

Bishop's Address to the 164th Convention of the Episcopal Church in Minnesota

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, so I would need to fish from the bank. Without hesitation, he 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 switched 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, perch, pumpkinseed, and maybe a few others. When I reached the proverbial "one last cast" point in the afternoon, I was trying to skip into some tree cover where I just knew there had to be some monsters hiding from the sun. As I leaned way out to make a backhanded flip, the soft bank pulled my feet out from underneath me, and threw me flat on my back, fully submerged in Long Lake. I was embarrassed, but 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 angel of God and walked away with a bad hip. Bishop Loya wrestled with a modest sized Minnesota bass, and walked away with a nagging pain in the wrist. What's true for Jacob and me, is true for all of us: the way we have mixed it up with God over the past 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 you elected me your tenth bishop on January 25, 2020. It feels like a lifetime ago, but it hasn't even been two years.

During that period, we moved church entirely online, we switched out bishops, cried in the streets after the murder of George Floyd, recommitted to the work of racial healing, spent hundreds of hours online together leading beyond the blizzard, which connected us across geography in a way we have never been able to do in our 165 years as a diocese. We moved church from online to outside and online, then we moved it inside (sometimes) 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 return to normal, and now we're not even sure how to plan an event scheduled to take place in two weeks, let alone several months from now. 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 three years.

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, good humor, and real courage. I want to thank all of you for how you've done that, and I especially want to thank the clergy for the ways they have navigated through these rough and 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 will be criticized by someone, and all the other ways the pandemic has made things so heavy, then it truly is amazing that even though we arrive at this convention tired, angry at COVID, and worried about who will come back or what we will 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.

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

If I were to stand here and give you confident answers to any of that, I'd be a charlatan trying to sell you superficial certainty, not a pastor who loves you enough to tell you the truth.

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

What I want to do this evening is invite you to consider four agreements that I believe will be critical to our ability to do that in the coming years.

The first is we have to believe in Jesus, and look to him as what we are called to become.

Eighteen months is long enough for all of you to have become 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 the thing you need to know about me is that I am a believer. I really believe that the soul of our 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 his 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 before us, we all need to really believe that together. Will you agree to live together like we really believe in Jesus?

Second, we have to agree to act like we are one body.

Since there are confirmations and baptisms everywhere I go, the first words I exchange with a congregation every week is that wonderful 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 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 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 is an amazing gift, and one of the reasons I felt called to join you. When we are at our best, we celebrate this 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 the pie, vying for legitimacy and recognition. If we are going to meet the challenges in front of us, that won't 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, or 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 act like we are truly one body?

The third agreement is that we need to be patient, with ourselves, with one another, and with God.

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 I'd like to accomplish in the next year, and when I asked her about them, I could tell she was trying hard not to laugh and said, "Bishop, I think if we could do most of that in the next three years that would really be something." In my mind, everything should take about five minutes to accomplish, and it turns out, that's not true.

I hope you all 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 called to anything in my life. But I'm not naive, I will also admit that it is hard, and like all 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 is with the ways I am confronted with my own sinfulness and limitations every day. You all have placed an extraordinary trust in me, we have major challenges in front of us as a church, and I don't want to screw it up.

But it took us at least 500 years to arrive at our current situation, 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 extending that same patience in all directions if we aren't going to break the ship apart in the process.

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 that time, we have responded like we don't actually believe in Jesus. We have worried about it, denied it, fought over small distractions, and tried to make bold plans. For too long, we have been chasing a vision of success measured by 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 are really trying to look like Jesus, then we know that we don't pack up and give up when death comes calling. 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, white supremacy, patriarchy, genocide of indigenous people, decimation of the planet, and on and on. God has been trying to rip that out of our hands for more than fifty years 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 the church that was coopted by the very system 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 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 the Spirit is asking 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 deeply, embracing the poor and 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 we introduced last year were meant to help us begin to do that. Tomorrow 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 learning 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.

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, could get off right now if we want to, and, who would blame them? As for me, I have nowhere else to turn. I really believe love is the soul of the

universe. I believe love calls us to die in order to really live. I believe love is the most powerful force for change and healing in the world, and that the 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 travel, or better bets.

The pandemic is going to leave a mark. 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, from the stunning shores of Lake Bemidji.

The Right Reverend Craig William Loya
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