

BELIEVING OUTSIDE THE BOX

Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. ²So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, ³saying, ‘Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?’ ⁴Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, ⁵‘I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. There was something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners; and it came close to me. ⁶As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. ⁷I also heard a voice saying to me, “Get up, Peter; kill and eat.” ⁸But I replied, “By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.” ⁹But a second time the voice answered from heaven, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.” ¹⁰This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. ¹¹At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. ¹²The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man’s house. ¹³He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, “Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; ¹⁴he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.” ¹⁵And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. ¹⁶And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, “John baptized with

*water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.”*¹⁷ *If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?’*¹⁸ *When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, ‘Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.’* (Acts 11:1-18, NRSV)

In her book *Working On God*, Winifred Gallagher describes a dinner party where she brought up the topic of God. The result was a discussion that lasted the rest of the evening. Parts of the talk included confessing the brokenness of their families, depression, addiction, and disappointment in their professional lives. They wished for something better than psychotherapy to give all the disparate details of their lives a coherent big picture. To a person they were super-consumers who were sick of materialism, super-achievers who were sick of ambitious workaholism, and rugged individualists who felt alienated.

Gallagher says, “Each person at the table spoke of something lacking in a life more privileged than peaceful, something that seemed to be...spiritual, if not religious” (Random House, 1999, p. xv). After having similar conversations Gallagher realized that those she talked with revised “every value they were reared on—intellectual, political, social, aesthetic, sexual, [even] culinary—except one [religion]. Since their childhood version of it, loaded with familial, developmental, and cultural baggage, had collided head-on with a college education, they had assumed that religion is for intellectual and emotional weaklings” (Ibid.). Gallagher asked, “What if the problem wasn’t religion, but a childish concept of it? What if religion could be about something else” (Ibid)?

Perhaps we've tried to keep God in a box with our narrow beliefs from bygone days. Or perhaps we hardly consider ourselves people of faith anymore because the foundation of faith that once held us up will no longer bear the weight of our doubts and questions. The good news is that our spirituality and theology were never meant to be static holdovers from 50 AD or 1950. While our faith is grounded in the rich soil of Christ, it grows in the sunshine and rain of present day. From its earliest days, the Christian church has wrestled with controversy about who is in and who is out, who is acceptable in God's eyes and who is unacceptable. But as today's scripture lesson shows, God cannot be boxed in because God doesn't want anyone left out.

In today's story Peter was in big trouble with some who felt he had crossed a sacred line and done the unthinkable. Bear in mind that the first Christians continued to practice their Jewish faith. Without question, Peter violated a longstanding religious law by entering a Gentile's house and sharing a meal. Worse still, Peter actually shared the story of Jesus with these non-Jews and they became believers. How could Peter of all people be a part of such heresy?

As the story goes, a Roman soldier named Cornelius and his family were Gentiles, but they believed in and prayed to God. Furthermore, they gave generously to the poor. In Acts 10 it tells us that one afternoon around three o'clock Cornelius had a vision of an angel from God telling him to send for a man named Simon Peter. The angel gave specific instructions of the town and the house where Peter could be found. Cornelius, who had 100 soldiers under his command, sent one of his soldiers and two of his servants to find Peter.

About noon the next day Peter, who was staying at a friend's house in a town called Joppa, went up on the roof to

pray. He saw a vision of a large sheet being lowered from heaven full of non-kosher food. Peter heard a voice telling him to prepare the food and eat. He replied, “By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.” A second time the voice from heaven spoke saying, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.” It happened three times and then the sheet, animals and all, went up again to heaven. Bewildered, Peter had no idea what the vision meant until suddenly three Gentiles showed up at the house.

Peter felt the Spirit tell him to go with them and not to treat them any differently just because they were Gentiles. They took him to Cornelius’ house. Peter broke a barrier by entering the house and eventually sharing a meal. The apostle listened as Cornelius told of his vision from God. When Peter opened his mouth to speak suddenly the Holy Spirit came upon the Gentiles just as it had on the disciples on the Day of Pentecost. Peter concluded, “If then God gave them the same gift [the Holy Spirit] that God gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?” In other words, “Who am I to argue with God?” With that, Peter’s former critics praised God and said, “Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.”

There’s a great line from a song on Paul Simon’s *Graceland* album that says, “Who am I to blow against the wind?” Peter must have felt the same way. Having had his finite mind expanded by God’s infinite wisdom, he wasn’t about to put up a fight. I imagine Peter’s eyes as big as saucers and his brow furrowed because something he had believed his whole life, something taught to him by his parents and his rabbis had just been overturned by God. Boom. Just like that. Sometimes insights come gradually over time with much deliberation. But at other times, the

enlightenment occurs suddenly, unexpectedly, like a bolt from the blue.

There was a time in my life when such bolts from the blue hit me left and right. As many of you know I grew up *very* Southern Baptist. I was born in a Baptist hospital, baptized in a Baptist church, attended a Baptist high school, participated in the Baptist Student Union in college, graduated from a Baptist seminary, got married in a Baptist church, worked at a Baptist college, and was ordained a Baptist minister. (Wait a second, what am I doing in this Congregational/UCC church anyway?)

Growing up I accepted everything I was taught about God and the Bible. I never knew there were other points of view for a long time. And then I became friends with a Methodist! Being closed minded at the time I thought that the Methodists had it all wrong because they baptized babies and the Presbyterians weren't any better. And the Roman Catholics, you don't even want to know how hot we thought the afterlife would be for them.

Growing up I never heard of women serving as deacons and never knew that there were churches with ordained women who served as ministers. The great debate in my home church was whether a divorced man could be a deacon. As I recall he ended up not serving. Don't get me wrong, ours was *not* a mean-spirited fundamentalist church. Rather ours was a traditional, meaning very conservative, church. Our greatest concern was the eternal salvation of our family, friends, neighbors, and everyone else in the world for that matter. So through our denomination we sent missionaries around the world to try and save as many lost souls as possible.

Unbeknownst to me, the Baptist seminary I chose to attend in Louisville had the reputation of being liberal. I'm

sure some people must have warned me but I didn't even understand the difference in those days. (For the record, the seminary has since been taken over by fundamentalists and purged of all things liberal or moderate including the accredited School of Social Work.) The bolts from the blue began from the first day of class when I started hearing things I'd never heard before—the creation of the world probably didn't take place in seven 24-hour days, Jesus treated women as equals, we had something to learn from Roman Catholics, and the Bible contained a few inconsistencies. At first I found these ideas threatening and remained skeptical. By the end of the semester I became a little more open to these new ideas, but also felt guilty about all of those lost souls who were going to hell because of my ineffective evangelism.

I thought I had found the answer I needed as I enrolled in a course on personal evangelism for the 3 week January term. All the guys in my dorm who had been at seminary longer talked me out of taking the course and I am eternally grateful they did. Instead they talked me into taking a course on comparative world religion taught by Dr. Jon Jonsson from South Africa. This course literally changed my life for two reasons. First, it helped me understand that God's truth can be found in many places including other religions. Second, in the course I met a beautiful Texan named Colleen Brown to whom I've been married almost 15 years.

Besides theology and biblical interpretation, during the spring semester I took a Christian ethics course that challenged my traditional Baptist views on a host of issues including capital punishment, homosexuality, economics, and war and peace. Upon graduation, I felt like Peter whose narrow views on Gentiles had been blown wide open by the all-inclusive Spirit of God.

Eventually I found my way to the UCC, a progressive denomination that's known for breaking down barriers and opening doors to everyone, absolutely everyone without exception. I also found my way to this church where people are open-minded and tolerant, a place that encourages thinking and even believing outside the box.

Winifred Gallagher writes, "Portraits of Jesus...are always more like paintings than photographs. Each image reflects the artist as well as the subject. Those I like best leave a lot of room for mystery" (Ibid. p. 291). And so, as we go through life, let us follow our God of mystery into or out of whatever boxes may come our way. And like Gallagher, let's keep our paintbrushes handy. AMEN.

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PASTORAL PRAYER

Loving God, whose word is a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path, fill us with your Holy Spirit that we might hear your word and follow. Open our minds to new truths that we might not be stuck in the past. Instead draw us into a hopeful future beyond the constrictions of prejudice. Lead us to love as you loved. Teach us kindness, not just to people who look like us or think like us, but to all people. Thus make us one.

And now to you, O God, belongs all glory, praise, and honor through Jesus Christ we pray. AMEN.