

To all God's Beloved in Minnesota. Grace to you and peace from God the maker and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

Before I get into my actual address, I want you to invite you to take a just moment to acknowledge the fact that this is the first time that our diocese has gathered together in Convention since January 25<sup>th</sup> of 2020 in person. It has been a long and hard couple of years, and I hope that, even though for many years forward we're going to be processing the trauma and harvesting the wisdom and taking stock of how we have changed, I hope one of the things that has changed personally is that we never again take the gift of *this* for granted.

I'm going to start with a reading from the 11<sup>th</sup> chapter of the book of Genesis.

I.

“Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. And they said to one another, ‘Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly.’ And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. Then they said, ‘Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.’ The Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built. And the Lord said, ‘Look, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another’s speech.’ So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. Therefore it was called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth; and from there the Lord scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.”

–Genesis 11:1-9

I don't know about you, but I've always found this story confusing, and honestly even a little troubling. I mean, the premise seems like a good thing, right? Human beings have rallied around a common cause, they have united across all their vast diversity, they've achieved something great together. But then God swoops in like an angry toddler and knocks the blocks over, scattering and confusing the builders, as if to neutralize some perceived threat to God's supremacy. It seems petty, and not at all the character of God that we imagine. What did the builders do wrong? And what was the point of God's punishment?

My understanding of this story totally shifted this summer when I read a brief commentary on it by Rabbi Ari Lamm. There are a number of curious things about this story. In the first place, while we are told at the beginning that the whole earth spoke the same language, the verses that immediately precede it tell us exactly the opposite. The descendants of Noah near the end of chapter 10 had been scattered across the earth, each speaking their own languages. So which is it? It would seem that the plot has taken a sudden and unplanned turn in the space between two verses.

Even more, the wording in Hebrew when they say ‘let us make bricks for ourselves’ is the exact same phrasing that is used to describe the Israelites’ experience of slavery in the land of Egypt, where they were forced to make bricks to build an empire of oppression. Those are the only two places in the Bible where the phrase for ‘making bricks’ is used in exactly that way. So, that’s on purpose. The editors of the book of Genesis want us to recall the story of slavery in Egypt when we hear the people say ‘let us make bricks.’

It's an awesome story. The layers go on and on. But the bottom line is that it turns out this is fundamentally a story about how diversity is God’s design, and uniformity is human regression. It’s Pharaoh who enforces a false uniformity by building; God insists that creation run wild with diversity.

And besides that, if you remember a few chapters back in Genesis, maybe you’ve heard that story, when God created human beings, God doesn’t appoint them to be builders, but gardeners, putting us in Eden to till and to keep. See, we don’t have to *make* a name for ourselves. We already *have* a name, which is Beloved.

Our sin at Babel is that we traded our vocation as gardeners for the seduction of becoming builders. God wasn’t trying to stop us. God was trying to save us, and to bring us back.

## II.

Two weeks ago, October 11, was exactly twenty years since the Friday evening when I was ordained to the transitional diaconate in tiny little Trinity Church in Mission, South Dakota. I only caught it, like you often do with these things, when I sat down to write my message for our weekly e-mail newsletter and realized it was the feast of St. Philip the Deacon.

It hit me like a punch in the gut, honestly. That’s partly because milestones always remind us that the thread of life spools out with such breathtaking speed, and we are given to the people with whom we live, and work, and worship for such a precious short time. But part of that was because as I sat there reflecting on all those years, I was reminded again that the Episcopal Church has been having essentially the exact same conversation for the entirety of the two decades that I have served it as an ordained person. We are anxious about our decline, and we wring our hands about what we’re going to do, or we bring in fancy speakers to give us some great new plan, or we distract ourselves with petty arguments, pointing our fingers at one other. How can we attract more members? What will we do with these treasured sacred buildings? We have spent so much time frantically trying to rebuild some imagined tower of church, and I have mostly gone along for that ride. I, many of you know this, I have even played a leading role in some of the Episcopal Church’s denomination-wide attempts to do this! They have all failed. And as I sat staring at a blank screen that afternoon, I was embarrassed by the anxious ways that I have spent too much of the precious little time that I have.

## III.

Frankly, if there was a solution, we would have found it by now. The truth is, the tower we think we used to be has been almost completely toppled by cultural, economic, and historical forces that none of us caused and none of us can stop. But we are exhausted from trying. We have worn

ourselves out, believing the lie that we can make a name for ourselves again if we just make enough bricks.

My heart's deepest hope is that, as a diocese, this convention can mark a turning point. Not because we discover some grand new plan for rebuilding our beloved tower, but because this is where we decide to set aside our ambition to be builders, and take up again our calling to be gardeners.

From the perspective that I have as your bishop, I see three options for us. We can keep doing most of the same things in most of the same ways we've done for so long, and that might not be an entirely bad option. Along the way we can entertain ourselves with petty fights that we make up or by passing the hot potato of blame around between the clergy, the lay leaders, the bishop, the diocesan staff, or whoever else we can find to catch it and play the game for awhile. That's a choice. We can stay here, just play out the thread, and have a little dysfunctional fun along the way.

We could also, and this is probably a less likely option, we could also just retreat and give up. We could walk away and fly the white flag and give up. I don't think that's going to happen, but who would blame us if it did?

But what I want to wonder about today is, I wonder if, instead of white-knuckled grasping or indignant surrender, we could just stay here, but *let go*. Not give up, but *let go* of those heavy bricks in our hands, and just play in the dirt together for awhile, waiting to see what God might grow when we aren't keeping God at arm's length with all our building.

Minnesota, can this be a point where we stop, at least for a season, worrying about how to build, and return to the practice of gardening God's church for God's world?

#### IV.

So what if we do? Just pretend that we say yes to that question for a minute. What might it look like for us to try to do that? There are three things I want to invite us to consider together about what it might look like for us to return to our vocation as gardeners.

1) First, what if spend some time not doing much else but tending to the root system? Nothing can grow tall or wide, or bear any fruit at all, until it has first grown deep. Two years ago we identified four diocesan priorities: discipleship, justice, faithful innovation, and congregational vitality. Discipleship is without question the keystone priority. That's the only way that God will use us to grow the deep and thick root system that can produce the fruits of justice, innovation, and vitality. What I want to invite us all into today is to spend at least the next year focusing almost exclusively on discipleship, that is, participating fully in God's life by intentionally apprenticing ourselves, moment by moment, to Jesus. Focusing on those simple practices of daily prayer, dwelling in scripture, sharing our lives in real ways with each other, and coming alongside the poor and marginalized. I'm asking you to commit to this yourself and to invite everyone in your faith community to be part of a small discipleship group in the next year that is committed to doing this with other people. There's a new resource some of you have seen from the Episcopal Church that's called "Centered," which is really nothing more than a simple way

for us to gather in small discipleship groups to support and share with one another as we tend to our root system. I hope, and I really mean this, I hope that every Minnesota Episcopalian will become part of one of these small gatherings this year. You don't have to use Centered but it's simple, it's easy to use, and it's all people need to join up with three, or four, or five other people.

Can we gather ourselves into small communities to deepen our roots together?

2) What if we re-learned together how to consciously and intentionally let God lead in our lives and in our ministries? You've often heard me say this before and I am not the only one who says it and I didn't make it up, but in the Episcopal Church, as much as I love us, we often operate as if we are functional atheists. We are so good at talking about God as if God is a wonderful and interesting and great idea, but it is less often that we talk about God as if we expect God to show up and do something in our lives and in our ministries. Gardeners can't force anything to grow. Gardeners can only cultivate the conditions that allow life to flourish. It's nature, and God, doing their thing that gives the growth.

I will stand here at my first in-person convention and admit to you without shame or fear that I do not know how to save or fix the church. And you don't either. But the good news is that saving and fixing the church, turns out, it's not my job, and it's not your job. The church is God's job. Our job is to stand out in the fields and let God use us in whatever way God will to cultivate the fruits of love, of hope, of reconciliation, of forgiveness, of peace, of joy. We can bring whatever tools we can afford along with us, and we can do our best to care for those tools together, but whether, how, and where the fruit sprouts and ripens is not anything you or I can control, so we may as well relieve ourselves of the burden of trying to make or repair so many more bricks. If God is who we and the scriptures claim God is, I mean, just go with that for a minute, if God is who we really claim God to be, then honestly God is going to be about the project of healing the world with love whether the Episcopal church is on board or not, and no matter how small, large, wealthy or poor we might happen to be along the way.

Can we lay down the burden of thinking it's our job to force fruit to grow, and learn to simply recognize, and follow, where God is already leading?

3) Can we help God cultivate a diverse church ecology?

This is why I started with that story. Diversity is God's design. The drive for uniformity is part of how we distort the ways we are made in God's image. That's not just true for language, nation, race, tribe, and culture, though it's certainly true for all of that. It's also true for the way the church expresses and organizes itself. It's strange that for the past hundred or so years, give or take a few hundred years, we have essentially had one mental picture of what it means to be a local community of disciples. You can all recite it: you have a building, you have a priest, people come to the building for an hour on Sunday for Eucharist, and you offer programs and services that people either want or they don't. While there is a lot about that model without question that is important and lifegiving, and it's not totally going anywhere anytime soon, it tends to focus more on the question of how do we get people to show up for our stuff rather than on how we are helping people to show up looking and acting like Jesus in the world. And the other thing I'm

scratching my head about is that we've somehow along the way adopted the mindset that bigger is better. But small communities are where we can really share our lives together. Small communities are where we can help each other become apprentices of Jesus more fully. That drive for every church to follow the same model, and for churches to be big, is Pharaoh pushing us to make bricks and build Babel.

I'm going to say something crazy now. We often assume, I think, that our future as a diocese will involve fewer congregations. We imagine that we'll have fewer congregations than we do today. And when we think that, we assume that our work right now is just to turn it and just to downsize appropriately. But what if that's not true? What if our future looks like more faith communities than we have now, but they are mostly much smaller? What if God is urging us in this season to form gatherings of five to ten people who meet in living rooms, or the beauty of the outdoors, who pray, this will shock you, while they are fishing or backpacking together, or after Sunday morning soccer games or whatever? What if we form small groups who till justice by listening to and feeding their neighbors, or by facilitating community conversations about race? What if fifteen or twenty or so of those small groups joined up with one of our larger, traditional communities once a month for a Eucharist and story slam about all the things they're seeing God doing in their lives and in the world? What if we followed hundreds of seedling, crazy ideas for how we can connect the gospel of love with a world starving for it that evidently isn't finding it in a lot of our traditional spaces? What if we just followed that, held it lightly, and see what God grows?

In the coming months, Canon Blair Pogue is going to begin gathering some groups to try to do just that. She's going to begin gathering a group of us to begin playing with what that might look like. How might we gently help God shift the landscape and the center of gravity in the diocese to what is small, and joining God in the world?

I don't know if any of that will "work" at all, and I don't know what will happen, but we can totally do it! It's a real option for us on our buffet of options in this moment.

That's my invitation: tending our root system as disciples, so that we can let God lead us, I mean really lead us, and then join God in cultivating a wildly diverse ecology. We can't control what will happen. But we can till the soil, we can water it, weed it, and see what God might do.

V.

I believe that God is not done with this church, and I know my own sinfulness well enough to know there's no way that God is done with me. And if a wild revival of the small like I'm describing seems hard to believe, then you are welcome to join me the next time I visit Emmanuel in Alexandria, and see the way they have gardened a food shelf for forty years that now feeds a whole Minnesota county. After we tour the food shelf you can join us as four generations joyfully pose for a picture with Big Ole. You are welcome to stand next to me in front of the bulletin board at Holy Trinity in International Falls and see all the photos and news clippings of the way they rally their entire town to fill every crack they can see with God's abundant love. You can come sit with me on a Friday evening in Chatfield, and listen to that group talk about how they are listening deeply to their neighbors, literally going around and knocking on the doors to get to know the stories of what God is doing around their church

building. And after the conversation just for fun we can drive along the Root River over to Rushford, and if you have any doubts about God's goodness or power, I promise you that seeing the Driftless in October will knock all of those out entirely. And if you don't want to hang out with me, that's fine. You can follow Padre Neptali of a weekend as he surfs from Qunceañera to Quinceañera, to a Saturday night and then Sunday morning liturgy for three generations of immigrant families who know that God is real and alive and good. You can join the folks at Holy Trinity in Saint Paul for a Sunday morning that every time feels like being wrapped in a warm blanket of love on a cold Minnesota day. And if you don't want to go that far, you can walk down the street and sit in the courtyard at Calvary Church and look across the street as the fullest imaginable spectrum of human beings walk in and out of that clinic all day long, all of them seeking healing like the crowds pushing in to touch Jesus.

If you want to talk about the privilege that bishops have, that is it! I get to see all of that, all the time, every single day. I want so badly for you to see it, too. To come up in the plane with me and look over this beautiful diocese at 30,000 feet or at least to ride along next to me in the diocesan Volkswagen.

This is a moment for us to decide, Minnesota. Are we going to keep trying to be builders, or can we take up gardening again? I can't answer for you, but I'm going to do my best to say yes to God's invitation to set down the brick building, and re-learn how to garden. I really hope you will join me, and say yes to this invitation, too. The world can be such a lonely desert, parched with suffering, injustice, and sorrow. And the God that I know and meet in all of you every day longs to reforest that world, not with more towers that impress, but with fruit that nourishes, with love and justice and joy. We don't know what will happen. We don't know what the future might hold. But let's use what tiny little time we to dig into God's soil, to help the whole world see and know what unimaginably good things God, and God alone, can bring forth.

Submitted to you on this the twenty-eighth day of October, in the city of Rochester, the center for the world's healing. I am your deeply grateful companion on the way,

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The Right Reverend Craig W. Loya