

“Celebrating 40 Years”

Dear Friends, Greetings this morning in the name of our Risen and faithful and always with us (and present) Lord Jesus Christ. It is wonderful to be with you (here this morning) as we think back on 40 years of God's blessings, 40 years of life-changing ministry and work, and 40 years of privilege and responsibility and opportunity to shape and mold and influence young lives for the kingdom of God.

I need to start with a confession here today. I love worship. I enjoy the time we spend every week, year-round. To come together as a family of faith around God's Word and his promises and what he has done for us in Jesus is something I look forward to each time it happens. It's always good.

But today, I'm finding myself smiling (and enjoying) this time much more than normal. To look out at some of the faces (from the past) and some of the students and teachers (from today), and to see you all here together (in one service) warms my heart.

I'll make another confession. I'm glad we have name tags. All of the students (from the past) look a lot older than they did when they were students. Not surprising; students grow up, like the rest of us. And some of the teachers from the past, they look a lot older than they once did (also) when they were on our staff. (I'm not saying, I'm just saying.) It's all good. You're probably thinking the same about the preacher.

40 years can change a life. 40 years can make a life. 40 years can do all kinds of things (for a life) and for eternity in the hands of God. That's what has been happening in this place for 40 years.

As we began planning for this occasion, I couldn't help but do a good amount of reflecting. It's been quite a run during this time. I wasn't here when it all started, but I've been here for quite some time.

Some churches (I've known) have struggled with having a school, almost to the point of wishing they never had one. Some pastors (I've known) have done everything they can to keep their churches and schools separate, as if they're two different things, almost in opposition. That has not been my experience. That has not been our philosophy or approach.

From day one, our school has been nothing more (nor less) than an extension of the work we have been called and commissioned to do by Jesus, and an opportunity for us to share in a ministry that has had a lasting and an eternal impact in the lives of students and families for which our Lord Jesus was willing to give his life. This school has been blessed by this congregation, and this congregation has been blessed by having a school. God has been good.

It's hard to gather on a day like this without recognizing some of the people involved. It's appropriate that we do that, especially after 40 years. Let's start with those who made the decision (during those years) to send your kids to our school.

Why don't you stand if any of your children or grandchildren or great grandchildren attended our school during the past 40 years. Wow! That's impressive. (Thanks for entrusting your children to us.)

How about on our School Board or one of our Parent Teams, Home and School Club, STEP? And here, I'll mention (also) the team that has been working behind the scenes for our fellowship time after the service, the food, the decorations, all of the preps. Go ahead and stand if you served in one of those supportive capacities. (Thanks for your good and faithful and God-honoring work.)

How about on our staff? How many of you have served on the staff (here at our school) in the past 40 years? Teachers, aides, administration, specialties, go ahead and stand if you served in any of those ways. (Stay standing for a moment.)

You folks are the backbone of what we've done. None of this would have happened without you. We want you thank you collectively (as a congregation) for your faithful and dedicated sacrifice and Christ-honoring service. And I want to thank you (personally) for sharing in a work (and on a team) that has been such a gift to so many. Thank you all so much for all that you have done.

Now, go ahead and stand if you were ever a student at our school; preschool, elementary, it doesn't matter. We didn't know how many we would (actually have) here today, but it's quite a group. Many have moved on, obviously; others, not able to attend. We hope and pray that your time here at our school has

prepared you for what has followed (and what will follow) and that we have given you a good and a faithful foundation (and start) to a life-long relationship with Jesus Christ. You guys were (and have been) great!

Finally, I've had the privilege (over the years) of having a foot in both camps, our congregation and our school, and so I want to (on behalf of the school, say a word of thanks to you as a congregation. Your vision, your passion, your support and encouragement (and patience) and prayers have been a gift. This would not have happened were it not for all you have given and offered for the past 40 years. Let's thank God for the chance we've had to be part of such an impactful and life-changing work.

Are you up for more of this? How about a little quiz? This is a celebration for a school. Let's take a little quiz. Look at the front walls for a moment, starting with some of the statistics, some of the numbers.

Which one is the correct answer? How many staff members (all-inclusive), counting everybody, have served in those 40 years? 127, 194, 230, or 386? The correct answer: 230.

Alright, here's another one. How many families have been served in those 40 years? If they had more than one student, we're only counting them once. How many families? 1265, 1328, 1510, 1686? The correct answer: 1686.

Here's another one. How many students have we had on our campus over the years, individual students, no matter how many years they were here, counting each one only once? How many students? 1839, 2106, 2282, 2283? The correct answer: 2282, unless there was one student who was always hiding when we counted...which could have easily been the case...then it would be 2283.

FYI, (not on the slides): Total enrollment for those 40 years was just shy of 4,500 students. That's a lot of lives impacted for Christ. We also graduated (after the first 6 years when the school hadn't reached 5th grade quite yet), starting with preschool and adding a grade level each year, in those last 34 years, we graduated just shy of 400 students. That's quite a group.

A couple more, just for fun. How many children were sent to the office because they were feeling sick during school hours? 97, 197, 297, or we lost count after 500? Answer: We lost count after 500.

How many meetings did Carol Johnson attend in preparation for starting our school in 1979? 8, 14, 26, or she didn't care how many, because she was responding to God's call? Answer: She didn't care how many it took, because it was all in service of her Lord.

How many times did Mrs. Torgerson threaten to walk out on her job while she was Principal? 7, 12, 24, never? The answer: Never. She was as dedicated and committed as you'll ever find.

How many times did Mrs. Renken tell us she wasn't qualified for being our Principal, before she finally accepted the call? 3, 7, 17, I have no idea because I wouldn't hear it? Answer: I have no idea and I wouldn't hear it, because she was gifted and qualified by the One who gifted and qualified her for that role, (just like the rest of us) who have served, and that's the only vote that counts.

40 years of Christian Education. 40 years of life-changing work. 40 years of ministry that touched hundreds (if not thousands) of lives.

This is a mixed bag here today. I'm sure I'm not the only one. For many of us, even though we are celebrating (today) what God has done in this place (for 40 years), there's an element of sadness in all of this. I think it's good to name it.

It was a tough decision to close the elementary portion of our school. There was a lot of hard work (in the years leading up), as well as during this (final year) that led to the decision to close.

And there have been, as I'm sure you can imagine, more than (a few occasions) when questions have been asked looking back. If only we had done this. If only we had tried that. If only this had happened or that had happened or (something else) had happened, we might still be giving it a run.

I think we all know (from life) and our own experiences that those (after-the-fact) looking back questions don't get us too far. We need to learn and to grow and to (take away) from whatever we experience (in life) the lessons offered (and learned), but we can't (as much as we might like) turn back the clock.

This was a hard decision for our leaders, one (I know) they did not take lightly. It came only after a lot of hard work and conversation and prayer. It was also a hard decision for me as the one who was in charge (of this place) when the decision was made. That can be a heavy weight (professionally) if we let it. We all need to be careful (as we go through life) to own what (truly is) ours and to not own what's not.

It was also a hard decision for me personally, not to make this a personal thing, but it certainly felt that way at times. Mary and I sent our kids here (in 1994) when we first arrived. This place and its teaching staff and

the learning that took place were gifts for our family. The foundation we worked to lay (in their lives) at home was reinforced by what they learned (and lived) here at school. We will be forever grateful. (I know I'm not alone.) Many of you would say the same.

It was also hard (personally) because (40 years ago), as we've heard, my father, (along with Carol Johnson) and some of the others, was instrumental in opening the school. It wouldn't have happened without the vision he (and the others) brought. And now, as his son, to close what (he started) and what has been such a gift has been tough. This whole (mixed bag) piece is certainly not our focus today, but it's an element that is real.

On a (different note), a more positive one, during this last year, a number of people have stepped up and gone (above and beyond) what they signed on for. Our teachers have gone the extra mile. Our Administrative Team, made up of some of the teaching staff, has given their best (every step of the way) and never looked back or complained. It's been inspiring to watch.

The one I want to call out (here today) is one who would not want me to do this, but I'm going to do it anyway. After serving here for more than 20 years on our teaching staff, and after having "retired" two years ago to begin a new chapter in her own life, Laurie Vroom has given her time and energy and efforts to ensure that (one) we gave this last year (before deciding to close) our best shot, and (two) that after the decision was made, to ensure that we finished and ended this year strong. In a few short weeks, she will have followed through and accomplished what she set out to do (and she has done it without being paid), and I (and we) will never forget.

40 years is quite the run. 40 years is quite the history. 40 years is quite the number (in the Bible) in which a lot of God preparation and work took place.

A lot of things happened in the Bible that were tied to and connected with the number 40. I won't go through all of them, but it's worth noting some.

You remember. For 40 days, Noah was on the ark during that time when it never stopped raining and the entire earth was flooded. For 40 days, Moses was on Mount Sinai, and when he finally (came down) he had the Ten Commandments.

The nation of Israel was in the desert for 40 years, long enough for an entire generation (to die off) because they failed to trust God. For 40 days, the Philistine giant, Goliath, taunted the Israelite army, until God finally intervened and led David to knock him down with a sling.

Three Old Testament kings, David, Solomon, and Joash, (the Bible says) "found favor with God" and they each reigned for 40 years. For 40 days, Elijah fled to Mount Horeb, before God spoke to him in a "still, small voice." Even Jonah prophesied to the people of the city, "Yet 40 days and Ninevah will be overthrown!"

It's the same in the New Testament. At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus fasted for 40 days in the desert (during which time) he was tempted by the devil. And at the close, it was 40 days between Easter and Jesus' ascension into heaven, a time in the Church year we're in right now, in which Jesus appeared to his followers on (at least) ten different occasions.

In the Bible, it's all over the map, the number 40. It's quite the list, and we've touched on just a few. Dare we add another 40 to that same list? The 40 years in which God's blessings and wisdom and grace have been passed on and lived out and made known in this place.

It's interesting as you go through that list of "40's" in the Bible. There's no one pattern that's the same in each. Some of those times were troubled. You dig into the detail (of what was happening) and the people involved were being put to the test. (It wasn't fun.) Some of those times were joyous. You look at what was (happening there) and the people who (lived them out) were glad it was happening and that they were there. (It came to them as a gift.)

There's no one pattern that was the same in each. They all happened at different places and times, and to different people and for differing purposes. Each one of those stories (in its own way), was unique.

What wasn't unique to any (one of them) and what was the same for (all of them) was the fact that they all happened for a purpose beyond the event (and time) and people themselves, and they were all used and directed and carried out by the One who has the final say.

It's been quite a run here at St. Timothy's for the past 40 years. A lot of people have stepped up and served and sacrificed and shared along the way. It's been a collective effort. I am so thankful today for the years

we've had together and for having had the chance to get to know (and to serve with) the many who've played a part in what has happened.

But let's not forget what has really happened during those years and the bottom line reason we're celebrating as we are. We're here today because of what God has said and promised to us. We're here today because of what God has carried out and accomplished for us.

St. Timothy's Lutheran School? St. Timothy's Christian Academy? Call it what you want. Celebrate it by the name you've known (and that it had) while you were here. It doesn't matter.

What matters (after 40 years) is that this place (for 40 years) has belonged to God. This place (for 40 years) has been used and blessed by God. This is his place. This is his school. And we've been privileged to have had the opportunity to be a part of a work and a Master Plan that was ultimately his.

This school was not Carol Johnson's idea (nor the ones she worked with), and she knows it. It was God's. This school didn't start because of a vision my father had (more than 40 years ago), and he knew it. It was a Vision planted in his heart (and his mind) by a God who envisioned it happening from the beginning of time.

I remember one of the years in which we were challenged to do somewhat of a "reset" in what we were doing. We'd been distracted. We'd allowed ourselves to get caught up in things that were finally not our true purpose. (I'll confess.)

The "reset" we did was rather simple. We called ourselves back to the basics. Reading, writing, arithmetic? Those were not the basic three. The basic three were even more basic, and that's what we've been about for 40 years.

"Love God...Love each other...Teach the Kids." "Love God...Love each other...Teach the Kids." For 40 years, that's what we've been doing, and for 40 years, as a result of what (God has done), we have been blessed.

In closing today, let me offer one final thought. When it comes to the 40's in the Bible, whatever the 40 was, there was always something more powerful that followed. God doesn't use "his 40's" for no purpose. They always have a purpose, and there's always a story that follows every one of the 40's that are there.

It was true for Noah and the flood. It was certainly the case with Moses and the nation of Israel. And for David and Solomon and Joash, for Elijah and Jonah, and even for Christ himself, there was always a purpose and there was always a story that followed.

When it comes to our own "40" and to this school, the same will be true. For starters, the Preschool part of what we're doing is going to continue. Our plan is to build it up and make it stronger and keep it going for (only God knows) how many more "40's" there might be.

It's already there for some of our student's kids. God willing, it'll be there for their kids, as well. And so, not to turn this into an advertisement, but, pass on the word. Talk it up. The same "Christ-centered" focus and teaching will not stop. I have some real excitement about seeing what God has in store.

And to push it (even further), when it comes to the students and the teachers and the families that have walked onto this campus and passed through these doors and taught in this place for the past 40 years, it's even more exciting to think about what God will do in (and through) their lives in the years ahead.

In God's infinite wisdom and foreknowledge, the ripples of the work that has happened (in this place) and in the lives of God's children that have been touched (by this place) will keep on going out until the day Jesus returns. I can hardly wait to find out (in heaven) how God has used these 40 years for his glory.

There is always a purpose in God's plan, and there will always and forever be a story that follows...for you, for me, for what happened (in and through) this school, and for this place.

40 years of God's blessing. 40 years of God's grace. Today we thank him for all he has done, and for the story (in Jesus) that never ends.

Let's pray. Almighty God, we thank you and praise you for your goodness and your grace for these 40 years. For the lives that have been touched, for the knowledge that has been gained, and for the countless ways in which the message of what you have done for us in your Son has been planted and watered and nurtured and grown in the lives of your children.

Lord, we give these 40 years to you, as you have already given them to us. Take our efforts, take our love and our failings and our hard work, take all that we have done and given, and use it for the glory of Jesus.

Thank you, Lord, for all you have given and all you have done in us and through us for these 40 years.
In Jesus' name. Amen.