

“God Out of the Box”
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Bruton Parish Church – Williamsburg, VA
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Exodus, 1 Corinthians, John 2:13-22

Writer Anne Lamott quotes a priest friend of hers saying, “You can safely assume you’re creating God in your own image when God hates all the same people you do.”¹ The same is true when we find that God thinks like we do, acts like we do, votes like we do, or any other time we put God into a box that is shaped like our own selves.

My seminary classmates teased me because of how often I would say, “You can’t put God in a box.” It was usually when one of them had said something like, “God can’t do that.” Especially in our Old Testament class, someone would frequently argue that God could only act in particular ways and still be God. That logic never made sense to me. God is God. God can do anything God wants to and certainly isn’t accountable to some seminary students as to why. The more they suggested that God couldn’t do things, the more I would say, “You can’t put God in a box.”

We frequently don’t understand why God does the things that God does. We’re not supposed to. If we did, that would make God pretty small and the box we put God in pretty small too. But the fact is, God doesn’t stay in any sized box we try to put God in.

¹ Lamott, Anne, *Bird by Bird* p. 22.

Today's Gospel shows us that the people in 1st century Palestine couldn't put God in a box either. Not one shaped like a temple. Not one shaped like a system of sacrifice. Not one shaped like what they had been taught for a very long time. This week we've jumped to the Gospel of John. In the other gospels, the story of the cleansing of the temple takes place toward the end, when Jesus has entered Jerusalem and is about to be crucified. The writer of John, however, places this story at the beginning of the Gospel and the beginning of Jesus' ministry.

It's right after his first sign at the wedding at Cana when he changes water into wine, that Jesus goes up to Jerusalem for Passover and enters the temple in this dramatic way, using a whip to drive cattle, sheep, and moneychangers out of the temple. What on earth was he doing? And who on earth gave him the authority to do it? That's what the religious authorities want to know. Who the heck is he?

Who is he? God incarnate. God – not in a box.

In each of the other gospels, Jesus says, "My house shall be called a house of prayer, but you are making it a den of robbers." But in John he says, "Stop making my Father's house a marketplace." The thing is, there needed to be a marketplace in which to purchase the animals for sacrifices required by Jewish law and in which to change the Imperial money with Caesar's head on it to the Temple currency. It really was a convenience and a service to the people who were coming to make their sacrifices, though certainly there was probably some price gouging going on as well. In this version, Jesus doesn't seem to be angry that the moneychangers are taking advantage of people; he seems to be upset that there are moneychangers and sacrificial animals for sale in the Temple at all. And then he calls the Temple his Father's house!

No wonder the religious authorities were demanding, “Who does he think he is?” Jesus seems to be throwing out the whole sacrificial system that the Jewish people had followed since Moses. It’s as if he’s telling them, “We’re not going to do it this way anymore. We’re going to do it a new way.” And like those of us who think that the way we’ve been doing it is just fine and those of us who have been *benefitting* from the way the system works, the temple authorities question him. After all, he’s defying centuries of Mosaic law, and he has no authority that they can see. “Show us a sign,” they say. “Okay, here’s your sign. Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” In typical Jesus form, he gives a cryptic answer. They take him literally. This guy thinks he can rebuild something in three days that has taken over 46 years to construct. We can understand where they’re coming from, right? They simply can’t understand what he’s saying. It doesn’t make sense to them.

He's talking about the temple of his body. He knows that he will be crucified and then rise again. He knows that he has come to bring a new covenant, one not based on the ritual sacrifice of animals in the temple for the forgiveness of sins, but one based his own giving of himself in love. Making sacrifices in the temple is no longer how the people will relate to God. God’s home is no longer in a single building. By choosing to take on human flesh, God dwells among us, Emmanuel – God with us. Not God in a temple, God in a sacrifice, God in a box. God with us. The Word became flesh and lived among us.

The Word became flesh and *lives* among us. Still.

And yet, it’s still tempting to try to put God in a box.

Sometimes we put God in the box called church, thinking that God resides here in this building where we come on Sunday mornings. We can forget that the purpose of coming to church and encountering God *here* is to equip and encourage and renew us to see God out *there* and to share the good news of God-with-us wherever we are.

Like the religious authorities of Jesus' time, we can also attempt to house God in a box of rules. God was the one who made the rules. God gets to decide how they need to be followed. Richard Rohr says, "Every time God forgives us, God is saying that God's own rules do not matter as much as the relationship that God wants to create with us."² It's not that the rules don't matter at all; it's that God wants to be in relationship with us more than anything. God wants us to live in the perfect freedom of God's love.

And that's another box we put God in – the one that thinks love means being polite or nice. We think that the God of love approves of everything we do and will only act in certain socially acceptable ways. In that box there's no room for the whip-wielding, table-turning, institution-challenging Jesus we read about in today's gospel. There's no room for the Jesus who challenged privilege and power and the status quo. There's no room for the God who brought the Hebrew people out of slavery. There's no room for God to die and rise again, breaking even the power of death to enslave us.

² Richard Rohr, *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2011), 66-67.

The good news for us today is that God won't stay in any of our boxes. We are made in God's image, not the other way around. No matter how many times we try to contain God to something explainable, understandable, and tame, God will continue to break out of our restrictive images and flood us with unimaginable love. Love that can do the most unexpected things.

Sometimes it just looks different from what we imagined. Sometimes it looks like turning over the tables of an old system or dying to an old self so that the new one can be born. Thanks be to God for that! If God stayed in our boxes, we would only have death to look forward to, and instead we have the gift of resurrection.