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Little Boxes: Transfiguration According to Mark, Chapter 9, February 11, 2018

Will you pray with me? May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be good and pleasing to you, O God, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Have you ever been driving down the road when something you see sparks your imagination? I mean something that does more than catch your attention in passing, but it opens-up entire insights into how you see the world. I would call it a mini or micro “transfiguration.” It is a moment of transformation (which is another and more relatable way to translate the Greek word used for transfiguration), and I am all for the church using more understandable language like lobby instead of narthex, but I digress. I recently read a story about someone for whom this happened: A sudden moment of vision or inspiration, a clear view on the reality of things, changed her life and has inspired others to see clearly as well.

Her daughter tells the story from 1962 of driving with her parents from San Francisco through Daly City in the Bay Area on their way to a political organizing gathering organized by local Quakers. Her mother suddenly, upon looking at the hillside where development was happening, threw the steering wheel to her husband who had been in the passenger seat. **“Take the wheel honey, I have a song to write,”** we can imagine her saying.

There and then somewhere in the suburbs, south of San Francisco maybe using the dashboard as a desk, a song was written. An activist, one of the founders of the Women’s Institute for the Freedom of the Press, musician, dedicated Unitarian, Malvina Reynolds, wrote a song that has come to epitomize the rebellion against conformity and being boxed-in.¹ Her song was later made famous by singer Pete Seeger:

“Little boxes on the hillside,
 Little boxes made of ticky tacky,
 Little boxes on the hillside,
 Little boxes all the same.
 There's a green one and a pink one
 And a blue one and a yellow one,
 And they're all made out of ticky tacky
 And they all look just the same.

And the people in the houses
 All went to the university,
 Where they were put in boxes
 And they came out all the same,
 And there's doctors and lawyers,
 And [ministers]² and executives,
 And they're all made out of ticky tacky
 And they all [think] just the same...³

And they all play on the golf course
 And drink their martinis dry

¹ <https://web.archive.org/web/20071222231203/http://music.homegrownseries.com/?p=5>

² Wording changes made in brackets for context and effect.

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VUoXtddNPAM>

And they all have pretty children
 And the children go to school,
 And the children go to summer camp
 And then to the university
 Where they are put in boxes
 And they come out all the same.

And the boys go into business
 And marry and raise a family
 In boxes made of ticky tacky
 And they all look just the same,
 There's a pink one and a green one
 And a blue one and a yellow one
 And they're all made out of ticky tacky
 And they all look just the same.”- Malvina Reynolds

Protest song perhaps, anthem of nonconformity, yes... but this is also my favorite (and this might surprise you) Transfiguration Sunday hymn. Every year on this Sunday in the lectionary, every single time I read Mark, Chapter 9, I always find myself humming [hum the song] this great song. Why you might ask?

Jesus takes his closest friends to hike up a hillside with him, and when they reach the summit the disciples, as the story goes, witness a glimpse of reality: love embodied. They see Jesus, for the first time in the Gospels, reveal himself to be a sign and symbol of God’s wildly untamed love. This is a glimpse, not a whole picture, but it is a glimpse into the power, freedom, and the burning love beyond appearances. God’s voice echoes from the clouds: “This is my son, the Beloved, the One Whom I love—in whom love is invested! Listen to him.” Not only is Jesus there, but the representatives of tradition Elijah and Moses also appear for a glimpse of a different dimension. And we thought Colorado was the only place with people having *special visions!*

Our Christian tradition is filled with rich and far out stories, but there is none as strange and fabulous as this one.

In response to seeing something new, seeing the Transfiguration of Christ, the disciples don’t celebrate something new happening, but they revert to something old. They attempt to put Jesus in a box. **There in the glowing radiant white, their shocked instinct is to take him and say, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and for Elijah...”** *There is a pink one and a green one and a blue one...*

The dwelling places or booths or boxes (also translations) the disciples want to build for Jesus and his companions are highly symbolic here. They symbolize a tradition found in Ancient Near Eastern religions of that time that gods and demigods (Greek, Eastern, and others) would have portable tent-like alters and shrines (literally little boxes) built so that the people, a specific tribe, could own and claim and keep that god with them. And by doing this the people, especially nomadic people, believed they would have favor with that god and control its love in a way. Another symbolic part of this story is the mountaintop. Jesus appearing on the mountaintop in his true form is another way that the author of Mark borrows from Greek literature of the “coming out” of new gods to their human followers borrow a trope. With this the author is putting Jesus in the company of familiar stories, but then Mark inverts it entirely. The disciples’ response, however, is deeply rooted in the Ancient Near Eastern tradition in which they are embedded.

The disciples' first instinct here, upon learning that their mountain climbing buddy, Jesus, is actually a manifestation of the Divine is to do what? When we read this passage, we often laugh (Ha Ha Ha) and think the disciples are dumb, while in fact they are just ancient opportunists. [See, see that is what happens when you read the Bible literally instead of narratively as it was intended... you miss really cool stuff.] **What the disciples are suggesting they want to build in this dwelling is really a god-trap! They want to build a trap, a box, and capture this new god in it before he can get away!** Not so stupid after all in context...

What they don't know though is that the religion they are unconsciously part of founding, this Christianity business, is something new...or should be something new when not confined inappropriately and incorrectly by boxes of dogma and doctrine and pews and other traps like that!

Jesus rejects the disciples' offer of building a box for him. We in the United Church of Christ as in other progressive Christian traditions understand Jesus as the bearer of something new—liberation for the oppressed, the opening-up of boxes, and the embodiment of a Love that cannot be held by anyone's box or church or dogma or confine or definition.

Instead of accepting the traditional god-in-a-box role, in this story God is doing something different for the first time. This story is supposed to signal to both the Greek and the Jewish communities that this new tradition is something new, weird, far out, and different—Jesus refuses the traditional boxes. “This is my son, the Beloved, the One Whom I love! Listen to him.” **Rather, this whole Jesus business is supposed to be about a LOVE that is free and out there in the world.** It is radical, it is wild, it is new, and it won't get in a box.

Our faith tradition, at its best, is one that was intended to breakout of the little boxes on a hillside, no two loves are the same, and to set God and people free. So, what happened to Christianity? What went wrong?

By 1962, when Malvina Reynolds wrote *Little Boxes*, this religion that was supposed to be all about getting out of the boxes was the one that had become more about little boxes than any other. We became the box factory. It is the subtext of her songs. We have denominational boxes. We have belief boxes. We have good and bad check boxes. Many in our religion have boxes for love they will accept and love like mine that they will not accept. We have boxes for the saints and boxes for the sinners. We have boxes for the high pledgers and boxes for those who don't pledge. We have endless boxes—believe me—I just helped design our new database. **We have so many boxes now in Christianity that even UPS is jealous! FedEx called and they want their boxes back, friends.** We are called, by a loving God in this passage, to be those who reject boxes and traditional boundaries like Christ does. What reason does God give for us to listen to Jesus in Mark Chapter 9? We are only told that that he is the one whom God's LOVE is channeled through. “Hey, I love this guy, listen up.” That is our job now in 2018 as the Body of Christ in the world—a channel of love and liberation.

Valentines Day is this week when we get a very normative view of what love looks like, and I have to say that it looks *awfully* straight to me from my vantage point. We all know that love is hard work, we know that it comes in many forms, we know that for some it includes having kids, and for others of us having children isn't in the picture, for some it means being single and for others married, for some local and others have to be long distance for a time, for some in an RV and others in a house, for some communications comes easily and for others quiet is key, for some dogs for other couples cats (don't ask me why). Valentine's Day would tell us that everyone's love and relationship should fit in an identical red, heart-shaped box made by Russell Stover.

Our Scripture today from Mark 9, however, says otherwise. Transfiguration or Transformation Sunday says otherwise. It is the time when we see a colorful world, where God rejects traditional boxes for deities, and when we are invited by God's love to find new ways to define our belief, our relationships, and our own identities before a God who calls us, calls you *beloved*.

Malvina Reynolds saw something that day on the hills outside of San Francisco. She saw a physical manifestation of the attempts of society to cubical our lives, our loves, and even God. That moment of clarity, her own Transfiguration vision, led to the creation of a simple song, one that many of us know, that stands as a prophesy of counter-culture to anyone who might want to box God, you, or me in.

“Little boxes on the hillside,
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Little Boxes is a song about the uniformity, the compartmentalizing, the *cubicalization* of our lives and our society, but it can also be about what has happened to the church, to religion, and what we still today, just like Peter, James, and John, attempt to do to God. We try to put God into a box—a box that only serves only our tribe, our viewpoint, our people, our style of love, those like us already. Today's story from Mark deconstructs that box.

May none of you ever find yourselves boxed in, and know that Jesus...that guy we talk about once a month at Plymouth... ya... he refused “the box” in the name of love on Transfiguration Sunday so many years ago... and so can you! Amen.