

“A Building from God”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
June 10, 2018

2 Corinthians 4:13 – 5:1

Which of your physical traits do you value the most? Your eyes? Your skin? Your hair? I remember as a teenager and young adult, I always appreciated being tall. I could see over people when I was in a crowd, I could reach things without the need of a step stool or ladder, and I could play basketball and other sports which valued height. I also remember the comment Barbara Modlin made when I first got here fifteen years ago (Barbara was the secretary at that time). She said, “Thank goodness they chose a tall pastor – you can get things off the shelves the way Mark Merrill did!” Mark was the past associate pastor, and is taller than me!

Which of your physical traits do you least appreciate? Your hair? Your skin? Your height? Your weight? When we are younger, we can be very self-conscious about our physical attributes, especially as compared to our peers. I remember being very shy and embarrassed about my acne as a teenager, and wishing I had been born with a different set of genes as it related to my skin complexion. But then I also realized that I was not alone, that other friends dealt with this, too, and that provided a measure of comfort and solace among all of us who were not part of the “pretty people” club.

But this comparison with others about our appearances lasts our entire lives. We compare our weight, our height, our complexion to those who, in our minds, look prettier or more handsome than us. 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 to be healthy. Look at the commercials on television or the internet and you will see how our American culture feeds on this insecurity. The latest treatment to cure baldness, lose weight, and other, let’s just call them “enhancement treatments”, speak to how we are always looking for ways to correct our imperfections and draw closer to society’s standard of beauty. 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. In that kingdom, no one is categorized as welcome or unwelcome, as alien or citizen - for all are seen equally as children of God. 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 a sister or brother in Christ is suffering from grief or fear or the burden of life's crushing load, and we show compassion and care and concern for them, 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.

And yet. I go back to where I began. Our bodies are so central to our sense of self. They are probably the single-biggest factor in forming our identity. When we are young, we believe we are invincible, that our bodies will never weaken or break down. As we age, we cannot count on our bodies like we once did. And as we die, we come face-to-face with the stark reality of these mortal, earthly tents in which we reside.

The hardest thing for me about my father’s illness and death last year was watching his body – his earthly tent – just waste away. Dad was always someone who was active, who always looked younger than his actual age. He never had a broken bone, never had spent a night in the hospital, never dealt with anything worse than prostate cancer and had been cured of that for over ten years. He probably weighed only ten pounds more than when he was married, and he took care of himself so that he and Mom could enjoy retirement to its fullest.

That’s why it was so hard to watch the disease of leukemia eat away at his earthly tent. It was subtle at first – I noticed last summer that he was breathing a bit heavier than normal as we worked on the remodel of our kitchen. Later, he noticed he could not walk up two flights of stairs without needing to stop and rest. It was thought it was a heart issue, so a heart catheterization was ordered. Only after that test and the subsequent blood work was it confirmed that he had acute myeloid leukemia.

It progressed more rapidly after that. A couple of weeks after starting chemotherapy treatment, Dad noticed his back was sore. He tried stretches, but that made things worse. Then pain in his legs. Heating pads, ointments, pain pills. This for a man who never took pain medication in his life.

His and my mother’s world became smaller and smaller. He never drove the car after being diagnosed three months before his death. He gradually went from being able to live on all three floors of their house, to just two floors, to finally one floor. It was discovered that the pain in his back was the result of a burst disc, which was the direct result of the leukemia. He had a procedure to repair it – ten days before he died. The first and only broken bone Dad ever had.

I am not telling you all this to make you feel sorry for me or my family. I tell you this because I know so many of you have experienced this yourself or with your own loved ones. You have seen earthly tents

waste away in front of you, sometimes gradually over a long period of time, sometimes so quickly you cannot believe how fast things have changed. It's as if one day everything is normal, and the next day you or the person you love is simply a shell of their former self.

What's hardest is when you know or your loved one knows the body is failing you and there's nothing more that can be done. I saw that in Dad's eyes after that back surgery. He so wanted to do the physical therapy, to try and get stronger, to do the work that he knew he needed to do. The will power was never a question. His body simply wouldn't cooperate, and that was a foreign experience for him. I could see it in his eyes. He knew that his earthly tent was wasting away and that its time on this earth was finite indeed.

Paul says, "So we do not lose heart . . . For we have a building from God, eternal in the heavens" (5:1). That is the hope we hold onto as Christians that our Creator welcomes us into the heavenly kingdom even after our earthly tents have returned to this earth. For any of us who have lived through illness and disease and death of a loved one, we know that hope is present. It just may take us different lengths of time to embrace it and grasp it. For some of us, that hope is real and present now, for after a lengthy, debilitating illness, we are grateful that our parent or spouse or friend is no longer in excruciating pain and is inhabiting their building from God. For others of us, it is too soon to embrace that hope, for we are still in deep pain over the affects disease had on our loved one's earthly tent.

But the beauty of our God is that God is patient and kind, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. God's eternal hope will always be there - sooner or later, whenever we are ready. And whenever we are ready to embrace that hope, then we will be forever reminded that our lives are more than just these earthly tents which we inhabit now.

I am grateful for that hope being present whenever I am ready to embrace it. May you be grateful, as well.

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