

“Be Bold, Don’t Fold”

Acts 4:1-31

Series: Living Outside the Box Week 3. Living Outside Fears

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It looked like fun. I like a challenge. I love mazes. But this was no ordinary maze carved in a cornfield. It was a maze in a box - a big cube made of wood. Once you enter the door, the inside is separated into rooms with odd shaped openings. The purpose of the box is to train cave explorers how to squeeze through small passageways and twist around stalactites and stalagmites. At first it was easy to move from room to room. Yet the holes started getting smaller and the twists were turning me into a pretzel. I soon discovered I was blessed and cursed. The blessing is I am small and pretty flexible so I was able to get to the center of the box without much trouble. And the curse? When I reached the center of the box I remembered I’m claustrophobic. And the person in front of me was stuck. He couldn’t move forward and I couldn’t turn around to go back.

“Lisa, get me out of here.” Outside I could hear my wife ... laughing. “Don’t you want to figure out the maze?” “No, I want out of the maze!” Did she run for help? Not right away. First she had to take a picture of the pastor in a box. The air grew thin, the walls were closing in. I was afraid they were going to turn me into a permanent exhibit. “Oh Mommy looked it’s a Caged Clergy.” “Stay away honey, he’s Presbyterian. They bite.” Finally, the man with the key arrived. “Don’t you want to figure out the maze?” he asked. “No!” “Do you want me to talk you through it?” What’s wrong with these people? “Just get me out of here!” With a turn of the key he unlocked a side panel and let us out. I felt like one of those miners rescued in Chile.

My deliverer was named Bruce. I wanted to get down on my knees and call him Bruce Almighty. “Thank you for letting me,” I said. “Don’t mention it,” He said. “I have to do this several times a day.” “I don’t think I’ll ever go in a cave again,” I said. Bruce replied, “Well like it says in the Bible, we all have different gifts. Do you ever read the Bible?” “A few times. I’m a minister.” “Sorry, pastor,” he apologized. “You may be afraid of tight spaces, but I could never get up and give a sermon. I’d be terrified.” “Well Bruce, you may never have to get up and give a sermon,” I said. “But in gratitude for saving me, I promise I’ll turn you into a sermon illustration.”

What fear keeps you boxed in? Some people would rather die than give a speech. One of my children’s teachers preferred a painful root canal rather than talk at back-to-school night. He told us this at back-to-school night. Some fear the dentist. Some, like me, are afraid of getting stuck in tight spaces. Others hate heights, crowds or even leaving their house. You can be afraid about your future, your finances or your family. Fears start when we are very young. Many children are afraid of the dark or thunderstorms or both. During a violent thunderstorm a mother was tucking her small boy into bed. She was about to turn off the light when he asked, in a trembling voice, "Mommy, will you sleep with me tonight?" The mother smiled and gave him a reassuring hug. "I can't, Dear," she

said, "I have to sleep with your daddy." After a little silence his shaky voice said: "Daddy's a big sissy."

You don't need to be a psychologist to know that your fears are directly connected to your insecurities. It makes sense. Whenever you are not secure, whenever you do not feel safe, whenever you are threatened, at risk or in danger, fear floods your soul. We all face different fears. What frightens you may not bother me and vice versa. Yet we all have fears and that's not always bad. Sometimes fear protects us from truly dangerous situations. If you've had a heart attack you really should stay away from a double cheeseburger, triple thick milkshake and a bottomless bucket of fries. Yet many of our fears hinder us more than help. That led someone to say F.E.A.R. stands for False Evidence Appearing Real. Many of our fears are really figments of our imagination. And they are keeping us boxed in.

During this series, Living Outside the Box, we are examining several barriers which block us from being all God created us to be. They are lids which limit our spiritual growth. We keep bumping up against assumptions, boundaries and fears. Of course it is easier and more comfortable to stay inside the box. Why not just keep the lid on? Because whatever we let stand between us and God becomes our god. I'm sure we all know people who let fear rule their lives. What's more, if we stay inside the box we'll miss what's waiting for us on the outside: growth and a deeper relationship with God. Here's some Good News: the Holy Spirit is waiting to help us break through the barrier and live outside the box. We need to be courageous, to be bold and not fold. You ask, "How can I be courageous when I feel afraid?" Courage is not the absence of fear. Courage is only needed in the face of fear. When it comes to facing your fears, pray to the Holy Spirit and ask Him to make you bold and not fold.

Today, I want to look at the greatest fear which keeps most Christians in the box: sharing the Good News about Jesus. Time and again, this is the fear which causes the most Christians to fold. Yet when you break through this box, it also ignites the greatest spiritual growth. Only when you stop hiding your faith in the box can you start living outside the box. The fear of sharing your faith is supported by a number of myths. If we bust through these myths, we'll break through our fears.

Myth #1 – Only Pastors Are Called to Do God's Work. Peter and John were fishermen when Jesus called them to follow Him. The disciples were not seminary trained, not highly educated, they were not even courageous or bold. Remember, when Jesus was arrested, all of them folded. Even Peter denied Jesus three times when he was challenged by no more than a servant girl. Yet just a few weeks later, in Acts chapter 3 we see Peter and John talking about Jesus to a huge crowd in the Temple and in Acts 4 they stand up and tell the Good News to the high priest and the entire supreme Jewish council. These are the same authorities who judged and pronounced the death sentence on Jesus, the same leaders Peter and John were afraid to face after the Last Supper. This time, however, they were bold.

When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus. (Acts 4:13).

Well of course, you say, they were not afraid to share the Good News because they spent three years with Jesus. If that's the case, why did they run away before? The real difference is the Holy Spirit. Acts 4:8 says, "Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them..." It was the Holy Spirit that made them bold, the same Spirit that is calling you, the same Spirit that is in you.

Bob Broeze is not a pastor. Yet he prayed and the Holy Spirit called Bob and his wife Sue to go to Haiti.

Like many of you when I heard about the earthquake back in January in Haiti I knew I had to do something. It would have been very easy to write a check or maybe two checks and forget about it but I just knew I had to do more.

I frequently pray a prayer to God and ask Him for help to expand my territory, to help me think of new ways that I can do His work. One day after I had prayed that prayer I received an email from the head of the Foundation for Peace. He was asking for people to go to Haiti and to help out wherever was needed. Interestingly my wife Sue went through the same thought process and she had also made a decision to go to Haiti.

So Sue and I did decide to go. It was not without some fear and trepidation. We knew that Haiti was a very different environment from other places where we had gone on other mission trips. We knew that there was more crime and more poverty, and that we might see more death and destruction than we ever imagined. So we decided to go and we ended up working at a very interesting place – Camp Hope. It's in the eastern part of Haiti. These are people who have lost their homes and their families. Many of them have lost limbs. But none of them have lost hope.

We built latrines and showers. We participated in VBS clinics. We built a soccer field for the kids to play, and we actually played soccer with the kids from time to time. I guess the best project we did was the school that is on a piece of property adjacent to Camp Hope. We started it in March and finished it in May. It's a high school with five rooms that replaced the previous school that was essentially a two-room hut with a thatched roof. The classes started in the beginning of October. It was really an awesome project.

Jesus is calling you to share His Good News. You do not have to be a pastor. Like Bob and Sue, all you need is to be willing to let the Holy Spirit use you.

Myth #2 – I Just Want to Let My Good Deeds Speak for Me. There's a popular quote going around the Christian Church these days

“Preach the Gospel at all times. If necessary use words.” St. Francis

That sounds nice. It suggests that if I do plenty of good deeds they will share the Gospel message for me. There’s a few problems with that quote. First – St. Francis never said it. Second – If the Good News is communicated through the deeds of Christians then we are doing a bad job because the number one word outsiders use to describe Christians is “hypocrites.” Most important – it’s not the way Jesus or the disciples shared the Good News. In the Bible it’s not Good Deeds OR Good News but Good Deeds AND Good News. It’s always words AND actions. It’s life AND lips. Do you know the Greek word for “salvation” is the same word for “healing” and “health.” God is always concerned with both body and spirit, physical healing and spiritual healing. Why were Peter and John on trial? They healed a handicapped beggar.

Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: "Rulers and elders of the people! If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a cripple and are asked how he was healed, then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. (Acts 4:8-10).

Peter started with a Good Deed and went on to tell the Good News. Some churches only tell Good News but don’t do Good Deeds. We Presbyterians tend to do Good Deeds but stay silent about the Good News. God gave you two hands and two feet. He doesn’t want you to use only one side of your body. Use both. If we want to be Jesus’ Hands and Feet let’s use both.

Myth #3 – I Don’t Know the Message. I hear this fear all the time: “I don’t know the Bible very well. What if they ask me a question I can’t answer? It’s best to keep it simple. Peter and John said,

It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. He is "the stone you builders rejected, which has become the capstone" (Psalm 118:22). Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved. (Acts 4:10-12)

The whole message is right there.

1. Jesus was crucified for our sins.
2. God raised Him from the dead to prove He defeated sin and death.
3. This was a fulfillment of God’s plan in the Old Testament.
4. This is the only way to salvation God provides.

Now that last part may bother you. In fact, you may be afraid you will offend someone if you say Jesus is the only way to salvation. I saw a billboard on the Turnpike last weekend from the Unitarian Universalist Church which said, “Many Pathways, One Mountain.” In

other words, there are many ways to God and salvation – choose whichever one feels right to you. That belief may seem very tolerant and inoffensive to people but it actually offends God. In essence it says God foolishly wasted the life of His only Son to save us. Didn't God know there were other pathways? Was God so stupid that He needlessly sacrificed His dear Son?

If you believe Jesus is the Son of God, that He died to forgive our sins and that His resurrection opened the door to eternal life, it's not intolerant or offensive to share that Good News. If you discovered the cure for cancer or AIDS it wouldn't be intolerant for you to share it. You'd probably be given the Nobel Prize. We didn't discover the cure for the disease of sin. But we've been given the job of sharing it.

Myth #4 – I Will Do A Bad Job. “I don't want to twist anyone's arm.” “I don't want to force my faith down someone's throat.” “I will explain it wrong and turn them off.” Please don't force your faith down someone's throat and don't twist any arms. Peter and John didn't. When the Ruling Council told them to be quiet about Jesus,

Peter and John replied, "Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard." (Acts 4:19-20).

What's the easiest, kindest way to share the Good News? Share your own story. People may question the Bible or theology. They may throw philosophical arguments at you. But they can't question your journey with Jesus. It's your story and you are the expert on it. Peter and John could not stop speaking about what they had seen and heard. Tell what you've seen and heard about Jesus. Tell them what you were like before you met Jesus, what happened and what you are like now. Study after study shows that people are not won to Christ by philosophical arguments but by a friend who shares the difference Jesus has made in his or her life. Once you tell your story, then let it go and let them judge for themselves just as Peter and John did.

Myth #5 – Suffering Turns People Away from God. Sometimes that is true. But more often, during times of suffering and pain, when every other prop and support of life is gone, people turn to God as a last resort. The first Christians had nothing. They were poor and persecuted. Yet when Peter and John were released from prison and returned to the church did they cower and hide? Did they decide to stop talking about Jesus and close up shop?

On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said to them. When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. "Sovereign Lord," they said, "you made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus." (Acts 4:23-24, 29-30).

In the face of opposition and persecution, the people praised God and prayed for more boldness to speak the Good News and more power to perform Good Deeds.

Bob and Sue Broeze were nervous and a little fearful to go down to Haiti. They knew they would see greater death and destruction, greater poverty and pain than they'd witnessed on previous mission trips. Yet when they arrived at Camp Hope they were astonished by the deep faith, hope and joy of the Haitian people. Before the earthquake they had almost nothing. After the earthquake they literally had nothing. Yet like the first Christians, they raised their voices in song and praise to God who was carrying them through the anguish, pain and loss. Suffering does not have to close the door on God. For those who turn to Jesus in the midst of suffering it can become the pathway to His peace.

Myth #6 – I'm All Alone in Sharing the Good News. The truth is: we don't make people believe in Jesus. The Holy Spirit is the one who breaks the power of sin, transforms lives and sets hearts on fire. All we do is tell the Good News on the outside. The Spirit does the real work on the inside. Prayer is essential when we share the Good News because it helps us get out of the box and get in the flow of the Spirit.

After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly. (Acts 4:31).

God gave them a confirmation that He was with them through the power of the Holy Spirit. Nothing will help you grow more in your relationship with Jesus than telling others about Him. Today I want to give you an opportunity to get out of the box, break through the fear and get into the flow of the Spirit. In your bulletin is an Invest and Invite Card. It's a take off on those Capital One Commercials – "What's in Your Wallet." This says, "Who's in your Wallet." It says

I'll seek to invest in others who don't have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and invite them to Woodside. Here are 3 people I am attempting to invest in and invite to Woodside.

Then it gives you spaces for three names and three things to do: 1. Pray daily for them 2. Share my verbal witness 3. Invite them to Woodside. This takes time. But as you pray, share and invite you will get past your fear of sharing, you will have the joy of seeing people come to know Jesus and, along the way, you'll receive confirmations that the Holy Spirit is working with you and you are doing God's work.

When he was down in Haiti, Bob Broeze received a confirmation that God was working through him. It all started 6 months before, when Bruce Jones asked Bob to help him load up some items here at Woodside which they planned to ship down to the Dominican Republic.

I helped Bruce load these ugly salmon chairs that we used in Fellowship Hall, a number of toys, and a box of shoes. There were futons and mattresses as well as a shed that had been donated. We loaded all these things into the truck and drove it up to Long Valley, NJ, and loaded it into the container that would be shipped to the DR.

Fast forward to March of this year. I was on my second trip to Haiti, had just finished dinner, and was sitting on the front steps admiring the scenery, and a truck backed into the front yard. It had a big black water tank on it, and I didn't really think anything of it. Eventually, the tank was taken off the truck, and I noticed some things that I recognized on the back of the truck. I saw a pile of ugly salmon chairs – just as ugly as the ones I had loaded into the container six months earlier – the shed that had been donated, all of the toys and many other items that we had loaded into the container. I don't think there are coincidences in life. I think this was the work of God, and I think He was trying to tell me that I was doing the right thing by being there.

As a final note, when we arrived in Camp Hope for the Easter service in April, I was amazed and totally pleased to see those ugly salmon colored chairs set up in a makeshift church – basically tarps supported by sticks – for the Easter service.

Last January, Haiti was way outside my comfort zone – it was outside the box for me. Right now, Haiti is well inside my comfort zone. In fact, I am planning to lead a trip to Haiti in February of 2011. We will build a vocational school that will support Camp Hope as well as the people in the local communities around Camp Hope. I would urge all of you to look deep inside and try to think outside the box. If you believe this is for you, I would like you to join me when we go Haiti in February.

God bless you.

The Holy Spirit is calling you to get out of the box. As you share Good Deed and Good News, the Spirit will meet you there and help you to be bold and not fold.