

Church of the Covenant
August 23, 2015

TEXT: I Kings 8:1,6,10-11, 22-30, 41-43

Out of the box God

We're going to begin with a little congregational participation exercise this morning. I am hoping that you – or a neighbor – have a pen or pencil. I'd like you to find one, and then find some white space somewhere on your bulletin. You don't need a lot. Draw 9 dots in 3 rows of 3. That was the easy part. Now – without lifting your pen off of the paper, I want you to draw 4 straight lines that will go through all 9 dots. All of those words are important – 4, straight, all 9, don't lift pen from the page. Go. I'll keep talking while you keep trying. This little exercise was part of a study on creativity led by JP Guilford in the early 1970's. If all of your attempts have kept you inside the square, you are not alone. 80% of Guilford's subjects were self-limiters. Like yourselves, they were not instructed to contain their lines within the square –and yet – 80% were blinded to possibilities by perceived boundaries. Still frustrated? Want the big reveal? Here it is. Your AHA moment for the day.

This is literally outside the box thinking. And mostly, it reveals how very comfortable most of us are inside the box. Some say – it never occurred to me. Others protest – that's not fair. It's not unlike the reaction to the puzzle in the Children's message – we constrained ourselves to think that numbers only work a certain way – mathematically. We couldn't imagine the possibility that they were visual representations of something else altogether. Or this one – I have 5 apples and I take away 3. How many apples do I have? (3) John's mother has 4 children. One is named April, one named May, one named June. What is the 4th named? (John)

Thinking outside the box not only calls for lowering our self-imposed boundaries. It calls for careful listening, and restraining ourselves from the assumptions it is so easy to follow.

Meanwhile, back in Jerusalem, back in the mid 900's BCE, a box was being built. We've been hearing about it for weeks – back when it was King David's dream that God deferred - to now, when Solomon has made the big reveal and then prayed a really long prayer. That temple building campaign makes any church capital campaign look like peanuts. It was so expensive that King Solomon had to trade 20 cities in Galilee to a neighboring king to raise cash for building supplies. Foreign laborers were conscripted to work on it, which certainly raises some ethical questions. The details of its specifications and the building process found in preceding chapters can cure what ails you on a sleepless night. It took 7 years to complete it. And it was later known as the First Temple – which tells you what? Yep, all that work, all that money, all that investment of dream and good intention (and a side of ego) was destroyed by the Babylonians in 587. Then there was a Second Temple...the next box. Which only lasted until 70 CE. That is the nature of boxes. They are temporary. Which is not at all the nature of God. Which is why we have to be careful about confusing the two, or trying to contain one in the other.

Solomon was wise – God had given him the wisdom he'd asked for – remember that from just last week? He must have sensed the mixed messages this Temple would send. And so, as the ark of the covenant – the smaller box of God's presence that had travelled with the people wherever they went – as it was placed inside the inner sanctuary, where no one but the priests would be able to go, he prayed. And in the midst of his prayer, King Solomon had his own AHA moment – “But – will God really dwell on earth?” Looking at that box of a Temple – all

60X20x30 cubits of cedar and gold of it – he wondered “What was I thinking? Who am I to contain or confine God?” and he prayed on “The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you! How much less this temple I have built!” God cannot be boxed up, cannot be boxed in, cannot be contained or confined.

King Solomon prayed on, praying that God would hear the prayers of others in all kinds of circumstances. But he very clearly did not say that those prayers had to be prayed in the box. “Hear your people when they pray toward this place.” Toward – that’s an outside the box word. And it was powerful good news to those Israelites who were later exiled to Babylon – taken away from the presence of the Temple. They just needed to pray toward it – and could be assured that they were not taken away from the presence of God. That temple, this church, any such God box, is a sign- a sign that reminds the world of the presence of God in the world --- wherever you may be. When I traveled to The Gambia – an African country with a significant Muslim population, I was incredibly moved by the calls to prayer, and people stopping what they were doing, all facing toward Mecca, and praying. That place, though far away, acknowledged the presence of God for them where they were.

Letting God out of the box is only part of the equation of faithful outside the box thinking about the church today. The other part is something Solomon was bold and radical to include in his prayer. “As for the foreigner who does not belong...when they come and pray toward this temple, then hear from heaven. Do whatever the foreigner asks of you..” Now that was some biblical outside the box thinking. The Old Testament is not particularly kind to foreigners. They were outsiders – seen as either enemies to be conquered, or as unclean influences to be avoided. But here, now – Solomon leads God’s people prayerfully outside the

box of their “just us”ness, full of people “just like us”. Outsiders aren’t kept out – their prayers are heard, their place given a place, their perspective given credibility. Not something church boxes in recent church history have been known for. But maybe what we’re being called to.

How well do we listen to those outside the church box we know so well? In this day and age, fewer people are church insiders by inheritance. You know this – many of you have told me this about your own families. We read about the rise of the Spiritual But Not Religious (SBNRs) and the NONEs. Solomon prayed that outsiders be given equal status and equal access to God. How are we living out that prayer today? We have a Community Listening Team doing work around needs in our local community. But really, we’re all on the Community Listening Team. We need to listen to others’ voices out there, and hear what churches look and feel like from their perspective. Let’s learn how we can best bear witness to the promise and love of God in their midst now. What is needed, what is their prayer, what is good news for them now? It may not be like, or look like, what the life inside the box has been like for you over the years.

But remember the thing about boxes. Even the grandest of them all, Solomon’s Temple, was limited. Solomon in his wisdom realized that the day it was dedicated. It could not contain all that is God. And, as boxes are, it was temporary. It served its time. And then there was a new, another box that bore witness to God’s presence among us. And another. Different each time. We can mourn the loss of the box, holding on to its sides and corners for dear life. Or we can imagine and even move outside the box, opening ourselves up to ways God may be pushing the boundaries we built for ourselves, marveling at the ways God is at work out there, listening to those who see us from a different perspective, and seeking to serve up hope and

compassion, justice and love – the way of Jesus - wherever, to whomever, and however it is needed.

Whether with 9 dots or the life of our church, it is human nature to be inside the box – to self-limit and find identity and comfort in boundaries and walls. But ours is a God who is outside any box. I wonder what would happen if we loved and trusted that God so much that we just couldn't – and just wouldn't -contain ourselves?