

Date: August 21, 2005

SUNDAY: Ordinary 21

SERMON: Living Outside the Box

Text(s): Romans 12:1-21; Matthew 16:13-20

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We've all heard the phrase "thinking outside the box" so much in recent years that it's become a cliché. But it really only entered our vocabulary in the early 1970's when some books on leadership for corporate executives made it popular. Originally it was a reference to a particular puzzle, where nine dots are arranged in three vertical rows to form a grid. The object of the puzzle was to connect all nine dots, using only four lines. The only way to do that was to extend some of the lines beyond the borders of the "box" or grid. So it became a metaphor for creative or innovative thinking, as opposed to "inside the box" thinking which accepts the boundaries of the status quo and does not venture beyond them.

A perfect example of an "inside the box" thinker was Charles Duell, the head of the U.S. Patent Office, who said "Everything that can be invented has already been invented." That was in 1899. Today, the phrase "inside the box" has almost no positive connotations whatsoever. Except, perhaps for the cartoon I once saw that showed a man shaking his finger at his cat which was standing in its litter box, and he was saying, "Don't think outside the box."

And yet, despite the positive value we give to thinking "outside the box" and the negative connotations we put on "inside the box" thinking, most of us are content to be "inside the box" people most of the time, aren't we? "Inside the box" is where we are comfortable. We humans have a pretty strong herd instinct; we prefer thinking and behaving like the majority of people around us think and behave. In just about every area of life, from the clothing styles we wear or the foods we prefer to eat to the political ideas and positions we support to the cultural values we espouse, we have a strong tendency to think and live "inside the box." The "box" gives

structure and shape to our daily lives. We know our place, we know the expectations on us, we know how we're supposed to act and think and feel in a given situation. And that's not bad. It's a natural and normal human desire to have structure and order and social harmony. Without structure and order, life would be unbearably chaotic. The familiar routines we follow, the daily rituals we perform, the common ideas and practices we share with a particular community of people— all these things are necessary if we're going to make sense of life.

The danger arises, however, when the box becomes a prison, preventing us from ever having a new idea or seeing a fresh perspective or behaving in a different way in response to a new reality. We can become so accustomed to the shape of life inside the box that nothing short of a catastrophe can shake us up. While the box provides needed structure and order, it also becomes a killer of creativity or originality or our ability to adapt to change.

You may remember in the movie *Amadeus*, the older court composer Salieri was an "inside the box" musician. His music followed the compositional rules of his day; they were disciplined, well-structured. . . and dull. The young Mozart, on the other hand, was thinking and composing "outside the box" of the musical fashion and taste of his day. And even if the emperor of Austria thought his compositions had "too many notes," it's Mozart and not Salieri whose music continues to touch our souls and delight us centuries later.

That's why corporate leaders are urging their employees to "think outside the box." To keep ahead of the competition in today's marketplace, a company cannot allow itself to "get into a rut" or stay "inside the box." The same is true of any organization or institution, including churches, perhaps especially churches. Some years ago, someone wrote a very funny book entitled "The Seven Last Words of the Church." Those seven words are "We've never done it that way before." That's "inside the box" thinking. Safe, but boring. Comfortable, but

dull. Structured, but lifeless— a skeleton with no living flesh on the bones.

St. Paul understood the dangers of getting boxed in, as we heard in our epistle lesson today. *“I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God— what is good and acceptable and perfect.”* Do not be conformed, but be transformed. I like the way J. B. Phillips in his paraphrase translation of this passage puts it: *“Don’t let the world around you squeeze you into its own mold.”* Or, don’t let yourself get trapped inside the box.

What box is Paul talking about? He refers to it as “this world,” and in the two chapters prior to our passage today, he’s given it very specific meaning. “This world” for Paul was the whole conglomeration of culture, religion, tradition, and politics that kept people divided and hostile toward one another. Even more specifically, the division of all humanity into Jews and Gentiles was the particular box Paul and other deeply religious Jews of his day had grown up in, a box fenced about by the Law of Moses so that only those who lived “under the Law” (these are Paul’s terms), could have a relationship to Israel’s God who was also inside that box. Those “without the Law” couldn’t know God or please God. They were the *goyim*, the nations or Gentiles. To be outside that particular box was to be outside the very reach of God’s love.

But something happened— something that convinced Paul that perhaps his and his tradition’s box was not big enough to confine God in it. God had apparently done something that was totally outside the box. In the two chapters prior to our lesson, he engages in a long and closely-reasoned argument to convince his readers that an ultimate “outside the box” event

has occurred which has forever changed the shape of human life and relationships. In fact, it has broken down, not only the box in which Jews held themselves separate from Gentiles; it had broken down all the boxes which human beings construct to keep themselves safe and others out.

That something for Paul was what he called “the resurrection of Jesus from the dead,” a term ready-to-hand from his own tradition of Pharisaic Judaism, where it referred to what God was expected to do for all the faithful in Israel at the end of the world. Paul appears to be the first one to describe whatever it was that happened to the crucified rabbi from Nazareth as resurrection from the dead. He came to this conclusion because of a very personal experience he had in which he was confronted by the living presence of that crucified man, and called to a mission that would literally change the world. That experience smashed the walls of Paul’s comfortable box, and demanded from Paul a response— a response of trust that the God of Israel, by raising Jesus from the dead, had brought the old world, the old box to an end, and had inaugurated a new world, where Jews and Gentiles alike were included among the people of God, or as Paul himself had described it in an earlier epistle, there is *“no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female, but all are one in Christ.”*

And that’s how Paul understands the church— as the visible witness to this new world outside the box. The church, just because it brings together all sorts of people and unites them in one community, is a kind of outpost or colony, if you will, of heaven. It is the new community of men and women, Jews and Gentiles, slaves and free, who understand that they are equally loved and redeemed by God’s grace, and therefore, are bound to one another in love and mutual responsibility. By nature, the church is an “outside the box” phenomenon in its inclusion of people whom the world’s systems would keep in separate boxes on the basis of ethnicity or social

status or gender.

The question, of course, is how do we live together in that new reality when all of us come to it still lugging our old boxes with us and reluctant to give them up? And that's why Paul says, "*Don't let this world keep you trapped in a box. Don't be conformed to this world's way of classifying and judging other people. Instead, let God transform your mind, your worldview from within.*"

That's easy enough to say, but what does it really mean? How can we avoid being "conformed to this world?" Well, it seems to me, if I can use some contemporary jargon, that what Paul is talking about is our need to undergo a paradigm shift. What's that, you ask?

I heard a speaker at a conference describe how his son, newly graduated from college came back home to live with Mom and Dad while he looked for a job, as so many college grads do these days. After a few months, he found a job, and he immediately began thinking of what he was going to do with his money. One morning at breakfast, (which his mother still fixed for him) he excitedly told his parents that the first thing he was going to do was save his money to buy a new sports car. His mother listened to her son go on for a moment, and then she said, "Well, I don't know if you're going to be able to afford that car."

"Why not?" he asked.

"Well, after you give your father and me \$500 a month for rent, and another \$300 a month for food and for using our car, plus gas, of course, and pay for your health insurance, and your share of the car insurance, I'm not sure how much of that paycheck you'll have left.

His father said, "As I looked at my son's expression, I immediately understood what a paradigm shift was. He was going through one right at that moment."

The paradigm shift that Paul is talking about is an even more radical one, and it involves

nothing less than a transformation of our minds from within. It means no longer living and thinking and behaving in ways that are conformed to the values and standards of judgment of a world that separates people, that builds barriers and fences to divide "us" from "them" and which create discrimination and violence.

How can we recognize, much less get out of, the boxes in which we live? How can we be "transformed by the renewing of our minds?" How can we begin to live outside the box?

The rest of this chapter in the epistle to the Romans gives the answers. The answers are ones we already know. They are simplicity itself. Yet putting them into practice, as we also know, is much more difficult. We can't do it alone. Just as the pressure of the world squeezes us into its mold, so we need the pressure of an alternative community, the pressure of new habits, new behaviors, new practices to help that transformation begin and take root.

"Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection. . . persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. . . bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them (now there's a tough, "outside the box behavior, isn't it?) Live in harmony with one another. . . associate with the lowly. . . do not claim to be wiser than you are. . . do not repay anyone evil for evil. (What's the "inside the box" thinking on that one? You've heard the old saying, "Don't get mad; get even." That's a "boxed in" attitude. Forgiveness and reconciliation are "outside the box" realities.) "If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink. Don't be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

Easy to say, but atrociously difficult to do, isn't it? We can recognize the qualities of life outside the box as desirable; but it's not easy to

think or act ourselves out of the box.

That's what "going to church" is all about; it's where we learn how to act so that we can practice "outside the box" behavior in order to make God's new creation visible to ourselves and the rest of the world. It's where we remind ourselves again and again that the battle to free ourselves from the old box has already been won. We live this side of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. The new age, the new world already exists, but we have to recognize and enter into that triumph through action, through learning new behavior. Think of coming to church as behavior modification therapy, if you will. This is where we learn how to become that new human community where love governs our behavior rather than self-interest or competition; where forgiveness and reconciliation take the place of violence and revenge; where generosity and prayer drive out materialism and greed; where harmony and hospitality to the stranger break down the walls of racism and tribalism and nationalism. That's why Christians go to church. We don't go to church just to hear the music or to hear a sermon or say some prayers to help us get through the week, or to see our friends, though all of those things are part of it. We go to church to learn how to live outside the box and to find the strength in unity with others who are also learning new habits of the heart. We go to church to learn how to "be transformed by the renewing of our minds, so that we may discern what the will of God is." It's here, in community, in relationships of accountability and love for one another, that we begin to experience the transformation of our minds and discover that all of the deepest desires of our hearts are met. And when we have found our hearts' desire, we will have a saving word for others boxed in by their self-made prison bars. We will be able to offer them a vision of a world recreated, offer them hope of a new beginning, a new freedom, a new joy and peace.