

“Love Through Obedience”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church — Indianapolis, Indiana
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1 John 5: 1-6

They were a struggling church, having started just a few years ago. After an initial great beginning, things were somewhat stagnant and unsteady. All of those people who had come so excited and energetic about Jesus Christ, well, some started to question how things were being done. A few got their feelings hurt, and latched on to some new movement spreading through the area. Before they knew it, all the hope and promise which seemed so prominent a short while ago now was replaced with confusion and dissension. They were torn: were they to adhere to what their teacher had taught them, or were they to follow this new group which taught some of the same things, but honestly was quite different from what they knew? It was not an easy time to be the church.

This may sound like a typical Presbyterian or other mainline Protestant congregation of the 21st century. But in fact, this is likely the church to which the writer of 1 John addressed his letter. Instead of a disgruntled split in membership over finances or the pastor or a building or social issues, this conflicted situation was primarily over faith. Specifically, there were some in the community who didn't necessarily believe that Jesus Christ died for the salvation of the world. There was a movement at that time called Docetism, which didn't consider Jesus to necessarily be a fully human being, but more of a spirit. This could be who this other group latched-on to, although it's not clear. What is clear is that there are those “who went out from us” (2:19), the community of faith, and now John is writing to remind them what is truth and what is not truth in Jesus Christ.

The truth in Jesus is that he is the Christ, the Son of God, and “everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God” (5:1). And as is written earlier in 1 John, to believe in God is to believe that God is love. That love is embodied in God's only Son, and because God loved us, we are called to love one another. That is the essence of God's commandments, and as John states, “the love of God is . . . that we obey his commandments, [which] are not burdensome” (5:3). If we are to be true children of God, we must obey God's commandments of love, for without love, we are truly nothing.

This was John's message to his church in trouble. What he most feared was how that church was losing any and all distinction with the world around it. Influenced by money, politics, material concerns, the church had become more aligned with the world than with God.

“Whatever is born of God conquers the world.” It was clear that the world was the enemy in John’s mind to the life of the church. If it was to thrive once again, the church had to find its center, namely its faith in Jesus Christ: “And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith. Who is it that conquers the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?” (5:5). For the writer of 1 John, the line between the world and the church had become blurred beyond distinction. If it was to be a faithful witness to Jesus Christ, it had to speak out against the world and conquer it through faith.

“Conquering the world through faith.” Does that sound like our mission today as the church? It sounds more like something from the past, when explorers and empires took over non-western lands in the name of Christianity. “Conquering the world through faith.” Is that what you and I want to do the rest of our lives? Does that phrase have any positive implications for us in the 21st century? I love to play the board game “Risk,” or its electronic version on my phone. The goal of that game is to conquer the world, defeating your opponents in battles and wars waged by rolling dice and moving armies. In the end, I always remind myself it is just a game, a game which unfortunately plays on our feelings of domination and power over smaller, weaker groups of people. Is that how we are to interpret “conquering the world through faith?” Is Christianity supposed to dominate all the weaker religions and conquer the world? Some might say that is the point of being the church. Perhaps another way of looking at it is how we as the church are supposed to be in relation with the world around us.

Have you noticed today how many of our television shows are about “real people” leading “real lives” in the “real world?” The American public has become fascinated with the lives of “ordinary” people in either extraordinary situations or just living their day-to-day lives.

And yet, it’s this “real world” that we want to escape from so much of the time. We buy boats, cars, vacation homes, all kinds of adult toys so we can occupy ourselves with mindless activities and forget our dull, ordinary lives for just a little while. What is the real world to us, anyway? A place where we work our tails off the majority of the week with little self-satisfaction at the end of the day? A place where bills pile up with seemingly less income coming in to cover the higher costs? A place where we wonder if there is anything better than what we are doing, living, experiencing now? For most of us, that is the “real world.”

That “real world” has done a very good job of tricking the church into thinking that is all there is. We live in a country which espouses the freedom of religion and the separation of church and state. Yet on a typical weekend, most of the people in Indianapolis are not sitting here in church, but are “free” to do as they please: to be on the lake, to play a round of golf, to sit at home and relax after a hard week’s work in the

office. We are a church in the midst of a world which promises freedom of religion, and look at our churches: they are declining in membership and vitality. Then look at Christians in places like China where they are persecuted for their beliefs, and yet the church there is thriving. William Willimon puts it this way: "The world has figured out ways to keep people from the church without having to make laws to keep people out of church" (*Pulpit Resource, Yr. B, 41*).

As individuals, this idea of freedom has taken an ironic twist with most of us in the United States. "We are encouraged to think of ourselves as free, independent, and ethical when in reality our lives are caught in the grip of a host of unstated, but nevertheless real forces over which we have no choice or control." Sure we say we are free to choose this car or this house or this bar of soap or this pair of pants. But we always have this feeling that we have to buy more things. "We can choose which soap to use, but we are not free *not* to choose. We must buy." Instead of thinking of our freedom, maybe we need to think about to what we are each attached. "To be attached to something, someone greater, whose will for us is love rather than to make a sale, now that would be freedom indeed!" (*Willimon, 42*).

There is much more to this world than accumulating the nicest possessions, or the biggest piece of property, or the most comfortable pension. There is much more to being the church than being free to come and go into our houses of worship, or to remain comfortable in our financial situations, or to accumulate the nicest people we can find. John's letter to his church should be a wake-up call to us, for it speaks directly to our situation. We live in a world which wants us to believe that there is nothing greater or better than the one we are living in now. It causes us to quit hoping or dreaming that there is a different way to live our lives. It causes the church to accommodate itself into thinking the world's way is how it should be done.

John says that the one who conquers the world is the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God. Because he is the Son of God, he saves the world from all that is evil, and redeems the world through God's love. If you need any proof of how this is true, you only need to look to the Holy Spirit, for "the Spirit is the one that testifies, for the Spirit is truth" (5:6).

I wonder if too many times, as the church we look first to how the world does things, rather than listening, feeling, and knowing how the Spirit would have us do things. "By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments" (5:2). Instead of casting out the addicted or drunkard as the world would, we are called to obey God's commandment to love our neighbor by offering a space for redemption and wholeness. Instead of building walls that separate us from those who are different than ourselves as the world would, we are called to obey God's commandment to love

our neighbor by welcoming the immigrant, the impoverished, and the stranger. Instead of thinking only of ourselves, as the world tends to do, we are called to obey God's commandment to love our neighbor by thinking first of the other, just as God first thought of us in his son, Jesus Christ.

Jesus said, "I do not give to you as the world gives" (John 14:27). Thank God he did not. Instead, Jesus gave as God has given: selflessly, abundantly, sacrificially. We model that love of God through Jesus when we obediently love one another and our world, so that eventually, the world might be changed through God's Spirit.

A woman once said, "Every time I come to church, I turn just a little. I turn toward who I was meant to be. Just a little more of who I really am and where I am supposed to be headed." I think that's a helpful image of what the Christian journey is all about. It's not a matter of winning over the world in a day and enjoying the splendors for the rest of your life. It's not about accepting that life will never change. It's about believing in an alternative world which God rules and Jesus shows us in his love. It takes time — a lot of time — but through faith we eventually discover this world. "To catch even a glimpse of that alternative world ruled not by brutality but by love, [that] is to be able to conquer" (*Willimon, 41*). All we need to do is believe that it is possible, and God will show us where we need to be.

Thanks be to the living, loving God. Amen.