

“Overcoming Denial Through Love”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
April 26, 2015

1 John 3: 16-24

For the last few weeks, I have been in denial. I have been drifting down that river in Egypt. I have been totally and completely unwilling to accept reality. What reality is that, you might ask? The reality that my youngest child is now old enough to be confirmed as an active member of the church.

It seems like only yesterday that Heather was one-year-old when we arrived here in Indianapolis. I have two vivid images burned into my memory that still seem to have just happened. One is a picture someone took of Margaret Wilson holding Heather at the welcome dinner you hosted for our family when we arrived. The other is from the first Christmas we were here. It is a picture of Mary Carter holding a sound-asleep Heather on her lap after the Christmas Eve Service on one of the pews in the main hallway. Those literally seem like they happened last month, not twelve years ago. There is no way so much time could have passed since then.

Perhaps you have experienced similar feelings of denial. Not about me – you probably can readily admit that I am truly old enough to have my youngest child ready to be confirmed as a member of the church! But maybe in your own life, you have lived in denial that time has marched on or that things have changed so dramatically. Your son or daughter is now a young adult, but denial causes you to only see him or her as a child in need of your protection and constant advice. Your work place is introducing new and improved ways of accomplishing tasks, but denial causes you to be resistant to learning new ways of doing things. Your loved one is aging, has changing needs, or is dealing with illness and disease, but denial causes you to see him or her as if nothing is wrong.

The church can be an even heartier breeding ground for denial. Programming is continued for groups who have very few participating anymore. Ideas from generations ago are offered to address modern challenges that need modern approaches. Assumptions are made that someone else will step in and serve in leadership, help with that event, invite someone to worship, greet that visitor in the hallway. The church can be one of the heartiest breeding grounds for denial.

Oftentimes, when we are in denial, we are not able to face a new reality before us. When we are in denial, it can be too painful to admit where we have failed, how we have struggled, or what we need to do differently. When we are in denial, it can be too disruptive to our

worldview to admit that things are not rosy and perfect, that we might have to spend time and resources differently than we have been, or that others' viewpoints have actually changed significantly from what we believe. Denial can cause us to retreat to using only words and thoughts, and paralyze our ability to live out faith in action and deed.

The writer of 1 John does not speak about denial directly, but he addresses the temptation we can fall into as Christians to deny our changed reality as disciples of our risen Lord. For John, there is only one commandment we should live by: "We should believe in the name of God's Son, Jesus Christ, and love one another, just as he has commanded us" (3:23). When our faith is grounded in that reality, then everything we do flows from that core belief. "All who obey his commandment abide in him, and he abides in them" (3:24). If we truly believe in this new reality of God's love in Jesus Christ, of life conquering death, then everything that we do will reflect how we love God and one another as disciples of Christ.

In fact, John uses an example that any of us could relate to in 21st-century America. He writes: "How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?" (3:17). For John, since God has laid down his life for us in Jesus Christ, "we ought to lay down our lives for one another" (3:16). While some have literally died for the faith, there are other ways to lay down our lives for one another, including assisting "a brother or sister in need." It is one thing to spew words about faith and hope and love to our fellow brothers and sisters in the faith. But without actions that bear truth to those words, we are denying the new reality that is present in Jesus Christ our risen Lord.

Ronald Cole-Turner writes: *For Christians, self-sacrifice should be ordinary, not extraordinary. We ought to lay down our lives, John writes, not intending to give a grand challenge for heroic Christians but an everyday commandment for ordinary Christians. The Christian life is a life laid down for others, a life built on self-sacrifice.*

Laying down our lives, at its core, can mean any number of ways in which we lay aside our claim to own our lives. We lay down our lives when we put others first. We lay down our lives when we live for the good of others. We lay down our lives when we make time for others. To love others is to lay down our life for them. When we lay down the completely normal human desire to live for ourselves, and when instead we allow the love of God to reorient us toward the needs of others, we are laying down our lives.

How can you claim to receive the love of God in your life, John asks us, if you do not show love in your actions? Many Christians today claim they believe in Jesus Christ. By that, they mean they assent to the truth of the gospel. But what is the truth of the gospel, if not believing that living a life of sacrificial love is the starting point of our new life in

Christ? Believing in Christ means believing that Christ saves us by making us like himself.

Faith and love come bound together as a single package. Faith alone, the Reformers said, is all that is required for salvation. But faith is never alone. When God creates saving faith in our hearts, God creates active love. Faith in Jesus Christ is faith that transforms the believing heart, making it a self-sacrificed heart (*Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 2, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2008: 442-444*).

“Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action” (3:18).

Another way I can feel old today is looking back at how many young women and men have been confirmed as disciples of Christ in my time as pastor of this church. Including Heather and Amber today, thirty-two youth have been through the confirmation class at John Knox since 2003. In all of those cases, each student was mentored in the faith by an adult disciple. And as part of each of those classes, every student was required to write a personal statement of faith, which they shared with the Session upon being welcomed as an active member of the church. It is in those statements that I witness spiritual growth and development, and I hear God speaking to us, the church, as to where we should be going through the Spirit’s leading.

In May’s newsletter, I have shared with the congregation portions of Amber’s and Heather’s faith statements, and I would strongly encourage you to read them, if you haven’t already. I’m going to embarrass them both by sharing two particularly important statements that they wrote.

On being a disciple, Heather says: “I believe that being a disciple of Jesus Christ means being an active and participative member of the church. I need to use my talents to serve him, and I need to be able to spread his teachings wherever and whenever I can. I believe that being a disciple of Christ means setting an example of what he was and is” (Heather Mansell).

On what the church means to her, Amber wrote, “To me, the church is a family coming together to worship God. The church is not a building. Church is the Body of Christ. The hands, feet, eyes, and ears of God. Church is wherever we are, when doing the work of God. My church is very inviting, fun, and feels like a family doing work for Christ” (Amber Judy).

Those are words of faith in action. Those are words exhibiting love in truth and action. Those are statements that ought to challenge, inspire, and force each of us to examine our perspective on this congregation and our active participation in it.

As part of the listening sessions we are engaged in right now, one of the questions you are asked to consider is, “What future do you think God has in mind for John Knox Presbyterian Church, especially as you

think about the next 10 years?” That question forces us to dream and vision into the future. But it also makes a basic assumption that we might all take for granted: that John Knox Presbyterian Church will be here in ten years time. You might call it blasphemous or egregiously short-sighted to suggest this congregation might not be here 10 years from now.

And yet, if we do not recognize that our increasing age in population must be compensated by strong initiatives to welcome new people to our congregation, we will be the embodiment of denial. If our perspective on the church’s identity is solely grounded on a building, and not on “the hands, feet, eyes, and ears of God,” then who will honestly be drawn to be here in ten years time? If we only seek to live for ourselves, refusing “to lay down our lives for one another,” then how are “we setting an example of what Jesus was and is?”

If our faith is solely rooted in words and speech, and fails to be embodied in truth and action, then we will just fall further into the pit of denial.

But denial – like Good Friday – does not have to have the final word. When we embody the love John speaks of – sacrificial, laying-down-our-lives-for-one-another love – then denial is pushed aside, and we truly accept the new reality of Easter morning.

Denial – like death – does not have the final word. But we must be witnesses – “setting an example of what Jesus was and is” – so that we might truly be “the church wherever we are, whenever we are doing the work of God.”

Look outward in faith, not inward in fear. Lay down your life for your sister or brother in faith, rather than always thinking first of yourself. And when you start floating down that river in Egypt called denial, remember that love conquers all things – even our doubts and our fears – for in loving one another, we are loving the one who conquered death and gave us life eternal.

“Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action” (3:18).

Thanks be to God. Amen.