

Tears flow as beloved pastor retires

"Well done, good and faithful servant! ... Come and share your master's happiness!" are words that Jesus spoke in what is called "The Parable of the Talents," found in the Gospel according to Matthew (Chapt. 25) and Luke (Chapt. 19). After 37 years of ministry, the Rev. Robert F. Hoenich can begin his years of retirement with his wife, Nan, knowing that he has been a "good and faithful servant."

Last Sunday, he certainly was reminded how much his parish family at Christ's United Lutheran Church loved and respected him as their pastor for the past nine years as he celebrated his final service. Tears and hugs abounded as made his farewell and greeted everyone at the door as they left the nave of the church, saying goodbye to their pastor and their friend.

"I'll miss him, too. I didn't have a lot of contact with him, but it was always a pleasure meeting up with him here and there over the years. He was dedicated to his ministry, which means that his love for Jesus



John E. Usalis
Wandering
Around

was evident in his words and actions.

"On April 1, 2001, I began ministry in this congregation," said Hoenich to the congregation as part of the ceremony as a departing pastor. "I have, with God's help and to the best of my abilities, exercised this trust. After prayer and careful consideration, I am now leaving this charge, and I publicly state that my tenure as pastor of this congregation ends this day."

The previous weekend, the congregation held a farewell dinner at the Fountain Springs Country Inn.

At a meeting of the congregation on Feb. 11, 2001, the congregation
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The Rev. Robert F. Hoenich gives his final children's sermon as pastor at the Feb. 28 Sunday worship service at Christ's United Lutheran Church, Gordon.

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WANDERIN'

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voted unanimously to elect the Hoenich as the new pastor of Christ's United Lutheran Church. He had been the pastor of St. Peter's Lutheran Church in Pine Grove for 20 years and was at one time, in the 1970s, an intern at Christ's United Lutheran Church as well. He is well-known throughout the Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod, had been dean of the Schuylkill Mission District for six years and is a very well-known and respected member of the clergy.

The parish children came to the front of the church and sang before the full church for Hoenich. During one song, I got the distinct impression that the retiring pastor was a fishing fan, especially when they make the motions of someone casting a line and the broad smile that came to the pastor's face.

Pastor Hoenich sat among them and spoke to them. He thanked them for their inspiration to him and the congregation over the years and to warmly welcome the new pastor when one is assigned.

"You need to promise me one thing. Promise me that you will love a new pastor as much as you loved me. Can you do that?" asked Hoenich, with the children making the promise. "And you need to hug the new pastor."

"Now, you know how tall I am. I'm really tall. It could be someone shorter than me, or it could be somebody a little taller than me. Make sure they get down on their knees so they can see you. If they have trouble getting up, help them up, too. OK? And if that doesn't work, get one of your parents."

His sermon was strong and powerful, focusing on the importance of the Cross of Jesus Christ. Hoenich spoke of the need to embrace the Cross and knowing that each individual is just as important in God's eyes no matter the social status, financial position or any other human conditions.

"The Church is called to a life that goes beyond the contentment with the way things are in this world — Taking care of one's self, distinguishing between the rich and the poor, identifying one's life as more important than another's and seeing life as human cargo," he said. "I'm reminded of Jesus' words to his disciples as He predicted His death. He said to them, 'If anyone wants to become my follower, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow



JOHN E. USALIS/STAFF PHOTO

Members of Christ's United Lutheran Church near Gordon receive Bibles from the Rev. Robert F. Hoenich during his last service as pastor.

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"Lovers of the Cross we're called to be, not enemies of the Cross. If the Church is a lifeboat in the icy waters of this world, then we indeed are to be lifting people on board with us, spiritually most especially, letting them know the gift of salvation which is ours through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Loving all of humanity as God has first loved us. There is no human cargo in God's vocabulary — only precious souls to be loved and cared for; giving food to the hungry and giving drink to their thirsty."

Hoenich read a prayer he found that he said "summarizes where I am personally right now."

"O God of young faith and new beginnings,

"I remember the church of my childhood when you first stepped into my life and fed me with your life. Your life is a treasure. I have never stopped seeking. It is a treasure I have never stopped finding. I remember the deep, ever-growing faith of my parents, who not only taught me to walk, but taught me to walk in your path. But now at this point of my life, I leave you, O God, of my young faith and these new beginnings. For the path my parents pointed out to me seems to be empty that leads to a cross and a

hunger for a sign — a rainbow, a sprouting seed, a meal shared with love, a warm embrace, to assure me that it really is the best path.

"God of young faith and tired faith, breathe into my life a new beginning."

As he concluded his sermon, Hoenich asked everyone to stay firm in the Lord.

"I am counting on you to do just that — to stand firm in the Lord," he said. "As a pastor in the Church, I am calling you to that faith.

Remember what you have been taught in this church. Stay on the path that others have helped you walk on, and indeed we have helped each other to stay on it. It is a path that leads to a cross — the cross of our dear Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. It is upon that path that we are to be walking. Amen and God bless you."

One of Hoenich's final pastoral acts was to baptize a new church member. Infant Khloe Marie Heiser; daughter of Sherry Heiser, was baptized in the center aisle with the congregation looking on. After the baptism, Hoenich proudly carried the newly baptized infant around the church so all could see.

As the service reached its con-

cluding symbols of his ministry to the congregation: water and baptismal bowl, Pulpit Bible, children's sermon books, chalice and paten, and oil used to anoint in healing, and Bibles as a representation that shows the forgiveness of sins for those who are repentant.

"It is time for me to go forth, having restored to you the signs of this office, which you presented to me. I ask that you send me forth in your love," said Hoenich to the congregation.

"May God's blessings be with you as you go forth from us to continue the ministry of Christ," the congregation said in unison.

"The Lord bless and keep you, the Lord make His face shine upon you and be gracious to you, the Lord look upon you with favor and give you peace," he said, giving the final blessing as pastor, with the congregation responding, "Amen."

He was hugged and kissed by everyone who participated in the service in the sanctuary, and later greeted everyone at a gathering in the church hall.

A supply pastor will serve the congregation for Sunday services until a new pastor is found. The Rev. Dana Heckman-Beil, pastor of Good Shepherd