

Funeral Homily
Rev. Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
January 29, 2020

Janet Ruth Pitcock
May 11, 1935 – January 21, 2020

John 14: 1-6, 25-27
Romans 12: 1-8

Probably the hardest thing about life is death. Our head tells us that we will not live forever, but our heart has a hard time accepting that. It is hard to wake up one day and come to realize that the world is not the same as it was the day before. The friend you relied on to tell you what you needed to hear will no longer share in those conversations. The parent who taught you about life through their love will no longer be present. The spouse who walked beside you through thick and thin, for better or worse, will no longer be there for the journey. The world is not the same today as it was yesterday.

That is death's reality. It is a shock to our system, because as human beings, we are relational. Our identity is formed by the people who are a part of our life: family, friends, classmates, coworkers, and so on. What shocks us about death is that key person, who we related to in significant and meaningful ways, is now gone. Just as our identity is formed through relationships, death alters our personal identity due to the absence of that relationship.

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, in fact, have the final word. As you will see at the top of your bulletin today, in the Presbyterian Church we 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 identity, but our faith in the resurrection grounds our being in the One who created us, who redeems us, and who sustains us.

In our gathering together here today, we are bearing witness. We are bearing witness to God's grace and presence in the life of Janet Pitcock, one of God's children, who touched each of us and so many others in immeasurable ways. But we are also bearing witness to the fact that we trust and believe that God will be with us in all times of life, even in times of anxiety, stress, and uncertainty.

I visited Janet in the hospital the day before she died. It was a day that I had off due to the Martin Luther King, Jr., holiday. But something told me I needed to go and see her that day. I could tell then that she was in some pain and not feeling well, but we still had a good visit. We shared some laughs, as one always did when visiting Janet, and we had a prayer together. As I left, I said to her what I often say to folks when we part ways, “I'll see you soon.” Little

did I know that less than 24 hours later I would be at her bedside with her family as she breathed her last.

Even though Janet died so soon after I said, “I’ll see you soon,” perhaps in saying that I was speaking the faith that Jesus shares with his disciples the night before he died. In John’s Gospel, as 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 Janet and so many others very, very soon, as we will meet in the many dwelling places that our Lord has prepared for us.

In his Letter to the Romans, Paul appeals to the believers to “not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect” (12:2). As I read that, I could not help but think of Janet and her life of faith. In her life as a disciple of Jesus Christ, Janet sought to do God’s will with the gifts and talents God had bestowed on her.

We have heard Nancy and Cynthia speak of the deep love and care Janet had for her family – her husband, Terry, her daughters, her grandchildren, her siblings and their families. After five minutes of talking to Janet, you could tell that her family was her most treasured gift from God, and she was fiercely devoted to them – and they to her. That love and care is an example to us of the fierce love God has for each of us in Jesus Christ – a love that Janet exhibited in transformative, meaningful ways.

And as I read the end of this passage from Romans, I was reminded of how Janet’s gifts from God were such a blessing to us at John Knox and to the Body of Christ as a whole. Janet was a leader of our congregation – serving as both an elder and a deacon, as well as in so many other capacities during her fifty-plus years of service to this church. She was generous in giving of her time and energy toward a multitude of ministries, many times providing compassion and mentoring to others at just the right time and place. And she served the larger church admirably, as well, as she was a member of the Camp Pyoca Advisory Council in the 1990s when they built the current lodge that still stands today.

And her sense of humor and infectious laugh brought all of us joy and cheerfulness just when we needed it the most. The last time Janet served as an elder on the Session, our church’s governing board, we were wrestling with some pretty challenging issues. In the midst of some tense and serious discussions, Janet had the knack to say something that made us laugh, yet also brought us back into the right perspective as leaders in the church. I truly

believe she was God's way of helping us not become so stressed that we became paralyzed with inaction, but instead stayed together in faith as leaders of God's people.

Janet backed up what she believed by her actions, and threw herself all-in so that a goal might be reached. Two examples come to my mind as that relates to our church. She was a member of the building committee that added on the Fellowship Hall, kitchen, and parlor thirty years ago. And then more recently, Janet was a part of the capital campaign teams that helped finance this sanctuary, which was dedicated in 2010. She was a key person who brought new ideas about how to raise monies to fund the debt for this construction. One of her ideas was the purse auction we held for four years - she had attended such an event at a church in Avon, and she wanted us to do it here. Which led to yours truly dressing in drag to be one of the models for the auction. So, I have Janet Pitcock to thank for some incredibly embarrassing pictures that are now forever on Facebook!

But it also was because of her and so many others that we got to celebrate a great accomplishment this past Sunday, as we paid off the balance of our loan for this space, and for the first time in our church's fifty-eight years, we are debt free. I could not help but think of Janet and so many other saints who have gone before us as we drove that final check to Louisville yesterday, marking this historic milestone in our church's life.

Finally, Janet was thoughtful and kind in ways that made you feel loved and special. One of my hobbies is needlepoint, and one time I visited Janet and Terry at their home in Avon as Janet was recuperating from an illness. As I visited with them, I noticed all the cross-stitch pieces in their home, including one which was of a hummingbird and the words, "Praise God from whom all blessings flow." Janet shared that she had made it as well as all the others, and I told her of my love of needlework, and how that had been shared with me by my parents and grandparents. Later that year - I think it may have been at Christmas - she brought me a gift, my very own cross-stitch of the hummingbird and doxology. It sits on my desk in my office, and every time I see it, I am reminded of Janet's life of giving, gratitude, and kindness.

As we go from this place, may we aspire to not be confirmed to this world, but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds, just as Janet Pitcock lived her life of faith. And in so doing, may we seek to share our gifts which God has given us, so that the Body of Christ might reach its fullest potential to share God's love with this world.

"The Lord is your keeper - the Lord will keep your life. The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore."

Thanks be to God. Amen.