

Dear Friends in Christ,

As you may know, I spent some time travelling during my sabbatical. My husband and I began a month-long trip beginning in Vietnam, then Cambodia, and finally Thailand to visit our former foreign exchange student. We had never been to that side of the planet before and found the food, the people, the scenery, and so much more to be unique, beautiful, and a completely new experience. We visited the Revolution Museum in Hanoi, north Vietnam, the Hoa La prison (known in the U.S. as the “Hanoi Hilton”), and learned the Vietnamese perspective on “The American War”. As you might imagine, the experience and conclusions about that war were from a different perspective, one that I had not been exposed to previously.

From Vietnam, we traveled to Cambodia. During our time there, tensions flared over disputed territory with Thailand. We heard from the Cambodians how this was Thailand’s fault. After crossing the border into Thailand, we heard from the Thai’s how the trouble was Cambodia’s fault. As peace talks continue, I wonder if anyone has the capacity to look at the situation with an unbiased lens.

Narrative matters, meaning that the lens through which we interpret things shapes our opinions and informs our actions. Also, facts can be told in such a way as to influence the hearer’s opinion. It matters how the story is told and how the facts are relayed in order to produce a desired result, and how, at its worst, facts are ignored or denied if they challenge or do not support the narrative or lies are told in order to create an illusion of truth that supports the narrative.

How are we to know what to believe is true in the face of competing narratives?

In Vietnam, I could not dismiss their narrative as invalid because first and foremost, it was their experience. And then, there were the facts that were still observable...of Agent Orange still in the soil and ongoing birth defects even to the second and third generation, of the pain and destruction caused by the conflict, of the exploitation of labor and resources by outside actors, of the deep resolve of the Vietnamese people for self-rule being underestimated by both the French and the U.S. Fifty years later, any scholar of this conflict largely agrees on what were the missed opportunities for peace, the hubris that blinded, and the missteps that harmed, on both sides. What we see in hindsight can be heart breaking from any perspective. And after 50 years, that there is healing and a warm joyful welcome for former enemies is a gift.

Whatever your narrative, whatever conclusions you are drawing about current events, whatever your predisposition that shapes what you hear and how you hear it, I ask you to pray; for safety, for clarity, for wisdom, for courage, and for what is lifegiving for all concerned.

In this Lenten Season we remember our baptismal promises and the threefold renouncements that precede the Apostles Creed in our baptismal liturgy.

- “Do you renounce the devil and all the forces that defy God?”
- Do you renounce the powers of this world that rebel against God?
- Do you renounce the ways of sin that draw you from God?”

As people of faith, my hope would be that our narrative would be guided by the light that Christ shines and by the cross that bears witness. Jesus calls us to lift up the lowly and have compassion

for the neighbor. Whatever your narrative, your baptismal promise is to work for justice and renounce the forces that defy God. Together, we work to make a positive difference in the world and my hope is that at the very least, within the community of faith and through it, we always extend warm and joyful welcome.

Yours in Christ,

Bishop Katherine Finegan