

"The Boxes of Life"

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John 21:4-7a

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A True Story—They gathered in a sprawling retreat center nestled in the quiet, green hills of North Carolina. A small group of clergymen and clergywomen. The purpose of the retreat was to explore the world of the "Gen-Xers" (Generation X); individuals born between approximately 1961 and 1981. Everyone soon became engrossed in the conversation. Eventually, one of the clergy said to the group, "I guess if you want to reach Gen-Xers, you have to think outside the box." Without hesitation the Gen-Xer facilitating the discussion replied, "What box? We don't have a box. You have to think *beyond the box.*" (*Bill Easum & Dave Travis, "Beyond the Box," Group Pub., p. 8. Adpt.*)

Sociologists and "culture-ologists" tell us Gen-Xers do not like being put in a box or being expected to even stand *next* to a box. In general, they prefer *no* box! "They are individuals who believe, act, and live as if the box never existed." Today I want to talk a bit about "boxes."

There are big boxes and little ones; ones made out of thin poster board, and others out of thick cardboard, wood, metal, or lucite. There are painted boxes, plain boxes, and boxes covered with velvet. Some are square while others are rectangle, or oval, or round, or oblong. There are boxes easy to open and others hard to get into. Some can be easily broken or crushed while others are hard to make a dent in.

In some ways, boxes are like challenges and possibilities in life. Some are big; some small. Some are round and smooth while others have sharp corners. Some challenges (and possibilities) are easy to get into while others are very hard to open. Some are easy to crush while others are nearly impossible to even make a little dent in.

In general, 1st century Christians did not have a tethered view of church and church life. They had few if any boxes which delineated faith and life in the faith. Early Christians were not afraid to "color outside the lines" because there were few lines at that moment in time. I like to think they often said to each other, "If we do this, will it bring more people to Christ and help grow the kingdom?" or "If we do this, will it *transform* people's lives as Christ transformed 'ours'?" I would even dare to suggest they may have viewed life and faith more along the lines of how today's Gen-Xers do.

Challenges and possibilities tend to clarify whether we are in the box, out of the box, or try to have no box.

Another way to think about "boxes" and "challenges/possibilities" is like they are a bar of soap. (Please bear with me on this one!) As a child I remember taking summer art classes. Invariably one of the craft activities involved a bar of soap and a carving utensil. The art teacher would say something like, "You have a bar of soap. You have a carving utensil. Now go make something!" I also remember that all of us were able to carve something out of our bar of soap. You could express this another way. "You have a challenge. You have a carving utensil. Now go make something out of it."

True Story—A certain writer relates a story about a man he knows who had two sons. Both were married. Their wives became pregnant about the same time. One ended in a miscarriage; the other in a healthy baby. So twice in that same year, this man went to the same hospital, spoke with the same nurses and doctors, and walked down the same hallways. The first time was to mourn a death. The second time was to celebrate a birth. Then this writer says,

"We live in the hallways, don't we?
We've left one room and gone to the other.
We've sat outside, waiting.
We've felt that kind of pain,
 but also been overwhelmed by amazing joy.
We've all been in the hallways
 one way or another...
 ... like my friend with 2 sons." (adpt)

Jesus also tells a story about a man with two sons. (*See Luke 15*) The story begins with the younger son asking his father for his full inheritance...*now*. (A "way beyond the box" situation.) In 1st century Jewish culture, the youngest son's request (or probably a demand) would have been a huge offense. Even more exceptional, the father does not refuse. He places the money in his youngest son's hand, no questions asked. (Again, "beyond the box.")

The son leaves; spends all of it quickly. After a while, lonely and destitute, he returns home to work for his father as one of the servants. When he arrives he is not shunned, nor punished, nor reprimanded, nor even treated as a servant. His Dad welcomes him with open arms and throws a huge party. Dad does not just call for the best lamb to be prepared for family dinner. Oh, no. He calls for the very best calf to be prepared; a meal big enough for the whole village! (Once more, "beyond the box.")

His Dad's behavior infuriates the older brother (older son). He refuses to join the party and complains bitterly about how unfair this is; probably going on and on, blaming his brother for all the bad things he has done. (An "inside the box" behavior.) The Dad reminds his eldest son that as the oldest, he will eventually inherit the vast majority of everything, "So be generous and gracious to your lost brother, who is now back home." (A "beyond the box" thinking.)

Then, suddenly, the older brother "sees the light." He puts his arms around his father and says,

"You're right, Dad. I'm sorry.
I've been really stupid. I love my younger
brother and am really glad he's back.
Let me get you some wine. Then let's go
find my brother and join the party!"

Right.....? Well... not exactly. We know not what the older brother did.

Some brothers never join the party. Some Dads never throw one. Some brothers never come back. Some things never get resolved and just stay "in the box." On the other hand, many challenges and

possibilities *are* met, and much risk-taking is often rewarded in unexpected ways. Many people and institutions *do* manage to flourish with "beyond the box" attitudes and perspectives.

The older brother in the Bible story seems to wish things were all "back in the box"...familiar, comfortable, how they are "supposed" to be. The Dad, it would seem, hopes for things to move forward in a new way "...without any boxes any more..."

Was not Jesus Himself nearly always "beyond the box"? Maybe this is one reason why He tells this story...to show us what we *can* do with any circumstance we face; tackle it with a faith that knows no bounds and a belief that knows no box.

A Story—The authors David Baytes and Ted Orland wrote a book titled "Art and Fear." In it they tell the true story of a ceramics teacher who one time divided his class into two groups. One group would be graded on *how many pieces they created in the time they had*. The other group was allowed to make only *one* work of art, and would be graded on *the quality of that piece*. In the end, it was the *quantity* group that ended up producing the works of greatest *quality*. Why? It seemed "that while the quantity group was busy churning out many pieces of art...and along the way learning from their mistakes...the quality group had sat theorizing about perfection, and in the end that group had little more to show for their efforts than grandiose theories and a pile of...clay." (Adpt. from the story shared in *Drops Like Stars* by Rob Bell, pp. 106f.)

There is a saying: "God is the God Who wastes nothing." *Everything* is an opportunity to grow and expand, to evolve and learn, to produce and create, to step "outside the box," if not even go further and step "beyond the box"! Is not that precisely what God did when God sent the Son to earth to be born of human flesh and live among us, breathe like us, eat like us, walk and talk like us, and laugh and cry like us?

Did you know that the Native Americans have a very interesting tradition? When they are weaving a beautiful rug, they always leave a blemish in one corner, because that is where they believe the Spirit enters their work?

One day I was watching a special on PBS about the American glass artist Dale Chihuly whose studio is in Washington State. He is renowned world-wide for his stupendous sculptures in colored glass. As I watched this special, and saw his apprentices handling and blowing the glass into astonishingly gorgeous shapes, the commentator noticed an area to the side filled with shelves. On those shelves were a multitude of shapes and sizes of glass, shimmering with color and hues. He asked Chihuly what those were, because, though they were brilliantly beautiful, they did not seem to look right. Chihuly told the commentator those were the *mistakes*. (*Sidebar: I remember thinking to myself how I would love to have one of Chihuly's mistakes sitting in my living room!* When the commentator asked what he was going to do with all those amazing pieces of glass, Chihuly said they would later be melted down and re-used to create other art pieces! Turns out, the artist never discards *any* pieces of glass that are less than perfect, no matter how small or large they are. He uses them later to make more amazing glass art!

So...friends...Chihuly is another example, I suggest, of someone who thinks "beyond the box"!

The disciples have fished all night with no success. They see a man on the lakeshore. He yells out to them to try the other side of the boat. "Who is this man?" they must think to themselves. "After all, we are the professional fisherman. We are the ones who know how and where to fish!" Yet they get out of their box and do what this stranger tells them. Their nets become so full they have trouble hauling them in. (see today's scripture text)

And Jesus says to them, "Come, and have breakfast [with Me]." (*Jn 21:32*)

And Jesus says to us all the time, "Come, and walk with Me...beyond the box."

Praise God from Whom all blessings flow.

(Some of the thoughts in this sermon are drawn from Rob Bell's book, "Drops Like Stars," 2009, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI.)