

Outside the Box

It seems that one of the things that businesses are looking for is people who can think “outside the box.” Do you think outside the box? I have an exercise for you to think about as we begin the sermon. It is a fun problem and a little bit of mental gymnastics. The set up is:

You’re driving down the road in your car on a wild and stormy night. The weather is like a hurricane, with heavy rains, high winds, and lightning flashing constantly. While driving, you come across a partially covered bus stop, and you can see three people waiting for a bus:

1. An old woman who looks as if she is about to die.
2. An old friend who once saved your life.
3. The perfect partner you have been dreaming about (your “soulmate”).

Knowing that you only have room for one passenger in your car (it’s a really small car), which one would you choose to offer a ride to? And why?

You can pick up the old woman, because she is going to die, and thus you should save her first. Or you can take the old friend because he once saved your life, and this would be the perfect chance to pay him back. However, you may never be able to find your soulmate again.

Here is the answer one bright person gave:

“I would give the car keys to my old friend, and let him take the old woman to the hospital. Then I would stay behind and wait for the bus with the partner of my dreams.

You might have heard the story of the Pentecostal man who wandered into a United Church. During the sermon, the visitor got so excited that whenever the minister made a point, the Pentecostal man would scream out, “Praise God!” or “Hallelujah!” or “Amen!” The ushers were so upset by the Pentecostal’s behaviour that the head usher went down the aisle and whispered to him, “You’ll have to keep quiet! The minister is right in the middle of the sermon!” The Pentecostal man replied, “Keep quiet? How can I keep quiet? I’ve got the Holy Spirit!” To which the head usher replied, “Well, you didn’t get it in this church!”

I think our Pentecostal friend made a theological error. He didn’t have the Holy Spirit as if he owned it and could control it, but the Holy Spirit had him. It welled up inside him in an uncontrollable action. This is the problem with much of what we do in the church and in our lives. We wish we *had*, that we in some way owned, the Holy Spirit. We wish that we could put the Spirit of God into nice, neat, tidy confines of categories and barriers. We would like to put God in a box to be handled whenever it was convenient for us. The difficulty is that God’s Spirit blows where it will. There is no way we can contain it. We have to realize that things of the Spirit are very much outside our control, outside the box of our normal thinking, outside the box.

When we look at the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures of the Bible, we get a certain picture of God. We see that God is always a God who is doing something new. God is always pushing the boundaries of human comfort. Even though we would like a God who is safe and

predictable, God comes to us and says, “Put your hand in mind and we will do something new and different together.”

A friend of mine was the minister of a church in Toronto by the name of Christchurch. Late one evening he arrived at the airport and hailed a taxicab. He was going to go by his office at the church on his way home. He said to the taxicab driver, “Take me to Christchurch, please.” My friend got busy reading a book in the back seat. The cabbie pulled up in front of St. Michael’s Catholic Church. My friend said to the driver, “This isn’t Christchurch.” The taxicab driver replied, “Listen, Mister, if God ain’t here, God ain’t in town!” Many people in the church have the same sort of mentality. “If God ain’t here in the church, then God’ ain’t in town.” We try to put God into a little category. We can think that God works only inside the church. Yet God always seems to be breaking away from our definitions and expectations. God is working outside the box. God is working in our world in some very different and amazing ways.

In this morning’s scripture lesson, the disciples come to Jesus with a problem. Jesus has attracted this huge crowd and now it is coming up to lunchtime and the people will need something to eat. The disciples call upon one of their number, Philip, who is from the neighbouring town, to see if he knows where they can get some bread. Philip realizes that they don’t have enough money to feed all of these people and if they did, there isn’t enough extra food in the town to feed this crowd. We have the problem defined and realize that there is no possible solution. The disciples are at a dead end.

Then one of the disciples mentions that there is a little boy who has brought lunch with him: some loaves and fish. “But what are they among so many people?” We know what happens next. Jesus performs the miracle of feeding the five thousand. The rest of this chapter in John’s gospel ties in this story with what we have come to believe about communion. The chapter closes with some in the crowd wandering away from Jesus because they think that he is too radical or that God doesn’t work like this or that God is demanding too much from them. C.S. Lewis once said that “a familiar captivity is frequently more desirable than an unfamiliar freedom.”

We say that we are an “Easter people”, that we live on this side of Easter. Easter proclaims that God works outside the box; that the rock couldn’t hold Jesus in the tomb but that God raised Jesus from the dead. The purpose of Easter is to get us to realize that God works in ways which are beyond the greatest of human expectations. The Acts of the Apostles and the rest of the New Testament shows us how God works beyond the limits in the lives of everyday men and women.

William Borders was a famous minister in Atlanta, Georgia. One Sunday he startled his congregation by beginning the worship service with a prayer. He prayed, “Dear God, may something happen in our service this morning that’s not printed in our church bulletins.” Here was a man open to a new wind blowing. He was open to the fact that God could be doing a new thing. He was open to the fact that he wasn’t in control of that service; that God was in control.

Over the years, I have come to appreciate the thinking of John Wesley, the originator of the Methodist movement out of which the United Church grew. In modern language, Wesley

told ministers and priests to put down their prayer books and let go and let God have God's way with their lives. Wesley was not against having prayers written down. He was concerned that the church of his day allowed no room for the working of the Holy Spirit. When a minister structures a service, I think room should always be left for the unexpected, the blowing through of God's Spirit. You may have noticed that often during a regular Sunday service, when I pray the Prayers of the People or the "long prayer" as we used to call it as children, there is nothing written down. This is in keeping with Wesley's instructions on how ministers were to pray with the people. This enables us to have a much freer, more liberating experience of God.

I would love to have been a fly on the wall in the kitchen of the home of the little boy in this morning's story. I can imagine him running home to find his mother. "Mom, mom, you wouldn't believe what happened today! As I was listening to Jesus I heard that there was a problem. Nobody but me had brought any food, so I said to one of the friends of Jesus that I had some fish and some bread. The man said forget it, but Jesus came over and took my little lunch and the food kept coming and coming out of my basket. Mom, I think that with Jesus, anything is possible! I gave the little bit I had to Jesus, and he did the impossible!"

Today, what are the walls that are keeping you bound, from living life to its fullest? Is there something or someone that you have given up on in life? Is there a situation in life that you feel has you fenced in? Is there something that seems to be a dead end? The Gospel of John tells us that Jesus works signs all over the place, even in our own lives. Not always do things turn out the way we want them to or expect them to. Just ask the disciples as they collected up twelve baskets of leftovers that day! When we have faith in God and put our trust in God, things turn out the way that God wants them to. And God's way is always far better than our own.

This morning we celebrate in a time of joyful worship that God is with us and God is willing to work outside the box in our own lives and may we truly have an experience of God's Spirit coming to us. Amen.