

7th Sunday of Easter 2011 “Of Mission Statements and Ministry”

As many of you know, our Family of Faith has a special relationship with Advent Lutheran Church in Warren. A year ago their Pastor retired and they found themselves unable to call a new Pastor because of their size and their budget. And so last summer, some parents from Advent approached us to care for their confirmation ministry. At the same time the Bishop and his staff were trying to decide how to work with the parish and so we sent him a note saying, that as they were planning, we would like to have a seat at the table. We heard right back as Bishop Riley invited us to share a proposal which we did after meeting with representatives from our two parishes. And what was born of that dialogue is a unique shared ministry that we believe not only addresses Advent and its future, but which can serve as a model here in our Synod and across the ELCA. These are challenging times to be the church, in this age of skyrocketing insurance costs and ever tighter budgets. We heard again at Synod Assembly this week that two more of our congregations here in NJ have closed in the last year, one of them a vibrant congregation in South Jersey a decade ago. And so last fall we began this experimental ministry on a nine month trial basis. It meant calling Pastor Kriesat back out of retirement and back onto our staff. He preaches and leads

worship at Advent normally three Sundays a month. He provides their primary pastoral care. Pastor Jim and I alternate each month leading worship there one Sunday and providing the backup pastoral care. (Today our Jonathan Fuller is again serving as their musician for worship). Their confirmands are part of our program here. Outside of Sundays and Christmas eve, all of our special worship is done jointly here. We have a joint Adult Education ministry that provides classes on both campuses. Advent shares in our Soup Kitchen ministry and three of their folks will be joining us on our Appalachian Ministry in Tennessee next month. That's a lot of what folks see happening. But what folks may not have seen is all the work that has gone on behind the scenes to engage our sisters and brothers there in frank discussions about their ministry. Several months back Pastor took several of their leaders to the Synod's Transformational Ministry Event which he regularly works with. And in these ensuing months we have been working with their Council to define their identity and their ministry. And so a few weeks back when I was over to lead worship they had a special congregational meeting to request a one year extension on this partnership with Faith and included in that paper which our Council will respond to next week, was their new Mission Statement which they unanimously adopted. As most of you know, Pastor and I don't do maintenance ministry, and so this

planning process and exploration of the future was probably one of if not the most important thing we have done in our 9 month experiment. Important because as a very special relationship is growing between our people, the people of Advent are coming to grips with who they are and what God is calling them to do.

Arthur Miller is regarded by many as one of our great American playwrights. And it's 60 years now since his classic, "Death of a Salesman," was first produced on Broadway. It won a Pulitzer Prize and a Tony and now more than half a century later it continues to be revived on Broadway and around the world. Because it is a classic story. Because it is a tragedy of the American Dream.

For those of you not familiar with the story, it is the tale of Willy Loman, a traveling salesman, and his family. More, it is about Willy's unfulfilled and some would say unrealistic dreams. Many say it is about Loman trying to be what he wasn't. And the line I will never forget from the show, is after Willy's death when his son Biff says, "The tragedy is, he never really knew who he was."

Can you imagine going through life and not knowing who you are? It would affect your relationships. It would affect your

goals. It would affect your values. It would affect who you are and how you live.

And it is no different with the church. I have been working with congregations in crisis for 40 years and I have a simple rule of thumb: Show me a congregation in crisis and I will show you a community that has forgotten who (and whose) they are. And that's why we've got such great lessons today on this last Sunday of Easter...this last Sunday before Pentecost. Let me summarize them for you. They tell us we are an Easter people. People filled with resurrection hope...that changes us, that changes how we see the world. They tell us we are God's witnesses...to the whole world. There is no selfish parochialism here. They tell us that Christ empowers us to do awesome works in His name and for Christ's sake.

Our Family of Faith has had to deal with more than its share of crises over the years as we sought to claim our servant identity. As Peter reminds us in our second lesson, "the devil prowls to undo Christ's work." And as we have weathered those storms and as we have struggled with ministry decisions there have been telling moments. More than once we have heard a simple call to go back to check our Mission Statement. And when we did, when we were reminded of our identity, the ministry decisions got much easier.

Page 1 of your Family Notes this morning: *The Family of Faith is a Christ-centered servant community that strives to be loving, forgiving, healing and affirming, as it continues to seek new opportunities to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ to the world. Sustained by the Holy Spirit, we worship, serve, learn, and grow together by sharing God's gifts of our time, talents and treasures.* And so no coincidence that Thursday we gathered our new Art Task Force to explore how that Statement will become a part of our new narthex area, greeting us all as we arrive for worship and leave for ministry.

What can be said of the Church can be said for each of us. We need to remember our Mission. We need to remember who we are: We are God's baptized, servant children. Blessed with Easter hope and offered unbelievable opportunities to forever care for God's children, to change and heal a broken and hurting world. We do have an Easter message to share. Lift high the cross, the love of Christ proclaim!