

## **Mission Impossible?**

### **Inside or Outside the Box?**

**1 John 3:16-24**

**May 19, 2019**

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**Mission Series**

*“Little children, let us love, not in word or speech,  
but in truth and action.”*

**1 John 3:18**

### **Prayer of Preparation**

O Lord, may we abide in you and you in us as we hear your Word and receive your Spirit, following in the way of Christ. Amen.

### **Message**

It is easy, I think, in these busy days, to lose sight of who we are and what we are called to do. As we shared a few weeks ago, we live in an age of distraction, in a time of constant motion and commotion.

Indeed, I was reading this week how easy it is to lose focus. For example, how many of you have accidentally entered the password of your cell phone on the microwave because you were going to fast?! Wow! Or you know you are living in a different era when you have a list of 15 phone numbers for a family of three, or you email the person who works at the desk next to you! Guilty! Or you know you don't played solitaire with real cards anymore. Or you know that feeling of panic, which you would not have had twenty or thirty years ago, because you left the house without your cell phone!<sup>1</sup>

It has become easier, I think, to lose sight of who we are and what we are called to do in an age of distraction, if not mind-numbing change. The new “normal” is not so “normal”; indeed, it is just very different.

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<sup>1</sup> Aspects of this sermon come from *Homiletics* “Get in the Box” (May 7, 2006). Go to [www.homiletics.online.org](http://www.homiletics.online.org).

In fact, it has been said that for every so-called new advance *in* technology, there are also the side-effects *of* technology. Sitting in front of a computer screen for hours, for instance, while productive, is really not good for our physical health, even our relational health. And yet, we seem to see such advances as progress.

A friend of mine at Southern Methodist University calls this phenomenon the tyranny of the new. We continue to believe in the myth that what comes next is always better than what came before.<sup>2</sup>

This seems to be the very definition of modern. The “modern” is always associated with what is supposed to be new or improved, enlightened or advanced, as against what is old or ancient or slow, or what is thought of as “dark ages.”

The author C.S. Lewis thought this kind of thinking was dangerous, and he called it “chronological snobbery.” Somehow we modern folk have gotten to the point where *we* think have supplanted all previous generations in wisdom and knowledge, even in moral superiority.

Lewis was fearful that we were losing sight of what is good and beautiful in favor of what appears to be functional or fashionable. Things, even people, become disposable. History seems to bear that insight out.

### **Inside or Outside the Box**

Early on in my ministry, I can remember in meetings or at conferences how such thinking took hold. I can remember how many consultants and gurus would make comments about the latest trends in ministry.

And I can remember hearing folks say, “Now, we got to think outside the box. We just can’t keep on doing what we have been doing. It is not good. The old ways don’t work anymore. Young people just don’t like all this old stuff, and if we are going to reach them, especially the Baby Boomers, we will need a band, a seeker service, and a really cool, young pastor.”

And that’s what happened. Many churches simply gutted their sanctuaries: No more organ. No more traditional music. No more this, no more that.

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<sup>2</sup> Thanks to D. Stephen Long of Southern Methodist University for this insight about the very nature of modernity in an email.

That was in the early 90s. And the so-called worship wars were in full swing. Get rid of the old. Usher in the new.

Today, it is the Millennials. What do we have to do to reach the Millennials? Have a coffee shop? Have candles and Gregorian Chants? Whatever it takes! Bring back the organ and the creeds! But again, I keep hearing, “We need to think outside the box.”

After thirty years of hearing this mantra, I am beginning to wonder if we even know what is in the box! Because all I have heard during this time is how we need to think outside the box. Get outside the box. Crawl out of the box. Jump out of the box. Leap out of the box. Get away from the box. Live outside the box.

And more and more I have come to realize, “What is it that we don’t like about the box? Is the box really that bad?”

What is going on here? Am I just an old “fuddy-duddy” or “stick-in-the-mud”?

To be sure, I see the need to understand the cultural landscape and to be creative. And I understand the need to listen and understand demographics and find ways of connecting to people and doing innovative ministry.

No argument here. I am all for meaningful mission. I am all for figuring ways of engaging in mission outside the walls of this church. I am all for finding and training people who will go into the neighborhoods of this community and relate the gospel to people. The church cannot stand still in that sense. It always has to move with God in mission.

Indeed, the more I read about John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, the more I can understand how he felt he had to go outside the Church of England to reach people and remain obedient to Christ and fulfill his mission. The church of his day had become so ingrown with dry rot that it wasn’t going to move with the Spirit. That was a problem.

But I am also mindful of the fact that Wesley did not lose sight of the box: Wesley made sure that God’s love in Christ was front and center. After all, that’s what made him who he was.

**Not Boxed In!**

In other words, if we *really* want to think outside the box, then we *really* cannot do away with the box, because it is the box that so often reminds us of who we are and what we are called to do. It is the box that has gotten us where we are.

For example, years ago – and I am leery of using illustrations from business – but years ago, the Hardee’s food chain decided to change things and so it hired a famous model to eat a hamburger while soaping a race car. It was supposed to raise the Hardee’s Banner. What happened? Sales plummeted, and the whole campaign was a flop. Maybe if Hardee’s had focused on making a better hamburger, it might have stayed afoot with the other fast-food chains. Instead, it forgot what had brought success from the beginning. A case of getting too far from the box.<sup>3</sup>

It is similar to sports teams or colleges: they typically excel when they stick with what they do best, to that one thing or strength, or to what I like to call the Curley Principle from *City Slickers*: that one thing! Focusing on that one thing is what the box is about! Forget that and it doesn’t matter whether we think outside the box or not.

Grace Church, what is it that one thing we do very well, that core ability, or that core competency? That gift we share on Christ’s behalf?

### **Letter of First John**

Last week, if you may remember, we focused on how in John’s First Letter he was seeking to guide his church back to the basics of the Christian faith, or to what is inside the box. Apparently, there were persons who did not believe in Jesus as God’s Son, as well as the notion of Jesus’ death on the cross as an act of atonement for sin. Apparently, persons were deceived on the one hand (1:8) and doing what they would like on the other (3:4). Not to mention how there was simply an absence of love and respect in the community (3:23).

And what First John is trying to say is how the church needs to be clear about what it is to be about, or what is in the box. For when the church – that is, when we – lose sight of what is in the box, or of how Jesus laid down his life for us, we are also in the process of losing sight of the knowledge of how we are to lay down our lives for one another (1 John 3:16). In other words, we begin to lose sight

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<sup>3</sup> Douglas, Rushkoff, “Back in the Box,” *Fast Company* (November 2005), 37-38.

of what Jesus' sacrificial love truly entails, that it is not only an act of forgiveness, but it is also *a pattern of behavior* among those who believe (1 John 3:23).

Jesus himself said so: "Greater love has no one than this; than to lay down one's life for one's friends" (15:13). And First John puts it this way: "Little children, let us love, not simply in word or speech, but in truth and action" (1 John 3:18). Otherwise, how can we say we abide in God, if we are not showing it by our actions? If we see someone in need, and do not respond, how can we say God is in us? (1 John 3:17). In short, we can't.

Rather, what pleases God is to believe in his Son on the one hand and to love one another on the other (1 John 3:22-23). Failing those two things, and we miss what's in the box.

### **Love in Action**

It sounds so simple, and yet, I have always wondered why Jesus and the early apostles spoke so often about love *in this way*. I mean, the apostle Paul wrote about love, didn't he (cf. 1 Cor. 13), and John writes about love here. And Luke and Peter and James all, in some fashion, write about acting in love toward God and others. And I can't help but think that surely one of the reasons they wrote so much about love is because they witnessed such a lack of it, among those inside and outside the church. Why spill so much ink unless the church was NOT actually doing what it was supposed to be doing? I mean, if this commandment to love one another is to be our core competency as Christians, then it just can't be words, right? It has to be deeds. Making it real, true.

Again, I think it was John Wesley who wrote a great deal about what it means to be a "real" Christian as opposed to an "almost" Christian. Real Christians, he said, *actually* bear the fruit of what they believe by loving and caring for others. They *really* believe that Christ died for them and forgives them, and they *really* believe that the Spirit brings new life and so put love into action.

Not as some "idea," but *really* do it.

### **Faith Promise**

As we noted last week, we all can make a difference in mission by our giving. No doubt about it. Many, many thanks. May God give the increase! And

we all can participate in mission by our praying and witnessing, which I hope we will continue, only more.

But it is only by remembering what is in the box that we can stay grounded as children of God; that is, it is only by remembering what Christ has done *for* us (1 John 3:13) and what the Spirit does *in* us (1 John 3:24) – that we can know what we are called to do (1 John 3:23).

Hence, the importance of the box. We need the box to remember that point, not as admirers of the box, but as practitioners of what's inside it. For once we get that down, we can go wherever Christ leads. No longer are we limited by the box, but by our own lack of imagination.

For God is already going out ahead of us, calling us and pointing out where we need to go.

My prayer is simply that we won't refuse to help our brothers and sisters in need (1 John 3:17), but that we will continue to find ways of loving God and each another, of being Christ's church in mission (1 John 3:23).

For failing to realize that would surely indicate that we had missed the point all along: that what is inside the box is what makes us who we are in the first place and that what is inside is truly meant to be shared with everyone.

Amen.