



Dear Partners in Christ,

I write this while sitting in the Chicago airport enduring what began as a six-hour layover. It has now been extended another 80 minutes and I'm hoping the flight won't be

cancelled altogether. I do believe this is the price we pay for living where we do; flying in and out of the Northern Great Lakes Synod is often complicated. However, I am happy to be returning from the ordination of a new pastor, Rev. Kayla Keilholtz, newly called to serve Grace, Pembine. By the time you read this, she and her husband, Kurt, will have moved to our Synod and she will have begun her efforts alongside the people of Grace.

Her ordination took place January 4, 2020 at the chapel on the campus of United Lutheran Seminary in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. I was happy to go as I had never been to Gettysburg and I was hoping to see some historical sites in addition to participating in Pastor Kayla's ordination celebration.

However, I arrived in the dark and fog, and the following day was still thick with clouds that obscured any view beyond the highway. While the signs from the road pointed to historical sites not far away, all I could see was the cloud bank that hugged the guardrails.



Thankfully, as the day wore on, the fog dissipated, and I was able to visit the Gettysburg Battlefield. The fields have been preserved along with the history. Cemetery Ridge was dotted with various memorials to each cannon battalion that fought and died. The few visitors were quiet and reverent under the open sky as we surveyed the expanse of ground where so many had been mortally wounded and died. No other conflict in our relatively brief history as a nation cost as many American lives, not only because of the way war was waged, but because we were killing each other as enemies. I stood for a while there, as a chilly wind swept up the ridge and the gray somber sky was heavy with the rain yet to come. It was a sobering and disturbing reminder of the human capacity for violence in the midst of political, theological and ideological divisions.

In addition to the battlefield, I also went to the museum on Seminary Ridge which is on the Gettysburg Seminary campus. The



museum was housed in what had been the Lutheran Theological Seminary; already a fixture at the time of battle of Gettysburg. The building was used both as a lookout and as a hospital, with soldiers from both North and South being brought there for treatment of their wounds. The Reverend Schmucker, then President of the seminary, and his wife and children among others, helped care for the wounded and dying regardless of the color of their uniform.

I learned that the seminary building was both a strategic asset, as one could see the entire battle movements from its cupola, and a place of refuge. It struck me that the church today could serve much the same purpose. With the Spirit of Christ at work in us, I hope and pray that we are

able to see the larger picture, maintain a helpful distance, and adopt a position where we can be of good use; providing refuge, safety, comfort, and assistance to those most in need, whatever side they are on.

Yes, we see battle lines being drawn. We can't help but be aware of the deeply held convictions of our fellow citizens and church members as to how the country and the church should invest itself and what directions they should be moving. My hope, however, remains that because of Christ, we will have insight that the world may not have.



A difficult truth to own is that from the vantage point of hindsight, we remember that earnest and sincere brothers and sisters in Christ held deep convictions that slavery was necessary and ordained by God. Yet most people today agree without argument that slavery was and is wrong and far from a God-blessed enterprise - no matter how much scripture was used to justify it, no matter how many churches defended it, no matter how many Christians fought and died to preserve it.

Another difficult truth is that the issues that prompted the civil conflict would not (could not?) have been resolved without war. So where does that leave us? Now?

As I stood on that Gettysburg battlefield, I was painfully aware that today people seem more

and more willing to denigrate, mock, and condemn others as they disagree over deeply held political, theological, or ideological convictions. Is it possible that the church, and maybe even specifically your church, or more broadly, the ELCA, can provide a way forward through the battle lines? Can we be a place and a people to discuss without rancor, hatred or ridicule the very things about which we may disagree so fiercely?

This is my hope anyway, that we see more clearly God's will and purpose for all that we can be as the Body of Christ in a world increasingly bent on wounding or destroying each other, even if they live next door or sit in the pew nearby or are listed as a Facebook friend - and that's not even counting all of God's children across the world or across the aisle.

There is much worth fighting for. There is a place for righteous indignation. The gospel is certainly clear that we are to advocate for and attend to "the least of these." Sometimes it may be necessary that friendships die or even that wars are waged for the sake of justice. But is it possible to defend our convictions without wounding each other? Can we debate instead of ridicule? Discuss instead of provoke? Can we own that perhaps there is more to see and know beyond the fog that cloaks our view, and be open to learning something from those we would rather dismiss?

Whether the issue is abortion or immigration, racism or white privilege, LGBTQ or gender justice, foreign policy or political campaigns, we have to find a way to talk about these things.

At this point in history, I believe the church is called once again to discern its place, its purpose, its witness, and its voice. What is the "right" side of history? How will we as the Body of Christ discern that? What are our deeply held

convictions and why do we feel so strongly about them? How will we disagree well? What are we not seeing? What else is there to consider?

May God grant us the vantage point that can only be seen through the cross of Jesus and the witness of his ministry, the clarity that comes as a gift from the Spirit, and the courage to move forward with a humility willing to concede that perhaps our convictions, assumptions, and conclusions... might just be wrong.

Yours in Christ,

Bishop Katherine Finegan



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my VISION
2020