



To All God's Beloved in Minnesota,

Grace to you and Peace, from God our Creator, and from the Lord Jesus Christ, who gives us life through crucified love, and holds us together when things fall apart.

Just two stories, and then two invitations this year.

One of the great saints of my life was Professor Rowan Greer, who taught me the theology of the early church at Yale Divinity School. Rowan was an intellectual titan, and a real believer in the power of Jesus. At the end of almost every lecture, having brilliantly distilled the way the first Christians struggled to make sense of their encounter with Jesus, he would give a little chuckle, shrug, and say, "Well, there you have it." His deep faith, and his rich life of prayer, gave him the ability to see human beings, and the church, in proper perspective: impossibly beautiful and completely ridiculous.

Rowan's book *Broken Lights and Mended Lives* has long been a north star in my life and ministry. Near the end, he devotes a few pages to a little-known figure in church history named Paulinus of Pella. Paulinus married into a life of wealth and political influence in fourth century Gaul, and as the Visigoths began to chip away at the edges of the Roman Empire, he watched everything collapse around him. He lost his property, his political voice, and then his father, his wife, and his children died, one after another, and he was left alone and desolate for the remainder of his life.

The only reason we even know Paulinus is because when he was 83, forty years into the disaster his life became, he wrote an autobiographical poem that was simply called *Thanksgiving (Eucharisticos)*. Here is someone whose own life was shattered as he watched the world around him come utterly undone. By any measure his life was a failure. And at the end, all he has is thanksgiving, all he has is Eucharist. He writes: "whatever lot awaits me at my end let hope of beholding thee, O Christ, assuage it, and let all fearful doubts be dispelled by the sure confidence that alike while I am in this mortal body I am thine, since all is thine, and that when released from it I shall be in some part of thy body."

Paulinus shows us the Christian posture in a world that is falling apart: not fixated on success or failure, but simply clinging to the power of God. Neither succumbing to the anxious idolatry of believing it's up to us to fix everything, nor giving up in despair, Paulinus continued to show up with God, and with the world, standing with Jesus in prayer and love.

My second story is much closer to home, and comes from Andrew Root's book, *Churches and the Crisis of Decline*. It's the story of a church he calls St. John the Baptist, which could be just about any church, anywhere. In the middle of the twentieth century, St. John the Baptist was the place to be. Full pews, thriving programs for all ages, plenty of civic influence, and a hub of community activity. Over the years, the neighborhood and town changed, the church entered a long season of slow decline, and eventually there were only a handful of members. They called a bright, young pastor who was cut in the social justice warrior cloth, who held the promise of salvation through relevance. But growth didn't come, and eventually the congregation grew tired of her controversial messages, and she moved on. So they called another young pastor, who was fully steeped in the church growth movement. He put some fresh paint on their dusty brand, so they became, not just St. John the Baptist, but, "Thrive at St. John the Baptist." He brought some hipper music to their worship, and laid out a strategic plan that engaged all the tried and

true management principles of church growth. It didn't take long before his ambition wore the small congregation out, and, predictably, he got a better offer at a bigger, fancier church across town. The congregation was left to languish with the question of who are we going to be?

But then one day, a young man showed up for the small Wednesday morning Bible study. His grandmother, one of the church's matriarchs, had recently died. He told the small group that before she died, she told him she wanted him to find God. So, he said, I came here because I assume you know how to find him. The surprised group looked around at each other and then someone said, "Do we?"

That young man, and that epiphany, led St. John's on a journey driven by a new question. For decades they had been asking "how do we save our church?" Now they were asking, "How do we find God?" It changed everything. They had been acting as if the church is the center of the story, when it is actually God, active in Jesus through the power of the Spirit, who is the center. They didn't experience miraculous growth, and they remained economically vulnerable. But they discovered a depth and vitality together they had never known before. They weren't big, they were *alive*, having learned what it means to find and be found by God in Jesus.

Like Paulinus of Pella, we are living in the midst of an American empire that is coming unraveled through deep and increasingly violent tears in its fabric. In the aftermath of this week's election, there is no question the years to come will involve more struggle and conflict, and will require the courage for us to stand with those on the margins. It's not exactly like the late days of the Roman Empire Paulinus lived through, but it's not not like it.

And like the remnant at St. John the Baptist, we are living with a model of being church that often feels like it is collapsing under its own weight. Every year, we have more congregations who are facing difficult choices about their buildings and their futures. Even our largest and most well-resourced congregations struggle mightily amidst strong cultural headwinds and changing tides. Trying to keep all the plates spinning takes an extraordinary toll on our lay and ordained leaders.

What's true in Minnesota is true everywhere in our church. There is no question our long term future will look very different from our recent past. This is only a bad thing if you believe the point of the church is to succeed as an institution at the center of power and influence rather than on the margins. This is only bad news if you have not read the scriptures, where God's project to heal the world with love doesn't rest on acquiring wealth, power, and people, but by enlisting small communities of the often wildly under qualified to practice Jesus' way of love.

But just like Root's St. John the Baptist, we've kind of lost the plot over the years. We have faced change, not as an invitation to deepen our roots in Jesus, but to try every anxious, occasionally cringe-inducing thing, to return to what we used to be. And if you look over every plan and strategy from the last forty or more years, the unspoken message underneath it all is, "well, just try harder." But, beloved, we aren't going to address the challenge of decline by focusing on the challenge of decline, and trying harder. We will only address the challenge by tethering ourselves to the power of the living God in Jesus.

What I want to invite us into as a diocese in the years to come is not working harder and doing more, but to simply return our focus to going deeper in our relationship with Jesus, and watching with playful curiosity to see what fruit he bears with, in, and through us.

Like Paulinus, and St. John the Baptist, our call is not to anxiously try to hold onto what is passing away, and neither is it to give up in despair. Our job is to keep showing up with God, with each other, and for the world. Our job, in a really big church, or the smallest of small churches, is exactly the same: to keep finding and being found by God. The question we are called to answer, with every breath, every moment,

every decision of our lives is Jesus' to his disciples: who do you say that I am? And who do we say Jesus is? Jesus is the human face of God, the heart of the universe who shows us that dying is living, that losing is having, that giving ourselves away is the only way we will fill ourselves up. What matters is not the size of our churches, it's not the condition of our buildings, it's not how many people show up, or how sustainable our budgets are. The only thing that matters for us is that this Jesus is Lord, no earthly power, and no institutional model. And this Jesus is Lord, not because he accumulates more for himself, but because he gives everything away. Is that what we look like we are confessing?

What I dream for us in the coming years is that we will return to the simplicity of being with Jesus, with each other, and for the world by doing just two things: deepening our roots in Jesus, and planting seeds for God's future.

Deepening roots is about focusing on how we meet Jesus rather than how we will fix the church. It's how St. John the Baptist really came alive. Deepening our roots looks like St. Paul's in Duluth forming small discipleship groups around *Practicing the Way*, not to read a book for knowledge or inspiration, but to learn what it means to really follow Jesus together in daily life. Deepening our roots looks like St. Davids in Minnetonka continuing to gather for Compline every single night for four years since the start of the pandemic. Deepening our roots looks like the Lenten Hymn Sing among our Ojibwe congregations, where people share deeply about their struggles and joys, and how God is moving among them. What would we be like if we looked at every activity, every committee, every budget line item and asked, "is this deepening our roots?" Is this helping us participate in God's life more fully?

Planting seeds is how we remember that, with God, the story is never over, and one thing falling apart contains the beginnings of what comes next. Planting seeds looks like turning from looking to the past with nostalgia to playfully embracing what might be. Planting seeds looks like Epiphany Church in Plymouth starting new congregations at retirement communities in their neighborhood. Planting seeds looks like laundry love in St. Cloud, where Nancy Dyson is recovering the old idea of the parish, the sense that the people entrusted to our care are not just those in the pews, but in the region where we are planted. Planting seeds looks like Colleen Tully's quiet ministry with the recovery community in Southwestern Minnesota, with monthly recovery Eucharists in Windom, and a group that gathers in the basement of someone's home for a monthly recovery Eucharist in Blue Earth, where we haven't had a formal congregation in decades. Planting seeds looks like A Place at the Table in Kasson, where a simple feeding program has grown into a joyful, spiritual community, a Wednesday night congregation alongside their traditional Sunday service. Planting seeds looks like Casa Maria in Richfield, where a coalition of our faith communities have come together around San Nicolas to provide critical support and service for recent immigrants at a time when the national rhetoric and political winds are putting a vulnerable population at greater risk. Planting seeds looks like every congregation on the lookout for small, simple ways to connect with neighbors where *they* live, work, and play, and in ways they can understand. Planting seeds looks like starting new kinds of communities alongside our beautiful existing ones.

None of this is about saving or fixing the church. None of this is about getting more for ourselves. In fact, when we think the point of the church is to serve us or to acquire resources like people and money in order to survive, then we are no different than the empires of the world that see people as commodities to be exploited. We follow a savior who confronted empire not through powerful conquest, but crucified love. So when the world looks at us, does it see another empire competing for attention and allegiance, or does it see God's crucified love, which grows by giving it all away, and lives by dying?

What I am trying to do in my own work is to filter every day, every meeting, every engagement through the question: is this deepening our roots in Jesus or planting seeds? What I am asking you who are congregational leaders to do is to filter every activity, every conversation, every decision through the question, "is this deepening our roots in Jesus or planting seeds?" What I hope the diocesan council, and

the Trustees, the Commission on Ministry, the Standing Committee will join me in is asking, over and over and over again is, “is this deepening our roots or planting seeds?”

The Book of Ecclesiastes, which doesn't get much love outside the old song by the Byrds, reminds us that wisdom grows from accepting that everything has a life cycle. What we think of as essential—buildings, a priest in every community, lots of people in the pews—is novel historically and globally. The first Christians Rowan taught me to love didn't have buildings, or money, or the hymnal, or committees. In many places around the world the church is thriving, it is fully alive, without any of those things. So, in the years to come, we might very well own far less real estate. Many of our congregations might look more like our siblings throughout history and around the world and meet in small house churches, or in public places, traveling lightly together, existing on the margins with Jesus. We don't have to fight that. We don't have to be afraid. We don't have to be ashamed. The world is always turning, the model is always shifting. We sow seeds. We water and tend. God gives the growth. Nothing under heaven is permanent but the victory of Jesus over death. The church is not the star of God's story, and as long as we are finding and being found by God, planting the seeds from the fruit of what is passing away, we're fine, though the empires of both the world and the church continue to rise and fall around us.

One final coda as I finish. This past summer, I took up fly fishing. It is really hard, and I am really bad. I fall in the river a lot. I have broken enough rod tips to make the Orvis company seriously question its generous warranty, and I spend more time cursing at tangled line than admiring caught fish. But despite my bumbling incompetence, when I'm standing in, say, the Root River in Minnesota's Driftless, I feel seen, and held, and cherished by a loving God like almost no other place in my life.

To be a good fly angler, you have to learn how to do something called mending the line. We normally think of mending as fixing, or repairing. But in fly fishing, mending refers to the skill of turning the line over and over on the water so your fly floats like a real bug. You catch fish by mastering ancient, repetitive motion.

That's our work. As the current of the world continues to storm and swirl around us, we are called to stand in the river, knowing that we are seen, held, and cherished by a loving God. And, we are called to mend the line, to take the treasures that tie us to Jesus—the scriptures, the sacraments, ancient patterns of prayer, life together, solidarity with the oppressed—and turn them over and over and over, not something wholly different than before, just some new looks, some new shapes, adapting to the water's flow in this unique moment, until the river of God's love finally and fully gathers all the broken pieces of what has fallen apart, and holds us all together in the one light.

Submitted to you on this, the 8th day of November, 2024, in the city of Bemidji, I am, despite my bumbling incompetence, by God's grace alone,

+CWL

The Right Reverend Craig Loya
X Bishop of Minnesota