

“Thankful Living”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
October 27, 2013

Psalm 65

Yesterday was a first in my fifteen years of ordained ministry. I conducted both a funeral and a wedding on the same day. Obviously, the wedding was already planned. But the funeral came about last week. I told the funeral director, “As long as we’re done by noon, I can do it.” And in his words, “Frank, knowing how you move things along, you’ll be just fine.”

The wedding was for Linda Lengerich and her fiancé, Tim Hayes. Linda and Tim are not current members of the church, but Linda’s son, Kyle, is, and Linda was at one time. When I first came to John Knox ten-and-a-half years ago, Linda and her family were attending regularly. Her husband, Marcus, would come occasionally, but he suffered with emotional illness, and that became a strain on their marriage. Eventually, they separated and it became a real struggle for Linda and her children. Then, on a March evening in 2004, Marcus’ demons were too much for him. In my mind, he came to a place that he considered safe – here at the church – and took his own life back here in the parking lot. For only the second time in my career, I had to tell a child that their father had died.

This church wrapped its arms and hearts around the Lengerich family during that tragedy, and I could not have been prouder of how we showed compassion and love to them. Understandably, there were too many reminders for Linda of that pain here, and she needed to find a new place for her spiritual needs to be met. And so, for her to call me a year ago and say that she was engaged and wanted me to marry her and Tim, and for the wedding to be here at John Knox, it was emotional, to say the least. Yesterday was a reminder that even from pain and hurt and chaos in our past, God is always working to birth new life. And I felt humbled to have the perspective of time to recognize that fact as I married Linda and Tim in this sacred space.

The funeral was yesterday morning, and it was for Neil Thompson. I received a call from Flanner & Buchanan next door last Friday, asking if I would be available for his funeral. I’ve told the funeral home to call me if they have a family who doesn’t have a church home. I may not always be available, but I feel it’s a small way I can provide help to a family in a time of need, if my schedule allows it. I kind of hemmed and hawed on the phone, knowing that I had the wedding in the afternoon.

Then the funeral director said, “Mr. Thompson asked for you to lead his funeral.” Well, that threw me for a loop! I decided it was important to honor his wishes, even though I couldn’t recall Mr. Thompson. So, when I met with Dale and Sue Thompson, Neil’s son and daughter-in-law, I had to come clean. I told them I was honored to be asked to lead Neil’s service, but I was at a loss for why he asked me.

Sue told me that when Neil had been diagnosed with leukemia a few years ago, and it was clear it was terminal, she asked him what he wanted for his funeral,

including who would lead it. He said that a long time ago, he came occasionally to John Knox with a neighbor and friend, and had been here for other events over the years. He and his wife, Norma, didn't have a church home. But in his words, "I would like the minister at John Knox to lead my funeral, because I appreciate what that church does for our community."

"I appreciate what John Knox Presbyterian Church does for our community."

This church, this community of faith, this branch of the Body of Christ, makes a huge difference in the lives of many, many people. It is easy to forget that when we are in the bubble of routine and tasks and programs. But moments like this remind me that people in our community have formed a perception of John Knox Presbyterian Church. It is a perception that what happens here – in worship, in outreach, in caring for others, in service – what happens here changes people's lives for the better.

That is the theme of our stewardship season this year: "Changing People's Lives for Christ." The materials you were sent two weeks ago share a plethora of stories of how God has impacted the lives of children, youth, and adults through our church's ministries. Those stories reflect strangers who have been shown compassion by providing food, clothing, or shelter. Those stories reflect children being taught God's Word in Vacation Bible School, special community events, or Church School each Sunday morning. Those stories reflect our youth being given opportunities to serve and grow in the faith, so that their roots are deepened for a lifetime of discipleship. These are not numbers on a page, or budgets on a spreadsheet. These are flesh and blood human beings, young and old, friend and stranger, whom God has touched deeply through your gifts of time, talent and treasure.

Similarly, our scripture lesson today reminds us once again of God's glory and presence in the world, and how we are called to respond in faithfulness and gratitude for all God has done.

Probably the most vivid image which comes to our minds when we hear Psalm 65 read is the beauty in creation. You silence the roaring seas, the roaring of their waves . . . You visit the earth and water it . . . the river of God is full of water . . . the meadows clothe themselves with flocks, the valleys deck themselves with grain. It is a psalm rich with visual reminders of God's presence with us in creation.

David Ruhe writes: Along Interstate 80 in Iowa, between Newton and Grinnell, is an exquisite place. Driving east through the rolling terrain, one crests an ordinary-looking hill to be greeted by an extraordinary scene of breathtaking beauty. The view encompasses two miles or so. The highway makes a gentle and majestic sweep to the left as it slopes down toward a bridge that crosses a winding stream. On either side of the road, furrows undulate to caress the contours of the land. The place is beautiful in every season, but in the fall, just at the time of harvest, it really puts on a show. More than once, when captivated by that scene, I have thought to myself, "Tough day for the atheists" (David Ruhe, [Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 4](#), Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2010: 200).

We all have those places and moments that spark our awe of the Creator. It might be on our drive to work, and we witness an incredible sunrise. It might be a place of great natural beauty to which we return again and again in our lives. It

might be a place at which we felt God's presence in a particular, important way, and we will never forget how that moment changed our lives. These are times in life when we echo the psalmist's words: "Praise is due to you, O God, O you who answer prayer!"

But the psalmist speaks the foundations of our faith that we trust and believe in a forgiving God who welcomes us all into his loving arms. "When deeds of iniquity overwhelm us, you forgive our transgressions" (65:3). "By awesome deeds you answer us with deliverance, O God of our salvation; you are the hope of all the ends of the earth and the farthest seas" (65:5). And as we witness to God's unbounded grace, the earth shows forth its plenty: "You provide the people with grain, for so you have prepared it. The pastures of the wilderness overflow . . ." (65:9,12).

This psalm describes a movement in the life of the spirit that begins with dutiful response to God for particular blessings, moves through awe at God's majesty, and culminates in an extravagant eruption of joyous praise. It teaches that to grow in gratitude is to become more and more the fulfillment of what God has created us to be: to move from being dutiful toward becoming truly beautiful (ibid, 200-204).

"To grow in gratitude is to move from being dutiful toward becoming truly beautiful."

Our church has never been a rich church, at least as the world defines "rich." We are not a church with a large endowment on which we can always fall back on. We do not have hefty savings that offer a soft cushion on which we can rely in case a crisis befalls us. We are only able to change people's lives for Christ because of the generous, sacrificial giving by many faithful individuals. We are only able to serve this community due to how we prioritize our resources for the most impactful ways.

Some people do not like to talk about money in the church, and that may include some of you. It feels invasive to our personal privacy, or maybe it has felt manipulative in the past. If this church didn't want to talk about money in honest, faithful ways, it probably should have chosen a different pastor ten-and-a-half years ago. I don't believe we would have done all that we have done to change people's lives if we weren't willing to speak plainly and bluntly about money and its relationship to our lives of faith. An annual budget that has grown 58% in 10 years. Two capital campaigns to fund a \$1.5 million sanctuary and building improvements. And the realization that a third campaign will begin next year for this long-term investment in our future. None of this could happen without being faithfully honest in how we see money and its place in our life of discipleship.

It is easy to fall into a sense of comfort and assurance that our church will always be there, changing people's lives as God has in the past. The church will be there to teach and mentor our children, to provide us meaningful worship, to show compassion to the needy, to celebrate with us at births and wedding, to attend to us personally when we are grieving or in crisis. Maybe we believe that this building at 30th and High School Road, and the activities that take place here, will never go away, something we can always count on.

Or can we? We have had seven deaths of members so far in 2013. Four of the top ten givers are over the age of 70, accounting for 17% of our annual giving.

Will we wait for the other person to step up in their investment in this place, or will we take that step now, so that lives might continue to be changed?

We believe that our future is our children and youth, and that is evident in how children and youth are an integral part of all that happens in our life together. This investment in ministry for 2014 would include having a youth director for the entire year, providing consistency and deepening of our youth's faith and call to discipleship. Will we wait for the other person to step up in their investment in this place, or will we take that step now, so that lives might continue to be changed?

Coming back from sabbatical earlier this year, I am convinced of one essential thing. Our top priority as a congregation must be to reach out, welcome, and bring new people into the life of our church. We can no longer assume that new people will join us. We must be intentional in our invitations, we must be focused in how new people are spiritually fed here, and all aspects of our ministry – worship, education, mission, congregational care, finance, facility – ought to reflect our mission as an open, caring community. I am excited by the work begun in this effort now by leadership groups, and how these might stir congregation-wide conversations about our future vision. But to make those dreams a reality, it will take generosity and dedication of valuable resources such as time and money. Will we wait for the other person to step up in their investment in this place, or will we take that step now, so that lives might continue to be changed?

The phrase “limited income” is a misnomer. I personally do not know of anyone who lives on an unlimited income. We all have limitations to our financial resources. The decision we have to make is how we will prioritize and choose where those limited resources are distributed. Do you believe that your investment here is changing lives, is producing the “dividend” in faith which you would expect? Is that investment in balance with the other priorities in your life, or is it out of balance? Are we leading thankful lives of faith?

Over fifty years ago, this land where the church is located was part of a farm, owned by one woman. She decided it was time to sell her expansive farm, so that homes and growth could take place in this part of town. The presbytery bought this four-acre parcel, and eventually that new church development became John Knox Presbyterian Church.

The woman who decided to sell this land? It was the grandmother of Dale Thompson, whose father I led the funeral for yesterday. Had it not been for her decision to allow change to take place, this congregation would not have had the opportunity to affect this community in ways that were so meaningful to her son-in-law.

“Praise is due to you, O God!” Amen.