

This morning we are going to be reading a text from I John. I John is part of three letters which we know as 1st, 2nd, and 3rd John that are found toward the end of the Bible in the New Testament.

These letters were written in about 100 AD or CE or about 70 years after the death of Jesus. The author was someone who was part of the same community that produced the gospel of John but, most likely, a different person than the gospel writer.

Some call I John a letter and some call it a sermon. Either way, it was addressed to a community that had a big church split. The split was apparently over whether or not Jesus was really human.

I John is written to the ones who believed that Jesus was both fully God and fully human and the author tries to reinforce this important belief for them. We will see glimpses of this controversy in our reading this morning.

Read I John 5:1-6

The writer of I John says that when we love the children then we love God.

Today we are celebrating 16 years of ministry of the Allison Creek Preschool. We thought it was 15 but in looking back at our history we are actually at year 16. Oops.

It's great to have a couple of our former directors here today and at least one of our original students, Gabrielle. I am glad that several current students and teachers are able to be here today as well and it was great to have the kids lead us in singing.

I shared briefly at the preschool board meeting this week about the early days of the preschool but I think it's important for everyone to hear about the vision and struggles to start this preschool. There is even more to the story than what I shared at the preschool board meeting.

This preschool is an amazing story of vision, perseverance, and providence. It should not have succeeded.

This coming fall there will be 100 students and about 20 teachers and staff in the preschool. But it's important to know that the preschool was razor thin of never being born.

I want to invite you back to 17 years ago. 17 years ago this parking lot was a gravel parking lot. Where you have your chairs was a mix of rocks and overgrown grass. Inside here was an educational wing that included toys that one person described as "experienced toys." In other words, old and outdated.

But one person saw a vision. Her name is Lois Pederson and she is sitting right over there. Lois was nominated to serve on our Session or governing body. Lois pulled me aside one day as she was coming on Session and said, "Sam, I have a vision.

I have a vision for a preschool here. This facility is perfect." I can tell you that at that time no one else saw that vision. Several questioned that vision.

Providence Presbytery was offering grants to fund new ministries. We applied for and received a \$12,000 grant to be dispersed over 3 years. We used that money to hire a preschool director. Her salary was \$6,000 per year.

We put together a team to plan a preschool. On that leadership team included Linda Argo, Lois Pederson, and others. We put together a job description for a preschool director and we were ready to begin the search when Lois received an email.

The woman introduced herself to Lois and said she was a preschool director who had recently moved to the area and she was driving by the church and she thought this was a perfect place for a preschool.

As Lois knows, we had not put the word out that we were starting a preschool. We met with this woman and we hired her as our first preschool director. Her name was Renee.

We planned to start in January of that year because we had been told that other preschools in our area had waiting lists. We thought we could begin with the ones turned away from other preschools. As January rolled around we had a total of one application.

We decided that maybe we should wait. So we began advertising that we would start up in the fall. Over the next few months our 1 application turned into 2 applications. Our grant money was running out.

So we called a Session meeting on Pentecost Sunday morning, May 30th of that year 2004. I even have my paper calendar that shows that Session meeting. Lois Covington did the children's message that day in worship and Mark Sleeper gave a Minute for Mission.

Earlier that year Sarah Gladden had eye surgery and in April I did a baptism for Margaret Corbett Hopf or Greta as we know her today. We made a video on VHS to show to the church in March about starting the preschool and starring in that video was Ms. Katrin and 2 year old Julia who are with the kids right now.

We filmed part of the video from Penland Tree farm because you could see the top of the steeple from over the trees. Bob Clinton sold his dairy herd that March and in June teenager Lyndsay Gladden Capistran and I went on a mission trip to Honduras.

The Session meeting of May 30th was called to cancel the preschool. This was a recommendation of the Preschool Board and after consultation with the preschool director. We gave it a shot. But it wasn't to be. May 30th, 2004 was to be the end of the preschool dream.

I usually get the mail on Sunday mornings. So I did on that morning. It's a good thing I did. It's a good thing there was not slow mail service that Memorial Day holiday weekend. Because in the mail box were two more preschool applications. We now had 4 applications.

So the Session gathered in my office. And I told them what I had found. There were several elders who were not convinced that we should start a preschool. As one elder said, why would any parents put a child in a half day preschool?

But with the knowledge that we had 4 applications, that Session did not act on the request to cancel the preschool. We decided to wait and see what happened.

The preschool director Renee quit and Lois Covington stepped in to teach and serve in the roll of the first preschool director. We hired one other teacher and we began with one class and 2 teachers.

That first class grew to 12 students and we thought we were off and running. Year 2 came along and we began the year with 3 teachers and we had 5 students. That's a great ratio but not very economically viable. We were losing money big time.

But then people started to show up out of the blue. Monica Roveri showed up and said she felt led by God to help out. She didn't know what that meant but she felt that she was to be here. We eventually hired her as the next director and we were off and running. She would not be our last preschool director that is Catholic.

Elizabeth Gibson followed Monica and the preschool continued to grow. Some of you may know Elizabeth as the Assistant Principal at Clover Middle. Emily Hurst followed after Elizabeth and was committed to helping build a stronger relationship with the church which she accomplished. Devin Willis is now in the director's seat and the preschool has continued to build on the labors of these previous visionaries as the impact continues to expand.

The author of I John says that as you love the children you love God. Today is a time to celebrate all of the people who have loved the children as their way to love God. But today is also a time to remind all of us that our responsibility is to love God by loving the children.

Some children are easy to love. Some children feel that love all around them. But, unfortunately, many children in our community do not feel that same love and support. So the invitation today is to open our eyes to the needs of children all around us.

We are called to pay special attention to the child that is forgotten, the child who is in pain, the child who is being abused, the child who is being bullied, the child who is called different, the child without economic advantages.

When we love the children we love God. I am thankful for the ministry of the Allison Creek Preschool. I am thankful for all of the early preschool board members and Session members especially Lois Pederson who saw a vision and who were used by God to see it through some very rocky times.

I am thankful for all of the directors and teachers who are part of a long and special tradition of loving God by loving the children.

When you are called by God to love the children or a particular child, sometimes the road is very hard. There are lots of valleys along the way. There are times when you want to give up.

There are times you feel discouraged. There are times you feel like you have failed.

But we are reminded again today that as we love the children then we love God.

Be open to the child that God is calling on you to love. AMEN.

+++++

-Given: May 16, 2021 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)