

Sunday May 25, 2025
Sixth Sunday of Easter

Meditation: “Outside the box”

At Christmas my grandson was still very much a baby, but when we visited earlier this month it was interesting to see how much he'd grown and learned. He is no longer the baby he was at Christmas. Now he is sitting up on his own, moving around on his own, verbalizing, trying to stand up and walk. He is transitioning from a baby into a little boy, and he looked more like a little boy than a baby in the photos we just received.

All of this has me watching what kind of a parent my daughter is becoming. She is significantly older now than I was when she was nine months old. I felt I didn't have much in the way of a fatherly role model, yet there were things that I was sure I was NOT going to do. One of the things I did want to do was to teach her about different cultures and foods and belief systems. I didn't want her to see the difference first, but the sameness between people regardless of their skin colour, their cultural origins, their belief systems, and so on.

One particular time I remember is taking Christina out to dinner with a coop student I had worked with. He was from Ethiopia, and so we found ourselves at an Ethiopian restaurant. He shared with us that Ethiopia is believed to be the place where people first started drinking coffee. He also shared with us beliefs about sharing a meal. You see, when we arrived at the restaurant, there was no cutlery. The meal was ordered and a single large round tray was brought to the table. In the centre of the tray was bread, which resembled tortillas. Great big round, flat, supple loaves of bread. Around the perimeter of the tray was a variety of different dishes – seasoned vegetables, curried goat, a bean paste, and so on. We were to tear off a piece of bread and use it to scoop up some of the vegetable or goat or bean paste or.... And then pop it into our mouths and eat it. We were taught that in Ethiopia people who break bread together will never be enemies, and the way to heal a rift between

people is to get them to share a meal – to break bread – together. Sort of sounds like communion, doesn't it?

What I was trying to do with Christina was to get her to look and listen and think outside of the boxes that some in our society work so hard to maintain.

Paul was not travelling for pleasure or profit. Paul was travelling as an ambassador of God. Paul was not sticking to his own kind, in his own place. Paul was reaching out beyond those limitations. Paul was reaching out of Asia and into Europe. Paul was reaching out to women – something that was culturally inappropriate for him. Paul was reaching out beyond the poor and marginalized to whom Jesus ministered. Paul reached out to Lydia, a seller of purple, a European woman of wealth and status. Paul was working outside of the boxes that both Judaism and the followers of The Way prescribed. One thing, because she was a woman, the followers of The Way could not complain about her not being circumcised.

The thing about boxes is that, while they can supply us with a sense of security and safety and group identity, they can also be used to control us and to separate some from others. To truly be free and to enjoy the diversity of life we have to move outside the boxes that we have created.

I think I was successful in teaching Christina to be curious about what lay beyond the boxes of our culture, class, and nationality. She has travelled to Ireland, France, Spain and India. She has travelled there because she has friends who are from those places. She has learned about their cultures, their food, their beliefs. One of her friends is from a family that is so wealthy that I can't even imagine what their life is like, and they live alongside people who are so poor that I can't even imagine what their life is like. Christina found it mind boggling to see such wealth and such poverty living literally a few feet apart.

What all of this has done is to enrich Christina's life in ways that I will never know.

For the early church, Paul's meeting with Lydia was crucial. Yes, the apostles ministered to the vulnerable and marginalized wherever they went, as Jesus had done before them. AND, they needed financial support to do that work. Lydia was crucial to the early church not only as a believer, but because she had the financial means to help support the work of the apostles. Remember Paul's analogy of the church being like a body where each part has it's role to play? The church needs knees to kneel on, a brain to direct the various parts, a heart to pump blood to the entire body, and all of the other parts each doing their thing.

The apostles thought outside the box of their own kind, the Jewish people, and place, Israel. They went out and grew the church across Asia, into Europe, into Africa, and into India. They went out to the vulnerable and marginalized, and to the rich and powerful – people like Emperor Constantine's mother. Thinking outside of the boxes they knew wound up enriching the church in many different ways. It made the church a vibrant organism, with many different understandings about God and God's mission and the meaning of our lives.

Sometimes I look around the church, and by church I mean the wider body of Christ here, sometimes I look around the church and I see the stagnation and decline that has arisen as a result of building boxes that have offered security and certainty, and have also controlled and limited thinking, acceptance of difference, and diversity. Yes, the church is in decline, in some ways. Yes, there are dead, diseased and dying branches that need to be pruned from the vine and burned in the fire. AND, there is also new growth in areas that we never imagined, in areas beyond the boxes of our own expectations. There are new United Church congregations forming, even now. Congregations of

followers of The Way who come from Ghana, Korea, and the Philippines. Congregations of followers of The Way who do not identify as male or female or as heterosexual. Congregations of people who are below the age of 70, who have many children, who are full of chaos and diversity and life. And all of these congregations add diversity and enrich the church in ways that we may never fully understand or appreciate.

Boxes are great at doing some things, but life is best and most fully lived outside the box, as Paul came to realize in his travels that included places like the riverbank outside of Philippi.