

I used to have visions of what it would look like from that pulpit---what it would feel like as I stood in that box and stared out at the congregation. As I stared out at you. I have even had the opportunity to stand in that very pulpit and speak what I believed God had put on my heart. I used to take a deep breath before I entered into the walls of that box and step forward until I could no longer move.

I gave my first sermon from that pulpit. Over two years ago I stood within those walls and cried to you as I spoke of Isaiah. It seems serendipitous that now, when given the opportunity to come full circle I find myself unable to enter that pulpit before you today. I can't, in good conscious enter into that box. Since being in seminary I have learned a thing or two about that box we call the pulpit.

Wikipedia graciously and wisely informed me that this box we call the pulpit didn't exist until about the 3rd century AD. And then other sources confirmed that. Once the pulpit entered one church it seems all of the others conformed. And somewhere along the way human society decided that the pulpit was *the place* where God's Word could be spoken. And the generations that followed conformed accordingly. Now, we make students go through years of study, take tests and sit before committees to be able to grace that pulpit....this human invention that by the way, in case it hasn't clicked---didn't even exist in the time of Jesus...you know the one we strive to be like?

Conformity, less than 300 years after the death of Jesus had infiltrated our faith. That box we call the pulpit is a tangible reminder of ongoing conformity. And each time we step into that box we are conformists.

I'm not quite sure when I realized I hated the societally constructed box we call the pulpit. But I do. I hate that box. I have seen what happens in that box. I have witnessed violence be preached from that box. I've even been the victim of it. I pray you haven't. Because it is vicious.

And you know, in total transparency I have probably said some stupid shit myself from within those four walls. Why does that box strip of us our humility and heart the way it does? Why does the Gospel message leave us the moment we step into that box until we can step no further? Why do we lose the ability to see each other's humanness as we stand in that box?

Why? Why do we accept the conformity of that box?

Romans 12:2

Do not conform yourselves to this age, but be transformed by the renewal of your minds, so that you can judge what God's will is---what is good, pleasing and perfect.

A mic drop in a single verse. That's Paul. And then if we read bit further... Verse 3-

3. In light of the grace I have from God, I urge each of you not to exaggerate your own importance. Each of you must judge yourself soberly by the standard of faith God have given you.

In a moment of throwing exegesis out the window you know what I hear in this verse? Get off the pedestal. Get out of that box and frankly, get over yourself. I think I've heard it called humble pie, perhaps? I'll be the first to tell you, humble pie tastes like crap sometimes. But it's so good for the soul.

A wise pastor once taught me that you never give a message you don't need to hear yourself. I need this message. And maybe you do too.

Pastors, therapists, professors often, it seems, while very good at offering care to others are not the best at giving care to themselves. It is easy to read to scripture and think of what our members, students or listeners need. But what about the needs of us? How can scripture guide us? I don't know about you but I often find myself reading scripture thinking "oh, so and so needs to read this!" When someone lies we like to quote the Ten Commandments. But what about when we lie? Or commit adultery? What do we quote then?

When a member doesn't tithe that 10% we, as faith leaders read them Nehemiah, but what about when we don't tithe? What do we quote then? When someone falls prey to a societal norm that takes them away from their faith we quote Paul in Romans 12:2, you know, do not conform yourselves to this age...but what do we quote to ourselves when we lose sight of the Gospels and instead preach the status quo?

Romans 12:2. Talk about a loaded scripture. It tells us to flash deuces to society and break the norm. It challenges us to be weird by societal standards, but faithful by God's. I used to find this scripture confining. It kept me from experiencing a lot of the things I saw society doing...a lot of things I wanted to do.

Then somewhere along the way I realized that instead, Paul's words free us all. I do not have to conform to society's will, I do not have to live with in the box of labels or identities in order to experience God. And neither do you. The world, society---we do not have to conform. Church. We do not have to conform to the church---especially when it is disease ridden. Seminary. We do not have to conform to the complacency and apathy that exists here. And that box.

That fucking box. That box that for so long has sneered at God's people and picked who gets to live and who dies. The box that sucks us in and makes us believe we have power over others. That box that leaves us inflated and far from humility. That box that the Pharaohs would

have loved and Jesus would have hated. That box that keeps us at arm's length from our fellow brothers and sisters. That box that says money and recruiting is more important than providing deserved care to those who seek it. That box that says give me your money and in return I'll steal your soul. That box that still says our brothers and sisters of color are unworthy of a spot at the table. That box that says our LGBTQ brothers and sisters are unworthy of a spot at the table, that somehow they are less than that great white straight privilege. That box that speaks of poverty yet funds corruption and sneers at the hungry. That box.

That fucking box. Look, I know that is a harsh word. I know that word might make you uncomfortable. Rest assured, you are not alone. The 1 in 3 men of color unfairly incarcerated in their life...well they are uncomfortable too. And the LGBT youth that commit suicide every 17 minutes, well they felt uncomfortable too. And the women and girls who are the victim of sexual violence every two minutes, yeah, they're uncomfortable too. All because of boxes that left no room for them at the Table. So yes, we need to take a wrecking ball to that fucking box. And yes, that's a harsh word.

In my humanness I couldn't find a better word that represented what I was really trying to say here. But you know what? Ultimately I realized it's not about *that* word, it's about THE Word. THE Word and what it says about that box. At least for me. Truth cannot be contained in that box. It offers conformity and a small place to stand while the life is literally sucked out of you.

Love is found among the people, not that box. You have to get out of that box and venture out. Because you know what happens when you venture out of that box? You become vulnerable. Your humanity is dripping from your pores and it's absolutely terrifying. Your body shakes, tears threaten to escape and claim you as human and there is nowhere to escape the gazes of those before you. But you know what else happens when you get out of that box?

You can see the people sitting in the pews, and perhaps much more importantly, they can see you. When we see people, and I mean really see each other, that's when love, grace and hope grow. The moment we step out of that box we leave our pride and egos behind. We become vulnerable before those in the pews and when we let our humanness outshine the pedestal that comes with the title of minister the people in the pews, the ones that matter the most, well they can be human then too. And it is in that humanness, and only then, that we have room for things like love.

But love is found among the people, not that box. Surrounded by our fellow brothers and sisters. Hope is found in community. Those who gather and rally for one another in times of need and in times of joy. Not in that box. Grace exists when the confines of that box can't take another life. Not another single one. Spiritual, physical, emotional....not another single life.

Discipleship exists in ministry as a verb, this phenomenon that we go and do and live into. Service is found outside those walls and inside the ministry of presence and time. The Spirit? The Spirit is found in relationship with one another, in the art of really knowing one another. God? The Word as we know it? Well it's not in that box. It's out there. In the throes of humanity, right there among the people. Among us.

Listen, I recognize that there is sometimes more to that box than the view I am providing today. I am not saying we can never step foot in that box. For some, the chance to step in that box is liberating, especially for those who have long been denied the opportunity to preach from a pulpit. For some, their ministry depends on claiming the power of the pulpit. For some, that is the only way they can be heard, or taken seriously. And for others, that box represents the status quo, conformity and small box to stand in while life passes before us, and moves on without us. I get it. There is no one right answer. It's not about right or wrong. It's about awareness. Know what you're doing when you step into that box...or step out of it.

Better yet, make sure that what you're stepping into isn't a box at all. Let that pulpit, whether you're standing in it or not, be a place of grace and not exclusion. Shed the conformity of that box and find the Spirit, guiding you to exist *within* the people of God, after all, we are human, we *are* part of that great fellowship of humanity, in or out of the pulpit. Don't let that box strip us of our humanity and replace it with some unattainable Savior complex. Find the place to stand for and before God. Whether we find that place in the pulpit, or out here, among the people. But whatever you do, don't get trapped in that box of conformity.

Because that box?

Destroy that societally constructed box so that the *pulpit* is what remains. Take a wrecking ball to that box if you have to. Reclaim inclusivity. And Go. Go be a minister, in whatever form you are called to and whatever you do, get out of that box. And serve God.

Amen.