

“Go and Make Disciples”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
Capital Campaign Celebration – June 11, 2017

Matthew 28: 16-20

Today is a day to give thanks for God’s presence in our past, to give thanks for God’s grace in the present, and to give thanks for God’s guidance and direction in the future.

Today is a day to give thanks for God’s presence in our past.

Over fifty-five years ago, a group of women, men and children began worshipping together as a new church development on the west-side of Indianapolis. Many of them came from St. Andrew Presbyterian Church, but others were from around Speedway and other neighborhoods on the west side. To continue with the Scottish heritage of their Presbyterian roots, the church decided to be known as John Knox Presbyterian Church. The presbytery purchased four acres of land at 30th and High School Road. This group of believers met for two years down the street, at St. John’s Episcopal Church, before ground was broken and the first building was built on this property. And so for fifty-three years, a structure has been in this location that symbolizes the Body of Christ’s presence in this community.

Our church’s past has been full of God’s abiding presence in many ways. There have been thousands of disciples who have grown, led, taught, and served Christ in this place. We have witnessed great connections with the larger church in this place, including one of our elders – Sandy Crawford – serving as the Moderator of Whitewater Valley Presbytery, and numerous lay people and clergy serving in leadership roles of the larger church. Our church has been blessed with consistency of pastoral leadership, with only three installed senior pastors in fifty-five years of ministry. We have been blessed with the gift of music and education and the arts, as the Spirit has broadened our hearts and minds through so many people’s incredible gifts. We have seen children mature into youth, young adults grow into seasoned leaders, and people of all ages seeking to learn from one another, no matter the generation.

The church is not just a building. The church is each one of us going out into the world, as Jesus commissioned us, to make disciples of all nations, baptizing in the name of the triune God, and teaching others all that Christ has taught us (Matthew 28). To fulfill that commission of our Lord, we also need to congregate together – to worship, to learn, to pray, to grow, to support one another. Buildings provide a space for us to come together, and thus much of our church’s life is centered in this structure at 30th and High School Road. We come together in one place, so we might be sent out into many places in this world.

Ten years ago, we started having conversations about our space. We looked at how our space was being used for various ministries and activities, and how we could best utilize our existing space. We also looked long and hard at our worship space. It was over forty years old, and presented some great challenges for long-term use and maintenance. It was built in a specific time in a specific style, and in many ways that style no longer fit what we needed as a congregation. We could either fix major issues, but still be left with the same inflexible, dark, existing space. Or we could make a long-term commitment, spend twice as much, and build a new space that was more representative of who we are now as a congregation and what we felt God was calling us to be in the future.

On March 22, 2009, by a vote of 83%, this congregation chose to invest long-term in its future by proceeding with the construction of this sanctuary. And over the course of the next sixteen months, we witnessed the physical transformation of our space as I showed earlier with the children. Those physical changes were the culmination of years of conversations about why space is important, the theological meanings behind worship space and its furnishings, and listening to one another about our hopes for the future. When we dedicated this sanctuary on July 4, 2010, it was truly a day to give thanks, as we physically entered a new space to encounter God as a community of faith.

Today is a day to give thanks for God's grace in the present.

There is no question we have benefited greatly from this space as a congregation. It has provided greater flexibility for worship, as everything up on this platform is movable - not like the pulpit in the old sanctuary that was made of brick! It has centered our worship in one space, whereas before we had the traditional service in the sanctuary, and the contemporary service in the Fellowship Hall. Its flexibility has allowed it to be used for other events and occasions, such as the Easter Festival's Journey through Holy Week, or concerts by outside groups, or plays and meetings and even graduations. It has also provided a space that is more energy efficient and costs less to maintain than the previous space, which then allows more of our resources to be used for mission and ministry.

But this space is not just about our worship and how we come together each week for spiritual nourishment. I said it over and over and over the last several years, and I'm sure folks were sick of hearing me say it. But I will always and forever state that this space represents our decision as a congregation to stay in this location at 30th and High School Road. Every time we walk in here, we should be reminded that when we decided to build this - and take on the long-term indebtedness that it required - we decided to stay and serve and minister to this community. We could have decided to pick up and move to an area that was closer to our "members" - and perhaps in doing that we could have grown significantly in numbers. But we did not believe that that was what God was calling us to; we heard God calling us to serve from this location to these women and men and children in our

immediate neighborhood. This building embodies that commitment to our community.

And you have heard today from just three of the many organizations that meet in this space, and how they are serving our neighbors in real, transformative ways. The Speedway Cooperative Preschool, the English as a Second Language Classes of Wayne Township Adult Education, and the Neighborhood Christian Legal Clinic all are doing amazing things out of this space to improve our community and help our neighbors grow. Over these last seven years, we have continued to witness God's grace around us, as our church facility is truly not our own. I shared this maybe a year ago, but on average, John Knox uses the facility about 50 hours a month for its programming, while outside groups and organizations use our facility about 200 hours a month – four times as much.

Would this have been the case if we had made a different decision on March 22, 2009? Would we have experienced this renewed commitment to our community if we were in Brownsburg, or Avon, or somewhere else? I'm not sure. What I am sure about is that God has blessed us in innumerable ways after the decision we did faithfully make. And I know how grateful Chris and Michelle and Sylvia and Dinah and so many others are that we are living out the Great Commission in this place, as this space shows our neighbors that we are here for the long-term.

Today is a day to give thanks for God's guidance and direction in the future.

The phrase that has always given me great comfort from Jesus' Great Commission is what he says at the end: "And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (28:20). No matter what comes, God will be with you and me and all of us. As we celebrated last Sunday on Pentecost, God promised the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, to fulfill Jesus' words, so we might know and believe and feel that God is always alongside us.

I will confess to you that I was terrified ten years ago when we first had these conversations about a new worship space and a building project. I know numbers, and I knew it would not be something that would be taken care of by a few, high-income members. Such an endeavor would require a significant increase in giving by a wide range of people for a long period of time. This was not going to be one, rich member's lasting legacy! This was going to be a long, extended journey of sacrifice and commitment.

We will speak in more detail at the luncheon today about numbers from the three capital campaigns. But for now, consider this. Since we started the first campaign, we have never been a church of more than 325, and today we are more around 225-250 members and regular attendees. And in nine years, more than \$1.7 million has been given to this endeavor; we have always received more than what was originally pledged; and our debt is now down to nearly a third of the original project total of \$1.5 million. Folks, that is outstanding for a church like us, and it is a testimony to the ownership of the

vision so many have had, including those who have become a part of the church since this all started.

But the other reality we face as we move forward as a church is that as long as that debt is with us, we are limited in our ability to invest in new ministries in Christ's name. The sooner we are able to pay down and retire completely the remaining \$580,000 on the loan, the sooner we can step out and share Christ's light in new ways. It might be an outreach program that combines gifts in the area of music and children. It might be partnering with another agency to provide housing for low-income neighbors. It might be offering our space to the community in a way we haven't thought of yet. Who knows what that new thing might be - that's what God knows and what we are called to find out. But until this debt is paid off, we are limited financially in our ability to try that new thing which God has in store for us.

That is why we are inviting you today to make a special one-time contribution to the Principal Gift Offering, all of which will go directly to the principal on our loan. That is why we will continue to keep you informed as to how we are doing, what new ways we might give toward the retirement of the debt, and thus fulfill this promise we made several years ago.

Today we are celebrating God's bounteous blessings on us as a congregation, and we are giving thanks for the over-flowing generosity of hundreds and hundreds of individuals and families who have contributed to these three capital campaigns. We are giving thanks to our partners in the Presbyterian Church (USA), who helped finance our loan and who have been contributors to help reduce the interest rate on our loan. We are giving thanks for how we have grown and developed as a congregation because of what God has done through this space for our worship and service as God's children.

But for a moment, I want you to envision what another celebration might look like. We are all gathered here, together in this space, and on the table are some papers. They aren't just any papers - they are our mortgage papers. They represent the long-term commitment we decided to make on March 22, 2009. They represent the sacrificial giving so many have made over several years.

And on that day in the future, we are lighting a match to those papers. On that day in the future, we are joyfully celebrating that we as a church are debt-free. On that day in the future, we are excitedly looking forward to what we can then do as Christ's disciples in this Open. Caring. Community.

How long will it be before that day in the future arrives? What will it take for us to achieve that great celebration as a people of faith? What can you do to bring that day to fruition?

Whenever that day may come, we know this: God has been, is, and always will be by our side - even to the end of the age.

Thanks be to the living, loving God, now and forever. Amen.