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Pentecost 02, June 11, 2023

“What a Difference a Year Makes”

If there was one word to describe the beginning of this past year it was flexible. Will we be in the sanctuary or the Gathering Space this week? Or is it the Community Room? The most asked question? Anybody know where the ... fill in the blank ..., is? For those who are wondering, no, we haven't found my mirror for the sacristy, yet. Charlotte assures me it didn't get sold in the rummage sale. Thanks to Marlys Braunlich, I have something in there.

Flexibility was not just about the renovation. Just weeks before the Open House for new preschoolers, we torn down the original playground to prepare for the ark. The playground has always been a magnet for the new children. What were we to do? Little did we know God had already provided.

In the pictures that are rolling on the monitor as I speak, you'll see some shots of kids rolling down the sides of the retention pond. It was the most popular attraction of Hot Dog night for preschool. Luckily, we had had no rain so it was nice and dry.

Much of this year was taken up with renovation. It's easy to just settle in and not deal with issues. Thanks to the leadership of our “Go Campaign” team and the tremendous generosity and support of the people of our congregation, we now had the resources to deal with many situations.

In addition, we also took a big plunge into getting involved with our community by partnering with Habitat for Humanity to help build a home. It's a good fit for us because both want to help change lives. The house was completed, but our Mission Team hopes to find some way to continue in our partnership with Habitat in the future.

Many of the pictures you're seeing in the slide show are of renovation. The renovation committee, led by Doc Tessendorf, assisted by John Pilecki, Andy Reding, Pastor Don & Roxann Muller, Debbie Chappelle, and Charlotte Chrysler, with an assist from Pastor Dan Hoffman, who acted as a consultant to us, took the bull by the horns and got lots of projects launched. At one point, more than half our building was in some phase of renovation.

This past month we saw the conclusion of the renovation of the sanctuary project as we had new windows installed. There has been some talk about installing stained glass but we are just at the beginning of that process. We'll be asking the congregation for permission to go forward with the design of it. How we are going to pay for such a project. It's not part of the “Go Campaign.” It's really very simple, we're going to ask those of you who want to see it happen, to help make it happen.

It's a long-standing tradition here that we don't put names on things. It has served us well and I think it will especially serve us well in this project. Each of us will get to determine, if we say to go forward, what the topics in those four windows will be. They will be designed, constructed and installed. We're easily looking at a 1 – 2-year process.

Why do we want to do this? When we began the renovation project our goal was to make our worship space and building a more welcoming and attractive place to offer our praise and thanksgiving of Jesus. We want people to feel the warmth and hospitality that God has for us as they come into this place, in which God dwells. When a place, any place, is well-maintained, people are more likely to feel comfortable in it and attracted by it.

We know that people don't just come to see how a church looks, they want to see what the hearts of the people at the church are, but a church property that looks unkempt can detract from our ability to meet those people. It would convey a message that we don't care and we never want to give people that impression.

It's easy to think that the only thing that was important this year was renovation. That's not true. Once again, this year we packed over 100 boxes for Operation Christmas Child, providing items for families that may not have received any other gift at Christmas. To some, they might appear as trinkets, but for those who offered them, we know they are a reminder of God's great love for the world. All the supplies for Operation Christmas Child and the funds to send the boxes on their way were donated by the people of Good Shepherd.

Then in the spring, our Sunday School took on the task of creating baby care kits for Lutheran World Relief. God has blessed us thru His love, revealed by Jesus. He has called us to be a blessing. These two projects remind us that our mission is beyond ourselves. As Jesus reminds us, we are caring for the littlest ones in the world, who desperately need help.

Our Mission team introduced a new event this year, the Neighborhood Carnival. On a bright shiny day in mid-May people flocked from all over the town to come get a hot dog, go down the slide, graciously provided by the Brahm family and played games that were designed and made by our Sunday School classes.

Our other teams were not slackers either. Helping to plan worship and special events; created both Advent and Lenten devotion books and planned several prayer events. Hosted funeral dinners. If you're with us on Saturday night we returned to celebrating anniversaries with Ron & Lisa Baley. Our mowers and garden angels continue to make our property a welcoming destination.

Our leaders have offered much service to the congregation. Our Call Committee continues to seek our next pastor and God has blessed us in so many ways. We are also seeking our next preschool teacher, so that that mission may continue. We give Him thanks for those blessings.

Like many congregations, we continue to rebuild after the years of COVID. We've seen a number of new faces join us at worship, while also seeing some very familiar one return to in person worship. But we're also missing lots of people who were with us before covid came. This is an area where each of us is able to help. If you see someone from church, whom you haven't seen in a while, tell them you miss them and would be glad to welcome them back. If you have a friend, who seems interested, invite them. The reality is that many have developed new habits and after three years of not being active or coming to worship, they have filled that space. This problem is not ours alone. It is endemic in most churches.

One reality we face, and God warns us about this, is that people will go their own way. They will listen to other voices and believe they are telling them the truth. They will be deceived by the call of other obligations. Our leaders are working on ways that we might touch those who have not yet returned, but that will depend on those of us, who have returned being willing to help.

Are you willing to do the work of praying for those who have not returned, establishing connections to people whom you know, so that we can invite and encourage them? Can we convey the great loss we feel in their absence? Will we do it for the right motives? Paul says, "The love of God constrains us." They are God's children. He wants them to be here.

He sent Jesus into this world to die for them just as He died for those of us who sit in these pews each week. Perhaps you feel called to a ministry of care for those who have not returned? It is a ministry that takes great commitment because you don't see the fruit of your labor immediately; sometimes not for a long time, but it is vital.

We know one thing; God will work in us and through us to reach others. He always does. He has called us to be His people and His people care for other people. It is part of the fulfillment of the law and the prophets.

Are we listening to those around us who have hurts and need healing. Jesus comes to heal. Are we caring for those who are grieving, they need comfort. Jesus promises to bring comfort to those who seek Him. Are we listening to the disaffected, the people who feel marginalized by finances, race and many other factors. Jesus would talk to them and listen to their concerns. He did it time and time again.

Will we go to places that we don't normally go, to invite people we might not normally invite because God wants all people to be saved. He makes no bones about that. We know the lengths God went to redeem all people. He sent Jesus into the world to do one thing, to die for people so that they might live with Him.

So many people have worked so hard to help our church not only to look nice but also to be welcoming. It is not just the job of the greeters to greet people. We are all responsible for that. It is not the job of the usher alone to hand out materials that make people feel comfortable. Each one of us is a representative of our Lord Jesus Christ. He has invited us to be part of the Body of Christ.

He calls us through the waters of baptism and shares a dinner invitation with us each week to eat and drink with Him. He wants everybody to be welcomed and enjoy the meal He has prepared for them. Amazingly, it is a very expensive meal, yet Jesus offers it to us for free. He is the God of grace and glory who welcomes us all to His Kingdom.

He shares His Glory with us in the hope that we will take it into our lives so that we can share it with others. To those who commit their lives to Him, He gives power, power to call others to that same faith and power. The church of Jesus Christ will always face challenges, but they'll face them with the power and presence of God with us. We are "Everyday disciples, 'Sharing Christ, Changing Lives!' by Gathering, Growing, Giving and Going to the glory of God.

Count me in: How will you recommit your life in Jesus in this coming season of your life?