

July 29, 2007
God Speaks – Outside the Box
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For those of you who have seen the bulletin, you know already that my topic is:
'God Speaks – Outside the Box'

But to give this some context, it's important I give you some idea of what life 'inside the box' is about.

To be perfectly honest and so no one feels excluded, we all live inside a box. And not just one box, but many.

For example, my body is a box – getting more square with age...once 6 feet tall and a foot and ½ wide I am slowly digressing to where if I live to be 300 years old I will be a perfect 5 by 5 foot square.

But this building we're in is also a box; my office is a box, the business I'm in, is a box, my mind is a box – a box of do's and don'ts; a box which relies on things being and working a certain way, so that there are no surprises – nothing to upset my equilibrium, my sense of well-being, my sense of 'who I am'.

There is nothing inherently wrong about living in a box. Despite the slow demise of this body I live in, I prefer it to the alternative: i.e. of being strewn all over the place, my heart here, my head two blocks away, and my hand in somebody else's pocket. It's important that I respect the inner pre-requisites of this box I live in – to see that it gets exercise and just the right amount of chocolate.

It can also be said that we sitting here are in a box. No two of us alike – each with something unique to bring to the table and yet in some incredible way, belonging to each other. We represent a continuum of belief - some of us are committed, some of us are kicking the tires and some of us have worn the tires right down to the rim... but generally speaking we either believe in Jesus Christ or are committed to the possibility that he is worth considering.

And just like the other boxes that make up our lives –this box we share also has inner pre-requisites – making sure we have enough money to run the place; ensuring that our staff are adequately compensated and cared for; building teams of committed volunteers to make certain that all who come here – both young and old, ministry partner and guest, Christian and non-Christian – feel as though they belong.

It is within these confines that we are instructed in what we believe – about God, about each other and about the world around us.

But here's the dilemma. Share your faith with someone outside this box and tell me if you don't feel like you're speaking another language. They look at you as though you're speaking from inside a box and they can't quite make out what it is they're hearing. And if they do take the time to try and understand what you're trying to say, more often than not they'll say "Well, that's good for you but it really means little or nothing to me."

And they're being truthful. And you do your best to respect their honesty – but inwardly you're thinking: 'well, if you had just been diagnosed with a life threatening illness, you'd be interested in what I had to say'. Sorry, I shouldn't put my thoughts in your mind...

You would do better than that and out of a real desire to connect with the person would ask: 'So what is it that most concerns you?'

And they might say that they're concerned about peace in the Middle East or in Afghanistan, or about freedom for those in oppressive regimes like Zimbabwe or Darfur, or about human rights violations in places like Columbia or China. Or they might simply be overwhelmed by global warming...the thought that the world they're leaving their children is far worse than the world they grew up in...

For someone it might be something really personal like why it is when they have enough to donate money to alleviate world hunger, they choose to buy a Lexus instead.

And you nod your head in agreement but are somewhat at a loss for words as to how to connect their concerns with the claims of the Gospel. Call it a case of two people talking whose life essentials seemingly don't match.

Compare the World Issues Section of the newspaper with the Sermon titles noted on the Church page in the weekend newspaper...we're not even talking the same things.

This is why for people outside the church – some of whom include our family members – see the church about as essential to their lives as an afternoon at the museum or a night at the opera. It's not bad while they're there and they can tell the people who attend regularly love it – but it's really not for them. It's not so much they think we're speaking a different language or that our expression is archaic, it's more the matter we're just not talking about the same issues.

While the world around us is concerned with issues like global warming, the AIDS crisis in Africa, or the lack of clean water in developing nations – we are otherwise pre-occupied with the Da Vinci Code wars, the 'who is Jesus?' debates, the 'gay-marriage' issue and the merits of 'seeker-friendly' services.

That there are two different spheres in itself is not alarming...those contrasting spheres or 'boxes' exist between the world and any institution – be it business, education or politics.

But for anyone who believes that Christ's resurrection marks the beginning of God's rule on earth; the beginning of the end of such things as poverty and oppression, violence and racial prejudice; that the evidence of God's rule on earth is reflected in the way Christians live, there is cause for alarm...or better yet – prayer and fasting.

To put it another way – if God so loved the world that He sent his only Son – and the end result of His doing so is that millions are still starving, and wars are still being fought, and humanity's abandoned its divine mandate to care for God's creation – there is good reason for those outside the church to really wonder where our heads are at, especially if our best answer is: 'don't worry, just believe in Jesus because a new world is coming'.

And they'd have reason to wonder where are heads are at!

Anyone who has had even the briefest exposure to the words of Christ knows there's not an element of deferral in any of his teaching. He didn't teach us to love our enemies with the thought that we do so in heaven. Presumably in heaven, we won't have any enemies to love. He taught us to love our enemies for the one and only place we are likely to have enemies – here on earth.

The same holds true for the other great themes of his teaching: forgiveness, faith, showing mercy, doing justice, making peace, loving God, loving our neighbour and prayer. Their context is right here, right now – 'so God's will is done here on earth as it is in heaven'.

When we avoid the issues that threaten to make our planet anything but heaven – issues such as racism and greed and violence and war - then 'outsiders' have reason to think the box we're in is 'escapist', 'detached', disengaged from this life...

I want to read a passage from Luke's gospel which hopefully will help us work through this dilemma where our faith – instead of opening us up to the world so we are as approachable and down to earth as Jesus was – threatens to box us in.

The context for this passage from Luke 4 is: Jesus' public ministry has just started. He's been baptized by John the Baptist, survived 40 days without food in the wilderness during which he is tempted by the devil. He doesn't cave and the gospel writer Luke, notes that he returns to Galilee 'filled with the Holy Spirit's power. Reports about him spread quickly through the whole region. He taught regularly in the synagogue and was praised by everyone.'

But then he faces a challenge that on some level we can all identify with – he is asked to speak in the synagogue of his boyhood. You can imagine that the audience might have included the woman who had taught him the 23rd Psalm in Sabbath Primary School, or the kind gentleman who took him under his wing the year Jesus turned 16 years old. Maybe some of those in attendance were his old fishing buddies.

Beginning at verse 16:

When Jesus came to the village of Nazareth, his boyhood home, he went as usual to the synagogue on the Sabbath and stood up to read the Scriptures. The scroll of Isaiah the prophet was handed to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where this was written: *The Spirit of the LORD is upon me, for he has anointed me to bring Good News to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim that captives will be released, that the blind will see, that the oppressed will be set free, and that the time of the LORD's favour has come.*

He rolled up the scroll, handed it back to the attendant, and sat down. All eyes in the synagogue looked at him intently. Then he began to speak to them.

"The Scripture you've just heard has been fulfilled this very day!" Everyone spoke well of him and was amazed by the gracious words that came from his lips. **"How can this be?"** they asked. **"Isn't this Joseph's son?"** Then he said, **"You will undoubtedly quote me this proverb: 'Physician, heal yourself'—meaning, 'Do miracles here in your hometown like those you did in Capernaum.'**

But I tell you the truth, no prophet is accepted in his own hometown. "Certainly there were many needy widows in Israel in Elijah's time, when the heavens were closed for three and a half years, and a severe famine devastated the land. Yet Elijah was not sent

to any of them. He was sent instead to a foreigner—a widow of Zarephath in the land of Sidon.

And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, but the only one healed was Naaman, a Syrian.” When they heard this, the people in the synagogue were furious. Jumping up, they mobbed him and forced him to the edge of the hill on which the town was built. They intended to push him over the cliff, but he passed right through the crowd and went on his way.

Luke 4:16-30 NLT

Now I know the expression – you can never go home – but this response by his home church to his sermon is in another category altogether!

What is it that made them so angry?

I know his sermon didn't include any jokes or anecdotes. It didn't provide a list of his 3 main points, nor leave his audience with any obvious take home that they could apply in the coming week. But that's hardly cause to push him off a cliff

I think the only way we can make sense of their reaction is to say they were ensconced in a box.

Let's flesh out that box a little.

From the time these folks were infants, they had been told they were God's chosen people. And equally as long, they had been told they were the people for whom God's Messiah would come...and that with his coming would come freedom, prosperity and authority over all nations. And from the time they were infants they had been oppressed by the Romans, and made to be captives in their own land.

Jesus' sermon begins well. He seems to be saying what everyone's been saying about him. He claims to be the fulfillment of one of scripture's most vivid prophecies about the Messiah. He makes reference to the poor, to the captives, to the blind, to the oppressed and the ushering in of God's rule.

Where things start going south for him is when he says that no prophet is accepted in his home town.

Then it gets worse. He tells them that despite there being many needy Jewish widows during the time of the prophet Elijah, some of whom wouldn't have survived the 3½ years the country went without rain, God sent Elijah to a Gentile widow to miraculously provide for her.

And then to drive the point home, Jesus talks about how in the time of Elisha – that despite their being many Jewish lepers at the time, God used Elisha to heal a Syrian general who had leprosy. To give you some idea of how offensive that would have been, the Jews would have considered such a man to be a terrorist.

Jesus was clearly talking outside the box that his hometown synagogue was in.

They were probably expecting him to say something about the singular importance Nazareth would have in the building of his kingdom, how he would always think of Nazareth as his ideal home and the place every town should aspire to. They probably were expecting him to say something about the profound spiritual impact this synagogue had had on him, especially the teachers who made him memorize his bible verses. They were probably expecting him to announce a privileged place for them all, once he had assumed his throne.

Instead he speaks with near reverence for a Gentile widow from Zarephath and a Syrian military commander from Damascus. People outside the box...

No wonder they were determined to kill him before he'd started.

We always feel threatened whenever God is discovered to be outside our circle – moving in the lives of people whose theology and lifestyle are 'outside the box'.

But I don't think Jesus said what he did for shock value. I really think he had something else in mind.

God is omniscient. He knows everything...He knows how fast light travels and how many blades of grass there are east of Manitoba. He even knows if and when the Leafs next win the Stanley Cup.

Those listening to Jesus preach in Nazareth would have known that God knows all things.

Probably some of them would have memorized those verses from Psalm 139:

O Lord, you have examined my heart and know everything about me. You know when I sit and when I rise .You know my thoughts even when I am far away. You see me when I travel and when I rest at home. You know everything I do. You know what I am going to say even before I say it Lord...

Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too great for me to understand.

Psalm 139:1-4,6

Those in the synagogue that day would have believed God knew their inner longings, their desire to be freed from their Roman oppressors, their lifelong desire for a Messiah to save them and establish justice and peace on earth.

But what they had never considered about God's omniscience which Jesus' words jarringly brought to their awareness was God's equally intimate knowledge of the outsider – an immigrant widow in Elijah's day and an enemy general in Elisha's day.

In Michael Moore's documentary 'Fahrenheit 9/11' there is this gut-wrenching scene of an Iraqi woman in anguish after she learns her nephew, a civilian, has been killed by a cruise missile which was intended to destroy a munitions factory but leveled a private residence instead. Later in the film, there is an equally heart-breaking scene involving an American mother who learns of her son being killed in combat there. Two women – one Muslim, one Christian – both in agony. God's omniscience means he knows the depth of each of their sorrows, he knows their anguish, He loves them both, each one He longs to embrace as their Comforter and Healer.

Looking again at what Jesus preached to his home church in Nazareth, it's as though he was telling them: 'If you are going to accept the Messiah for who he is, you have to get out from under the box which sees him as a hometown boy, who can't possibly love anyone as much as he loves you. You have to get out from under the box that says the Messiah is obliged to destroy your enemies rather than love them as much as he loves you'.

God's being omniscient means he knows both sides of every conflict. In every situation he knows right and wrong, he is without prejudice. He is indebted to no one. He can't be bought or induced into assuming our side no matter how right our theology, or how long we've known him.

God knows the immigrant as well as he knows the resident, He knows the terrorist as well as he knows the peace-maker. God knows what each of us are born with; He knows what has been brought on by our environment and upbringing. God also knows what is our own darn fault.

This synagogue isn't the only place where things went badly after Jesus had spoken there. The same held true in other synagogues where he taught – for example the synagogue in Capernaum as recorded in John's gospel chapter 6 or in the Galilean synagogue as recorded in the opening verses of Mark's gospel – chapter 3.

Contrast that with how well Jesus was received whenever he preached outside the synagogue. Mark 12:37 notes that the common people heard him gladly. John 7:46 records that after the Temple guards were sent out by the religious leaders to arrest Jesus while he was teaching on the streets of Jerusalem, their defense on returning empty-handed was: 'We have never heard anyone speak like this!'

Matthew 7:29 records that the thousands who heard Jesus give his sermon on the mount 'were amazed at his teaching, for he taught with authority, quite unlike the teachers of the law.'

90% of what we have recorded of Jesus' words, are words he spoke outside the synagogue, from a fishing boat, or from a hillside or at a wedding or in a friend's home with his closest followers.

Christ's challenge to us is no different than to those he grew up with. He loves those outside our box as much as he loves us in here.

As individuals, we have to get out from under the box of a 'me based' spirituality...this 'me and God' mindset that has very little to do with God and very much to do with me.

Inside the box of a 'me based' spirituality is this focus on what's good for me, something that doesn't rock my boat, a belief system which is safe, that coddles me, that emphasizes my right to be 'the best I can be' – as if God has nothing better to do than to tell me what a good boy I am.

God loves us for sure – but it is a love we experience as we share in his sufferings, it is a love that we discover in the hard things he has to tell us, it is a love that calls us to his cross...

But how? All of us suffer from this propensity 'to hear what we want to hear and disregard the rest!'

One thing we have to do is to stop trying to squeeze Jesus into our life story as though he is some tag-along for the life we've always wanted.

Instead we have to work our way into the pages of his story and find ourselves in the shoes of the rich young ruler, or the woman caught in adultery, or the moneychangers trying to make their religion profitable, or the Pharisees who had assumed their piety and devotion merited Platinum status in God's eyes. Get in their shoes and then listen what Jesus tells you. And see if you don't tremble.

We would do well to see him in ways we'd never considered before – that he was single, went home alone, slept alone and would have known the longing for intimacy all of us hunger for. We would do well to see ourselves aligned with the people who loved him, the people he touched, the people he'd call 'blessed', the people 'outside the box'.

Otherwise we don't hear him the way we should. We hear him as if we'd grown up with him, as though he is only there to meet our expectations, rather than transform us into people who speak and act as He does.

For weeks now I have been haunted by some words Jesus repeats 7 times in the opening chapters of The Revelation.

Anyone with ears to hear must listen to the Spirit and understand what he is saying to the churches.

Revelation 2:7, 11, 17, 28; 3:6, 13, 22 NLT

I have to confess in all honesty, that I rarely, if ever, take the time to listen to God to hear what he is saying to the churches. I typically listen for the issues that pertain to me or the people I know, and ignore anything else he might be saying concerning the people outside my own little world.

But when we listen to God to hear what he is saying to the churches – the whole paradigm shifts. We are no longer hearing to gain the upper hand spiritually – we are hearing because we are gripped with this expectancy that he is on the move somewhere – it may be our church, it may be another church, it may be on Wall Street or in the streets of Calcutta and we don't want to miss him.

If we listen, maybe we'll hear him speaking words of peace into the war zones of our world or words of restitution to this planet's most impoverished people.

Let's not miss the opportunity to do our part. For the animosity between various religious factions, for the growing gang warfare on Toronto streets, for the excessive consumerism which threatens the future livelihood of our children, God is calling us to listen and to act...

For the genuine expression we as his followers can give to his being Lord of all – God is calling us to listen and to act...

About a year ago I participated in a protest march that begun about a block north and east of where I work and ended about a block south and west of where I work. It was a little outside the box for me since typically tend to keep my anger against injustice in the closet...

The protest was to bring attention to the 40% drop in the 'real' purchasing power of Social Assistance payments since 1995 – making life harder for people with disabilities, Seniors and single moms on welfare.

It really was an incredible experience....one of those novel experiences where you feel this mystical link with strangers you'd otherwise never meet...Muslim women wearing hijab (i.e. veils) pushing their infants in strollers, disabled people in wheelchairs, social activists with bullhorns, priests, nuns, homeless people, Senior citizens, people with mental disabilities, children...the kind of people that one might imagine following Jesus when he rode into Jerusalem on a donkey...

I got into some pretty interesting conversations – one of the Muslim women told me she had come in support of her friend, even though she herself wasn't on welfare. She told me that she believed God wanted her to do that and I told her that was the reason I was there as well. Some were strident, some soft-spoken – but all because they had some feel for how hard life can be when you're poor. It had me secretly wishing that I could bring them all to church the following Sunday – but of course that wasn't possible.

Then it had me thinking that if I couldn't bring them to church to introduce them to Jesus, then I had to figure out how to introduce Jesus to where they are.

That truly is the challenge we are all facing isn't it? For most of us, 90% of the time we spend, we spend with people other than the people in here...people who are caught up in issues other than the ones we caught up in.

Some 'take homes' to help us get out from underneath the box...

- Love your enemies – i.e. the people you know who either hate you or malign you and pray for the enemies you don't know like the Taliban and dishonest corporate executives whose greed has robbed others of gainful employment.
- Take the time to listen to people with different opinions than yours – on subjects ranging from abortion to global warming, from multiculturalism to sexual orientation. Those outside the box must the genuine sense that you are listening to them not as though they are dead wrong, but people worthy of being heard, otherwise is no good reason for them to either hear or consider what you believe.
- Let no disagreement threaten your friendship. We live in a crazy age where friendship means your friends are those who agree with you. Better the friend who has the courage to disagree with you and still remain your friend. That kind of friend can save us from all sorts of trouble, regardless of whether they're inside or outside the box.
- It's time for us to consider our faith and spirituality with a 'we' perspective rather than a 'me' perspective. A 'me perspective' is the smallest box of all, too small for Jesus to work in. Jesus insisted he'd be there whenever 2 or more were gathered in his name. 'Me and Jesus' is scripturally speaking a figment of our imagination. We are members of his body...not an appendage on our own...
- Finally, as a body of believers we do better outside the box than inside the box – just as our physical bodies do better in the open air than cooped up inside. It's outside which tests the mettle of who we really are – whether we're imitating Jesus Christ or Donald Trump. As one dear friend puts it, our lifestyle is our evangelism, our message, the hard evidence of what we really believe...