, the Mesopotamian city culture was characterized by the ziggurat, a pyramidal temple tower whose summit was believed to be the gateway to heaven, the realm of the gods.

Our national adventure in Modern Mesopotamia, Iraq or Afghanistan these past 15 years can be seen through this same mythology; that our national sense of Grandiosity or feeling god-like led us into the thinking that caused this seemingly intractable dilemma. The United States is, after all, the only superpower left to exert such Grandiosity, though Putin’s espoused Grandiosity is legendary, however hollow.

On the spiritual level, the battle lines between liberal religion and the more fundamental elements of Christianity, Islam and Judaism have been seen erupting in many of the issues we hear debated on the national stage. A few years ago, the Religious Right’s rally around the brain-dead Terri Schiavo displayed a Grandiosity that exists despite general rejection by a majority of Americans.

Congress's rejection of gun legislation for people on the U.S. no-fly list despite overall voter approval displays this dragon of Grandiosity that still believes it speaks for the country. This is Grandiosity on the national stage, where the talking heads of the media or Washington portray a vision that the divine is inspiring them to pursue certain agendas despite being rebuked by the majority of the nation.

The response to this type of rebuke, to this particular dragon of Grandiosity, is to demonize their critics whether the critic be the courts or the media, which they tend to label as activist or liberal. Who can forget Carl Rove on the 2012 Fox election coverage when the Fox experts called Ohio for President Obama?

He reacted by calling the forecasters wrong and, when Megyn Kelly asked him what Republican math he was using, they walked him into the prediction office on camera to show him. This is the dragon of Grandiosity. Candidate Trump rejects Judge Gonzalo Curiel's credibility because of his Mexican ancestry despite his legendary hero status for fighting drug cartels.

Both these individuals believed their own myths. There be dragons there.

On the individual level, this dragon of Grandiosity belches out its fire with threats to incinerate the castle in communities of faith like ours. Who hasn't heard someone's Grandiosity erupt about positions they used to hold or jobs they used to perform as a sign of credibility for the task or argument they currently are trying to accomplish? It appears as certain righteous indignation that says to the rest of us that they are correct or right just because they know something or did something sometime during their life that they remember as so much better than anyone else. These grandiose energies devour good will and relationships. No one wants to work with someone who has all the answers and whose opinions are superior to another's, be they clergy or laity.

At times I am tempted to respond, "Don't tell me what you have done; show me what you can do." Certainly the Boston Bombers' apparent attitude that they wouldn't be detected exhibits this Grandiosity.

This is the power the dragon of Grandiosity has over us. It strives to put through its agenda, and its cost usually involves straining a relationship. Dealing with these dragons calls for the cunning of a prince and not the strength of a St. George. Combating a dragon in this fashion, we do not have to kill the dragon to make it ineffective. But occasionally we are forced to say, "Your dysfunctional way of

being is not worth your presence. Your talk belies your abilities, but your actions destroy relationships.”

Listening to our refugee committee, we hear some of this energy appearing in their committee interactions. The 8th century poem, “Beowulf,” which was made into a movie in 2007, shows this dragon in action. In the story the young hero, Beowulf, defeats the giant Grendel, but must strike a bargain with Grendel’s mother to keep his hero reputation intact, and it is this bargain that destroys Beowulf’s spirit or relationship with himself. The dragon Grandiosity exerts its cost.

Our old maps tell us there are dragons there, but if the map we are referring to is ourselves, then the fabric of our dragons is those unconscious forces like the god-energy, Grandiosity.

Do we keep this energy like Beowulf or try to slay this dragon within? First we have to recognize the dragon for what it is. It is the shadow of those flaws in us that we more easily identify in other people. If you want to hear this phenomenon without looking too close at those you know personally, listen to the rhetoric of some of our politicians. Just look at the presumptive GOP candidate every time he rails at someone; it is his own self that is wounded. In this case, it is easy to see the dangers inherent in these energies. With these energies we first have to accept that we all carry significant shadows, and our first task needs to be accepting our shadows.

In the story “Peter Pan,” his shadow became separated from his person, and it took Wendy to sew it on. Identifying our own shadow is never very easy or straight forward. One way to do this is to look at the traits of other people that disturb us the most. Those traits are active within ourselves. The dragon of Grandiosity may be an element of our own being without our noticing it.

If we can’t see these energies in ourselves we will project them in other people. “The Paper Bag Princess” By Robert N. Munsch (Canadian Unitarian):

Elizabeth was a beautiful princess. She lived in a castle and had expensive princess clothes. She was going to marry a prince named Ronald. Unfortunately, a dragon smashed her castle, burned all her clothes with his fiery breath, and carried off Prince Ronald. Elizabeth decided to chase the dragon and get Ronald back. She looked everywhere for something to wear, but the only thing she could find that was not burnt was a paper bag. She put it on and followed the dragon. He was easy

to follow because he left a trail of burnt forests and horse's bones. Finally, Elizabeth came to a cave with a large door that had a huge knocker and banged on the door. The dragon stuck his nose out of the door and said, "Well, a princess! I love to eat princesses, but I have already eaten a whole castle today. I am a busy dragon. Come back tomorrow!" He slammed the door so fast that Elizabeth almost got her nose caught.

Elizabeth grabbed the knocker and banged the door again. The dragon stuck his nose out the door and said, "Go away! I love to eat princesses, but I have already eaten a whole castle today. I am a busy dragon. Come back tomorrow!"

"Wait," shouted Elizabeth. "Is it true that you are the smartest and fiercest dragon in the whole world?" "Yes," said the dragon. "Is it true," said Elizabeth, "that you can burn up ten forests with your fiery breath?" "Oh, yes," said the dragon, and he took a huge deep breath and breathed out so much fire that he burnt up fifty forests.

"Fantastic," said Elizabeth, and the dragon took another huge breath and breathed out so much fire that he burnt up one hundred forests. "Magnificent," said Elizabeth, and the dragon took another huge breath, but this time nothing came out. The dragon didn't have enough fire left to cook a meat ball.

Elizabeth said, "Dragon, is it true that you can fly around the world in just 10 seconds?" "Why yes," said the dragon and he jumped up and flew all way around the world in just 10 seconds. He was very tired when he got back, but Elizabeth shouted, "Fantastic, do it again!" So the dragon jumped up and flew around the whole world in just 20 seconds. When he got back he was too tired to talk and he lay down and went straight to sleep.

Elizabeth whispered very softly, "Hey Dragon." The dragon didn't move at all. She lifted up the dragon's ear and put her head right inside. She shouted as loud as she could, "Hey, dragon!" The dragon was so tired he didn't even move. Elizabeth walked right over to the dragon and opened the door to the cave. There was Prince Ronald. He looked at her and said, "Elizabeth, you are a mess! You smell like ashes, your hair is all tangled and you are wearing a dirty old paper bag. Come back when you are dressed like a real princess." "Ronald," said Elizabeth, "Your clothes are really pretty and your hair is very neat. You look like a real prince, but you are a bum." They didn't get married after all.

Personal Grandiosity may be a self-regulating phenomenon. Here's a story that is true, but may not be factual. There is a transcript between one of our naval vehicles and radar return that was identified as HMS Vigilant. After searching several frequencies, the USS John F. Kennedy finally made contact, and the communication went like this:

USS John F. Kennedy: Unidentified radar return 25 nm south-south east of Gander please identify yourself.

Roger sir this HMS Vigilant go ahead.

Roger Vigilant this is the aircraft carrier John F. Kennedy. We indicate on our current course we will collide in 25 minutes. Please turn port immediately to course 340.

Roger Kennedy: Vigilant copies.

After 10 minutes. Roger Vigilant: Kennedy still observes no course correction, "Turn immediately to heading 350."

Roger Kennedy: this is Vigilant negative.

At this time the captain becomes aggravated and gets on the radio himself. Vigilant this is Captain Hathaway commanding officer of the USS John F. Kennedy. Do you realize that our aircraft carrier weighs in at 61,000 tons and has 80 aircraft and a crew of 5,000 souls? Sir, I can't turn this city on a dime. Come immediately to heading 360.

USS John F. Kennedy this is Mr. Steward Commander of HMS Vigilant. Are you aware that the Vigilant is a lighthouse? Sometimes eliminating Grandiosity comes on its own terms, or may be eliminated just by having good map. It's called hoisted on your own petard.

When we think of that old phrase from early maps, "*hic sunt dragones.*" We can also say there be dragons here for we all have dragons. We can hide them like the elephant in the living room, or we can face them. Let us leave today and try to recognize our own dragons.

In an ever-involving and never-ending world. Amen.