

Pushing the Envelope Romans 12:1-8; Matthew 15:21-28;
Psalm 138 8-21-2011

I have always been puzzled by the expression, “Pushing the envelope.” I sort of grasped the implication of it—that someone was going a bit farther than usual in pursuing something or other. But, I wasn’t sure. So, when it popped into my mind as a title for this meditation, I decided it was high time I looked it up and discovered from whence it had cometh and how it had entered our vocabulary as a much-used expression.

I discovered that, originally, it was a term used by test pilots and in math. This is what I learned from worldwidewords.org.

It comes from mathematics, specifically as it is used in aeroplane design. It was popularised by Tom Wolfe’s book of 1979, *The Right Stuff*, about test pilots and the early space programme. It’s an excellent example of the way that a bit of specialised jargon, known only to a few practitioners, can move into the general language.

In mathematics, an *envelope* is the enclosing boundary of a set or family of curves that is touched by every curve in the system. This usage is known from the latter part of the nineteenth century. It’s also used in electrical engineering for the curve that you get when you connect the successive peaks of a wave. This *envelope* curve encloses or envelops all the component curves.

Still awake and sort of with me? There is a bit more.

In aeronautics, the *envelope* is the outer boundary of all the curves that describe the performance of the aircraft under various conditions of engine thrust, speed, altitude, atmospheric

conditions, and the like. It is generally taken to be the known limits for the safe performance of the craft.

Test pilots have to test (or *push*) these limits to establish exactly what the plane is capable of doing, and where failure is likely to occur — to compare calculated performance limits with ones derived from experience. Test pilots called this *pushing the edge of the envelope* in the 1950s and 1960s, but this was soon shortened

Following Tom Wolfe's book and film, the phrase began to move out into the wider world; the first recorded use in the more general sense of going (or attempting to go) beyond the limits of what is known to be possible, came in the late 1980s.
(worldwidewords.org)

You now know more than you ever wanted to know about
“pushing the envelope.”

Now, we might wonder, what does this have to do with this morning's readings, one about the gifts of the spirit and the other about the Canaanite mother Jesus encountered?

Well, some of us have the special gift of getting things done. We might do it through exhortation or leadership, generosity or kindness or compassion. We can move things along through the special gift we have been given by the spirit. Sometimes we manage to move forward with a project or a life goal by testing the limits of what is usual, what it is that has been done before. We “push the envelope” to see what result we might achieve.

When we do this we must exercise some caution so that we do not go too far. We can accomplish a lot by pushing to a certain point but, then, we need to know when it is we should go no farther. If we push too hard we can end up turning off the very people we seek to engage, angering some and hurting others. We defeat ourselves by building a wall of resistance and we never

manage to have our special project completed or even to be heard if we have an idea that we consider important.

The Canaanite mother had a sense of just how far to push the envelope of her cause with Jesus. Evidently, she had heard of him and his ability to perform healing miracles. She sought him out and engaged him in conversation. It was not an easy task—he ignored her at first. He did so because Canaanites were the pagan enemies of Israel. But she persisted. She did not become angry, but she was intelligently persistent, she knelt at his feet and asked that her child might be healed. She was finally heard and granted her wish. She pushed the envelope to test its boundaries and she discovered that God's love could include even her and her child.

Jesus must have learned a lesson or two from this encounter. He discovered that his mission was broader than just to the Israelites. His mission was to be inclusive and was to embrace all comers. He set aside conforming to the world's expectations by reforming his mind to more clearly discern God's will.

We are his followers. There is no limiting God's love. There is only human nature that determines to shut out others or to embrace them. We are to be the carriers of God's love into the world. This is a special gift of the Spirit given to each and every one of us. Sometimes people are difficult to love, they disappoint and hurt us, or they might be foreign to us. But that matters not. We are called to practice love and acceptance. There is no way to avoid it if we are to be known as Christians.

Through sharing God's love and acceptance we resist conforming to the world around us and begin to transform our selves by renewing our minds so that we may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect in all we say and think and do. Amen

Henri Nouwen from A Cry for Mercy

O Lord, life passes by swiftly. Events that a few years ago kept me totally preoccupied have now become vague memories; conflicts that a few months ago seemed so crucial in my life now seem futile and hardly worth the energy; inner turmoil that robbed me of my sleep only a few weeks ago has now become a strange emotion of the past; books that filled me with amazement a few days ago now do not seem as important; thoughts which kept my mind captive only a few hours ago, have now lost their power and have been replaced by others.

Why is it so hard to learn from this insight? Why am I continuously trapped by a sense of urgency and emergency? Why do I not see that you are eternal, that your kingdom lasts forever, and that for you a thousand years are like one day? O Lord, let me enter into your presence and there taste the eternal, timeless, everlasting love with which you invite me to let go of my time bound anxieties, fears, preoccupations, and worries. "Seek first the kingdom," you said, and all these other things will be given you as well." All that is time bound will show its real meaning when I can look at it from the place where you want me to be, the place of undying love.

Lord, teach me your ways and give me the courage to follow them. Amen

