

“Be Transformed”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
August 17, 2014

Romans 12: 1-8

How does it feel to receive a gift from someone, but then to see that person give someone else what appears to be a larger or better gift? At Christmas, parents can be very sensitive about how gifts are distributed to each child, so that there are equal numbers and similar values of gifts. Or, on the other hand, we can witness not much thought going into who gets what, and our feelings can be hurt when it appears a sibling or cousin receives more than we do.

Do we often feel the same about the gifts God gives to each of us? When we look at our neighbor or our brother or sister in Christ, do we feel we have been “under-gifted” by God in comparison to him or her? I have always been in awe of those who have the gift of playing a musical instrument. As I sat in the choir last Sunday, it was fascinating to me to watch Jeff play the piano for the offertory. It’s amazing to me to watch Dawnie sit down at the organ, or Pat or Kel or Andrew play their instruments, and honestly, I have a bit of envy inside of me. Why didn’t God give me that gift? I imagine many of us can identify with the feeling of wishing God had given us a particular gift, like our neighbor or friend in the pew.

In our 11:00 worship service today, we will be handing out Coca-Cola. No, we didn’t sign a new sponsorship deal with the soft drink maker. No, we are not going to start a café setting in worship. And don’t worry, they will be unopened cans and bottles of Coke.

No, we will hand out the various sizes of Coca-Cola to coincide with a short video we will share in the service about gifts, and how the various sizes of Coke represent various gifts from God. The character who plays Jesus hands out an eight-ounce can to one person, a 20-ounce bottle to another, a one liter-bottle to another, and finally a three-liter bottle to another person. The folks who get the larger bottles are thrilled, but the woman who receives the eight-ounce can is disappointed and jealous.

“You always give me less than everyone else, Jesus,” she says.

“I gave you exactly what you needed. I picked that gift out particularly for you.”

“But I want what he has – the larger bottle of Coke!”

I’m struck by the concluding line of the character who plays Jesus: “You are letting everyone else’s gifts steal your joy. (Holding up the can) Until you can look past this, all you’re going to see is a can of Coke.”

How do we view the gifts God has given us, not through our individual, self-centered eyes, but through the lens of the community of faith? How are we to be transformed as disciples who seek God’s will for the Body of Christ,

and not think more highly of ourselves than we ought to think? And as we are transformed by the renewing of our minds, how can our gifts be truly used for God's glory, rather than judging who has the most gifts or best gift of all?

Seeking to be transformed as disciples speaks to Paul's message in his letter to the Romans. As Paul addresses the church in Rome, he has reached a point where he wants to emphasize the "how" of the faith, now that he has explained the "who, what, where, and why." How are you to live as children of the living God? "By presenting your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God . . . [not to be] conformed to this world, but transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you might discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect" (12:1-2).

He goes on to say that to live in community as the church, we must recognize that we cannot live the faith on our own, or try to accomplish our goals single-handedly. We must work together in order to do the will of God. "For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another" (12:4-5). The gifts we each have are unique and they are interdependent on one another in order to function to their fullest potential: the teacher who teaches, the exhorter who encourages others, the giver who is generous, the compassionate who comforts the suffering.

Take it a step further, and Paul's message speaks even broader than the confines of the church. The technician who repairs a broken power line, the nurse who provides medical care in the emergency room, the retiree who tutors a young child after school, the janitor who keeps litter from maligning God's green earth, the politician who crusades for health care for the poorest of society, the road construction crew who provides transportation where there once was none. Our culture does not encourage it, does not emphasize it, does not acknowledge the fact that as the human race we are truly interdependent on one another's gifts and abilities, in the same way Paul preached that the Body of Christ is based on community, not individualism.

Paul uses language in the beginning of this passage that stresses the giving up for God of our very selves. "Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship." To be a member of the Body of Christ means to offer all which you have – time, talents, resources, your very body – as an offering of thanksgiving for God's goodness to you. It is language that is familiar in the Christian context, for as Jesus taught and showed us, life itself is a gift given by God, and everything that we do is done in gratitude for that gift.

To offer yourself as a living sacrifice to God means you're willing to do whatever you feel called to do, but with the full intention to work together in community as one of the body's members. And whenever you make that sacrifice, you experience a greater reward than anything you can imagine: to see a child whom you mentored graduate from college; to see a family back on their feet after helping to build their home; to receive a note of

compassion in times of grief from someone you comforted years ago. Your sacrifice never goes unnoticed, and your reward will truly be splendid, indeed.

I've been thinking about this notion of how sharing our gifts within the body of Christ ultimately comes back around to nourish ourselves and others. Today is the start of our new Church School year at John Knox. In all honesty, we don't stop Church School at some point – indeed we meet all through the summer. But this is the day when children would move up in their classes based on where they are this school year. It's a day when we thank those who have committed to teaching children, youth, and adults, and we recommit ourselves to actively study and be nourished by God's Word.

When we first came to John Knox in 2003, Erin was three years old and Heather was one year old. They came up for children's messages each week, then would go out for Children in Worship, being taught Bible stories in various ways over the years. They have been taught by numerous adults in Church School, Vacation Bible School, Confirmation Class, and other settings, and it has been through that sharing of others' gifts that my children have a strong, deep knowledge of the Bible and the faith.

That is why it has been deeply meaningful to me to see Erin now assisting as a teacher with Children in Worship. To see all of our youth now returning the favor of teaching and mentoring our younger children in the faith in various ways, I believe that is a key example of how we are transformed as individual members of the Body of Christ, when we share our gifts collectively with the Body of Christ.

I would hope that that would be the example we all set for one another and for visitors who come to our church. That when we are asked to share our gifts, we don't think first about how it would be a burden on us, but instead how sharing that gift is our way of thanking those who came before us and shared their gifts with us. When we are asked to teach children or adults, will we remember those who taught and mentored us in the faith? When we are asked to serve as an elder, a deacon, or a trustee, will we remember those who were leaders for us as a church in our past, to help nurture the faith for us today? When we are asked to do something outside of our comfort zone, will we remember those who likely did things outside of their comfort zones for us, so that we might feel connected to the Body of Christ?

How will we respond when we are asked to share our gifts in particular ways? How will we be transformed through the grace of God – as individuals, as communities, as the Body of Christ? What are we willing to do to grow spiritually as disciples of Jesus Christ? May we sense anew how the Spirit is leading us to be transformed by the Lord our God.

Thanks be to God. Amen.