

Funeral Homily
Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
September 10, 2016

Betty Jean Noble Baird
July 13, 1929 – September 4, 2016

John 14: 1-6, 25-27
Romans 8: 31-39

As we gather today to celebrate the life of Betty Baird, it is understandable and natural for us to be filled with feelings of sadness, pain, and grief. A woman who meant so much to us in so many different ways has died, and that reality can hit us in a variety of ways. We will not share in new experiences with her. We will not form new memories with her. She will not be available to speak to, to listen to, to learn from. It is understandable to feel shock, emptiness, and anxiety when we face the reality of death.

And yet, it is important for us, as people of faith, to balance those real expressions of grief with feelings of hope, joy, and gratitude to God. We come today not only seeking comfort from God, but also giving thanks to God for how he has worked through one of his children to teach us the breadth and depth of his love.

The challenge of the Christian faith is to trust in something we cannot see, cannot touch, and cannot hear. The challenge – and crux – of the Christian faith is to believe that death does not have the final word. In the Presbyterian Church, we will often call a funeral service “a service of witness to the resurrection.” We live our lives of faith as witnesses to the one who conquered death so that we all might have eternal life. Death may alter our earthly identity, but our faith in the resurrection grounds our being in the One who created us, who redeems us, and who sustains us.

A couple of days after Betty was taken to the hospital, I visited her with all her family in her hospital room. When I visited her, she was not able to communicate very well, but she most definitely recognized me and responded in other, non-verbal ways. After we said a prayer together, I said to her what I often say to folks when I leave: “I’ll see you soon.” I knew I might not see her again, due to her weakening condition, and that may have seemed insensitive for me to say, especially as she was approaching the end of her earthly life.

But perhaps in saying that I am speaking the faith that Jesus shares in the reading we have heard from John’s Gospel. When Jesus spoke to his disciples, he knew they were worried, scared, and uncertain about what the future held if he was not going to be with them. To

ease their anxiety, Jesus assures them there is a place waiting for them in his father's kingdom. "In my Father's house, there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? I will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also." That is a great assurance to me, and I hope it is for you, as well. For in our faith in the resurrection, life does not end with the diseases we suffer from, the pain we endure, or the heartbreak we experience. Instead, eternal life is promised by the one who is "the way and the truth and the life." It is because of that faith that I know I will see and you will see Betty and so many others very, very soon, as we will meet in the many dwelling places that our Lord has prepared for us.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said: "You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house" (Matthew 5:14-15). The light that Jesus spoke of is something we are born with, something we are blessed with, something that identifies us as God's children. It is a source of energy, love, and hope to others that there is more to this world than what you see around you. That light exists in each of us, and as Jesus says, is not to be hidden, but is to "shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven" (5:16).

We each reflect that light in different ways, through the gifts, talents, and personalities God has bestowed on us. That light shines inside of us, reminding us that we are claimed by God and God's Son, Jesus Christ. Yet the decision we each have to make is: will we keep that light inside us, or will we expose it to those who surround us, so that it will give light to all who are in need?

God's light shone brightly through the life of Betty Baird in a number of ways. God showed us Christian hospitality through Betty. One of the things I noticed when I first came to John Knox was how Betty and Jim were always attentive to identifying new people who came to church, introducing themselves, and then making them feel welcome by introducing them to others at the church. And as I consider who is part of our church today, so many of them are here because of that welcome God extended through the Baird's.

And that hospitality was also expressed through Betty's cooking! She loved to bring dishes to church pitch-in suppers, host people for dinner at their home, and even when at Westside Garden Plaza, she would ask me when lunch was over, "Did you get enough to eat, Frank?" Apparently, chicken tetrazzini was the old standby in her kitchen, correct? Betty wanted others to feel satisfied and comfortable, and hosting them at her table was one of her gifts.

God cared for others through Betty. As you've heard Nancy say, church and faith was central to their family's life. And that was abundantly clear by the life of discipleship Betty lived. Betty and Jim

joined John Knox from its very beginning in 1962, and she served as the church's first paid secretary for 16 years. She was a long-time shepherd at John Knox, which is our program of caring for others here at the church. She would faithfully call her people – her flock – and share prayer concerns with the Deacons and pastors. And in so doing, she modeled for others what it meant to care for others in the name of Jesus Christ. And Betty knew God's love especially through music, and her many, many years of singing in the chancel choir. She would be greatly appreciative of the choir singing today, and offering those comforting words of "It Is Well with My Soul."

God taught us to treasure all that we have through Betty. Whether it was traveling around the country or the world, or spending time with her children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren, or smiling at someone who passed her in the hallway, or faithfully participating in activities at church or in the community – Betty didn't take for granted all that God had given her in life. She was grateful for the many ways God had blessed her, and she responded by living a life of gratitude.

We are each given a light that shines in us. That light can either be kept to ourselves, or shared with the world. There is no doubt what Betty chose to do with the light that God had given to her. Now, the question becomes: what will you do with the light God has shined on you through Betty? My prayer is that we may find it in ourselves to share that light of love. Because you never know how your light will illumine someone else's dark path, as surely Betty illumined each of our paths.

"I am convinced that neither death, nor life . . . nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Thanks be to God. Amen.