



Dear Northern Great Lakes Synod,

I had the honor of installing Pastor Catherine Ford at Faith Lutheran in Three Lakes, WI on Sunday, January 9. Not only was this a long-awaited event for Faith because they had been

without a pastor for more than two years, but the event needed to be rescheduled because of weather.

So it was with great joy that the congregation gathered, both online and a few in person, masked and spread out in the pews, to celebrate this new partnership of pastor and congregation.

In the Northern Great Lakes Synod, we schedule our installations of new pastors in the afternoon so that neighboring clergy can also attend, offering their support and a visible reminder that the church is more than one congregation, so that as a whole synod we rejoice together. The color of the day is always red in acknowledgement of the work of the Spirit that forged the new partnership and brought us all to this moment of celebration.

And just after the Installation Rite is completed, I present the new pastor to the congregation. When the applause has faded, I invite the pastoral leaders who are present to introduce themselves and offer a word of greeting.

At the installation of Pastor Ford, her mentor, Pastor Kari Vadis, was the first to speak. And into this moment still glowing warmly with good wishes and fresh from enthusiastic applause, Pastor Vadis recounts what was said at her installation. To the newly installed Pastor Ford, she says, "Here is your congregation." And as everyone smiles, she adds, "They will disappoint you. They will let you down."

I confess this is not what I was expecting. I wondered where she was going with this. It was

like a bucket of cold water being dumped on the good feels and warm happiness of the moment. But then, she went on. "Yes, they will disappoint you. But love them anyway. Forgive them, anyway." And then she added as she addressed the congregation, "Here is your pastor. She will let you down. She will disappoint you. Love her anyway. Forgive her anyway."

I do not know who said this to Pastor Kari at her installation, but these wise words continue to resonate.

The relationship of pastoral leader to congregation, and congregation to pastoral leader, indeed any relationship that we are in, cannot move forward without forgiveness and love. And in our current times, this has never been more true than now.

We have all suffered disappointments. Between adaptations and adjustments, pandemic protocols and sickness, loss of traditions and loss of loved ones, we are weary. And the reality is, we are not done with this yet.

I believe congregations are well practiced now at making decisions together. You know your context, your vaccination rate, and the rate of compliance when it comes to wearing a mask. If I can provide any more clarity to what you already know, I offer this:

- Continue, if possible, with an online worship option.
- Stay home if you feel sick, even if you only have a cold.
- Get vaccinated, if possible. While it will not prevent a person from getting COVID-19, it will diminish the possibility of hospitalization and death.
- Decide together if in-person worship is advisable, given vaccination rates in the congregation and the burden on the local healthcare system.
- Continue to love and forgive each other, even as we are weary and disappointed.

As the year of our Lord 2022 continues, we find our strength from the presence of Christ in each other. God gives us what we need for the challenges we face now, and the challenges ahead. And together we move forward, one step at a time.

Yours in Christ,

Bishop Katherine Finegan