

Dear People of the Northern Great Lakes Synod,

As I make final preparations to leave on sabbatical, I feel it keenly that even if my desk will be clear, there is much in the world that remains messy. As people of faith, we are being challenged in new ways that we may feel ill-equipped to handle.

I see, and feel with increasing pressure, the world trying to divide us and tear us apart. I encourage you to make your community of faith, that is, the body of Christ which you help to animate, your priority. Political divisions are real, but the demonization of those who disagree with you has been brought to a new level. Do not lump people together and join the bandwagon that would declare *them* to be “of the devil”. As we look at our world through the lens of the open tomb, we cannot look at another and not see someone for whom Jesus died. This includes MAGA, the immigrant, the liberal, the refugee, the transgender individual, those on the other side of the political aisle, your neighbor, and those who get their news from only one source. In times of disaster or civil unrest, you will need your neighbor and your community of faith to meet the challenges.

Remember the flooding in the Copper Country not so long ago? And how the larger community rallied to provide water and supplies to those impacted? Or the ice storm that knocked out power to so many for too long? With winter around the corner, you may well need the help of the neighbor you disagree with to plow your driveway. With troubles always around the corner, you may well need the pastor whose sermon and leadership you criticized to proclaim a word of hope and hold

your hand in comfort. Now is not the time to be burning bridges, even as we, each of us, are called to work and advocate for justice.

Write your congressional representative *and* extend grace to your disagreeable neighbor. Carry signs in protest *and* forgive those you consider misinformed. Be generous in your giving to those organizations that are on the ground, feeding the hungry, advocating for the immigrant, welcoming the stranger. Try not to be quick to criticize, to judge, to respond in anger or indignation. These are emotionally provoking times which make people vulnerable to manipulation and impulsive actions. Keeping a level head allows for creative solutions and conversations that deepen understanding, even as common ground may still be elusive.

As I write this, common ground regarding immigration policies continues to elude all of us. By the time you read this, our own Pastor Rita Chirala and her son will have left her congregation, and the country, despite our best efforts. Even as immigrants seek to follow good law and order, the system is designed to fail them. And more than a few U.S. Citizens have been swept up unlawfully. Even if our own Pastor Rita were to be able to fulfill all righteousness per a system that is stacked against her, I have no confidence that given a Supreme Court’s decision that allows for racial profiling that she and her son would be safe, even if citizenship were secured.

I call out this gross injustice. It is indefensible that people of color should be afraid every day of being arrested on *suspicion* of being an illegal immigrant, that they should have to carry a copy of their passport to prove citizenship should the arresting agent even take the time

to check. Or that immigrants who are striving to “follow the rules” and show up for their scheduled court date are summarily deported, and not necessarily to their country of origin.

I am grateful to our Canadian partners that a call has been secured for Pastor Rita so that she has a livelihood, and I continue to pray that the Canadian immigration lawyer will be able to secure the necessary visa in time. The work of providing comfort and support to Faith, Sault and to Pastor Rita’s colleagues and friends continues as they have suffered this abrupt separation even as it was necessary to keep Pastor Rita and her son safe.

I do not believe extending grace to people with whom we disagree means acquiescing to systems that are unjust. I pray for affection that transcends political division, for unified mission and purpose that binds us together in the face of all that tries to divide us, and for local community interdependence that is more reliable, generous, and available than government support.

I leave you, for now, with this blessing:

The God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus.

Amen

The God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Amen

The God of all grace + bless you now and forever.

Amen.

(ELW, Service of the Word, p. 221)

Yours in Christ,
Bishop Katherine Finegan