

Outside the Box Experiences

John 3:1-17 and Romans 8:12-17

In the early 1960's, an academically unremarkable Yale student, with the unexceptional name of Fred Smith, submitted a term paper for his Economics class. The paper outlined his idea for a company that would guarantee overnight delivery of time-sensitive goods. The professor was not impressed. He gave Smith a grade of "C" for his work, with the comment that the idea was not feasible in the real world. Fred Smith pursued his idea nonetheless, and went on to create FedEx. The very education and experience which qualified that economics professor as an authority in his field also turned out to be the thing that boxed in his thinking, and restrained his imagination from grasping an out of the box concept.

Nicodemus brought a box with him on the night that he came to visit Jesus. Nicodemus was a Pharisee, which means he was also a person of some higher learning and exceptional Godliness. The Pharisees as a group, were men who earnestly sought to know God's will and to follow it in every detail of their lives. The box that they used to contain life was the Torah—the Commandments that God had given through Moses, which defined the covenant between God and God's people. The box had clean lines and clearly defined dimensions. Anything that didn't fit in the box was easily identifiable as out of bounds.

A lot of Jesus' words and actions were--without a doubt--out of the box, as far as the Pharisees were concerned. And yet, Nicodemus' visit with Jesus did seem to be motivated by some doubts, or at least some questions. Doubts and questions about Jesus, but also doubts and questions about whether the Pharisee's interpretation of the Law formed too compact of a box to hold everything there was to know about God.

"Rabbi" he said to Jesus, "we know you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." What Nicodemus did not say with his lips, but which Jesus perceived in the old man's heart, was the silent question mark that hung in the air at the end of that sentence. What Nicodemus was thinking was "we know you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God. But... so much about you does not fit in the box of what we expect a Godly teacher to look like.

Jesus saw the opening, and did his best to help draw Nicodemus out of his inside-the-box point of view, by turning the box itself inside out. Beginning with a shift in perspective. "Very truly," Jesus said, "I tell you; no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Which translates into an appeal for Nicodemus to realize that the vantage point from which he had always surveyed the scope of God's intentions for men and women was not high enough to see the big picture of God's purposes. And that the parameters of God's kingdom, which always defies human assumptions, is as unpredictable as knowing the precise coordinates for the origins and destinations of the winds that blow; and as impossible as containing the wind in a box made by human hands.

Jesus said, "What is born of flesh is flesh; and what is born of Spirit is spirit." What is born of flesh is naturally limited in its power to imagine the infinite possibilities of that which is born of Spirit. Unless, that is, someone who has stood on the heights of God's kingdom—someone from outside the box; who bridges the chasm between flesh and Spirit--comes down personally to reveal what no human eyes have ever seen for themselves. Jesus made it unmistakably evident, that such a hypothetical someone has in fact descended from Heaven. And that, he is that someone.

Jesus came to us, and the Holy Spirit comes to us, to make what would otherwise be humanly unknowable, comprehensible. "For God so loved the World that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

Notice that it says "the world MIGHT be saved through him." There is always the possibility that those whose believing is so tightly confined to the box, that what is outside the box doesn't register in their field of vision, might miss the salvation he brings. The salvation that makes us children of God and siblings to Jesus.

The Apostle Paul talks about the difference between an in-the-box existence and an out-of-the-box experience of life as either living according to the flesh, or being led by the Spirit of God. He warned that living by the flesh means being enslaved to our anorexic ideas about God. Enslaved to the power of fear to downsize the capacity of our imaginations to hope; and to diminish our faith in out of the box solutions.

Perhaps the most important reason to be mindful of the Trinity on Trinity Sunday, or any time, is that it refuses to let us keep God in the box where we might otherwise consign Him. An explanation of how God can be One in Three Persons has stubbornly eluded the best minds of history.

May it always be so. Otherwise, humanity might forget to think outside the box and lose sight of the infinite nature of God.

Before I close and we join in prayer, I'd like to take a moment to acknowledge the unprecedented challenges that have confronted churches worldwide over these last fourteen months. In a year when faith has seldom in our lifetimes been more essential, our traditional faith-based support systems were hard pressed to provide a sense of blessed community. Nobody was prepared...there was no roadmap ever drawn up, that we could turn to as a guide for our steps through this kind of wilderness. This has truly been an out of the box experience for the ages. Yet, as with every crisis, this one brought with it an opportunity to think and act outside the box. A challenge to live our faith in new ways. To follow the Spirit even without knowing for certain where it was taking us or how long the journey might be.

At long last, the end now seems to be in sight. Maybe the box is a little larger than it was before this journey began. It's possible that there are more tools in the box at our disposal if and when we are again confronted with a crisis of this magnitude. Hopefully, the most important tool in the box, will be a faith that has been fire-tested. A faith that may have been bent but never broken.

This will be the last virtual worship service, with the possible exception of some special circumstances in the future. Beginning next Sunday and throughout the Summer we will be worshipping together outdoors. In September, we plan to regather for worship in the sanctuary. I hope that these virtual services have provided you with some sense of spiritual connection in spite of our limited experiences of community. Maybe like the portable Tabernacle that the Hebrews carried with them as a reminder of God's presence as they wandered through the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land. Most of all, I pray that they have helped you maintain an awareness of our strong and faithful God's steadfast love and care for you.

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