

Pastor's Message – 4/25/2021
1 John 3:16-24

The Major League baseball season has been in full swing now since the beginning of April and, as I am a Brewers' fan and follow baseball and, as I have found joy in this year's returned baseball season, I realized that there is a connection between baseball and today's Bible reading. The connection is a box: getting into the box, stepping out of the box, or staying in the box.

In baseball, first, the batter must get into the batter's box before play on the field can begin.

Beyond that, you've got your press box where you can watch the game but not play the game, or the coach's box, and even the dugout is a sort of box. Boxes are all over the stadium! They're an integral part of the game. The box, or specifically, getting out of the box is a metaphor for business success and, many have suggested, for church success, too. Getting out of the box or thinking outside the box is a metaphor for innovation.

Over the last year, we have been forced to think outside the box. Those who argue against getting out of the box, who want to reclaim the "normal" that was, may point to the idea that organizations can hurt themselves by moving too far "outside the box." Getting out of the box is scary for churches, I understand that, it's scary for me too; church folk don't like change. In spite of that, innovation can be very exciting.

However, when the world changes and the market changes and when people outside the church change, the church needs to think outside the box. Crawl out of the box, jump out of the box — or leap and spring out of the box. Walk around the box. Get away from the box. Think outside the box. Live outside the box. Stand on the box, look down on the box, kick the box. Everyone needs, at some point, to think about the box.

The last thing we want to do is live in the box or stay *in* the box. However, we do need to know what box we came from.

The church, any Church, needs to identify what it does best, and be guided by that core competency. In our Bible reading from 1 John today, John lays out the essentials for being in the church box.

Jesus commandment: "We must believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and love one another (vs. 23)." What pleases Him? "Give up our lives for our brothers and sisters (vs. 16)."

The first letter of John makes clear *that our core competency, our basic identity as Christians, is to love one another*. We see this love in what Jesus did for us, when he laid down his life for us, and we act on this knowledge when we "give up our lives for our brothers and sisters" (vs. 16).

The sacrificial love of Jesus is more than a nice idea and a noble concept — it is, in fact, a pattern of behavior that is supposed to be displayed by us in action. “How can God’s love be in that person,” asks John, “If someone has enough money to live well and sees a brother or sister in need but shows no compassion?” (3:17).

And it is no secret that there are plenty of people who are in need of God’s love.

Every day they pass me by, I can see it in their eyes.
 Empty people filled with care, headed who knows where.
 On they go through private pain, living fear to fear.
 Laughter hides their silent cries, only Jesus hears.

People need the Lord, people need the Lord.
 At the end of broken dreams, He's the open door.
 People need the Lord, people need the Lord.
 When will we realize people need the Lord?

We are called to take His light to a world where wrong seems right.
 What would be too great a cost for sharing life with one who's lost?
 Through His love our hearts can feel all the grief they bear.
 They must hear the words of life only we can share.

People need the Lord, people need the Lord.
 At the end of broken dreams, He's the open door.
 People need the Lord, people need the Lord.
 When will we realize that we must give our lives?
 For people need the Lord; people need the Lord.

Steve Green

Our task, then, is how to think and act outside the box and make God’s love real for those who need the Lord. Making it real. Putting it into action. That’s what John is talking about when he challenges us to love one another.

One of my teachers in Licensing School – so long ago now - was the Rev. Tim Bias, who was Pastor at 1st United Methodist Church in Normal, IL and has been General Secretary of the United Methodist Church. He taught a “Missions” course and reminded us at each class that when we left that class and left that building and left our churches, we were entering a mission field, for there we would meet uncountable numbers of people who need the Lord, and we had the opportunity for them to see Jesus in us.

He says that our mission, the mission of every believer, is to offer:

H – Hospitality: *proclaim the gospel, seek, welcome and gather people into the body of Christ.* What would happen if your congregation began to pray, “Send us the people no one else wants?” or “Help us receive the people you are sending to us?”

O – Opportunity: *lead persons to commit their lives to God through baptism by water and the spirit and profession of faith in Jesus Christ.* What would happen if you took John Wesley seriously and began to “Offer them Christ” whether or not they became part of the congregation?

P – Purpose: *help people grow in Christian living through worship, the sacraments, spiritual disciplines, and other means of grace, such as Wesley’s Christian conferencing.* What would happen if your congregation began to meet in small groups and developed relationships through the practice of spiritual disciplines?

E – Engagement: *send persons into the world to live lovingly and justly as servants of Christ by healing the sick, feeding the hungry, caring for the stranger, freeing the oppressed, being and becoming a compassionate, caring presence, and working to develop social structures that are consistent with the gospel.* What would happen if your congregation began to develop relationships in the community with local schools, with persons living in poverty, with health-care facilities?

We can’t do it all – no one person, nor one church – can do it all; that’s why we are United Methodists, connected with each other in our Circuit, our District, our Conference and around the world. We can’t do it all, but if you’re thinking about staying in the box, think about “The Hedgehog Concept:”

There’s an ancient Greek parable that goes: “The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing.”

Jim Collins, in his book, *Good to Great*, repeats the story (p. 90-91): The fox is a cunning creature, able to devise a myriad of complex strategies for sneak attacks upon the hedgehog. Day in and day out, the fox circles around the hedgehog’s den, waiting for the perfect moment to pounce. Fast, sleek, beautiful, fleet of foot and crafty – the fox looks like the sure winner. The hedgehog, on the other hand, is a dowdier creature, looking like a genetic mix-up between a porcupine and a small armadillo. He waddles along, going about his simple day, searching for lunch and taking care of his home.

The fox waits in cunning silence at the juncture in the trail. The hedgehog, minding his own business, wanders right into the path of the fox. “Aha, I’ve got you now!” thinks the fox. He leaps out, bounding across the

ground, lightning fast. The little hedgehog, sensing danger, looks up and thinks, “Here we go again. Will he ever learn?” Rolling up into a perfect little ball, the hedgehog becomes a sphere of sharp spikes, pointing outward in all directions.

The fox, bounding toward his prey, sees the hedgehog defense and calls off the attack. Retreating back to the forest, the fox begins to calculate a new line of attack. Each day, some version of this battle between the hedgehog and the fox takes place, and despite the greater cunning of the fox, the hedgehog always wins.

John calls us today to make sure that we don’t lose sight of the box that Jesus draws for us. No matter what happens, our identity as Christians is to show God’s love to those in need. We may do it in different ways, but if we aren’t doing that, we aren’t followers of Jesus.

It can be scary to think outside the box and do things differently, but in a changing world, if we are going to be successful in making disciples and being a faithful church, it is essential. What does it take to be successful? Here is a formula for success.

It's quite simple, really. Double your rate of failure.

You are thinking of failure as the enemy of success. But it isn't at all. You can be discouraged by failure or you can learn from it.

So go ahead and make mistakes. Make all you can. Because remember that's where you will find success.

Once a wise man drew a line on a board and told his student to make the line shorter without touching or erasing it. How would you do it? You have to shorten a line without touching it.

One smart student went to the board and drew a much longer line underneath that line thereby causing the first line to be the shorter of the two.

The lesson here is that if your difficulties appear to be very big, it helps to look at problems, and those who have problems that are larger than your own. It could help you gain some confidence that your problem is much smaller than you might realize, if only you look for solutions outside the box.

In I John 3, our submission to the authority of Jesus, through obeying his commandments, frees us from thinking small, confined to our box, and frees us up, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to be bold toward God and bold in enacting love for our neighbors, even to the point of laying down our lives for them. Our call is to know how our Jesus-defined box identifies us, stay with our Jesus-given core values, and then move out to live them out.