

“God Is Not Stuck in a Box”
Johan 4; Acts 17:22-28;
John 12:20-26

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First Presbyterian Church of Moscow

*Come gather 'round, people, wherever you roam
And admit that the waters around you have grown
And accept it that soon you'll be drenched to the bone.
If your time to you is worth savin'
Then you better start swimmin' or you'll sink like a stone
For the times, they are a-changin'.*

I figured some of you would know that particular start to a song. I decided not to recite it all. Bob Dylan released that song in 1964. He recognized that times were changing then. It doesn't feel to me like they have stopped a-changin'.

I've been thinking about the kinds of things that have changed in our lives. In 1900, 60% of the population lived in rural areas. In 1990, 75% of the population lived in an urban setting. That's a huge change right there. When I was born way back in the '50s, there were no cell phones, no personal computers, and TV was barely around. The times have kept changing.

We know as we look at the world we live in, things keep changing. We know the make-up of the population of the United States is changing. We recognize that as more people have come, there have been a wider variety of world religions that are present in our daily lives. According to the Pew Research Group, one of the biggest changes in religious affiliation has been the increase in the group that is unaffiliated with any religion. The times have changed. As we think about how much change there has been, it makes me wonder how the reformed tradition deals with all this changing.

One thing we have noticed about the reformed approach to faith is that it expects itself to always be changing. Reformed; always reforming. Always looking at the context that we're in. We have all these confessions that tell us about how people have reacted to different historical times and places. But in our time and place, what are the reactions that we have? In the book by Shirley Guthrie, “Always Reforming,” he suggests that there are 4 ways that we can react. The first one is to be exclusivist. We can say Jesus Christ is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, and the way I understand that is the right way. We hunker down around that right way. We have the wisdom and the understanding.

The second way he says we can react is to say we have a pretty good understanding of the truth and we're going to compare it to everybody else's truth and make sure we have that understanding. Our truth among all the rest of those truths, you might say.

The third way, he suggests, is that we can become inclusivist. That is, we know the grace and love of Jesus Christ. We understand it, and we're going to look for our

understanding in the world and see where that understanding is borne out, because we know it will be.

He waffles a little bit on this last one. He says the fourth way is to recognize that the first three ways are all about how we understand things. As long as we make it about our own understanding of how the world works and how our faith works, we think we have that understanding that nobody else can know as well as we do. It's our understanding. It's the right understanding.

When we say that Jesus Christ is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, it is not our understanding of Jesus Christ that is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, it is Jesus Christ who is those things. So he invites us to look at ourselves in that light, in thinking about where Jesus Christ might be.

That takes me back to Jonah. Jonah thought God was with his people and should only be with his people. In fact, when God suggested he go to Nineveh, he was afraid that God might not be only with his own people. He wanted to make sure God stayed just with his own people, so he ran away. The whole book of Johan is about God convincing Jonah, through an interesting journey. Jonah eventually goes to Nineveh and sees that God cares about this nation that is very different, other. God is out there. God sees. God knows what's going on in Nineveh. That's interesting.

When Paul goes to Athens and notices that they have a shrine to the unknown god, he said to them, "God is here ahead of me. God is present, and you even recognize that. You just don't understand God fully. Let me help you with that."

Then we have this interesting story about the Greeks wanting to come to know Jesus. It doesn't seem like Jesus responds at all to the question. Is Jesus going to hear the Greeks? He simply says, "The time has come." It suggests that because the Greeks are present, there's something about to happen. He recognizes the moment has come for what he is going to do. He says first he will have to die, but then life is going to blossom. Now is the moment for the seed to be planted and the growth to happen.

What I want to suggest is that we have a tendency to think that God is right here, and only right here. We tend to put God in a box. Can we really do that? We can put each other in boxes. We can put God in a box, but is God there and only there? It's what Jonah wanted to do to God—he wanted to put God in a box, keep Him for his own people. Paul was all about going out and saying, "God is not in a box. He's for everyone." When the Greeks came, Jesus seemed to recognize that what he was doing was about the blossoming.



So what does this suggest about what we, in our theological tradition, think about God? One thing I think it says is that just because we are in this particular theological tradition doesn't mean we have the full understanding of God. God is not just in our box. But it

also suggests that as we go out of our box, we might expect a couple of things. One of the things that is easy to do is to take my box with me and ask other people to get in it too. It feels to me like when we're following Jesus he is out ahead of us and it's not really like he's in a box. He tells us the Spirit blows wherever it will. Perhaps there's another approach. Perhaps when we encounter the other, which in these times which are a-changin' we do, we might be able to learn something. What I would suggest we first might learn is whether we're representing Jesus well. What is everybody else's experience of us?

I had an experience in college where I had a young man come to my dorm room and decide that he was going to bring me to Jesus. He never asked me a question. I grew up in a Christian home, I had been Christian as long as I knew, I had a fairly good understanding of scripture, but he didn't ask me a question. He wanted me to come to his understanding. I don't know if he really wanted me to come to Christ.

I don't know if I can bring Christ to somebody else if I can't represent Christ. And how do I know that? Sometimes I can think I'm doing a pretty good job, and then I encounter somebody who lets me know, sometimes in subtle ways and sometimes in pretty straightforward ways, that I'm not. Really, that's incredibly valuable. I need to know, because what I want to do is represent Christ, to bring the love and grace of God with me into the world.

But it's not just about me bringing it with me. Remember last week I talked about God being out in front of us and inviting us forward. The other thing I think we can do as we go out is to look and see where God is ahead of us. Where might I find Christ at work? Where is the love of God and neighbor already present? Where is healing and liberation going on? Where are the fruits of the Spirit evident? Where can I begin to see where God is at work?

So maybe I can find out something about myself. Maybe I can go out and see where God might be at work. And what's the third thing I can do? Maybe I can try to join in what God is doing, be part of what God does to encourage the love and grace of Jesus Christ among us.

Our congregation is part of the Presbytery's Future Church Project, and I think that's exactly what it's asking us to do. When we go forward in our lives can we see where God is, how God's ahead of us, how God is with us, and what we can do? It feels so easy to me to go into my week and look at the things that are wrong, to notice where God's not or at least what doesn't fit my conception of what God should be doing.

We have to recognize that God is beyond us. What I invite us to do as we go forward in our lives is to think about that. As you go through this week, notice when you see something that exhibits the love of God or neighbor. Notice where the fruits of the Spirit are evident. Notice where healing is happening. Perhaps ask, "How can I encourage this? How can I be part of what God is doing here? How can I open my heart, my life,

my mind to what God might be doing among us and beyond us?" I would love to hear wonderful stories about where you see God at work throughout your week.

God is a God that is much larger than any one of us, any one tradition, any one church. God is the God of creation, the God of all that is, and he's our God. He loves each of us and invites us to go with him into life.



Let's pray:

Lord, you so loved the world that you gave us your only Son that we might go into life, that we might recognize the grace you bring to us through him, the grace you take forward into the world, and how you invite us into all that is. Help us see you at work. Help us recognize how we can become part of what you are doing. Help us learn how well we are representing you, where we might see you, and how we might join in. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.