

DRAWING LINES
Psalm 139:1-12
April 13th, 2008

When I was twelve years old, I took a trip to Texas with my father. As part of that trip, we walked across the bridge over the Rio Grande at El Paso and visited Juarez, Mexico. This was my first time I'd ever been outside of the United States and I was really excited. I was also surprised.

My father intentionally avoided the main street in Juarez, a tourist trap of shops and restaurants, and we explored the neighborhoods of the city. Within a few blocks, we were walking by adobe houses without running water or electricity, streets with half clothed children playing in the dirt, and doorways with adults staring suspiciously at the gringos. It was unnerving. It was also confusing.

When we walked back across the bridge to El Paso, a gleaming American city of steel and concrete, I asked my father how an imaginary line dividing one country from another could make such a difference. He rambled on about history and politics and economics for a few minutes and then admitted it didn't make much sense.

I'm not the only one to ask such questions. John Glenn, the first American to see the earth from space, said, "I didn't think about how God saw us until I flew on that mission. On a map, every nation has a different color. But the Earth looks much different from space. You realize our borders are so artificial. Some are political, some have developed along ethnic lines, but all those lines disappear when you're looking down from space."

I like most of that quote. National boundaries are completely artificial. What I find odd is John Glenn's suggestion that in space you can see the earth like God sees it. I'm puzzled that an astronaut who traveled into space in the twentieth century would suggest God is up in heaven looking down on earth. Ironically, Glenn was drawing another imaginary line – one dividing God in heaven from those on earth.

John Glenn isn't alone in this habit. Though none of us would buy a telescope to look for God, most of us still use religious language implying God is floating above the earth. When it comes to locating God, our religious language is stuck in the first century when the world was understood as having three tiers – the heavens where the Gods existed, the earth where humans lived, and the depths - the land of the dead.

This was not merely metaphor. It was a reasonable explanation of the world before telescopes and rockets. In Jesus' day, they would have expected John Glenn to encounter celestial cities, flocks of angels, and the throne of God once

he blasted into heaven. Such speculation would have been considered reasonable. Today, those imaginary lines between heaven and earth are as artificial as the ones we draw between nations. If astronauts talked about visiting God as they prepared to go into space, they'd be removed from the mission and sent for a psych evaluation. No one believes God lives above the clouds.

Or do we?

Oddly, Christianity often suggests God is up in heaven looking down on us. Our scriptures are full of such images. Our theology still reflects this antiquated understanding. God comes down from heaven to become Jesus. Jesus, after his death, goes down to hell to preach to the dead. After his resurrection, Jesus ascends into heaven and returns to God. Someday, Jesus will appear in the clouds with an army of angels and return to earth.

I wish I could tell you these Christian ideas were metaphors, but most Christians take them very literally. The Left Behind series sold millions of copies to people who never questioned this three tiered universe. Many of us believe in the lines dividing heaven and earth just as faithfully as we believe in the lines that divide the US from Mexico.

Why do we – who should know that a three tiered universe does not exist – so often imply God is up in heaven?

When I was speaking in California, I was part of a conversation with a small group of Christians about the problem of immigration – a much more pressing issue there than here. Some were arguing for stricter laws and sending those who'd come here illegally back to their countries. They argued Christians should uphold justice. Others were in favor of leniency. They feared that stricter laws would separate families and cause hardship. They argued for compassion. In the middle of the conversation, one man said, "Isn't the real problem that we see these immigrants as illegal aliens instead of people like us?"

I've been thinking about his question this week. I wonder if that's the reason we draw lines on earth. Drawing lines allows us to pretend people on one side of the line are more deserving of the world's resources than those on the other side of the line. Drawing lines allows us to pretend people on the other side of the line aren't as human as us. They are aliens. Drawing lines allows us to call those who cross our imaginary lines illegal and criminal, instead of hungry and needy. Drawing lines, ultimately, allows us to pretend their plight is not our responsibility. They aren't Americans. They live on the wrong side of the line.

I wonder if this tendency to defend our imaginary lines so harshly also explains why John Glenn and so many of us are more comfortable with God up in heaven. We're hoping that if God is up in heaven, God won't notice how we're treating those on the other side of our imaginary lines. God won't notice that those on the most affluent side of line have most of the guns and bombs and those on the poor side have most of the disease and the hungry mouths to feed. If God is up in heaven, maybe God won't hear us justify our good fortune as divine blessing.

I'm reminded of a popular song by Bette Midler. She sings:

*From a distance the world looks blue and green,
and the snow-capped mountains white.
From a distance the ocean meets the stream,
and the eagle takes to flight.*

*From a distance, there is harmony,
and it echoes through the land.
It's the voice of hope, it's the voice of peace,
it's the voice of every man.*

*From a distance we all have enough,
and no one is in need.
And there are no guns, no bombs, and no disease,
no hungry mouths to feed.*

*And God is watching us, God is watching us,
God is watching us from a distance.*

From a distance? Is that really how we understand God? Distant and watching?

The writer of the 139th Psalm didn't believe that. Indeed, though he still spoke of a three tiered universe, he argued God was everywhere. Listen to his words:

*Where can I go from your Spirit?
Where can I flee from your presence?
If I go up to the heavens, you are there.
If I make my bed in the depths, you are there.
If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there
your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast.*

This is not the language of a distant God, floating in space, watching us from heaven. This is language of a God who crosses all lines, exists in all places, cares for all people, and works in all hearts and minds. This is not a God who respects the lines we draw. This God transcends our imaginary lines.

When we believe in this God, drawing lines becomes more and more difficult. God is not watching us from heaven. God is watching us from across the border. God is present in those kids playing in the dirt and those adults staring from those doorways in Juarez. God is the child in Darfur begging for water, the Iraqi widow mourning the death of her husband, and the homeless man asking for a dollar.

No wonder we use the language of the three tiered universe, with God in heaven, distant and watching. We don't like to think of God being on the other side of the line. We want to believe God in on our side, supporting our cause, fighting for our rights. We scar the earth, our species, and our communities with lines drawn in blood, convinced of our righteousness. "I'm on the Lord's side, On which side are you?"

No wonder we refuse to see the image of God in those on the other side of the line. It is much more difficult to draw lines, when those lines separate us from God.

But that is what our lines do. When we draw lines – be they national, or religious, or ethnic, or theological – we become atheists. We do not believe in a universal God, present in all people. We might as well return to offering sacrifices to the God of our nation or tribe.

Isn't that what happened to John Glenn? He had an epiphany in space and realized the lines didn't exist, but when he returned to earth he became an atheist. He became a senator of the United States of America and an advocate of the very lines he could not see or justify.

I won't be too critical of him. I've made the same mistake. I left the denomination of my childhood because I did not like the line between the sacred and the secular. I thought every place could be holy; every person a priest. But then I became a pastor and an advocate of the very line I could not see or justify. I became an atheist, often denying in word and deed, that there is one God – the God of all people, present in every person and moment, always capable of connecting us to one another. I implied God was most present and most concerned for those of us in the church.

I thought I had left line drawing behind, but I've discovered I've simply drawn different lines. Though I eventually abandoned the lines between the saved and unsaved, I've drawn lines between the church and unchurched, the Christian and the non-Christian, the Quaker and the non-Quaker. Each line suggesting God was more present and active on one side of the line than on the other.

John Glenn and I are not the first to struggle with this hypocrisy. Even the writer of the 139th Psalm was plagued with this human tendency. After extolling the wonder of God's presence in all places, he too becomes an atheist. In the midst of his vision of a universal God, he says, *If only you would slay the wicked, O God!*

That is so like me. In one breath, I pronounce God present in all people. In the next, I curse and denigrate those on the other side of the line. The more I examine my life, the more I realize lines always separate. They separate me from those people and things I fear. They give me the illusion of safety and the pretense of goodness. They convince me I am not like those on the other side of the line. They separate me from that within myself that I despise.

I'm often asked why I spend time working with and assisting sexual offenders. I usually offer some pious explanation – that its God's leading or that I'm obeying Jesus' command to care for least of these. The real reason is more complicated.

Years ago, I struggled with an addiction to pornography. I found it incredibly easy to objectify women. I experienced how sexual fantasies can become more and more ugly. Though I never acted on any of these fantasies, I felt their destructive power.

For many people, it is easy to draw a line between themselves and sexual offenders. For me, it is much more difficult. I can see myself in them. Aleksander Solzhenitsyn once said, "The dividing line between good and evil was not between peoples or nations, but right down the middle of every human heart."

Is this why I draw lines? Am I trying to separate myself from a part of me? Do I ignore the plight of those on the other side of the line because I know their misery could be my misery? Do I denigrate those on the other side of the line because I fear I am like them? Are the lines I draw designed to obscure this self-awareness?

It is not only God who exists on both sides of the line. I do too. All of us are capable of goodness and all of us are capable of doing evil. All of us have been victims and victimizers. The lines are so deceptive. Every line I draw outside myself is a lie.

Until I accept that every line runs directly through me, I will justify the lines I draw. But, once I accept this reality, I will begin to see the image of God and my own reflection in the faces of those on the other side of the line. They will cease to be aliens. They will become imperfect people exactly like me.