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Redwoods Presbyterian Church
Larkspur, California
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Jeremiah 1:4-10, Psalm 71:1-6, Luke 13:10-17
“Out of the Box”

Last Sunday afternoon I attended the San Francisco Outside Lands Concert in the Golden Gate Park. Twenty bands performed on four stages stretching over 10 city blocks.

Shortly after my arrival at noon I listened to a group billed as “gospel, soul and blues” and relaxed on the grass reading *Meditations with Meister Eckhart*.

Towards evening I stood at the main stage listening to Phoenix and Kings of Leon. I struck up a conversation with a young woman who has lived in the San Francisco Bay Area for 11 years. She grew up on a farm in Indiana and said you could go fishing in the river on your way to church on Sunday morning.

She lives in Corte Madera but is leaving in two weeks for Fairfax. I asked if she knew about Redwoods Presbyterian Church in Larkspur – the A-framed building that wraps around a redwoods grove. She said she’d seen the church and wondered why I asked. Was I a member there?

I told her I was the pastor of the church. She said that was “cool” and introduced me to her fiancé and said they were going to be married in the new year and wondered if I would perform the ceremony. This was a first: A request at a rock concert to conduct a wedding.

I guess if I thoroughly enjoyed what they thoroughly enjoyed then I was an excellent candidate to celebrate with them their very special day. It seemed that for them there was a pleasant and surprising discontinuity about a Presbyterian pastor at the Golden Gate concert.

The meeting was unintentional and serendipitous. I flashed back to a meal Suellen and I had with a German couple and their five-year-old son who I met at the San Francisco Theological Seminary lectionary retreat for pastors the previous week.

The Rev. Eugen Eckert, a musician, song writer and pastor in Frankfurt, Germany, is chaplain at the Goethe University and at the Commerzbank-Arena that hosts major soccer games, sports events and rock concerts. The premise of his ministry is to go where the people gather most – instead of waiting for them to come to him. He performs weddings and baptisms in a chapel at the arena. Players, fans, concert-goers and staff visit the chapel for quiet and prayer. Famous soccer players whose faith is important to them worship there.

This is new thinking in Christian circles. We meet God's vast and wonderful variety of people off campus – more than we do at church. I'm not sure I would have met this young couple if I'd waited for them to come to church. I could have but it was more likely I'd meet them where I did last Sunday. And since I met them there they were interested in coming here. This may happen or not but their hearts were opened to what was going on here because I was there.

Earlier in the day I read the words by Meister Eckhart:

“When one has learned to let go and let be, then one is well disposed, and he or she is always in the right place whether in society or in solitude. But if one has a wrong attitude, one is always in the wrong place whether in society or not. Now one who is rightly disposed has God with one in actual fact in all places, just as much in the street and in the midst of many people as in church, or the desert, or a monastic cell.”

Eckhart is not denying the significance of the church. He affirms the spirit in all places and that's why I could enjoy God at the Outside Lands Concert and enjoy God in the church. There's a lot more going for me in the church such as worship, the nurture of my faith in community and encouragement for meaningful engagement in the world.

My experience at Outside Lands and my conversation with the Rev. Eugen Eckert give us examples of how out-of-the-box our thinking must be if we are to be truly faithful to Jesus Christ. Isn't that the intention of the Gospel reading today?

Jesus is chastised by a religious leader for breaking the rules of the synagogue by healing a woman on the Sabbath. They draw lines in the sand: You do this here and you do that there. It's an amazing text and bears repeating.

“Now Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, ‘Woman, you are set free from your ailment.’

“When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the Sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, ‘There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the Sabbath day.’

“But the Lord answered him and said, ‘You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the Sabbath day?’

“When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing.”

Isn't it unbelievable how the Sabbath non-work rule of this religious community completely blinds them to compassion? Jesus unlocks that prison but I'm not sure the synagogue community appreciates it. The crowd rejoices just like the young woman I met at the concert when she heard I was a pastor and was also enjoying the music there.

Jesus shows this religious community how their narrow religiosity turns them away from a fuller and deeper spirituality. He breathes life into this realm of restriction. The irony though is that communities of Jesus, called churches, throughout the ages have placed new restrictions on their adherents and people have turned away.

Our church is open, welcoming and inviting but unfortunately we are painted with the brush of more restrictive Christian communities. People lump churches together. We are stereotyped. My ministry in part is dedicated to undoing the stereotypes and that's why stories like this in the gospels have an enormous appeal.

Jesus points to the line that says this is secular and this is sacred. He erases the line by healing during the week and on the Sabbath. Its okay to enjoy God – to really enjoy God – in all places and at all times: In ocean and occupation, whatever one's occupation is; in mountains and monasteries; and at rock concerts and church.

Jesus expands our perspective. He also breaks ridiculous rules and affirms all of life. Healing happens all the time and everywhere and especially at church – on the Sabbath.

My sermon could have been titled "24/7" because God is present in our world 24/7: during the week and on the Sabbath. 24/7 it's a beautiful world and we are encouraged to enjoy it. 24/7 it's a hurting world and we are challenged to heal it. 24/7 there's a living world and we are called to appreciate and care for it. 24/7 there's a dying world and we exhorted to transform it.

God expects us to enjoy life where we can and to transform life where it needs it. God heals today and every day. Amen.