

“What Will We Become?”  
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III  
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana  
March 4, 2012 – 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Congregation

1 Corinthians 12: 12-27  
Psalm 100

I can't say enough about how grateful I am for so many of you being present today. It's wonderful to see so many friends and special guests with us. Alan, Felipe, and Fernando, you are here from the presbytery and New Creation Congregation. Mark, you travelled from Illinois to be here. Keith, you and your wife, Judy, travelled from Kentucky to join us today. There are so many past friends and members who are here for worship today. Gosh, even my mom and dad came from West Virginia to be a part of this celebration today.

I feel a bit embarrassed to bring this up, though. And I would've hoped my parents would have realized this themselves, but apparently they didn't. I don't want to sound ungrateful, because I really am grateful. But you all are ten days late; my birthday was February 24, not March 4!

I reached a personal milestone ten days ago, as I reached the ripe old age of 40 years old. I can't say that I have been in any sort of personal malaise regarding this transition. It certainly has caused me to do a bit of self-reflection, though. I have pondered all that has happened in my life over the last four decades, and what might lie ahead in, I hope, the next four decades.

One part of my self-reflection has been this fact: that ten years before the world was graced with my presence, for better or for worse!, John Knox Presbyterian Church was chartered as a congregation of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). To realize that the church of which you are pastor has been in existence only a decade longer than you've been alive is, well, a little humbling, to say the least.

As many of you know, I am a student of history, and I love to learn about the stories and events which transpired in our past. It has been fascinating for me to both read and listen to stories surrounding this congregation's history, and to look through all of the wonderful memorabilia which has been brought in for display on the tables outside the sanctuary. Thanks to all of you who brought these in, and I hope you'll take some time to look through them today, if you haven't already.

Here are a couple of interesting facts about John Knox's birth as a church. The presbytery purchased this tract of land at the beginning of 1961, with the hopes that a new church would one day be located here. The presbytery and the Session of St. Andrew Presbyterian Church sent letters to interested members that summer, and an organizational meeting was held on July 25 in the basement of the Speedway State Bank – which I believe is still the bank we have our accounts in today, although it's now PNC Bank. This

congregation was initially known as the “Speedway Presbyterian Mission,” and it was later, in 1962, that they chose the name “John Knox” out of our shared heritage with the St. Andrew congregation.

And perhaps my favorite vignette from this church’s history is when they gathered for the first worship service. The history of the church states: “The first service was going smoothly until time for the offering. Collection plates were locked in the vestment closet, but ushers found some box lids in the office that served very well to receive the gifts of gratitude from the new congregation.” Just goes to show you that nothing will prevent us as Presbyterians from collecting an offering!

As I mentioned to the children, John Knox was chartered as a congregation on March 4, 1962, so this day is our official birthday, as it were. But the first time people gathered for worship as this congregation was on September 17, 1961. Rev. Larry Sunkel had been called as the organizing pastor, and he and his family left Irvington Presbyterian Church to help lead this new church development. Our congregation held its first service at St. John’s Episcopal Church, just down the street here, and met in that location for almost four years, until the first portion of this building was completed.

For that first service, Rev. Sunkel chose the two scripture lessons we have read this morning: the Old Testament Lesson was Psalm 100, and the New Testament Lesson was 1 Corinthians 12: 12-27. The title of his sermon that mid-September Sunday was “What Is the Church,” and the key verse which was specifically listed in the bulletin that day was verse 27: “Now you are the Body of Christ, and individually members of it.”

I’m sure for those who gathered for that first service, it was a message which spoke volumes. Here were approximately 40 men and women gathered for worship, probably wondering whether they had made a wise decision. “Who are these people? Will this succeed? What will we become? Is this what God has called me, called us, to do?” “What Is the Church” likely spoke volumes to the faithful who had gathered over fifty years ago down the street.

Paul writes: “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and we were all made to drink of one Spirit” (12:12-13). The church is not marked by specific numbers, by uniformity of opinion, or by belonging to a specific class of people. The church is made up of men, women, youth and children who have been baptized in the one Spirit into the one body.

The body is a complicated yet beautiful creation of God. It’s no wonder Paul uses it as his analogy for the church. For even though there are many different members of the body, all are important for the body’s overall functioning and health. So it is with the church. We are not weaker because of our differences; we are stronger as a result of them. That had to have been a great assurance to those gathered over fifty years ago for worship as the Speedway Presbyterian Mission. No matter how many are gathered in one

place, as long as they are gathered in Christ's name, they are the Body of Christ.

"What will we become?" I'm sure that was on the minds of those who gathered for worship in September 1961. Did they imagine they would become 121 charter members in less than six months? Did they imagine they would eventually reach over 500 members thirty years later? Did they imagine this church would become a pillar in its community, that its facility would change and grow to what it is today, that such a small group of people would one day become the open, caring, community it is in 2012?

And yet, on a day when we mark all that has happened in our past, the world does not allow us to simply sit and reminisce about the good old days. While we might wish to sit in this space and relish all the great memories, our lives of faith continue to move on. The life of the church, and the lives of the individual members of the body, do not stand still.

A family gathers to mourn and bury a father and grandfather, while another family gathers to mourn and bury a son, grandson, nephew, and cousin. A man and his family meet with doctors to talk about a course of treatment for the recurrence of cancer. A woman lives through the final, cloudy days of dementia, while a teenager struggles with the demands of school, peers, family, and future. A man comes in to the church wondering if he could have some help with filling his gas tank, while a woman comes in to the church wondering if she could just have a listening ear to share her worries. Communities are destroyed by devastating tornadoes, and it will take months, even years, for our neighbors to the south to find a sense of normalcy once again.

These lives of faith are not interested in milestones. These children of God are in need of compassion, of guidance, of support, of education, of generosity. "What will we become" applies not only to the past. "What will we become" also speaks to us today, as we discern what we will become as a congregation for our future ministry to this community and beyond.

What we have become is a community of faith which is not static, and that points to a future of continued transition and newness. One of the things we do well as Presbyterians is to keep statistics, and when we completed our 2011 statistics, John Knox listed 317 total adherents (great term). That number is the total of active members and baptized children in our congregation. Consider this: out of those 317 total adherents, 111 of them have joined John Knox in the last 10 years. Our collective memory as a congregation is shaped by both those who have been here a long time, and those who have been here a relatively short time. That is healthy, folks. If we are to continue to be healthy, we must be willing to do everything we can do to welcome others for who they are, not for who we wish they were.

Believe it or not, that may be even easier than you realize. This congregation has had a long history of opening its facility for other community groups to meet, and that has increased over the last five to seven years. Do you know that on any given week here at John Knox, there are over

140 adults and children who come through these doors - who are NOT members of this church? That's about 20 short of a normal Sunday's attendance for us. The great thing is that they are already here - we don't have to go out and find them.

What would it look like if we became a church which extended its hospitality beyond Sunday mornings, and left behind the perception that opening the facility is being welcoming? How might it look if hospitality teams were here on weekday evenings to intentionally and warmly welcome the community when it gathers here for Alcoholics Anonymous, Alanon, the Neighborhood Christian Legal Clinic, tutoring, or any of the other regular meetings at John Knox? What would we become if we gave a few hours of our time each month to invite others to join us?

Finally, 50 years ago, the larger church saw a need in this area for a Presbyterian presence, and in partnership with other congregations, planted John Knox Presbyterian Church. Fifty years later, the context which surrounds us is dramatically different. But this church decided five years ago: this is where we are called to serve, and we will invest our time, our talent, and our treasure to be here for this community.

The larger church came to us and saw a specific need and opportunity for serving a new community in our midst. We took a leap of faith and partnered with the presbytery to become a center for Hispanic Ministries, serving one of the largest Hispanic populations in our city. That has led to an incredible example of symmetry. On a day when we recognize our birth as a new church development fifty years ago, today we are partnering with the presbytery in hosting and supporting the Hispanic new church development, Iglesia Nueva Creacion.

What will we become as partners in ministry together in the years to come? How will we embrace the diverse elements of the Body of Christ? Will we shy away from what makes us different? Will we grow deeper in our connection with one another? What will we become, knowing that "we are the Body of Christ, and individually members of it," no matter what language we speak, what country we come from, or what level of faith experience we bring?

On November 26, 1961, those who desired to become members of this church signed a "Covenant of Membership." It read in part: *We the undersigned persons desire to be constituted and organized as a church, which is to be known as John Knox United Presbyterian Church. We do covenant and agree to walk together as disciples of Jesus Christ . . . We promise to maintain the church by our attendance at its services, our support of its work, our gifts, our efforts, and our prayers, and to seek in its fellowship to glorify the name and further the cause of our Lord Jesus Christ.*"

May we honor those who exhibited courage and faith fifty years ago by embracing that same covenant today.

Thanks be to God. Amen.