

Eulogy for Frederic Geehr, September 13, 2019

Dear family and friends of Pastor Fred Geehr, dear brothers and sisters in Christ!

"Praise the Lord!" The booming voice that echoed through the chambers of this church many a time is no more. If there ever was a distinctive pastor's voice, it belonged to that gentleman from Easton, whose instrument was trained in the Episcopal Boys Choir and honed over more than fifty years of preaching and interpreting the gospel. When the Lord called Frederic Geehr to become a minister, against the wishes of his father and mother, Fred did not have Moses' excuse, who said, "Pardon your servant, Lord. I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor since you have spoken to your servant. I am slow of speech and tongue." (Exodus 4: 10) Unlike Moses, Fred had the voice of a minister, and he also had the heart; he had the intellect to illuminate scripture and he also had the desire to serve; he had the humility to be a shepherd and he had the leadership skills. He served with great integrity and always put the needs of the church before his own. At some point back in the ancient 1940's, the Lord called his name: "Frederic!" God called him into his service - "Frederic!" - and no force on earth could deny him. Today, some seventy years later, we are most grateful for this man's many decades of service and for his presence in church, community and family.

Frederic Geehr was born on June 3, 1933 in Easton, Pennsylvania. His mother Elva died when he was only five years old and his father Franklin, a local electrical engineer, took this loss very hard. As Pastor Geehr told us on several occasions, his grandmother, lovingly called "Gamma," became an important and invaluable figure in his life. She lived with them and helped raise Fred and his younger sister Barbara until Franklin remarried. His new mother Melba, who was really more mother than stepmother, instilled in him a life-long appreciation for music. She was involved in the local theater and had a beautiful alto voice. And so, Fred's first career began when he was in elementary school. His first career was: choir boy! In recent years when the scourge of dementia wiped out large portions of his memory and intellect, Fred would often repeat the distilled essence of his first career because it was in his soul and no dementia could mess with that. Whether you wanted to hear it or not, he'd tell you that he sang in the Episcopal Boys choir and was later considered one of the top ten High School Baritones in the state of Pennsylvania. Haven't we all heard it? At the time he was referring to, at least one girl took note, but I suspect there were probably more, judging from the early photos that show a very handsome young man. The girl's name was Lois Rae Lutz. She thought he was cute, good looking, had a great voice and was interested in matters of faith, and that was important to her, since her father was a minister. They started dating in high school, and a few years later, on September 11, 1954 – Fred was just 21 – they got married. This past Monday, Fred died exactly two days short of their 65th wedding anniversary. And Lois simply said, "I miss him." It was a blessed marriage, a true partnership of many shared passions, especially church, music, art, justice and scholarship, in no particular order. It was a blessed marriage, with no shortage of love and mutual respect. Lois simply said, "I miss him," summing up the great void felt after so many wonderful years together.

As a good Lutheran from the Greater Allentown area, Fred Geehr went to Muhlenberg College, obtaining degrees in the classics, studying Greek, Latin and German, setting him up perfectly for his next step: the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, which he attended from 1955 until 1958. It was a busy time in his life. His first daughter Lisa was born while in seminary in Mount Airy. He also had to accept side jobs, making money to pay for his own college and seminary tuition. And he wasn't looking forward to getting a big pay check upon obtaining his degree and his first call. Pastors in the 1950's were only slightly better paid than slaves. Their wives were expected to chip in for free. And their children were part of the deal as well. It was a career choice for those who were called, not for those who had merely warm feelings toward the church. Frederic Geehr was called to be a pastor of the flock and he responded, dedicating his life to God's work for the next five decades without ever holding back.

He will get paid now.

His first call was in the mountains between Easton and Stroudsburg, at St. John's Lutheran Church in Pen Argyle. He spent a few years there, by the end of which the family had grown to three children, while Fred was longing for a different challenge. The family moved to Newcastle, Delaware where he took on a young mission congregation that was struggling. How did he get that call? The running joke was that he received the pastoral call because his booming voice could drown out the jets of nearby Dover Air Force base. Young Reverend Geehr could make himself heard, that's for sure. But not only vocally. In six years of service in Newcastle he helped the congregation build their first church and parsonage complex, get out of debt and develop a forward-looking perspective. I would be happy if I could achieve such accomplishments in twenty years... he did it in six! Ever the servant-leader, when the work was done, he felt his flock could benefit from new leadership and the family moved once again. After two brief years at St. Paul's in Ardmore, the longest and most impactful chapter in his ministry career began in 1969 – at Zion Lutheran Church in Flourtown, a congregation he and Lois shepherded for 27 years, until his retirement in 1996. Fittingly, on the grounds of that church he will have his final resting place.

I would like to say a few things about Pastor Geehr's ministry in all those years as it relates to the scripture passages selected for this service. The first lesson is from Isaiah 42, one of the so-called servant songs in Isaiah, a text that Christians have always interpreted as pointing to Christ. It has also been called a Messianic prophesy. In this beautiful text, God's servant is portrayed as one who will bring justice to the nations, who will be sensitive and careful with the weak and the marginalized of society. "A bruised reed he will not break," it says, "a smoldering wick he will not snuff out." This text is a reflection of Pastor's Geehr's character, his Christian values and his ministry style. He was always engaged in making a difference in his community, not just talking about needs in the community, but leading people to find solutions and programs to help, to keep the smoldering candles of society burning, tending to vulnerable people, letting Christ's light shine in the darkness. In Flourtown, he developed a Kinder care program that two of my own children attended many years later. He engineered a program for children with Down

Syndrome, called the Mark program, which was adopted by other communities as a model and implemented in several places in the county. And I say "he engineered" those programs deliberately. I believe my dear colleague Fred had this gift, perhaps from his father who was an electrical engineer, to look problems in the eye, analyze them and find solutions. It's a rare and special gift and he was good at it. He got involved in many other worthy causes: resettling refugees from Vietnam and southeast Asia, creating a safe-house for at risk young people in the old parsonage – against the resistance of church leadership; building ecumenical alliances with other local clergy in an organization called "Bethlehem Pike Clergy." The list goes on and on. If you made a complete list of Pastor Fred Geehr's social ministry endeavors, it would probably run several pages and have "compassion" and "service" written all over it. And people would recognize that he took a page from Christ's own life: "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." (Luke 15:2)

There is one other major accomplishment in his professional life that was much more hidden to most people and needs some illuminating. Pastor Geehr was a scholarly type, a meticulous note keeper, a book-smart person who deeply valued quality education and could come across as professorial. When he retired and had to give up huge parts of his extensive library, partly because he had to downsize, partly because his eyesight grew so bad that he couldn't enjoy most books anyway, he donated a great number of works to the Philadelphia Lutheran Seminary. The beneficiaries were the future pastors of our church. Since most of those books were already in the library, the ones from Pastor Geehr's collection were made available for free to students of theology. One of them wrote this letter, years later:

"Dear Rev. and Mrs. Geehr, You don't know me, but you have made a profound impact in my life. I first learned of you in my first semester at seminary, when much to my surprise, someone had donated the entire collection of Martin Luther's works to the seminary. I happen to be the recipient of those books, which have been an invaluable treasure to me in my preaching, teaching, and the completion of my S.T.M. thesis. For this gift, I cannot thank you enough!"

This person, Pastor John C. Nelson, goes on to explain that the notes and commentaries in Pastor Geehr's books were an education in and of itself and that those books impacted and blessed dozens of young pastors in training, a gift that keeps on giving to this day. Those who knew him, most definitely his family, knew a thing or two about Fred's meticulous record keeping. He not only graced each book with a handwritten and highly recognizable owner's signature, he also recorded precisely what the book had cost. A frugal mind who valued things, a child of the 1930 generation, he was someone whose lifestyle we could learn from today as our society suffers so profoundly from waste and the devaluation of material goods. They are called "consumer products" in contemporary language, and we consume them alright. As soon as they are purchased, they're only one step away from the trash heap... The books in Fred's library were meant to last, and last beyond his life time; and they do, now in the hands of a new generation. For that we are immensely grateful.

Finally, a word about the greatest collaborative act: Fred and Lois Geehr. It's pretty much unthinkable to picture them separately, which makes this such a sad day, because they blessed and supported one another throughout their lives. Together they went to their beloved Shakespeare Festival in Canada. Together, they went to their beloved Bach Festival in Bethlehem. Together, they purchased art. Together, they contributed to the Adult Forum Sessions when I started at St. Peter's. Together, they ate and slept and breathed and felt. And when Fred was grumpy, Lois would set him straight. She will miss that. They still had things to say to each other after all those years. When Pastor Geehr developed the dreaded Alzheimer Disease and they moved to Spring House Estates to have accessible care, they again leaned on each other. At one point they were on different sides of Willow Brooke Court, but that didn't last long, because these two could not be separated. Everybody could see that.

And so, I would like to reserve my final thank you for Lois and for Lisa, for Kirsten and Ethan and your families. You enabled your father and husband, Pastor Fred Geehr, to serve the church and the community and have a profound impact throughout his ministry years. I am sure there were sacrifices associated with that. I know that he still found time to care for you, bless you and love you, but you definitely shared him with a bigger cause. It's called the Kingdom of God. I know you miss him and probably have missed some of him over the last eight years. He is at peace now and we trust with every fiber of our Christian faith, that he is in good hands, in the peaceful presence of God Almighty, in the community of saints, submitting as we speak, his resume for entry into the chorus that sings forever. May God bless him! May God bless you!

And did I mention? He was a good man.

Amen.