

**PENTECOST 17A**  
***Looking to the Needs of Others***  
**(Philippians 2:1-3)**

In 1967...

- the average cost of a new house was \$14,250
- the average rent was \$125 a month
- the average cost of a new car was \$2,750
- while the average income per year was \$7,300
- and the Federal Minimum Wage was increased to \$1.40 an hour.

In 1967...

- a gallon of gas was 33 cents
- a postage stamp was 5 cents
- and a movie ticket ran you \$1.25 (although I do remember that the movie theater up on Route 9, that is no longer there, of course, had these Saturday kid-specials for 50 cents, and all the parents would send us there when it was raining, just to get us out of their hair for a few hours!)

In 1967...

- 60 cents would buy you 5 pounds of sugar
- milk was \$1.15 per gallon
- coffee was 90 cents per pound
- bacon 74 cents
- eggs went for 38 cents a dozen
- fresh-baked bread cost 22 cents per loaf
- and hamburger was 48 cents a pound.

And in *October* of 1967, or 50 years ago this month, Hope Christian School first opened its doors with my mom – Gloria Kropa – as its first teacher. The cost of tuition? A whopping 8 dollars a month!

So this past week I went ahead and I asked Judy Canfield if she wanted to consider offering a 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary special, you know a retro kind of promotion by reinstating that 8 dollars a month tuition... Needless to say, she didn't seem too impressed with my marketing strategy!

Now there were 22 students that first year. I know this because “Miss Wanda,” as all the children affectionately refer to her, pulled the original file with all of their applications for Judy and me to look at earlier this past week. Even now, after all these years, there

was still an application on file for every single student, except one... Steve Gibson. I guess if you're the pastor's son, you don't have to bother with such trivialities. Either that or, if his parents ever fell behind in *their* tuition payments, everyone knew exactly where to find them!

Anyway, by all accounts Hope Christian School was a resounding success from the very beginning. The following June, when Pastor Gibson, wrote to all the parents inviting them to an end of the school year closing program, he shared with them that there were already *52 students* signed up for the '68-'69 school year!

An early brochure then described how the preschool was dedicated to the spiritual, social, mental, and physical growth of each child. And it explicitly stated that there were "no restrictions regarding creed or color."

In fact, a quick look at those first 22 applications revealed that while 8 of the 22 students were Lutheran, including 7 from Hope itself, 4 were Roman Catholic, 2 were Methodist, 2 were Presbyterian, 2 were Baptist, 1 was Episcopalian, another was Dutch Reformed, and 2 families had indicated on their child's application that they *had no* religious affiliation.

So, from the very outset, Hope Christian School was a place where children from a variety of different faiths and backgrounds were welcomed and affirmed. According to that early brochure I just referenced, from the very beginning, it was a place dedicated to the development of each and every child; encouraging and helping them to adjust to other children *outside* their immediate family or neighborhood. And, furthermore, it was a place where they would also learn about the larger community around them, and have the opportunity to express themselves through art, music, and other group activities.

Finally, because it *was* an outreach ministry of Hope Lutheran Church, from the very beginning Hope Christian school was *also* committed to sharing God's word, and basic biblical teachings and values, not in a coercive or proselytizing way, but in an inviting, respectful, and non-judgmental way.

And from this humble, but inspiring, beginning, Hope Christian School has continued – over these past 50 years – to serve the greater Freehold area, offering a quality and affordable preschool experience to the families and children of our community – several generations now, in fact, as evidenced by today's attendance. And now, under the direction and leadership of Judy Canfield, it has reached new and even greater heights, indicating that Hope Christian School will likely be around to serve *future* generations of children in our community for at least *another* 50 years and hopefully more!

But why? That is to say, why *did* Hope Lutheran Church take on this worthy endeavor 50 years ago this month?

To answer this question, I would like to turn our attention back to our reading this morning from the book of Philippians. The apostle Paul is writing here to a group of early Christians and, as he often did, when writing such letters to these early Christian communities, he wanted to focus their attention, and remind them of their true calling and purpose. In other words, he wanted to talk to them about *who...* and *whose...* they were.

“Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,” he wrote. That is, let Christ’ life now be an example of how *you* are to live.

Then he went on to *remind them* of just who Jesus was and what it was that Jesus did. This Jesus, says Paul, “who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form,” Paul points out, “he (Jesus) humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross.”

In other words, God’s Son – who had all the power and authority to do everything and anything he ever wanted, and then some – chose *instead* to be a servant, rather than a typical king or ruler. Instead of exploiting his power and position, he took on our human flesh and frailty, endured ridicule and rejection and suffering, and ultimately died a slave’s death – a cruel and painful death – on behalf of the world. And he *did* all this as a supreme act of love and sacrifice.

So now what about *you*, you Christian people? Paul, again, tries to explain the essence of the Christian faith and life to the folks of Philippi.

“Be of the same mind,” he encourages, “having the same love...” Again, strive – however imperfect your efforts may be – to have the very same mind and love of Christ who died for us on the cross. Therefore, and especially, “Let each of *you* (now) look not to your *own* interests, but to the interests of *others*.”

Look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others...

As the former Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple, once put it many years ago, “The Church is the only society on earth that exists for the benefit of those who are *not* its members.”

Think about it! Almost every society or organization on this planet, exists primarily, if not solely, for the benefit of its members.

Governments exist to take care of their citizens. Corporations exist to earn profits for their shareholders. Clubs exist to further the experience of those who share the same interests and pursuits. But the *church*... in all of its messiness, and shortcomings, and sometimes downright *ugliness*... the church – at its core – exists for *others*!

Again, just as Christ lived and died for the sake of his brothers and sisters in the world, so too the church that bears his name exists always and only for the sake of the world – for the sake of *our* brothers and sisters, whoever they may be.

Which brings us back now to Hope Lutheran Church, and 50 years ago this month. A preschool; what a novel idea?

Actually, no. Two of the last three congregations I served – one in Pennsylvania and the other in Ohio – both started their own preschools within a year of Hope starting this one. Was it just a coincidence? A random and entirely unrelated development?

Probably not. Because at their heart these preschools were not started to serve only, or even primarily, the children of their own congregations or parishes. As I pointed out to you earlier, fewer than *a third* of those first students at Hope Christian School, 32% to be exact, were children of Hope Lutheran Church. Which means that, instead, a full 68%, or more than two-thirds, were children from *outside* this congregation, and in two instances even, children with apparently *no* religious affiliation whatsoever.

Which is to say, quite simply, that Hope Christian School was not started to serve only Hope Lutheran Church! It was created to serve, and continues to do so to this day, the children and families of our community. Granted, over the years, some families from Hope Christian School eventually found their way *into* Hope Lutheran Church. But many more did not. Nor was this ever a primary or driving force behind the school.

No, the primary or driving force was for Hope Lutheran Church to look not to its *own* interests, but to the interests of *others*; in this case, specifically, the interests of young children in our community who could benefit from a safe and affirming learning environment.

That was the aim 50 years ago. And that remains our aim today...

In the Gospel of Mark, believed to be the very first of the gospels to be written down, there is a wonderful story about a time when people were bringing little children to see Jesus, in order that he might touch and bless them. A story that was then repeated in the gospels of Matthew and Luke as well.

Jesus' disciples, however, "spoke sternly" to these parents, Mark tells us, and tried to keep the children *away* from Jesus. Perhaps they just didn't want Jesus to be bothered or distracted.

But when Jesus saw what was happening, he became angry at the *disciples* instead. "Let the little children come to me," he ordered, "do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.

Truly I tell you," said Jesus, "whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." And with that, Jesus took the children up in his arms, and blessed them...

The general consensus is that what Jesus meant here was that the simple, trusting faith of a young child is all that a Christian ever needs. We usually try to make things much more complicated than they really need to be. Including, and especially, in the church.

In other words, faith – in this case the Christian faith – is not about knowing theology, or memorizing Bible verses, or perfectly following certain laws and commandments. Rather, faith is simply the ability to trust in God, and in the *love* of God that we have seen and experienced in Jesus Christ...

The Swiss theologian, Karl Barth, was one of the towering Christian minds and personalities of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His 14 volume "Church Dogmatics," written between the years of 1932 and 1967 (there's that year again), was an in-depth and comprehensive description of Christian doctrine and belief. If anyone ever understood just what it meant to be a Christian, surely it was Karl Barth.

As the story goes, in 1962, six years before his death, he made his first and only visit to the United States. One night, during that visit, he lectured at a seminary in Virginia, and after the lecture he met with some of the students in a coffee shop for some informal conversation and dialogue.

Someone asked him if there was any way he could *summarize* his vast theological findings. Another student specifically asked, "What in your judgment is the *essence* of the Christian faith?"

Barth, it is said, paused for a moment. No doubt, the students who had gathered there with him in that little coffee shop were waiting for some profound insights from this theological giant. They all got out their pens and paper, and were poised to write down whatever great wisdom and insights he was about to share with them.

Then, finally, Barth answered. “Yes, I can summarize in a few words my understanding of the Christian faith. Let me put it this way... “Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so.”

Needless to say, the students were all dumbfounded. Expecting some deep and complicated theological explanation, they received *instead* that basic Christian truth we all learned as little children.

That basic Christian truth is what both inspired and informed the creation of Hope Christian School 50 years ago this month... And still inspires and informs Hope Christian School to this day...

Jesus loves me this I know... for the Bible tells me so.

Amen.