

~From the Bishop



Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

As I write this, the snow banks have almost disappeared. My office window is open, and I can smell Spring in the warming soil and leaf decay that wafts

up from the ground on the cool breeze that stirs the curtains.

It wasn't so long ago that March and April felt endless. I had grown up with snow melt in March and April daffodils not far behind. It was a difficult transition to enduring Spring by U.P. standards. It literally took me years to figure out that Spring in the U.P. is frozen mud and dirty snowbanks. But once I redefined what I expected of Spring, I found March and April to be less distressing and disappointing. Once I knew what the signs of Spring actually were, rather than what I wanted them to be, I found March and April to be hopeful rather than depressing.

As I write this, I feel hopeful. But there is also sadness as the world wakes up to the news of the Notre Dame fire. Like so many other tourists, I too have climbed the tower, marveled at the beautiful windows, took pictures of the gargoyles, and stood in that sanctuary awed by how that structure conveyed the majesty and mystery of God. I am not alone in my grief and sadness over the damage done to such an iconic witness to the faith of so many believers who participated in building this cathedral that took centuries. Generation after generation played a part even as they would never live to see its completion; such sacrifice and dedication, and certainly a very long view of history. They trusted that the community of faith would still need and value that Cathedral long after the workers and the builders and the present-day worshippers were years in the ground.

It's no wonder that we love our church buildings so. While none of our congregations in the Northern Great Lakes Synod have been in existence for 800+ years, most have spanned several generations. Immigrant families founded communities of faith and buildings where they would gather, that they expected to last.

But as Notre Dame burned, the faithful gathered outside it. And in the light of the flames, they sang hymns and prayed prayers. The Church gathered while their church burned.

The fire at Notre Dame is a stark reminder that buildings, while so very important and cherished, are not the Church. The Church, by definition, is the gathered faithful, those who offer their prayers and praise, those who seek the face of God and the presence of Christ in each other, those who together, proclaim Christ to their communities. I believe there is value in redefining church, or even rediscovering the actual definition of Church.

If we define Church as the building, then our vision for what God calls us to do and be is limited by the physicality of stone and carpet and pews. And if we feel that our church building is threatened, maybe by fire but more likely by the financial challenges of upkeep, then our priorities can also be challenged as we consider whether to put money towards ministry or some new building project. It is easy to improve a building. It is much more difficult to be a missionary to your own community. And the light bill is a far more pressing and defined need than a ministry vision that can be put off until there are funds for it.

While we value and cherish our church buildings, the Church is the people who gather in Christ's name; be it at the coffee house, in someone's home, at the park, anywhere. Where two or three are gathered...but of course, we always hope for more.

Yours in Christ,
Bishop Katherine Finegan