

Sermon / 24 November 2024 / Christ the King / John 183337 / No Boxes

You can't put Jesus in a box.

It would certainly make our lives a lot easier to put Jesus in a beautiful box of our own choosing. We can try as hard as we like, but Jesus cannot be put in a box.

That's exactly what Pilate tries to do in today's Gospel reading. He directly asks Jesus if he is a king. Is Jesus the king of the Jews? Jesus hedges and responds that Pilate himself called him a king. Jesus will not be put in a box.

Today we celebrate Christ the King Sunday. Jesus is king of kings!

But do we really want Jesus to be a king?

In some ways yes. A king can be benevolent. A king offers his subjects protection.

But a king can also be cruel and plunder the land for their own wealth and greed.

A king can dispense of those who do not tow the party line.

Is that the label we want to give Jesus? Is that the box into which we want to place our Savior?

Christ the King seems a difficult title to give Jesus.

There are other boxes we try to place Jesus in.

How about Jesus the Good Shepherd?

Pros: Jesus takes care of his flock and watches over us. Jesus guides us where we should go. He leads us besides still waters.

Cons: If Jesus is a shepherd, that makes us stupid, smelly sheep who are incapable of doing anything for ourselves.

Is that the box that best fits for Jesus in our lives?

There are many boxes we've created for Jesus. King. Shepherd. Prince of Peace. Wonderful Counselor. Rabbi. Teacher. Preacher. Storyteller. Foot washer. Healer. Table flipper. Son. Sea calmer. Status quo disrupter.

That's the problem with a box. It's a box. Jesus can't be put in a box because he's so much more than the label that can put on any one box.

Sure. Today we can liken Jesus to a good king. But there is so much more to the story. Boxes are limiting. There are four sides and most always a top to close the box.

And most often when we put something in a box....and close it with a lid....that box is put away. A box isn't something we use. A box is something used to store something – to hide something.

Close the box. Perhaps even label the box to remember what we put in it. And then place that box high on a shelf or in the back of a closet – and all too often forget about it until we need whatever is in the box. And then we must remember which box it is and where that box is stashed.

No, my friends. We cannot put Jesus in a box – because Jesus defies the category of any box AND because we need Jesus with us every day. Jesus cannot be stored away until we feel the need to pull him out of that King box....or that Shepherd box....or that warm fuzzy box.....however we've decided to label Jesus.

I love live theater. There is a theatrical term - “breaking the fourth wall.” It's also used in movies and television. “Breaking the fourth wall” occurs when a character or performer directly addresses the audience. The stage is a box, if you will. We, the audience sit outside that box and watch what happens inside it. But sometimes a character ignores that wall which faces the audience – they “break” the fourth wall and talk to us.

If we attempt to put Jesus in a box, he will break that fourth wall. Jesus will kick out one side of that stupid box and let us know that there is no box that can define him.

Just like a theater character breaking the fourth wall to tell us something we need to know about the play we're watching....Jesus breaks the fourth wall of the box we've placed him in to tell us something we need to know about the life we're living.

If we've placed Jesus in a “king” box, he'll break out to tell us something about the “shepherd” box....or the “teacher” box....Jesus will jump out of the “compassionate listener” box....or the “prince of peace” box....and demonstrate what the “status quo disrupter” box can do.

Jesus cannot be put in a single box. Jesus is more awesome...more wonderful...more complex...than any box can hold. There is no single label which correctly describes Jesus.

We must look beyond putting Jesus in the box that is most convenient for us. And we are called to do the same with every person we meet.

Last year on Christ the King Sunday, the Gospel for the day was from Matthew 25. It told us that the way we treat a stranger.....we are treating Christ in the same way. If we can't put Jesus in a box, then we can't put other people in a box either.

But that's what we as humans want to do. Let's put everything and everyone in a box with a nice, neat label. It will make our lives so easy and orderly. We don't have to deal with the complexities of life and human nature if everyone just stays in their box.

And there are so many boxes we have to put people in.

That person is homeless.

That person is a racist.

That person is lazy.

That person is a misogynist.

That person made bad choices.

That person doesn't understand how WE do things.

That person is here illegally.

That person is”less than.”

Putting people in a box and placing that box in the back of the closet is judging them for what we perceive them to be.

In the sermon on the mount, Jesus said, “Judge not lest you be judged.” In John, Jesus said, “Let the person without sin cast the first stone.”

Maybe Jesus would add, “You can't put me in a box. I don't want you to do that to anyone else. Do your best to look deeper and see what you might have in common.”

I know it's difficult. Especially right now. Our society seems to have two boxes. Us and Them. But we cannot build the Kingdom of God here on earth if we spend

our time putting so many people in a box that we want to tape shut and discard. It won't work that way.

We've got to try and see beyond the boxes we put people into and beyond the labels we slap on their chests.

And if you can't put Jesus in a box....and if we're called to refrain from putting other people in boxes.....

That leaves us – you and me. Let's not put ourselves in a box, either. Jesus wants so much more for us than to have us force ourselves into one way of thinking and being. Jesus calls us to do so much more than hide in a box with the lid securely closed just hanging out with the other people in that box complaining about all the other boxes we've created for "them."

Boxes are stifling. How can we grow and learn and change the world when we're around other people just like us all the time.

Even worse, how can you grow and learn and change the world when we've made a tiny, restrictive box for only yourself. That's the box for those of us who think we're not good enough.....or that box that says it's too hard and I'm not strong enough. That box where you go when you feel hopeless or no one understands you.

Don't do it! Break that fourth wall. Kick yourself out of that box you've so carefully constructed and closed yourself into.

One of the great joys of my ministry is working with young people who are searching for their identity – figuring out who they are. A few years ago, a young person talked to me and explained they were questioning their sexuality. Our conversation led to me suggesting to them they did not have to pick a label for themselves that day. In fact, they never had to pick a box, jump in, and stay there for the rest of their life. Boxes are confining and keep us from becoming the best person we can be. Boxes keep us from becoming the person Jesus wants us to be.

We are so much more than any box can hold.

No boxes for Jesus. No boxes for other people. No boxes for ourselves.

Break down those boxes. Rip them to shreds. What a joy it will be when our recycling bin is full to overflowing.