

“Opening the Boxes” Rev. Georgeanne Bennett 8/21/16
DoC Sermon, 8-21 Luke 13:10-17

Helen McDonald lost her imperious, demanding, much-loved father suddenly and she had no way to cope with her loss. She wanted to howl, she wanted something HARD to do. She wanted to test herself against something fierce and wild. So she decided to purchase and train a goshawk, reported to be the most vicious predator among raptors. Helen was a seasoned falconer, but goshawks are in a class by themselves and few falconers work with them.

Helen’s book “‘H’ is for Hawk, is the story of her relationship with Mabel, her goshawk. She does struggle mightily with Mabel, but she also falls in love with her. And Mabel has many surprises for Helen.

Helen thought she knew hawks; thought she understood Mabel. But one evening this happened. In Helen’s words:

I close my book with a snap, and as the cover falls my hawk makes a curious, bewitching movement. She twitches her head to one side then turns it upside down and continues to regard me with the tip of her beak pointing at the ceiling. I am astonished. I’ve seen this head-turning before. Baby falcons do it when they play. But goshawks? Really? I pull a sheet of paper towards me, tear a long strip from one side, scrunch it into a ball, and offer it to the hawk in my fingers. She grabs it with her beak. It crunches.

She likes the sound. She crunches it again and then lets it drop, turning her head upside down as it hits the floor. I pick it

up and offer it to her again. She grabs it and bites it very gently over and over again; gnam, gnam, gnam. She looks like a glove puppet, a Punch and Judy crocodile. Her eyes are narrowed in bird-laughter. I am laughing too.

I roll a magazine into a tube and peer at her through it as if it were a telescope. She ducks her head to look at me through the hole. She pushes her beak into it as far as it will go, biting the empty air inside. Putting my mouth to my side of my paper telescope, I boom into it: 'Hello, Mabel.' She pulls her beak free. All the feathers on her forehead are raised. She shakes her tail rapidly from side to side and shivers with happiness.

An obscure shame grips me. I had a fixed idea of what a goshawk was and it was not big enough to hold what goshawks are. No one had ever told me goshawks played. It was not in the books. I wondered if it was because no one had ever played with them. The thought made me terribly sad.

Helen had imagined a box that held the idea of "goshawk". Trouble was, goshawks were much, much bigger than that box.

Today's Scripture from Luke is one of Luke's so-called Sabbath controversies, where Jesus is teaching and healing in a synagogue on the Sabbath and the leaders get ticked off because it was against the rules to do work on the Sabbath, and healing was classified as work. And Jesus, like the good rabbi he was, comes up with an argument justifying the healing and the congregation around him rejoices.

And the woman who was healed? She is standing straight for the first time in 18 years. Jesus has lifted her burden and

freed her from whatever had kept her in bondage for all that time. We don't know what it was, but Jesus' touch and Jesus' voice freed her. Jesus recognized her for who she was, and brought her back to the person God had designed her to be, whole and perfect.

In "H" is for Hawk, Helen put Mabel, the goshawk, into a box labeled "goshawk" that was just too small. Defining Mabel too narrowly denied all the parts of Mabel that didn't fit. Like a capacity for play, a capacity for joy.

And in the passage from Luke, I imagine the bent-over woman as someone who had been forced into a box that just didn't fit her, that deformed her. Until Jesus touched and healed her. Until Jesus opened the box and set her free.

And don't we all too often do the same thing? We build a series of boxes and define folks by which ones they fit into. Race? Black, white, brown, yellow. That's all an artificial construct, mostly constructed to keep some of those folks in their places, designed by whoever was or is in power, generally privileged whites. People don't actually COME in those colors. People come in a continuum of colors, a mix-up of races, a glorious variety of skin tones, eye shapes, hair colors, sizes and shapes.

Often the boxes make us feel more comfortable. We can define who is in and who is out based on the boxes they fit into. And we can have our own little box that tells us who WE are. It may get a little tight sometimes, we may be a bit bent

over, but it is ours. We can tell who we are and we can tell who THEY are.

My favorite modern mystic, Richard Rohr, insists that we can only truly see and understand the world God created if we begin with a “yes” of basic acceptance. We do not judge or label or analyze or categorize too quickly. We never say flatly, this is in and this is out, this is good and this is bad. The boxes are there because all too often, we begin with “no”.

Not judging is hard. Human beings like to have categories, we like to have either/ors, good/bad, up/down, in/out. Then we know where WE stand. But when we do this, we don't see the world as God intends it to be; we only see our distorted version of the world.

I know some of you came to the Pride celebration yesterday. I was there, at our table, loving the day. If you missed it, I hope you will come next year. This summer, we have been talking about the Fruit of the Spirit. Today's word is “joy” and yesterday was the embodiment of “joy”. So many people out, in every sense of the word; loud and proud of who God made them. There were very few boxes in evidence!

But on normal days, the boxes we construct around gender and sexuality can be SO constricting. Unfortunately, the Bible all too often gets dragged into the argument, pointing at scriptures that seem to lay out rules for pairing and forgetting that the rules were designed for populations that existed 2000, 2500, 3000 years ago or more. When nothing was more important than increasing the population of a small, weak, fairly

insignificant group of folks who had one big idea. The idea of one God. If the People of God were to continue, everyone had to have a bunch of children. Of course, that isn't the only reason for strict rules about who could and should sleep with whom, but I DO insist that what made sense millennia ago probably doesn't apply today.

But still too many insist on the boxes, even though research and observation shows that most people exist on some sort of continuum between very heterosexual and very homosexual. Straight, queer, bi-sexual, a-sexual or not sure. And gender identity adds a whole new dimension to the equation.

Trying to keep people in boxes deforms them. Stunts them. In one of Brian McLaren's books, he tells the story of some friends who found a snapping turtle crossing a road. Now I don't know if any of you have ever come face-to-face with a snapper, but they are NOT an attractive animal. Far from it; they are downright ugly! And this snapper was also deformed. Or, maybe I should say, more deformed than most. At some point, when it was tiny, it had managed to get caught up in a plastic ring that had been tossed out. Not a problem when the ring was the same diameter as the turtle, but at this point the turtle was about a foot long, and its shell was shaped like a figure eight, with the plastic ring in the center.

You can imagine what this turtle was in for. As it continued to grow, and they can get REALLY big, its internal organs would be constricted to the point where they would

cease to function and the turtle would die. So of course McLaren's very brave friends cut the ring. And guess what? Nothing happened.

Except for one small thing. This turtle, who had been under a sentence of death, now had a future. It was a saved turtle, a rescued turtle.

People are the same. Some of you may know that before I moved out here, my work in Massachusetts was with an outdoor church. I worked with people who lived on the edges of society. Some of these had just had to work too hard to fit into the boxes that society and often their families had told them were necessary. The hardest, for me, were the kids. About 40% of homeless youth are GLBTQI, and many of those are throw-away kids whose families cast them out. Not always because of their sexuality, but way too often.

These kids have a long, hard road in front of them, and all too often they don't make it. The suicide rate is fearsome. But they have a chance if someone, anyone, helps them out of the box they have been forced into. If someone, anyone tells them they are perfect just the way they are. Tells them they are God's beloved children, no questions asked. Tells them they are beautiful. Tells them that all those labels that were stuck on them are nonsense. Tells them that they have a future.

In the past couple of weeks, two stories came my way about encounters with the TSA, the Transportation Security Administration. One from a seminary friend who had an article

published in *The Christian Century*. Emily is, as she writes, comfortable in her female body, but she presents as male. If she is forced to come up with a label, she goes for “gender non-conforming”. Apparently, those screening machines, where you raise your arms while it scans your body, have two buttons, a pink one and a blue one. So the operator, seeing her coming, pushes the blue button, and this leads to anomalies that have to be explored, often in a very invasive way. Emily has to tell them to push the pink button and let her go through again. But, as she says, the pink button really isn’t “her” either. And the whole process is messy and demoralizing. Just because she doesn’t fit, and won’t force herself to fit, any of the gender boxes that are out there.

The other article, which came across my Facebook feed, was also written by a person with a female body, but he considers himself a trans man. And he had a lovely encounter with a TSA agent. After going through the scanner and telling the agent that the scanner would soon have a melt down over anomalies, the TSA agent asked him which gender he wanted to be identified with. She told him, “you get to choose”. What a great example of how to be a human being and how to treat and honor another human being. How to NOT let the boxes define who they and we are!

We aren’t any easier on ourselves than we are on others. We are so afraid of being vulnerable that we build up an image of ourselves that conforms to what society expects of us, then we expend vast amounts of energy maintaining that image. We

build a box for ourselves, and then dedicate ourselves to furnishing the box.

Too often we don't even recognize that we are IN a box, or realize that we don't have to be there. The woman Jesus healed didn't ask to be healed. She probably didn't know she could be. Or worse yet, maybe she thought she deserved to be burdened. Because...well, fill in the blank. Because she had sinned, because she wasn't good enough, because she had failed somehow.

We all sin, we all fall short of what we could be, we are all limited human beings, but we are also all made in the image of God. We find it SO hard to accept that there is a core in us of divinity. Or maybe we just don't want to accept that – too scary, too much to live into. And, if we could recognize the divinity in ourselves, we would be forced to recognize it in everyone else. And everyone would be out of the boxes!

And we like our boxes, or at least we are comfortable with them. If we had to let go of the image we have created for ourselves, who would we be? And what would happen to us? It feels a little like death to let go and try to be the person we are meant to be. Interesting how many religions talk about transformation as death, or a kind of death. Jesus certainly did. He said we must die to ourselves, to lose ourselves to find ourselves. He didn't mean physical death; he meant letting go of our false ideas about ourselves. And Rumi, the 13th century Sufi poet, writes:

***There is a necessary dying,
and then Jesus is breathing again.***

***Very little grows on jagged rock.
Be ground. Be crumbled,
so wildflowers will come up
where you are.***

***You have been stony for too many years.
Try something different. Surrender.***

This story in the Luke sits in front of some of Jesus' descriptions of the Kingdom of God. I think it is deeply related to them. Maybe the Kingdom of God will be here when, like Jesus, we all recognize the burdens that others bear and do whatever we can to lift those burdens. When we all recognize the boxes we have been forced into and do what we can to open those boxes. When we can all walk upright, seen and valued for who we are. Each one of us a beloved child of God.

Amen.