

“Crossing the Line”

Acts 10:1-24

Series: Living Outside the Box

Week 8: Living Outside for Good

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The Woodside Church

Line... a line in the sand... We might stick a toe over the line... but we instinctively know that it's dangerous to cross the line... That line helps define our box. It gives the shape and definition to our box. If we cross the line, suddenly we are outside the box, and I'm not so sure I want to be outside the box...

Doug has been calling us, encouraging us, pushing and prodding us these last few weeks to cross that line... to get out of the box. But you and I, we have our boxes for a reason... they give shape and definition to our lives... security, comfort... it's a little dangerous to cross that line... to step out of the box...

Peter understood the danger of getting out of the box. In the beginning of the book of Acts we find him huddled with other followers of Jesus behind locked doors. Outside those walls is the fickle Jerusalem that had welcomed Jesus one day with Palm branches and loud shouts of Hosanna... and just days later shouted “Crucify him, crucify him.” Those dangerous crowds are still out there... they have Jesus' blood on their hands. Peter knows that they would not hesitate to take Jesus' followers, too, so those walls and that locked door are an essential protection from the danger out on the streets of Jerusalem. Peter knows it would be dangerous to cross the line... to get out of the box...

But on the day of Pentecost... God found those believers behind that locked door. The Spirit of God blew with tongues of fire into those disciples and suddenly Peter is propelled out into the street. He finds himself preaching... this fisherman is preaching... the crowds are gathering... Friends, I have to tell you that first sermon was not a feel good sermon... He looked those crowds right in the eye and said, “You, with the help of wicked men put Jesus to death... God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified both Lord and Christ...” Luke tells us that the people were cut to the heart. I thirty years of preaching I have never had the courage to preach that sermon. But on that day, the Spirit of God so moved Peter that he risked his life, he stepped out of his box and preached a sermon that brought 3000 to faith that day. What an amazing moment! Surely now, Peter will leave his box behind now that he has seen what God can do when he is willing to cross the line.

But by the time we see Peter in today's reading he has settled back into a box again. You can define in and out... the Jews are in... those Gentiles... even a God-fearing one like Cornelius, who prays and gives generously to those in need... even a Gentile like Cornelius exists on the outside of Peter's box. Peter had a moment outside his box but now Peter has settled back in... so God knows it's time to give Peter's box a little shake. A few weeks ago we had an amazing moment here at Woodside. We got a little taste of Pentecost. God blew a mighty wind through this place. Instead of our normal church

routine, the Spirit of God propelled us out into the streets... to care for our neighbors and love our elders... to feed the hungry and help those in need. Do you remember the energy, the excitement of that moment... the joy of that Sunday night celebration... it was a little taste of Pentecost! Woodside had left the building... we were out in the streets like those Spirit filled disciples... what an amazing moment! But now we're back here. Have we settled back in to our box like Peter? ...where we know the rules... where we are comfortable... where we belong.

Is God shaking our Box today?

When Peter settled in, God sent him a vision to shake the walls of his box a bit. In fact, God doesn't just shake it once, God gives Peter's box 3 shakes. It seems that it always takes three shakes to get Peter moving. When Peter denies Jesus 3 times in the courtyard, the cock crows three times. Three times Jesus asks Peter, do you love me more than these? Three times Jesus tells Peter to "feed my sheep." And this time three visions-- and all the while Peter is arguing with God, giving him reasons that his box is really the correct box. Peter is clinging to walls formed out of the Jewish law, walls that have defined him since he was a little boy. Peter is clinging to his box because he knows God is not asking him to leave the box for a moment this time. God wants Peter to leave the box behind, to cross the line, not just put a toe across, but to really cross the line. Peter instinctively knows that if you cross the line, there is no going back. So when God shakes Peter's box, he clings to the walls.

Richard Stearns was the President and CEO of Lenox. Fine china had purchased a beautiful home on the mainline, a jaguar in his garage, private schools for his children, first class accommodations when he traveled, and the ability to give generously to missions. Stearns was what he called "one of the good guys", a "poster child" for the successful Christian life. He was generous, kind, a strong leader in his church, a good witness in his business. Richard Stearns lived in a very nice box... a respectable box, a commendable box... in fact most of us would like a chance to live in his box. But one day God began to shake that box. Stearns writes in his book **The Hole In Our Gospel**, how he was clinging to the sides of his box while God did a bit of shaking. "I much preferred living in my bubble, the one that safely contained my life, family and career. It kept difficult things out, insulating me from anything too raw or upsetting. When such things intruded, as they rarely did, a channel could be changed, a newspaper page turned, or a check written to keep the world at a safe distance..." God kept shaking Richard Stearns' box not just to get him out for a moment here or there... God wanted Stearns to leave that box behind, so God kept shaking the box until he reluctantly agreed to leave the lucrative security of Lenox to be the President of World Vision. Stearns writes, "God turned my life inside out and it would never be the same..."

Is God shaking our box today?

Friends, November 7th we had a moment out there. We put our big toe across the line, and most of us had such a good experience we hope to have other "moments", other times when we will go out. But friends is God shaking our box... is God calling us like Richard Stearns to more than just a moment every once in a while?

When God shook Peter's box with those three visions Peter made a gutsy move. He broke the rules that defined the walls of his box and invited Cornelius' Gentile friends into his home. The Jewish law was clear, by inviting those men into his house his home was defiled... unclean. To welcome those men into his home, Peter had to stretch the walls of his box out. It was an uncomfortable stretch... a risky stretch. He was breaking the rules to stretch the walls out to welcome those Gentiles in.

Here at Woodside you have broken a few rules... a few conventions... to stretch your walls out to welcome in more. A lot of Presbyterian churches look like Woodside on the outside, but not many Presbyterian churches look like Woodside on the inside- 2 worship spaces... 3 worship styles... You even have youth leading one of your worship services, not just on "Youth Sunday" but every Sunday... in their language, their style. And it's working... they are coming. Look at the vitality of this ministry. Most of our sister churches have lost their youth, but not here. Friends, I have to tell you that this is one of the most creative boxes I have seen in the church. God shook your box and you responded by stretching out the walls, just like Peter did that day.

God shook the walls of Liberty Corner Presbyterian church in New Jersey and they too stretched out their walls. You call your youth led service Higher Ground, they call theirs Elevate. It is loud, flashy, packed with students. Liberty Corner for years had struggled to have an effective Student ministry, until God called Steve Jansen to lead that ministry. Within months of coming to Liberty Corner Elevate was started and the students poured in... 15, 50, 100, 100+... The Session was so excited to finally have teenagers back within their walls that they called Steve in to congratulate him, to celebrate the good work he was doing. Steve listened to their accolades and then he stood and moved to the window. He pointed down the street and he said, "a mile down that road is Basking Ridge high school. There are over 2000 students in that school. Most of them have no church home. Only a hundred come here. Most of those 2000 will never darken the door of this place no matter how exciting we make Elevate. Now is not the time to celebrate that we have 100. Now is the time to go out to reach the others who are still out there..." God is shaking Liberty Corner's box not so that they will stretch the walls of their box out... but so that they will get out of their box...

Is God shaking our box a bit today?

Jesus had called his disciples to cross this line again and again during his ministry. He said, "you are the light of the WORLD." "Go, make disciples of ALL NATIONS." "Be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

Peter had heard the call again and again... but it is not until this moment that Peter finally gets it. He realizes that staying in his box will not work, that stretching his walls out will not be enough. To reach Cornelius with the good news of Jesus Christ, Peter has to leave his box behind. Peter knows that this is not just a moment. To reach Cornelius, Peter will have to step across this line, knowing there is no going back. Peter knows there's danger in this move.

This is the defining moment. It is the moment you and I have been waiting for. Peter's decision in this moment to cross the line, to get out of his box to go to the Gentile Cornelius begins a wave that washes over the centuries to reach us... the Gentiles in the 21st Century.

God is shaking our box today. Who are we supposed to reach? Who is our Cornelius? Stretching out our walls won't be enough. Who is it that we will only be able to reach if we get out of this box?

In the fifth book of CS Lewis' Chronicles of Narnia, Prince Caspian, now King Caspian has set sail. He has left his beloved Narnia, his friends, the security of his throne behind, so that he can go out to find the 7 lost Lords. Caspian knows only three things: He knows that those 7 are somewhere in the Eastern Seas beyond the Lone Islands. He knows that those uncharted waters hold many dangers. And he knows that if he does not go the fate of those seven will be sealed. So Caspian leaves the comfort of the known to go in search of the lost.

God is shaking our box today. Who are we supposed to reach? Who is it that we will only be able to reach if we get out of this box?

CS Lewis, who wrote the **Voyage of the Dawn Treader**, understood full well the importance of getting out of the box to reach another. When Lewis began his career as a Professor at Oxford University he was an avowed atheist. Early on he was befriended by another Oxford Professor- JRR Tolkien- the author of the Lord of the Rings. Tolkien was a strong believer and he took it on as his mission to reach his hardened friend Lewis with the truth of the gospel. Lewis would never have accepted an invitation to church, so Tolkien went where Lewis was. He went to the pub. In the morning Tolkien went to church to pray. In the evening he would sit in the pub with Lewis and talk. They discussed and argued and pitted their minds against one another. Friends it took 10 years of pub evangelism to break through Lewis' defenses. We have the riches of CS Lewis' writings because Tolkien was willing to get out of his box and go where his friend was.

God is shaking our box today. Who are we supposed to reach? Who is it that we will only be able to reach if we get out of this box?

Friends this place we call our church is not the church. It is just a building. We are the church. This place is a way-station... where we are fed and healed... loved and prepared. This is the place we come for a moment, so that we can live out there on the mission field. Our mission field is in our neighborhood where our neighbors are hurting behind closed doors. The rules that define our box tell us not to interfere...to be polite... to look the other way. Will we leave the safety of our box and knock on that door, will we call, will we care. Our mission field is in our work place where being a person of integrity and grace can make us stand out uncomfortably, but our co-workers need to be touched by grace. Our mission field is in our families to those who have walked away from the faith, and we are often so shy to bring a witness. Our mission field is with those who are hungry and lonely and broken...

Our mission field is out there. Friends, we are the mission of Jesus Christ to the world God so loves. So come here for a moment. Be fed, healed, loved, prepared... and then get out of this box and live on that mission field for Jesus Christ.

Benediction:

When you look back at this Peter story, you might wonder why Peter had to risk it all for Cornelius. We are told that Cornelius and his family were devout and God-fearing. They prayed regularly and gave generously to those in need. Why did Peter need to risk it all for this man who seemed to be on a pretty good path. Our culture today would say that Cornelius was fine... all paths are fine. But Peter knew that Cornelius needed to meet Jesus. Who do you know on your mission field needs to meet Jesus, needs the love and care of Jesus, needs the grace and healing touch of Jesus? Friends, step across the line today. Get out of this box and go, so that they will meet Jesus! And may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you now and remain with you on that mission field!