*GET IN THE BOX*

1 John 3:16-24

May 2, 2021

Everyone, it seems, wants to get out of 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. Whatever. But we don’t want to live in the box, or even stay in the box.

From corporate boardrooms to church offices, the talk is all about escaping the constraints of business- as- usual and to discover broader visions, fresh perspectives, new strategies and creative innovations. A leader who can “think outside the box” is considered to be a priceless asset for any organization.

But what happens when you get too far outside the box?

In the endless rush to embrace new ideas, too many groups have forgotten who they are and what they are supposed to do. *Fast Company* Magazine offers us some cautionary tales about organizations that have lost touch with their core identity, and have suffered in the process.

Consider Volkswagen of America. It once produced efficient *volks wagens*, “people’s cars,” with plain interiors and simple mechanics. The Volkswagen Beetle was wildly poplar in the decades after the Second World War, as millions of drivers fell in love with the car’s low price, and affordable running costs. But now, Volkswagens cars include a luxury sedan and not one or two, but three– count ‘em: three—SUVs. And the Beetle, even the newish retro on,e is nowhere to be found.

And who has stepped into Volkswagen’s abandoned niche? BMW, surprisingly enough. Witness the Mini Cooper—simple, solid and small.

The fast-food chain Hardee’s also stepped outside the box about 15 years ago now, when it hired a half-baked and half-naked model, famous for being famous, to eat a burger while soaping up her car in a TV ad. Did sales improve? Nope. Maybe they should have built a better burger.

Dell constructed its computer empire on good hardware and the promise of helpful customer service located in Round Rock, TX. Now it outsources its tech support to the phone banks of India, and in the process have become like every other computer company.

What’s the lesson here?

It’s okay to get outside the box, but don’t lose the box. The box is what got you here. And to help us remember who we are, perhaps we need to come crawling back to the box, climb in, close the lid, sit in the dark, and think INSIDE the box for a while.

Groups need to identify the one thing they do best, and let that core ability guide their decision-making. “Your next big thing should really only be a new beginning,” writes Douglas Rushkoff in *Fast Company*, “a chance to do what you do, and do it incredibly well.”

It’s time for us to “get in the box,” get inside the church box. Time to do what Jesus wants us to do, and do it incredibly well. In our mission study a couple of years ago, we identified that what we do is love our neighbors, come alongside our neighborhood in Jesus Christ. And that’s pretty close to Biblical, don’t ‘you think?

The Great Commandment is to love the Lord your God with all your heart and strength and mind and soul. Jesus went on to say that there’s a second commandment like it, but I’m here to say this morning that we love our God BY LOVING OUR NEIGHBORS AS OURSELVES. And that‘s what our gift is at Greenwood Presbyterian Church. That’s just where our passion lies. Good deal!

This loving our neighbor, this coming alongside and being Jesus in our neighborhood is biblical too, in that it follows 1 John. John’s letter makes clear that *our core competency 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 “lay down our lives for one another (1 jn. 3:16). 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 does God’s love abide in anyone,” asks John, “who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need, and yet refuses to help?” (3:17). How does God’s love abide in that person?

Short answer: It doesn’t. God’s love lives in those who see a need, and respond with help.

Clarence Jordan captured the concreteness of this everyday love and compassionate assistance when he translated his Cotton Patch Version of 1 John 3:18, back in 1973: “My little ones, let’s not *talk* about love. Let’s not *sing* about love. Let’s put love into *action* and make it *real*.”

Making it real. Putting it into action. That’s what John is talking about when he challenges us to love one another.

So why is it so hard for us to live out this core Christian competency?

Most of us find it easier to argue with our political opponents than to love them.

Most of us are more comfortable taking a stand on abortion than taking care of a woman with a problem pregnancy.

Most of us would rather write a check to a homeless shelter than spend an evening providing job counseling to a person on the streets.

Most of us find it so much simpler to define our religious duty in terms of attending church and making offerings, rather than doing the complicated and challenging work of feeding the hungry, welcoming strangers, clothing the naked, caring for the sick and visiting the imprisoned.

Basically, I think we’re selfish and we’re scared. Selfish in that these acts that might make a real difference, take our time, and our time means more to us than our money, quite frankly. We don’t want anyone—even our children or our spouse-- to derail us from what we had planned . . . even if it’s nothing.

Selfish and scared. Fearful. Will going into a prison or even a local jail be dangerous to me? Welcoming strangers. I could find *myself* up against the law—facing jail time-- if I go down to the Texas border and help some refugees to safety. That food pantry. Isn’t it in a part of the city that taxis won’t even go?

Yeah, we’re scared.

But the scriptures say something to that:

“Perfect love casts out all fear.” And the key to rising to this challenge is to realize that love comes from God. We don’t have to root around and dig it up from somewhere inside us. John tells us that we know love because Jesus laid down His life for us.

That’s a truly divine accomplishment. He reminds us that God’s love lives in us. That’s a sacred spark inside us. He calls us to believe in the name of God’s son Jesus. That’s a life-giving link with the Lord (v. 23). And John assures you and me that God abides in us, by the Holy Spirit that He has given us. That, my friends, is a holy habitation.

If we succeed in loving one another, the credit actually belongs to God, not us. Any love we show is a sign and a signal that God’s love is working through us. You want proof that God is in you? Look at your acts of love. There it is. That’s God, isn’t it?

And you know what? We’re not required to figure out precise and perfect positions on all the tough issues of the day, as long as we love one another. John doesn’t say that we will be blessed by God once we achieve a political victory or articulate a flawless moral position. No. He says that we will receive from God whatever we ask “because we obey His commandments and do what pleases Him” (v. 22).

*His commandment*: Believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ and love one another (v.23).

*What pleases Him*: laying down our lives for one another (v. 16).

That’s the *church* box. No more; no less. And it’s time to crawl back into it.

Amen.