

“So We Do Not Lose Heart”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
June 7, 2015

2 Corinthians 4:13 – 5:1

Our bodies likely have the greatest influence on our sense of identity and self-worth. This collection of flesh, blood, fat, bone, nerves, and other material represent the physical presence of our spiritual being in this world. When we look at ourselves in the mirror, we see who the world sees – in all our beauty and imperfection. Our specific traits – eyes, hair, body build, and so on – reflect the genetic background of our parents, grandparents, and generations before. It is through our brains and instincts that we observe others and are initially attracted to them. What’s utterly amazing about how God created us is that our attraction to others varies greatly based on our own idea of what is “attractive.”

Our bodies, as the greatest influence on our sense of identity and self-worth, can also be the cause of low self-esteem. We compare our weight, our height, our complexion to those who, in our minds, look prettier or more handsome than us. This can affect us especially in our teenage-years, but also continue to plague us through adulthood. We lament we have our mother’s thighs or our father’s hairline. We can do things that are in and of themselves unhealthy in order to achieve what we believe is healthy. We can even question God as to why he would make us the way we are.

Perhaps that is why, when we are faced with illness or disease of our bodies, our faith is most deeply tested. When cancer threatens an organ, a limb, a breast, it is literally threatening to remove a part of our identity as embodied in our bodies. We question why God would want to do this to what he has created. We fear what life would be like without the ability to see, to hear, to move as we always have. We worry how the world will look at us in our diminished, not-whole capacity. We are scared to think about what happens when our bodies can no longer support us, and we are gone from this earth.

I believe this points us to a central message in the text we have read this morning. What impacts and affects our bodies is one example of how we are searching every day for where God makes contact with us in our lives of faith. Is it within our hearts and minds and souls? Is it among the people who surround us – family, friends, neighbors, strangers? Is it in the created world – nature, wildlife, outside of ourselves? As we struggle with the fears and unknowns of this world, where we search for God and Christ speaks directly to how we live through our fears.

As Paul writes to the church in Corinth, he reassures them of God's eternal hope in Jesus Christ. "So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day" (4:16). Paul recognizes that these early Christians are struggling, are facing many challenges, and are perhaps fearful of what lies ahead. And he speaks in terms that acknowledge that present reality – "outer nature wasting away" – but then gives them hope that through these trials God is present – "our inner nature is being renewed day by day."

Paul speaks of that inevitable mystery of the Christian faith: "Because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen, for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal" (4:18). It's a proclamation of faith in God's almighty power to overcome the earthly ills we know in this life, and to have an eternal hope in what we cannot see now, but which is promised to us through God's act of reconciliation in Jesus Christ. It is a belief in the kingdom that Christ rules. In that kingdom, there are no shootings or violent acts against innocent human beings. There are no diseases or illnesses that cannot be cured. There is no hatred or abuse or famine. The life that Christ rules is one of peace and hope. It is a life that we have been promised in his life, death, and resurrection.

That hope lives inside each of us as Christ's disciples – "our inner nature is renewed day by day." And our faith and trust is in "the one who raised the Lord Jesus (who) will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence" (4:13). The eternal hope we have in Christ is grounded in our hearts of faith, and is reaffirmed through the witness of the community of faith. When we show compassion and care and concern for one another in the midst of fear and grief, struggle and challenge, then we are bearing witness to the one crucified and risen.

This world in which we live will not last forever. And Paul acknowledges that fact with the last verse of this passage: "For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens" (5:1). That is a verse I will often read at the time of a funeral. For me, that sums up our faith in resurrection hope. Our earthly tent – our physical bodies – will not last for eternity; they are made of the earth, and it is to earth that we will return. But God has built a house for us that is eternal, not made of human hands, which is promised to us as witnesses to Christ's resurrection. It is eternal in the heavens. It is our eternal hope.

"So we do not lose heart." When our bodies break down; when our loved ones struggle with illness or disease; when our self-esteem is tied to our perception of our bodies; when we doubt and question and wonder why God would allow these things to happen – "Do not lose heart."

These bodies are just an earthly tent which we inhabit for our time here in this world. They are not the only or primary source of our identity as a child of God. That comes from our belief that “the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us into his presence” (4:14). Our identity is not grounded in our or others’ critiques about our physical appearances. Our identity is grounded in the eternal hope that God has made us in God’s image – and will surround us always with his loving presence.

“So we do not lose heart.” As we recognize our graduates today, we celebrate with them the accomplishments they have achieved in finishing this chapter of their schooling. For some, they will continue on for further education. For others, they will seek to enter the next chapter in their life of vocation.

Whatever their next step might be, they will not only face further achievement, but they will also surely face challenges. Roadblocks might appear in the form of difficulty with academics, jobs not opening up, and doubts arising about what they have chosen to pursue. They might hear the world saying to them, “You’re not good enough to do this.” Their identity and self-esteem might become tied to these critiques. They might wonder why God would allow these things to happen to them.

Graduates - when those times come, remember Paul’s words: “So we do not lose heart.” God has not left you, and God will never leave you. God believes in you, and will always surround you with his loving kindness. You are on a path that will be full of ups and downs, twists and turns. But it is a path that you don’t have to walk alone. For we know that God will do amazing things through you, because you are a child of God. Do not lose heart, believe in God’s love for you in Jesus Christ, and trust that your identity is always and forever grounded in the one who created you, who redeemed you, and who will forever sustain you.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.