

“We Have A Story To Tell”

- I. Introduction: We have a story to tell! It is a wonderful story – a love story between our God and God’s people. The story is long . . . it began in creation and is still being written today. Each generation of believers is charged with passing that story on in a memorable way to the generation that follows, and then helping that generation tell the story to their sons and daughters. Listen to what Moses said about telling the story in Deuteronomy: “Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. Keep the words that I am commanding you today in your heart.” Listen carefully now to what Moses said next: “Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you get up. Recite them to your children over and over again.”

We do indeed have a wonderful faith story to share. But I am not sure that many of us in our generation have communicated the story effectively enough or specifically enough in the last 50 years. I believe that sometimes we have taken the story for granted, assumed that it would be passed on, and, perhaps, left the telling to others. Consequently, parts of the story about God and God’s relationship with us have become fuzzy and spotty. So we here at the Church of the Ascension, your clergy and lay leadership, have decided to strengthen our commitment to telling the story, and for that we need your help.

- II. Urgency. Now, perhaps the most important thing to say about strengthening our Christian Formation efforts here at Ascension is this: It is urgent for us to make this change. This week I read a short entertaining book *Our Iceberg Is Melting* by John Kotter (with Holger Rathgeber, Peter Mueller, and Spenser Johnson, 2006) of the Harvard Business School. The story is about a colony of emperor penguins that are living happily on an iceberg in Antarctica. However, without knowing it, these penguins are on the edge of disaster. Their iceberg is melting from the bottom up. A particularly curious and thorough penguin by the name of Fred observed some changes in the berg. As he investigated he discovered that a huge lake had formed inside the iceberg at its base where it could not be seen. Not only that, but small fissures or cracks had developed in the ice that were filled with water. When cold weather came, this water would be likely to freeze and expand. Then the iceberg could easily fragment and disintegrate. Should this happen, the penguin colony

would be destroyed. The penguins ultimately solved their dilemma and saved themselves, but only after going through a number of steps in the problem-solving, change process. Their process is well worth reading about.

Their very first step is what I want to focus upon this morning. The book's authors describe this step as one of creating a sense of urgency by helping others see both the need for change and the importance of acting immediately. In our penguin story, Fred had to convince the colony's Leadership Council (the Vestry of the iceberg, so to speak) about the need to act, and then together the Leaders and Fred had to convince the whole colony and get their buy-in. In other words, the whole colony needed to be convinced of the urgency of their situation.

- III. The Urgency Here At Ascension. Let me explain why I think that there is an urgency about Christian Formation at this time. It is my belief and the opinion of many Christian thinkers that Christianity is fading in some parts of the world, notably Europe and North America, and growing in others (Africa, Asia, and Latin America). I believe that one of the ways that Christianity starts to fade is in the downsizing and deemphasizing of Christian Education. The stories of our faith are not taught systematically, less Scripture is presented, and when it is taught it is often presented in a boring or diluted way. One indicator of this is that Sunday Schools have been dropped or cut back or that in churches with Sunday School attendance is abysmally low. The first church to which I was called had an average weekly Sunday attendance of over 300 people; yet each Sunday there were approximately only 30 children or youth attending Sunday School. In addition, there was no youth program, although 30-40 youth regularly attended that church. Therefore, strengthening the church's Christian Education program was a high priority for the church's clergy and lay leadership.

Here at the Church of the Ascension our enrollment in Sunday School is higher than that. But I wouldn't say that we should rest on our laurels! When I asked for an estimate of how many children and young people we have here (that is preschool through 12th grade), I was told that we have an approximate grand total of 175. It was also estimated that the average attendance in our Sunday School last spring was 60-70 children and youth. "Well done!" to the parents who brought their children, to the teachers who taught them, and to the young people who got here no matter how many other competing things were going on. But by my calculation, there were still anywhere from 60-65% of our Ascension children and youth who were not here on any given Sunday. I believe that we can, and with God's help, will do better than that.

IV. Here's the deal. First, please don't take my comments as insensitive. I know how very busy and distracted many of us are, trying to make our schedules work. I know for many of you that Sunday is the one day that you can sleep later in the morning. I know what it is like to have to go through such a hassle to even get here on a Sunday morning that by the time you get here, no one in the family is speaking to anyone else!

But here's the good news that I want to share with you: The payoff is ultimately well worth the effort. It pays off in the spiritual grounding our children are given, the base they receive for a life-long faith. Just several weeks ago we heard a wonderful testimony to how this works from Caroline Vogel as she spoke about the dreams she had of becoming a priest and the call she heard right here at the chancel of Ascension. Believe me, I could give you example after example: The payoff is worth the effort.

Our children and young people need to be here, and we need to be helping them understand who Jesus Christ is and how to have a relationship with him. Without that, they will be disadvantaged in their life decisions. The alternative gods of secularism, consumerism, and self-centeredness are threaded throughout our society. These gods can be seductive, and they can be destructive. Our children need to know that they are an integral part of the Christian story as they decide how to live their lives.

Second, we are asking for your help. Parents and grandparents, do everything you can to make sure that your children are here for Sunday School. Young people, get involved here – consider becoming an acolyte or a Jr. Acolyte at Ascension and join the youth program that we are starting this fall. In turn, this is our pledge to you as clergy, staff, and lay leadership of Ascension: We will do our absolute best to have a phenomenal Christian Formation Program. Whether it is the wonderful Catechesis of the Good Shepherd class, our youth classes, or our classes for adults. We will commit to excellence – not perfection, but excellence.

V. Conclusion. This is important folks; in fact this is very important. Unless we do our best to create and support outstanding Christian Formation programs in our churches, we could realize somewhere down that road that our iceberg has been melting and we haven't been paying attention. And we may miss the chance to reach our kids. I speak from experience. When I left home and went away to college I encountered temptations I'd never known before. In some ways, I lived out the story of The Prodigal Son. What I believe saved me and brought me back was my knowledge of Scripture and my relationship with Christ. Both of these had been nurtured by Sunday School teachers, youth group leaders, pastors, and Christian professors who taught me that God loved me and that God expected good things from me. I knew

the story of The Prodigal Son. I knew that God welcomes you back and that God loves you. I knew that in a deep, deep place. I want our kids to know that too, so that when their challenges come and we may not be right beside them, they'll know from us that God is. Amen.