"The Journey of Faith"
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
First Sunday of Advent – November 30, 2014

1 Corinthians 1: 3-9

For three months, I have been wondering what I would say to you, Lisa, upon your return from sabbatical. I have been seeking the right words to convey the depth of our experience while you were on your pilgrimage. I have been prayerfully and thoughtfully pondering what would summarize our shared experiences of walking and praying and seeking God along our respective journeys of faith. And I think I've finally figured out how to put it into words. Are you ready? Here it is:

"Now, we're even!"

A year-and-a-half ago, this congregation was incredibly gracious in granting me a four-month sabbatical, and through the Lilly Endowment we received a Clergy Renewal Grant that allowed both me and the church to intentionally spend time in renewal. During that time, while we did have Bob Hunter here in a part-time role, the primary pastoral responsibilities fell to Lisa while I was gone. She had a great amount of added duties during that time which stretched her in ways she likely never dreamed of. And yet, she did so in truly admirable ways, and I know all of us – most especially myself – were grateful for her leadership last summer.

Now, fast-forward to this year, and this congregation and its leadership graciously and wisely saw the need and benefit of Lisa having a similar time of renewal in the form of a sabbatical. The time she spent in renewal was very different than what I did, and that is reflective of how the two of us are different in what feeds us spiritually and provides renewal. But until this fall, I could not have truly appreciated what it was like for Lisa and all of you when I was gone for my time of sabbath-keeping last year. Now, I most certainly do, and while we continued our ministries of worship, service, education, and prayer here in your absence, Lisa, it was not the same without you here alongside us. So, now, we're even!

The focus of the past three months in renewal for us all has been around walking and praying along our respective journeys of faith. Some time ago, Lisa felt a calling to embark on a pilgrimage walk, specifically the pilgrimage walk of El Camino de Santiago in Spain. Through interactions with friends and colleagues, she sensed God's tug on her heart and soul to walk this 500-mile journey, and she knew this would be the focus of her renewal time. She overcame some physical obstacles along the way, she trained physically and spiritually in the months leading up to her departure, and she walked and prayed and completed her pilgrimage to Santiago at the end of October. And we are anxious and excited to hear in the weeks and months ahead her

stories, and how her faith has been impacted by this once-in-a-lifetime experience.

We shared the same theme as Lisa while she was away, focusing on walking and praying on our own journeys of faith. As we discussed with the children earlier, the focus of our renewal this fall was the prayer wall, which Lisa (in her usual creative genius) prepared for us the final week before she left. Some of us tracked our steps each week with these pedometers or our own pedometers, and we recorded our steps walked in our passports, and we came to the wall. Some of us rode our bicycles, and we came to the wall. Some of us offered prayers or reflected on the weekly devotions that Lisa had prepared for us, and we came to the wall.

The prayer wall was the center of our renewal experience as a congregation. It was here that we wrote down the miles we walked each week. It was here that we pulled off little blue feet and started filling in the 3,882 lines, representing the distance in miles between Indianapolis and Santiago. And we walked so much that we had to order more feet, and started creating new paths that snaked their way around the wall. They snaked their way around the prayer requests we had written, and those reflected the joys and concerns that we encountered along our respective journeys of faith. They included prayers for family and friends who were sick, injured, or struggling with life's circumstances. They included prayers for celebrations and joys, giving gratitude to God for his love, care, and grace. They included prayers for Lisa as she journeyed on her pilgrimage: prayers for strength, safety, and God's presence with her. They included prayers written by members and friends of John Knox; they included prayers written by children from our tutoring program; and they included prayers written by guests from our community. This wall was the center of our renewal experience, and we truly felt connected to you, Lisa, through this wall and the materials you had prepared for us prior to your departure.

And we waited expectantly. We waited for news from your travels, to know you were safe and well. We waited to see how our progress went with making it from Indianapolis to Santiago. We waited for updates on people we had asked God to be with in prayer. We waited for this day, when we would be reunited and share in God's joy.

It seems only appropriate that we remember our expectant waiting on this Sunday, when we begin the season of waiting, the season of Advent. On this Sunday when our waiting has been fulfilled at the end of a time separated from one another, we now enter into a new time of waiting – waiting and preparing for God's Son to come into this world. Waiting expectantly requires faith, trust, and hope, and those have been and will be with us as a people of faith in this new Season of Advent.

In Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, he is addressing a church that has many issues and problems and divisions within itself. But you wouldn't guess that if you only read this introduction and greeting from the apostle to the church in Corinth. He could have opened this letter with rebukes and

admonishments to the Christians there, especially with the degree to which they had strayed in their journey of faith. However, he does not mention any of those conflicts in his greeting. Instead, he speaks of something far greater and more powerful than what might divide us as brothers and sisters in Christ.

"I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him . . . so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 1:4-5,7). Paul trusts and believes that each of the Corinthians have been blessed by God with the one thing that transforms life: God's grace in Jesus Christ. That gift sustains, strengthens, and empowers each of them to be God's witnesses as they wait expectantly for Christ's arrival. In the midst of waiting, God never abandons those who trust in him, and through him "you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord" (1:9).

Whenever we hear Paul speak of the "grace of God" we oftentimes translate "grace" as "forgiveness." Yet in this passage, grace has a deeper meaning than solely forgiveness. As Charles Campbell describes it: *Here grace is a dynamic power or energy within the people that bears fruit among them: grace moves with a power and activity similar to that of the Spirit. The grace of Jesus Christ enriches the community in speech and knowledge; it strengthens the testimony of Christ among them; it overflows in spiritual gifts; in enables the people to wait for the coming of Christ and to be strengthened to stand blameless on the day Christ comes. The grace of Jesus Christ encompasses the entirety of the community's life – past, present, and future – not simply as the forgiveness of sins, but as the power for faithful living* *(Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 1, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2008: 17).*

There is no doubt that the grace of Jesus Christ has been with us all in our past, most notably as we have been on our respective journeys of faith. There is no doubt that the grace of Christ strengthened Lisa during her pilgrimage, just as it strengthened us in times of need. There is no doubt that the grace of Christ enriched Lisa in speech and knowledge as she interacted with pilgrims along her journey, just as it enriched us in speech and knowledge with friends and strangers along our journey. There is no doubt that the grace of Christ broadened and deepened Lisa's connection with the community of faith, just as it broadened and deepened our understanding of faithfulness as we journeyed alongside her in our own lives of faithful discipleship.

(1) In October, our family had a chance to get away from the normal routine and spent a week of renewal and study at Silver Lake, Michigan, just outside Traverse City. One of the places we explored while there was Sleeping Bear Dunes National Seashore, (2) along the shores of Lake Michigan. As we walked, and walked, and walked, and walked, I could not help but see in the footprints in the sand reminders of what our respective journeys of faith must feel like at times.

(3) There are times when the journey of faith feels like a constant uphill climb, with no end in sight. Family illnesses, work struggles, financial stresses, marital strain – it can all mark our respective journeys. Sometimes it is very hard to simply put one foot in front of the other. And yet, the grace of Christ is with us.

(4) There are times when the journey of faith feels like a wide expanse and desert, where there seems to be no one else in sight. We wonder where God might be, where our friends and family might be, where anyone might be to lift us, guide us, and accompany us in our walk. And yet, the grace of Christ is with us.

(5) The proof of that is on the ground. We might be walking a steep narrow path. (6) We might be walking a wide, flat path. No matter the path we may be walking, (7) look at all the footprints that have already walked, are walking, and will be walking alongside us in faith.

There may be times when it feels as if we are alone – in our anger, our frustration, our sadness, our arrogance, our uncertainty – and we cannot feel the grace of Christ in our midst. Yet the promise and trust and faith of God is that we will never, ever be left alone, and that is made evident by the footprints of faithful sisters and brothers in Christ. (8) For when we trust in the grace of God in Jesus Christ, we eventually see the beauty in the end of the journey, a glory that makes all the journeying well worth the effort.

Let us celebrate the end of a time of expectant waiting today, as we give thanks to God for Lisa's safe return and powerful experiences of pilgrimage. Let us celebrate the waiting we have participated in by walking and praying alongside Lisa over these last three months. Let us expectantly wait again for the coming of God-with-Us, Emmanuel, as we journey together to Bethlehem. And in all of our waiting, may our journeys of faith be strengthened, empowered, and sustained by the transformative grace of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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