

“The Great Assumption”
Acts 1:1-11
Series: Living Outside the Box
Week 1. Living Outside Assumptions
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You should never assume anything.

Last December I was scheduled to perform a wedding ceremony for the daughter of Woodside members. I knew the mother of the bride to be an excellent planner. I was certain every candle, bow and bouquet would be perfectly in place. It even snowed at exactly 3 p.m. as the bridal procession began – right on cue. So when the mother of the bride wanted to put together the wedding bulletin I assumed she would do her usual superb performance. I was wrong. She made a tragic mistake which, thankfully, I caught before it went to the printers. One of the Scripture readings she selected was I John 4:16 and following which reads:

And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him.

Now that is a lovely passage for a wedding. Unfortunately that’s not what was in the bulletin. She just made one tiny typo. One little letter. Instead of I John 4:16 she put in John 4:16 and following which reads,

Jesus said to her, “You are right when you say you have no husband. The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband.

That’s not a wedding. That’s the Jerry Springer show.

Sometimes assumptions make us do something we regret. As a young executive was leaving the office at 6 p.m., he saw the CEO standing in front of a shredder with a piece of paper in his hand. “Listen,” said the CEO, “this is a very sensitive and confidential document. My administrator has left. Can you make this thing work?” “Certainly,” said the young executive. He turned the machine on, inserted the paper, and pressed the start button. “Excellent, excellent!” said the CEO as his paper disappeared inside the machine. “I just need one copy.”

And then there are the assumptions which get us into deep trouble. A fire blazed across the California Mountains. Hoping to cover the story, a CNN News photographer called the local airport to charter a flight. He was told a twin-engine plane would be waiting for him. Arriving at the airfield, he spotted a plane warming up outside a hanger. He jumped in, slammed the door shut, and shouted, 'Let's go'. The pilot taxied out, swung the plane into the wind and took off. Once in the air, the photographer instructed the pilot, 'Fly over the valley and make low passes so I can take pictures of the fires on the hillsides.' 'Why?' asked the pilot. 'Because I'm a photographer for CNN,' he responded,

'and I need to get some close up shots.' The pilot stammered, 'So, what you're telling me, is . . . You're NOT my flight instructor?'

Assumptions are dangerous. They fracture marriages, divide families, create hostile schools and workplaces, split churches. Pride is an assumption. So is prejudice. Assumptions give birth to fatalism, fanaticism and fear. Sisters and brothers, we are afflicted with assumptions. We are prisoners of our thinking. So often we have lost the battle even before it begins. When life gets stressful, when the pressure builds, we start to play the blame game. "It's the economy you know." "It's the government's fault." "It's the media." "It's the way my parents raised me." "My spouse just doesn't understand me." "I was given a raw deal." "It feels like everyone is against me." Assumptions make us look outside for someone or something to blame, where we should really look is within.

Assumptions are only one of the walls that keep us inside the box. Today we begin a new series: Living Outside the Box. When people today talk of thinking outside the box they mean approaching a problem from a fresh perspective or a new angle. God, however, did intend for us to just think outside the box. He wants us to live out there. He intended for us to live free from all the walls which keep us from growing, keep us from becoming the people He created us to be, keep us from being with Him. For the next eight weeks we will discover how to open and live outside one box after another. The explosive book of Acts will be our guidebook and map. As we watch the Holy Spirit break the Apostles out of their boxes, we'll learn how the Spirit can do the same for us.

Even the disciples were prisoners of assumptions. In fact, they were afflicted with the Great Assumption. Before the Ascension there was the Assumption. It shows up in the first chapter of the book of Acts. Forty days after the Resurrection the disciples ask Jesus a question.

So when they met together, they asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6).

What a dumb question. The disciples followed Jesus for three years. They witnessed His crucifixion and resurrection. For forty days they heard His teaching. Yet after spending all that time with Him they still completely misunderstood Jesus' mission. They expected Jesus to be a military Messiah who came to make Israel a mighty empire. They dreamed of sitting on thrones in Jerusalem next to Jesus while all the nations crawled on their knees to Him. It was a selfish and self-centered question. You can't blame them. Centuries of tradition trained them to think that way. God, however, is really not interested in real estate. After all He already owns it all. God does not want us to sit back and wait for everyone to come to us. That is the Great Assumption.

It still imprisons the Church today. Win Arn, a church consultant, surveyed a thousand churches with this question, "Why does the church exist?" 89% of church members replied, "The church's purpose is to take care of my family's needs and my needs." Only 11% said the purpose of the church is "to win the world for Jesus Christ." This may come as a shock but the church does not exist to cater to you and me.

In response to the Great Assumption, the next verse gives Jesus' plan. In fact, these are Jesus' last words to the His disciples before His ascension. You can tell a lot about a person from their last words. Just before he died, circus showman PT Barnum's last word were, "How were the receipts today at Madison Square Garden?" Poet Dylan Thomas' last words were "I've had eighteen straight whiskies; I think that's a record..." And playwright Oscar Wilde said, "Either that wallpaper goes, or I do." Jesus' last words were,

It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. (Acts 1:7-8).

Jesus smashed the Great Assumption with the Great Commission. The disciples asked, "When will the world come to us?" Jesus replied, "I'm sending you out to the whole world." As usual, God's purpose is 180 degrees different for ours. God wanted them to live outside the box.

Scholars point out that the rest of the book of Acts is an unfolding of this key verse. Like a rock thrown into a pool, the Holy Spirit moves the disciples outwards in ever expanding rings from Jerusalem to Judea, Samaria and all the way to Rome. For the first three hundred years the Church spread like wildfire. The Church was more a mission than an institution, more a movement than an establishment. But once we built buildings we fell back into the Great Assumption. We waited for everyone to come to us. Now hear me friends. Church buildings are not the problem. We are not imprisoned by our sanctuaries but by our assumptions. The Good News is we possess within ourselves the ability to break free. But first we must break some assumptions. Let me mention three.

Assumption 1: "I Can't Do It." When it comes to breaking out of any box – a box of depression, a box of addiction, a box of frustration, a box of anger, a box of failure – you may have hit the lid so many times you assume: I can't do it. It can't be done. I'm stuck in this box forever. We assume our power is our only resource. We are convinced we are all on our own, that God is not going to intervene. Presbyterians say it all depends on God but we act like it all depends on us. And we often don't expect anything supernatural to happen. I remember a story about a woman who came into a Presbyterian worship service and during the pastor's sermon shouted, "Hallelujah!" Some heads turned. She did it again. "Hallelujah!" A few feathers were ruffled. After the third "Hallelujah!" the head usher approached her and said, "Ma'am, you mustn't do that here." The woman replied, "But I've got the Spirit!" The usher replied, "Well you didn't get it here."

The truth is we don't get the Spirit. The Spirit gets us.

(Jesus) ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. "...you will be baptized with Holy Spirit not many days from now....You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you... (Acts 1:4-5, 8).

In Greek the word *baptize* means to plunge, sink, drench, soak and overwhelm. We don't just spritz ourselves with Spirit. It takes us over and it takes us out into the world. When you say, "I can't do it" you are doubting the Spirit. God's plans are always bigger than ours. Paul once said that

The power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine (Ephesians 3:20).

I'd be happy if God would do what I ask or imagine. But Paul says the power that created the cosmos wants to do superabundantly more than we can ask or imagine. One time I was advised to put a zero behind whatever goal I thought God was giving us. If we wanted to start five small groups – put a zero behind it and plan for 50. When we did that five years ago we didn't get 50. But today, when you count all the Growth Groups for adults and youth we have over 50. That has to be a God-thing because we could not accomplish that on our own power.

Don't box yourself in with the assumption you can't do it. If you are following God's will He will provide all the power you need. It's not God's will for you to be boxed in by denial, defeat, depression or destructive habits. His will for you is a life of love, joy, freedom, peace and grace. And He will provide the power of the Spirit to help you do what you can't do on your own: live outside the box.

Assumption 2: "I Can't Change." Some say, "I've tried to change and I keep making the same mistakes." Others complain, "I don't want to change. I'm comfortable the way things are." You've heard the oft repeated story, "How many Presbyterians does it take to change a light bulb?" Answer: "Change? I don't want to change. My grandmother gave that light bulb." But life is constantly changing. Do you know that General Electric just shut down their last plant that made incandescent light bulbs? Whether we like it or not the world is changing and it's getting faster all the time.

The book of Acts is a book of change. At the beginning, the followers of Jesus worshiped in the Temple, followed the Law, ate kosher food and didn't want anything to do with the Gentiles. For thousands of years they observed all these traditions and more. By the end of the book all that changed. The Spirit did all that. As you read Acts, notice how the apostles are always running to keep up with the Spirit. From Pentecost onward the Spirit keeps leap frogging over them. Just when they think they have a good thing going in Judea, the Spirit shows up in Samaria, then Ethiopia, Damascus, Caesarea, Antioch, Philippi, Corinth and on to Rome. If we want to see the Spirit at work we have to get out of this building. I once heard a preacher say, "Jesus says, 'Go and make disciples' and 'Lo, I am with you always.' But remember, there's no Lo without Go."

Your life will never stand still. The only time your life stops changing is when it stops. Resisting change is like trying to stop the Delaware from flowing. Thankfully, the Holy Spirit is the River of Life. The Spirit will help you to navigate the changes in your life, so get out of the box and get in the flow.

Assumption 3: “I Can’t Make a Difference” After Jesus gave them a mission to be His witnesses to the ends of the earth, He led them out of Jerusalem to the top of the Mount of Olives.

After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. “Men of Galilee,” they said, “why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.” (Acts 1:9-11)

I imagine after the disciples watched Jesus ascend into heaven they turned to each other and said, “Great. Now what do we do?” Jesus was gone. How could eleven lower to middle class men with almost no formal education change the world? What difference could they make? Nothing...on their own. But through the power of the Holy Spirit those eleven men standing on that hilltop changed the world. By the end of the book of Acts the Gospel had gone from that little hilltop right into the heart of the most powerful empire of that day in Rome. And there was no stopping it.

Last week at Presbytery we closed another congregation. Some say the day of the Church is over, that Christianity is on the way out and that church buildings will be closed or turned into bars, dance clubs or homes. I say the Church is not dying. The Church is a sleeping giant. God is still changing the world, God is still making a difference if believers are willing to get out of the box of the church building and join Him in the world. Rick Warren once said you don’t measure the effectiveness of a church by its seating capacity but by its sending capacity. Our goal is not to hide our faith in this box but to launch out, live outside the box and bless the world in the name of Jesus Christ.

What difference can a handful of people make? A handful of you started mission trips to the Bahamas, the Dominican Republic and to Haiti. A handful of you partnered with other churches and welcomed the homeless into the church buildings on bitter cold nights. A handful of you decided to partner with other churches who were offering dinners to the homeless. A handful of you partnered with other churches to lead worship services in prison. A handful of you are helping to build homes, working in soup kitchens, helping single moms recover from divorce, assisting the unemployed to find work. In all of that you are sharing the love and Good News of Jesus Christ. Last Easter this congregation raised \$40,000 – half went to the victims of the earthquake in Haiti. The other went to the local Advocates for the Homeless and those in Need and with that money they just bought a bus they desperately needed. This morning it’s parked outside in our lot. What difference can a handful make? In God’s power they can change the world.

Look at the list of projects in your bulletin. On Sunday, November 7th we will go out in handfuls and make a difference for the glory of Jesus Christ. These are going to fill up very fast. Sign up today or this week through your Growth Group. Don’t let assumptions keep you boxed in. Don’t say, “I can’t do it, I can’t change, I can’t make a

difference.” Be the change you want to see in others. Make a difference. By the power of the Holy Spirit just do it!

Tom Harsha, a member of Woodside, used to think a missionary was someone you give money to, someone who goes overseas and you only hear what they are doing occasionally from your pastor. Then Tom went on a mission trip to the Dominican Republic and everything changed. He became a missionary. Now he has been on 5 trips to the D.R. and to Haiti. He says he works harder on those trips than he does any other time of the year because he feels the power of the Spirit working in him and through the team he works with. But when Tom came home he discovered something new. He found he was still a missionary to the homeless and needy in Trenton, Lower Bucks and Philadelphia. He learned he is a missionary all the time. He’s a follower of Jesus outside the box of this building. And if you ask him why he brings the love of Jesus to all these people, I bet Tom will say, “That’s the wrong assumption. I don’t bring Jesus to them. That’s where I find Jesus.”