

“Loving God by Loving One Another”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church - Indianapolis, Indiana
May 10, 2015

1 John 5: 1-6
Acts 10: 44-48

I usually look forward to getting the mail here at the church. If I'm the one gathering it from the mailbox, I'll sort through it and toss the junk in recycling, cautiously place the envelopes with checks in the locked-file cabinet for deposit, and begrudgingly place the bills in Troy Judy's mailbox - our church treasurer. There have been times when going to the mailbox has been full of incredible joy and shock. There was the day I opened a letter from an attorney in town, which informed us that we had received the largest bequest ever from the estate of Ellie Gilliland. And there was the Saturday in June 2012 when I opened the letter from the Lilly Endowment stating that we had been granted a total of \$50,000 for me and the church to engage in the Clergy Renewal Experience. Those were great days to get the mail here at church.

I did not have such a joyous feeling when I opened my mail here on Thursday morning. I received this letter (hold it up) from the Department of Code Enforcement of the City of Indianapolis. It is addressed to "John Knox Presbyterian Church, c/o The Rev. Frank Mansell." No one calls me "The Rev. Frank Mansell." As I read further, I could feel my blood pressure rise.

"A recent inspection of the above referenced property indicated violations of the Revised Code of Indianapolis and Marion County as follows." I was then informed that the A-frame sign we use for specific events - this was for yesterday's Fabulous Family Fun Day - and the Preschool's publicity sign by the north driveway were out of compliance with current codes. If we did not resolve these issues by May 15, we could receive a citation for each violation, assessed a fee of \$215 for each visit to the property to see if the violation had been resolved, or a lawsuit with fines up to \$2,500 for each violation plus court costs.

Do you know what the first thing was that went through my mind after reading this? I won't tell you, because if I did it might get me fired. Do you know what the second thing was that went through my mind after reading this? "Really? This is most important right now to the city?" I mean, we have violence and murder and children in poverty and homelessness and unemployment - right here, right in this immediate neighborhood. One of the signs was inviting more of the community's children and families - with an incredible diversity of ethnicities and economic backgrounds - to provide growth and care and nurture in its

cooperative preschool. And the other sign was inviting the community to come together, for children and families, for an event in which we partnered with our city's police department! Again, you don't want to know what my first reaction was to this letter.

Now, don't worry. We aren't going to go to court over any of this, or have to pay exorbitant fines. The preschool took down their sign on Friday, and ours will be taken down tomorrow. But I have every intention of engaging this department of our city government with serious questions. And don't be surprised to see a letter to the editor at some point - I've only done it once before, but this has, needless to say, made me a little hot under the collar.

This experience brought to mind how much we rely on rules to order our life in community. I know that there are likely good reasons to have certain codes regarding signage - visibility, safety, etc. But when rules become our primary focus, and we lose sight of the intent behind the rules, we can lose our focus on what is truly most important. Don't get me wrong: I'm not advocating anarchy here! I'm just saying I wonder sometimes if we tend to get so caught up in the letter of the law that we forget the spirit of the law: to be a stronger, healthier community.

In our first scripture lesson today, we witness an extraordinary departure by leaders of the early church from an expected set of rules. Peter and his fellow apostles believed that the good news of Jesus Christ was meant for the Jewish people alone. That was his background, that was Jesus' background, and that was the background of so many of Jesus' initial followers. The first several chapters of the Book of Acts illustrates this focus by the church on the Jewish people and the Spirit's propagation throughout their communities to become followers of Jesus Christ.

But in chapter 10, Peter meets Cornelius, a centurion who is a Gentile, a non-Jew. Through a series of visions and messengers from God, these two men come together in Caesarea, and in conversation realize that God has initiated this encounter between these men from different backgrounds. The Spirit has told Peter to not call profane what God has made clean (10:15), and Cornelius has been instructed to seek out Peter, for his prayers have been heard and will be answered (10:4). In their conversation, in their encounter, God makes clear that the rules of the past are no longer applicable. And Peter states, "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him" (10:34).

If there was a department of code enforcement for the early church, it did not take precedence over the Holy Spirit. For while Peter was speaking, "the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word" (10:44). The Jewish believers were shocked and amazed that even Gentiles were shown God's grace, but they had no way of denying what they

witnessed: “for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God” (10:46). Which leads to Peter’s final confirmation of this extraordinary changing of the rules: “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” (10:47). The rules of the past have been altered forever. There is only one rule that God demands strict adherence to: the rule of love.

Which brings us to our second scripture lesson today. As we heard a couple of weeks ago, the writer of 1 John is most concerned with how we live out the commandment to love God by loving one another. That love for one another is not a selfish love; it is a sacrificial love, a love that should compel us “to lay down our lives for one another” (3:16). Why? Because God laid down his life for us through his love for the world in Jesus Christ. If we truly believe in that love for us, how can we reasonably refuse to share that love with a brother or sister in faith?

Now, John takes it a step further to say that, “Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God” (5:1). The only rule that matters to God is your faith and trust in Jesus Christ. And when we love God, we are obeying God’s commandments. If we are doing this, then “his commandments are not burdensome” (5:3). When we love one another as God has loved us, then our life in community is not dictated by burdensome rules and regulations, but by a freedom to conquer the world through our actions of faith in Jesus Christ. “Who is it that conquers the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?” (5:5)

One commentator writes: “They’ll know we are Christians by our love . . . yes, they’ll know we are Christians by our love.” So runs the familiar refrain of Peter Scholtes’s 1966 hymn, composed at the height of one of the most tumultuous periods of U.S. history and now sung worldwide. He was moved not only by Martin Luther King, Jr., Jesse Jackson, and others involved in the civil rights movement. Quite likely, one might surmise, he was also deeply steeped in the words and worldview of 1 John.

The author of 1 John does not offer details about what love actually looks like. He assumes his audience knows God’s commandments as summed up by Jesus and enacted in John’s Gospel – healing the lame, feeding the five thousand, sparing the woman caught in adultery, raising Lazarus. At the climax of the Last Supper, Jesus announces a “new commandment” in words 1 John picks up and repeats: “Little children . . . love one another. Just as I have loved you.”

God’s commandments are “not burdensome,” he says. This certainly flies in the face of experience. Fighting racism in all its subtle forms seems especially difficult, despite progress made in the many years since Scholtes penned his verse. On a more mundane level, if we are fully honest with ourselves, we might admit that it is easier to hate

the neighbor whose dog yaps at all hours or the idiot who pulls out in front of us in heavy traffic. (Or the department of code enforcement that sends you a nasty letter). Putting up with the (shortcomings) of our most intimate family members day in and day out, whether crumbs on the counter or rude, mean, even violent treatment, is indeed a burden. In all actuality most Christians stand a long way from restoring the loving “unity” about which Scholtes and the author of 1 John speak.

So how exactly is fulfilling God’s commandments not burdensome? The first verse states the answer in plain terms: “Everyone who believes Jesus is the Christ” is welcomed into the community where love flows freely. Love is a birthright of faith. Faith “conquers” the dross and drag of this world. When love arrives under the most mundane circumstances and in the dire social times of the 1960s and today, it comes as gift and grace. Genuine love is invited, not forced, motivated by faithfulness rather than fear, counts not as “loss” but gain in some deeper way, and leads to more just and loving relationships (Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 2, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2008: 490-494).

How do we faithfully and abundantly love God? By loving one another, for that is how the world will know we are Christians.

That includes those who are easy to love, who think like us, who look like us, who do not cause division or animosity, who follow the rules.

That includes those who are hard to love, who think differently than us, who look different than us, who cause animosity and stress, who don’t necessarily follow the rules.

(Picking up letter) For me, that includes Nichole Stark, the property inspector who sent me this letter. I will share with her what this church is doing to help and serve this community. I will share with her why we want our community to come to these events that we advertise on our signs. And I will not hold her in contempt, but will explain to her how we are seeking to fully and completely love our neighbors as God has loved us.

Who is your Nichole Stark? Who is your neighbor who is hard to love? How will you show him or her the love that God has shown you in Jesus Christ your Lord?

May we love God by loving one another, now and forever. Thanks be to God. Amen.