Very truly, I tell you,
unless a grain of wheat
falls into the earth and dies,
it remains just a single grain,
but if it dies it bears much fruit.

~John 12:24

Dear Northern Great Lakes Synod,

From August 2 – October 3, four of our congregations experienced their final worship service. Tears were shed, histories were celebrated, thanks was given for years of grace and ministry shared. People gathered in sanctuary space that was cherished and sacred and I have no doubt the memories came flooding in: where the Christmas tree stood, how the wedding party was crammed into the chancel, how the Easter lilies were arranged, where the casket was placed to celebrate the life of a beloved, how the family, sponsors, and child encircled the font.

Our sanctuaries hold sacred memory that evokes an emotional response. We feel the grief again, we experience the love we felt as the water was poured, the hand held, the peace shared, the supportive feel of the bonds and presence of beloved community that embraced us in sorrow and rejoiced at our good news. Experiencing the end of a church's life is hard. Loosening the ties to a building that sheltered so many rites of faith and meaningful moments makes the end even harder.

But even in death, especially in death, we are Easter people. We have heard proclaimed again and again and again that the shape of the Christian life is one of dying and rising. Good Friday precedes Easter, it must come first. Easter is not Easter without Good Friday. Resurrection cannot come unless there is death and loss first.

This is true of our individual lives. This is true of anything that we experience as loss. And this is true of all that God is up to as the church as we know it becomes something new.

Of course, not every community of faith will end....at least not in our time and not all at the same time. But all will experience transformation or change of some kind in the coming years, if they have not already. We are discovering new ways of doing ministry, new ways of equipping the saints for ministry, breaking new ground for ministry partnerships, leadership, liturgy, music, and institutional structures of support. We are both privileged and burdened to live in this "season of becoming" as we see beloved ways of doing things end but the new is not quite here yet. It is a time of both uncertainty and opportunity.

Consider the Israelites and their wandering in the wilderness. They were transitioning from being a people enslaved to becoming a chosen people. The transformation took 40 years, or as some might calculate it, two generations. Reading Exodus, we can see that when their days were most uncertain, God was nearest – literally in the pillar of smoke and fire and in the tent of meeting. The Israelites were never more intimately connected to God nor as dependent on God as when they were in the wilderness, relying on God for guidance, for support, even for their daily food of manna and occasional quail.

It seems to me that we could think of our current season as a wilderness time. We are blessed to rely on the presence and guidance of God more completely. The Holy Spirit of Christ stands ready to be intimately connected to inspire our current efforts and offers the resilience we need to remain in this place of tension, uncertain outcomes, and grief over loss. Our faithful response may mean discernment towards closure, or the end of some ministry effort, or the loss of some cherished tradition, or some courageous step toward an unknown…but Easter will come. New life awaits. All in good time.

Yours in Christ,

Bishop Katherine Finegan