



*No one has ever
seen God;
if we love one
another, God lives
in us, and his love
is perfected in us.
~1 John 4.12*

Dear Northern Great Lakes Synod,

Grace and peace to you as we begin the Year of our Lord 2023!

The fulcrum of history continues to turn as the Church and your church experience the pushes and pulls of being re-formed, re-shaped, and re-focused. I believe we are feeling both the pressure points and the possibilities as we move into the future. The Holy Spirit of Christ is at work! Our job, our challenge, is to discern that work and participate in it, or at least, get out of the way.

When in doubt about the direction or the effort, I find it helps to apply the command that Jesus gave: Love. To love others is the commandment that Jesus repeats consistently throughout his ministry. Jesus embodies love as he heals, teaches, and forgives. Jesus instructs love as he washes the feet of his disciples and chooses not to either escape death or wreak vengeance on the population that is so angry with Jesus that they crucify him.

The temptation, the propensity, to vilify and demonize people who make us angry has not diminished. No wonder Jesus commands us to love. As sinful, broken people, loving those we don't know or particularly care for certainly does not come naturally. Sure, it's easy to love the lovable; spouses and partners, our

children and grandchildren, family members, people we know and enjoy. But Jesus is talking about Agape Love...Holy Love...Unconditional Love; the love that is less an emotional feeling and more an intentional and strategic action.

This year of Love completes a three-year focus on the passage, "And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three." And the passage goes on to say, "and the greatest of these is love." This year, I encourage you to think how you personally, and your congregation collectively, will show God's love to each other, your community, and the world. There is much, I know, that you are already doing. Between Lutheran World Relief efforts, food pantries, backpack programs, and the financial support you give to ministry, I am impressed and rather proud of how we are making a difference to those challenged by poverty and hunger.

I also encourage you to consider participation in the Lenten Kaleidoscope Challenge: a new effort focusing a lens of love on racial equity, our indigenous neighbors, and the LGBTQIA+ community.

At this time in history, we have a unique opportunity to push back against the current momentum to divide, demonize, and vilify the other. I pray that we can give authentic witness to a world that seeks to judge, condemn, and polarize...that God is love, and God lives in us, is perfected in us, as we show that love.

May God bless your efforts!

Yours in Christ,

Bishop Katherine Finegan

