

**The Fifth Sunday of Easter
Holy Comforter, Charlotte
The Rev. John E. Shields
May 10, 2009**

We need to think outside the box!

You hear that a lot these days...think outside the box!

It is one of the insidious snippets of jargon that has become commonplace in our day-to-day talk and conversation.

Think outside the box.

Actually, the bottom line is – at the end of the day we need to think outside the box while the window of opportunity is still open, because opportunity is not a 24/7/365 proposition.

O Lord, have mercy --- jargon, jargon.

We all use it, do we not? I do. (But I hate myself in the morning for it.)

Well, what does it mean - to think outside the box?

You know don't you?

It means to depart from the usual way of thinking about something and trying a whole new approach.

It means giving up old ways of doing things – even the tried and true, and embarking upon radical, probably untried solutions or ideas.

It means to be creative is seeking solutions. Well, maybe, this is not such a bad idea.

What got me to thinking about this was Philip's relationship with the Ethiopian eunuch. We just heard about it in the lesson from Acts. It seems to me that Philip was definitely thinking outside the box.

One of the things that always occurs to me when I hear "...think outside the box..." is -- that may be a good idea, but do we know what is in the box?

Let's look at what is in the box in this situation.

Philip we assume is a Palestinian Jew - the eunuch is an Ethiopian. Philip is a Christian, perhaps the eunuch is a worshipping Jew – he is trying to read Isaiah and understand it. Most commentaries say that eunuchs were not allowed to worship in the temple – so what is in the box is race, religion, and religious rules and norms, plus sexuality, and nationality. Maybe there is other stuff, but that is probably enough to work with don't you think? Enough for one box.

Philip is one of the seven Deacons appointed in Acts, chapter 6 – he is often referred to as Philip the Evangelist. Not to be confused with Philip who is mentioned in the gospels and in the gospel of John and one of the twelve disciples of Jesus.

Philip is a Jew and a Christian. He is witnessing to an African and a eunuch. Even though eunuchs were not allowed to worship in the temple --- for some reason this person is reading the scriptures of Isaiah and is trying to understand the prophesy concerning the suffering servant.

Isn't it interesting that Philip seems to have no hesitation in reaching out to this man that the religious establishment did not consider worthy to worship in its holy place?

Philip doesn't let the man's race or sexuality box him in, rather, he sees him and interacts with him --- instructs him on the nature of scripture and prophesy, and finally affirms the man's conversion to Christianity and baptizes him.

The text says that an angel prompted Philip to approach the Ethiopian. This causes Philip, as we might say today, to think outside the box. I wonder about that angel – could that have been the Holy Spirit?

The lesson we have today is about evangelism.

O yes, it is about the E word – that word that Episcopalians tend to avoid and shun – maybe that is thinking outside the box.

I am sure that you have been aware of the thrust of the diocese of North Carolina to become a missionary diocese – parishes are asked to become missionary parishes – to make disciples and to make a difference.

Bishop Curry – a man I love deeply and admire greatly (thought I'd set the record straight early on with that.) The bishop has said on a number of occasions -- that his dream for the Diocese – for our church, is for it to look like the people of North Carolina.

His dream is for our church to reflect the diversity of race and ethnicity we find in our wonderful state. So might we consider ways in which we might become a missionary minded church? Will we have the courage to 'think outside the box?'

Will we have the faith to ask ourselves the hard questions?

You know what I mean? Is being a Christian more than having good manners and treating others fairly? Is belonging to the body of Christ more than just another grouping of my social set? Dare we risk a church where the gospel is preached even when it makes us uncomfortable?

Is being a missionary church more than nice liturgy, good music and pleasant, even beautiful, buildings? Can we dare to believe that the Advocate --- the Holy Spirit of God --- will lead us into bold new ministries?

Can we become missionaries for Jesus Christ and remain in our comfort zone? Or will we, like Philip, be asked to stretch ourselves beyond our normal limits and boundaries?

Those of you that attended the diocesan convention may remember this hymn. To me it is the call of the church in our time – it is the call of Holy Comforter Church at this time. The hymn was sung during the Eucharist at Canterbury during the recent Lambeth Conference. A conference where some bishops chose to exclude themselves by not attending and where one bishop – Eugene Robinson – was not invited to attend.

I can only hope the bishops realized the distance between what is and what ought to be as they sang this hymn.

**Let us build a house where love can dwell
And all can safely live,
A place where saints and children
Tell how hearts learn to forgive
Built of hopes and dreams and visions**

**Rock of faith and vault of grace,
Here the love of Christ shall end divisions:
All are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place.**

**Let us build a house where prophets speak,
And words are strong and true,
where all God's children dare to seek
to dream God's reign anew.
Here the cross shall stand as witness
And as symbol of God's grace;
Here as one we claim the faith of Jesus;
All are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place.**

**Let us build a house where love is found
In water, wine and wheat:
A banquet hall on holy ground,
Where peace and justice meet.
Here the love of God, through Jesus,
Is revealed in time and space,
As we share in Christ the feast that frees us;
All are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place.**

**Let us build a house where hands will reach
Beyond the wood and stone
To heal and strengthen, serve, and teach,
And live the Word they've known,
Here the outcast and the stranger
Bear the image of God's face;
Let us bring an end to fear and danger:
All are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place.**

**Let us build a house where all are named,
Their songs and visions heard
And loved and treasured, taught, and claimed
As words within the Word.**

**Built of tears and cries of laughter,
Prayers of faith and songs of grace,
Let this house proclaim from floor to rafter;
All are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place.**

**If we want to think outside of the box --- Let us live into the
example of our brother in Christ Philip and let us think about
how this church, and all churches, might embrace and live into
the message of All are welcome in this place.**

Think outside the box --- All are welcome!