

To All God's Beloved in Minnesota,

Grace to you and Peace from God our Creator and from God's son Jesus.

In early September, I visited Trinity Church in Park Rapids. Before I went, I asked the Reverend Steve Schaitberger to recommend a good fishing spot in the area. I was quick to add that I wouldn't have my kayak with me or any other kind of a boat, so I would need to fish from the bank. Without hesitation, Steve said, "Go to the south end of Long Lake. There's a small pool where the creek empties into the lake that should be holding a lot of walleye." So after I had worn out the congregation at Trinity in my usual way, and the last person had left the reception, I traded out my mitre for my fishing hat, and I headed to the spot. I didn't catch any walleye that afternoon, but I caught a little bit of just about everything else: bass, bluegill, pumpkinseed, perch, and, I don't know, maybe a few others. When I reached the proverbial "one last cast" part of the afternoon—and if you don't fish, it's basically like the Minnesota goodbye—I was trying to skip into some tree cover where I just knew there were some monsters hiding from the afternoon sun. As I leaned way out over the bank to try to make this super-awkward backhanded flip, the soft bank gave way underneath me, threw my feet straight up into the air, and I landed flat on my back, fully submerged in the waters of Long Lake. I was embarrassed, but mostly unhurt, except for a nagging wrist injury that I can still feel at this moment.

Our great ancestor in the faith, Jacob, wrestled with the mighty angel of God and walked away with a bad hip, and Bishop Loya wrestled with a modest sized Minnesota bass, and walked away with a nagging wrist pain. What's true for Jacob, and what's true for me, is true for all of us: the way we have mixed it up with God over the last eighteen months is going to leave a mark. The last time the Episcopal Church in Minnesota gathered fully as a body in convention was the day that you elected me your tenth bishop on January 25, 2020. That feels like a lifetime ago, but it hasn't even been two years.

But think about everything we've done in that period. First, we moved church entirely online, one bishop tagged out and another bishop tagged in, we marched and cried in the streets after the murder of George Floyd, we recommitted to the work of racial healing, we spent hundreds of hours online together leading beyond the blizzard, which connected us across geography in a way we have not experienced in all of our years as a diocese. Then, we moved church from online to outside, then we moved it inside, sometimes and in some places, and online kind of, then we thought we saw clear light at the end of the tunnel and the fall of 2021 would be the long-awaited family reunion and return to normal, and now we're not even sure how to plan an event scheduled to take place in two weeks, let alone six months. My friends, if January of 2020 feels like a lifetime ago, it's because the intervening twenty-two months have forced us to do the amount of lifting we'd normally do in five years or more.

But, limping and weary, we are still here. We are still here because of the extraordinary ways the people of our diocese have led us through these hard, hard times: with faith, resilience, with good humor, and with real courage. I want to thank all of you for how you have done that, and I especially want to thank our clergy for the ways they have navigated through these stormy waters. Being a priest or deacon in this church is always hard, but when you layer on the thousand decisions that COVID choreography requires, every one of which can and will be criticized by someone, and all the other ways the pandemic has made life so heavy and hard, then it truly is amazing that though we arrive at this convention tired, angry at COVID, and worried about who will come back or what will we become, even though like Jacob we are marked and wounded, we are still here. We are still together, shining light into the world's darkness. Thank you for how you got us here.

But, beloved, what of the future? What are we going to do, embattled, beleaguered, and marked as we have become?

You know, if I were to stand here and give you confident answers to any of that, I'd be a charlatan trying to sell you a superficial certainty, not a pastor who loves you enough to tell you the truth. So "I don't know" is the honest answer.

But here's the deal: it's not like we don't have a roadmap or a guide. Our one map and our one guide is the Lord Jesus Christ, and him crucified. In certainty and in uncertainty, when things feel easy and when we are up against the wall, our job, always, is simply to become a community that looks and acts more like Jesus. It really is that simple and it really is that hard.

So what I want to do this afternoon is invite you to consider four agreements that I believe will be critical to our ability to do the work that's in front of us in the years to come.

**The first agreement is that we have to believe in Jesus, and we have to look to Jesus as a model of what we are called to become.**

Eighteen months as your bishop is long enough for all of you to have become very well acquainted with my many shortcomings. I'm sorry to say that, God willing, you will have to live with those for many years to come. But whatever else you can rightly criticize about me, the thing I need you to know is that I am a believer. I really believe that the soul of the universe is a loving, active God. I believe that Jesus is the perfect and complete expression of that love, and that his pattern of laying down his life and giving it away shows us the pattern of true life and healing for the world. I believe that Jesus' resurrection from the dead shows us the triumph of love and justice that we are meant to preview for the whole world. I really believe that. And if we are going to meet the challenges in front of us, then we all really need to believe that together. So will you agree to live together like we really believe in Jesus?

**The second agreement that I want to invite you into today is, we have to act like we are one body.**

Since there are confirmations and baptisms everywhere I go, the first words I exchange with a congregation almost every single week is that magnificent paraphrase from Ephesians 4: “There is one body and one Spirit. There is one hope in God’s call to us. One Lord, one faith, one baptism. One God and Father of all.” It’s exhilarating every single time to remind you and to be reminded by you of our essential unity. It never gets old. I’ve learned that one of the main reasons I exist as a bishop is to remind us that we are all always on the same team. We are a big diocese, spread out over 87,000 square miles, across a staggering variety of geographies, and we are diverse in every way. That’s an amazing gift, and it’s one of the that reasons I felt called to join you. When we are at our best, we celebrate that fact and we celebrate each other. But when we are at our worst, Minnesota, we can act like we are a group of factions, competing for small pieces of a pie, vying for legitimacy and recognition. When we are at our worst, we can see the good of someone else as a threat to us. If we are going to meet the challenges in front of us, that will not do.

To act like we are one body means I always see your good as my good. What’s good for one part of the body is good for the whole body, and pain that is felt in one part of the body must be borne by the whole body. We all play on Team Jesus, and it’s never about me or about you, it’s never about this group or that group. It’s always and only about the Lord Jesus.

We are enough, we have enough, and God’s love is big enough to feed and heal us all. Can we agree to act like we are one body?

**The third agreement that I would invite you into on this day is that we need to be patient, with ourselves, with God, and with each other**

I may be a believer, I may really believe we are one body, but I am not a patient person. I recently gave Canon Schuster a list of goals that I’d hope we could accomplish in the coming year, and when I asked her about them, I could tell she was trying really hard not to laugh at me, and she said, “Bishop, I think if we could do most of that in the next three to five years, that would really be something.” In my mind, everything should take about five minutes, and it turns out, it takes longer.

I hope all of you have heard me say many times by now that I love my job. I really do and I’ve never felt more passionate about or more called to anything in my life. But I am not naive, and I will also admit that it is also hard, and like every single one of you, I carry some real frustration and disappointment at the end of many days. Some of that frustration is with the church, to be

sure, but most of that disappointment and frustration is with the ways I am confronted with my own sinfulness and limitations every single day. You all have placed an extraordinary trust in me, we have major challenges as a church in front of us, and I don't want to screw it up.

But I have to remember that it took us at least 500 years to arrive at our precise, current location, so it's going to take time to renovate this big old ship so that it will get us where we need to go. I need to be patient with myself, patient with you, patient with God, and we all need to agree to extend that same patience in all directions if we aren't going to break apart this ship in the process of turning it around. Can we agree to be patient?

**Finally, and most importantly, we have to agree to die.**

Many of you resonated a great deal when the Reverend Canon Lydia Kelsey Bucklin said in her sermon for my seating at St. Mark's Cathedral that we are ministers in a dying church, and, death is not the end. The Episcopal Church has been in a state of uninterrupted institutional decline for more than fifty years now. Throughout most of that time, we have responded like we don't actually believe in Jesus. We have worried about it, we have denied it, we have decided to fight over small distractions instead, we have tried to make bold plans. For too long, we have been chasing a vision of success measured by the world's standards of size, wealth, and influence rather than a vision that looks like the poor and crucified Jesus.

But beloved, we have to die. Jesus told us that's the deal. But if we really believe in Jesus, if we're really trying to look like Jesus, then we know we don't pack it up and give up when death comes calling. As followers of Jesus, we don't meet death wailing and gnashing our teeth. We meet death shouting alleluia because we have learned from Jesus that true living means dying, true nourishment comes from giving, and true solace is found by extending love's embrace even wider.

The church we are afraid of losing is largely one that went along for the ride of the domination systems of empire and white supremacy and patriarchy and genocide of indigenous people and decimation of the planet, and on and on. God has been trying to rip that out of our hands for more than fifty years now and we have wrestled God at every turn. So actually, the church isn't dying, folks, it's us, our sinful and idolatrous clinging to a way of being church that was coopted by the very system that Jesus came to overturn and save. That's what's dying. Now is the time for us to let go, and stop fighting, and give the righteous death of one way of being the church into the victorious hands of God's love. Can we let go, can we repent of the way we have turned the church itself into an idol, and let it die, trusting in the Spirit to show us the way forward?

I don't believe that the Spirit is asking any of us to become engineers who can master the complexity of this moment with better systems and formulas. I believe the Spirit is inviting us to

let go by returning to the simplicity of being and making disciples: worshipping together, sharing our lives in deep and real ways, embracing the poor and the marginalized. I believe that God is trying to wrestle us back into a church that looks and acts like Jesus.

The four priorities of discipleship, justice, faithful innovation, and vitality that we introduced last year were meant to help us make a beginning to do that. Tomorrow and in the days and weeks to come you'll be seeing a framework for thinking about vitality that is meant to help us become simple, and simply, church. And much of the next year of ongoing work on our budget, in our governance bodies, in our teaching and learning and gathering, will be committed to teaching us more and more how to return to the basics. To follow Jesus, to travel light, to meet God who is already on the move out there.

We have to believe. We have to play like we're on the same team. We have to be patient. And we have to be willing to die.

I won't lie to you because I love you. Much of what we have to face in the coming years will be hard, and honestly, a lot of it won't be much fun. So any one of us, including me, frankly, could get off the train right now if we want to, and who could blame them? As for me, I have nowhere else I can turn. I really believe in Jesus. I really believe that love is the soul of the universe. I believe love calls us to die in order to really live. I believe that love is the most powerful force for change and healing in the world, and I believe that our world is starving for it. So I'm sticking with Team Jesus, and I'm sticking with you, Minnesota, even though there might be other paths that look like easier to travel, or look like safer bets.

The pandemic is going to leave a mark. Turns out, that mark is God's promise to love us, and hold us, and make us whole. Thanks be to God for the inestimable gift of limping along this twisted road together.

Submitted on this fifth day of November, in the year of our Lord 2021, and from the stunning shores of Lake Bemidji,

The Right Reverend Craig William Loya  
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