

“Standing Firm in God’s Love”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
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2 Thessalonians 2: 1-5, 13-17

Last week, we witnessed something pretty historic in our city and our community of Speedway. Whether you are a racing fan or not, it’s nearly impossible to live in Indianapolis or on the west side of our community and not know about the Indianapolis Motor Speedway. It has been a fixture and literally is what gave this town its name more than one hundred years ago. Many of us have attended races, raised money by selling concessions or cleaning up after races, or have simply driven by it in our daily commute to downtown. The Speedway is a part of our community’s identity – always has been, and likely always will be.

That’s why Monday’s announcement was so significant and newsworthy. For the last seventy-four years, the Indianapolis Motor Speedway was owned by the Hulman-George Family. Prior to their purchase of the track, it was only owned by two other individuals. On Monday, it was announced that the Speedway, the IndyCar Race Series, and other related entities had been sold to Roger Penske and his corporation. Penske is a long-time race car owner and giant in the sport, and all indications are he is committed to continuing the upward momentum and progress that the Speedway has seen over the last several years.

There were two things that came out of the press conference announcing this change in ownership which were particularly striking to me. One was hearing how the sale was brought up. Tony George, the CEO of the Speedway, did not just put the Speedway up for sale – he sought out someone he trusted to take it over. And he used a word which we are very accustomed to using in the church: stewardship. At the last race of this season in September, George approached Penske and said: “I’d like to talk to you about stewardship.” This wasn’t just a business transaction to make a huge profit. George sought Penske out because he didn’t want the track to be in the hands of just anyone; he wanted the next person to be a good steward of what George and his family were entrusting to him.

The other thing was this comment by Tony George: “We all love it and we all care deeply for (the Speedway). I think we all realize that we probably had taken it as far as we can.” I am sure there are multiple factors that went into the decision to seek out a new owner, some of which may never become public. But for Tony George to state publicly that the Speedway and racing series had greater potential which required new leadership and resources to achieve, to me, that takes a lot

of humility and courage to admit. Leadership is not just about what we can do; it also can be about what we can't do and realizing we need others to step forward for the good of the organization.

When changes in leadership take place, like what we are witnessing at the Speedway, it can lead to anxiety and unrest, no matter how much effort is given to preventing such disruption. It's just human nature to be unsure when an organization experiences these kinds of transitions. We see it in the church all the time, for example, when either pastors or members leave, and the status quo is upended. As human beings, we tend to not handle change very well, to say the least.

The church in Thessalonica was a church full of confusion and high anxiety, even on the verge of schism. It was one of the churches that Paul founded early in his ministry, and the first letter to the Thessalonians reflects a more comforting, pastoral, compassionate tone. What has changed from the first to the second letters? Primarily, a false teaching which has gripped the Thessalonians with fear, and it causes Paul to rebut this teaching in a forceful and passionate way. And perhaps, in the midst of this ancient conversation between a pastor and his flock, we are called to hear God's guidance and direction to stand firm and hold fast to what we have been taught, so that our hearts and minds are comforted and strengthened by every good work and deed we do (2:15,17).

What is the false teaching that has gotten the Thessalonians into such an agitated state? That the "Day of the Lord," the return of Jesus Christ, was already at hand. Barbara Blodgett writes: *This apparently referred to the day when all righteous believers would be judged worthy and gathered up to meet the Lord upon his coming again. In his first letter to the Thessalonian community, Paul had stressed the nearness of the Day of the Lord and the nearness of the Thessalonians' salvation, so as to keep hope alive, given the hardships and persecutions they were facing. In this second letter, however, the emphasis is reversed and now they are reminded that, though still very near, the Day of the Lord has not yet arrived. The Thessalonians lived in a time of heightened expectation that the end of the world would be coming soon, so they were apparently worked up into an apocalyptic frenzy. The writer's insistence that the Day of the Lord had not yet arrived would have been reassuring* (*Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 4*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2010: 278).

And in the opening verses of this passage, we hear Paul's strong pleas for the community of faith remembering what he himself taught them: "We beg you, brothers and sisters, not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed . . . (2:1-2)" "Let no one deceive you in any way . . . (2:3)" "Do you not remember that I told you these things when I was still with you? (2:5)" It is a pastor pleading with his flock to not be deceived by the teachings of any who claim to be him. Paul wants these new believers to trust that God will be with them, through the grace of their

Lord, Jesus Christ, and that shall give them hope amid the struggles they are currently enduring.

Struggles and anxiety are still a common occurrence in our life as the church. Rumors can grow into perceived realities so fast that it is hard to know what is truth and what is untruth. Anxiety can elevate over perceptions instead of concrete realities. Fear replaces faith, and we can make decisions that are motivated by fear, rather than faith. Even today, we still struggle as the church with false teachings that drain our energy rather than rejuvenating our spirit.

In the second half of this passage, notice what Paul does to address this fear. Instead of escalating the fear of the Thessalonians, he replaces it with gratitude and encouragement. “But we must always give thanks to God for you, because God chose you as the first fruits for salvation through sanctification . . . and through belief in the truth” (2:13). Paul reassures them that they were chosen for this – through the proclamation of the good news – so that they might know God’s glory in Jesus Christ. There’s nothing to fear – God chose them for this purpose, so they might know the truth Paul has already taught them.

As a result, they are encouraged to “stand firm and hold fast to the traditions” of Paul and his disciples. Paul knows the gift of faith that is in the hearts of the Thessalonians, and he reaffirms that faith, trusting that they will continue to do “every good work and deed” until Jesus does come – whenever that may be. Instead of worrying about when the Lord will come again, they are encouraged to keep living faithfully in expectant hope, as Christ wishes for them to live.

Neta Pringle writes: *The story is told that one day back in early Puritan New England there was a major eclipse. The sun was blotted out, the day turned dark, and people were terrified. “The world is going to end. What shall we do?” One insightful man replied, “Let us be found doing our duty.”*

Think about it. As a parent, was it not wonderful to leave the kids alone for a few hours and come home to find things in order? You took pride in the fact that all was well. I think God is like that. When the Day of the Lord does come, when God no longer limits God’s power in the world, when evil is finally banished, God wants to find us at work for those things that are dear to the heart of God. Our task is to keep on keeping on (ibid, 282).

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It is easy to get tied up in knots of worry and anxiety. We are unsure if our loved one will survive an illness. We are uncertain if our work and vocation is making a difference in the world. We question if our faith is as strong as it needs to be to face the challenges before us. We are scared of death, because we worry about what happens next.

Worry, anxiety, fear – they all can consume our lives and prevent us from keeping a hopeful perspective. We can lose sight of God’s love

for us – in the people who care for us, the vocation we are called to, and the community of faith from which we learn of God's love. It has happened to all of us – most certainly, including myself.

But sometimes, even when we are struggling, and we keep on keeping on, God has a funny way of making himself known. It might be a note from someone we haven't heard from in a long time, letting us know that what we're doing matters deeply to them, and they are grateful. It might be when we're in the midst of struggling with a pressing task, and out of the blue we get a phone call from a friend asking if there's anything they can help us with. It might be when we're feeling weighed down by the burden of financial debt, and we receive an unexpected gift which frees us in ways we could never have imagined. Just like Paul with the Thessalonians, God has a way of reaching out and reminding us of God's love which we have known in the past.

When life gets hard, where will we turn? What will we remember? How will we respond? I pray that you will receive words and signs of encouragement from God when you need them most, reminding you of God's ever-present love for you in Jesus Christ. For sometimes when we keep on keeping on, God stands fast alongside us, and reveals the beauty and grace which has always been with us, but we simply could not see amid all of life's stresses.

Stand fast, hold firm, and keep on keeping on.

Thanks be to God. Amen.