

The secretary for the Newton, New Hampshire, police department had this bumper sticker on her car: WHY BE NORMAL? Now whenever I saw this I would ask myself, "What is normal?" When did someone decide that it was only appropriate to color inside the lines or to stay in a certain box called "normality". Think about it. Where would our world be if people had not stepped outside the box or colored outside the lines? It is because people have chosen to step outside the norm that many of the things we take for granted today were discovered or invented. What if Thomas Edison had agreed that candles and whale oil lamps were the "normal" way to light the world? We appreciate those who step outside the norm, or outside the box when we discover what they have discovered and find how to use it for our own benefit or good.

However, when we apply this same idea to our theology or to the church – look out. We have to keep God in our boxes. It may be okay for the world to color outside the lines or to step outside the box but never the church. At least not the church we belong to.

Our text from Mark today gives us two illustrations of what it means to be a follower of Jesus. They illustrate for us -- Our God cannot be bound by the limits of expectation.

The first story is of Jesus needing a time of rest. He goes away seeking some time to refresh, to rest. He is looking for some down time. However, he cannot; the crowds keep after him and there is this one Gentile woman. Her daughter is filled with an evil spirit and there is only one hope – a young, Jewish Rabbi. She has no hope for her daughter but to bring the situation to Jesus. She knows she has little hope of being heard – she is a Gentile and a woman. All cultural taboos in her time tell her that she should have nothing to do with him or him with her. Yet, she is willing to step outside the accepted norms of her day and she finds Jesus.

I want to paraphrase Jesus' response to her: "*Why should I step outside the box? Why should I act contrary to that which is expected of me by my society?*" He raises a valid question. Why should Jesus step outside of the culturally expected box of his culture? She is a Gentile and she is a woman – she has no place in Jewish society.

She will not allow Jesus to use culture as an excuse. Her daughter is sick. He and he alone can help her. She calls for Jesus to step outside the box. She wants him to reach out beyond the "box" – to color outside the lines of the expectations of their cultures. It is her only hope. And it is her faith that saves her daughter. She is pushing Jesus beyond the lines of culture—she wants, insists that he color outside the lines, step out of the box.

The second story seems more "normal". Jesus is confronted by a crowd with a request. They bring a man who is deaf and who has trouble speaking (because of his deafness). They beg Jesus "*to lay his hand on him.*" This is their expectation of Jesus.

Jesus takes the man aside. When they are alone, in a private place, Jesus touches the man's ears and spits and touches his tongue and the man is healed. This healing does not take place in the crowd – this is between Jesus and the man. However, this cannot be hid. They return and the man can hear and speak. Jesus' directions are for them to "tell no one."

Why? My take is that Jesus is not just a "miracle" worker, a healer. He is more, much more than this. Jesus knows the crowd will begin to place limits on what they expect of Jesus. They will try to make Jesus live up to the expectations they have for him – remember, they begged him to heal the man. Their expectations will not include the cross. They have a box for their Messiah. It will be hard for Jesus to be about the task that God has called him to if he tries to meet all the expectation the crowds place on him. He must step outside the box they are building for him – he must color outside the lines of expectation.

We love our religion in boxes. We have the expectations of what a follower of Jesus should be like. We know what to expect. We know how to act and yet we forget as we read the Gospels that Jesus could never be confined to the box of his culture. When we place limits on what is and is not acceptable we begin to limit the boundaries of God. When we limit ourselves we limit God.

Now you may ask, “How can we limit God?” Are we not called to be God’s representatives, ambassadors? Did God not choose to build the church through us? If these are true then the moment we begin to restrict, to place boundaries, we set up boxes and in doing so limit God.

Do you remember the confrontation in Acts 6? The disciples are brought before the Council and a decision must be reached on what to do with them. Gamaliel has the disciples dismissed and addresses those gathered, *“For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God”* (Acts 6:28b-29 NIV). Gamaliel knew there is a danger in limiting the grace, love and outreach of God.

When we stop looking outside the box, when we stop coloring outside the lines we begin to limit what God can do in our midst. When we fail to try something different we place God back in our theological boxes. When we fail to ask questions about possibilities we push God back into our boxes.

The Proverbs are wonderful truths. They call us back to reality. We are all made in God’s image: rich/poor. It doesn’t matter. Anyone who looks in a mirror is made in the image of God. None are better than the other. We are one—all created in God’s image.

The writer goes on to note that sharing with the poor is not an option but a mandate. Rather than blame people for being poor we are to work with them. Watched in disbelief as a US Congresswoman told a young, unemployed single mother to get a job and pay for her own health insurance. Even if she could find a job she probably would not be able afford the cost of health insurance. This was far from a Christian response.

What then should we do? The last Proverbs we looked at states that God stands in the place of poor. I wondered what the response of the Congress woman would have been if she had seen Jesus standing there instead of a young, single mother? And yet God stands in the place of poor. God pushes us outside the box, asks to color outside the lines – why, even the Gentile dog gets the crumbs that fall from the table.

I wrote in my blog a few months ago that I would like to change the image from box to egg shell. Why? Because we can always retreat back into our boxes, but once an egg shell is broken it cannot be retreated back into. We are forever on the outside, growing, learning, experiencing the new things of God. God is calling us to break out, see what wonders are in store. We need to break a few more egg shells!

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quoted is from NRSV, NCCC/USA 1989
NIV, New International Bible Society, Zondervan, 1973, 1978, 1984