By Faith Event

Installation of Pastor Sarah Semmler-Smith

Finlandia University – September 22, 2019

Bishop Katherine Finegan

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our creator and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the risen Christ.

If you’re a gardener at all, or even a Farmer’s Market shopper, you know that now is harvest time. Usually by the third week of September, in preparation for a killing frost, I have already had a frantic green tomato picking spree in the chilly twilight of an early September evening. But not this year. It’s been a good year for tomatoes. It’s satisfying as my husband and I have gone to some lengths to ensure that we planted in good soil. We put in mulch and compost, topsoil and fertilizer. We planted in the sunniest part of our yard and enclosed the whole thing with a deer fence. Our efforts have paid off as I have about 100 pounds of zucchini the size of torpedoes sitting on my counter, looking at me, waiting for me to do something with them. I can say with confidence that we planted in good soil, and we are still reaping a substantial harvest, yielding much more than the seed that was planted.

Today, here, we gather to celebrate the good soil from which came the graduates of Suomi Seminary. The pastors who came from this good Finnish Lutheran dirt went on to bear fruits of ministry wherever they were scattered. We give thanks today for all that God has done in and through their efforts to make a difference in Jesus’ name and build up the kingdom of God. We give thanks for God’s gift of faith to them that no doubt has been an example, an inspiration, and guidance for so many. Our reading from Hebrews gives us a litany of sorts…By faith Abraham set out not knowing where he was going. By faith, Rahab didn’t perish. By faith, Isaac invoked blessing. By faith. By faith. By faith. By faith, the Suomi Seminary was founded. By faith, students were instructed and sent. And by faith, they went, not knowing exactly what they were getting into, but trusting that what they sought to do, the work they set out to accomplish, they did not do alone, for they believed God was with them, by faith.

The power of this faith, the power of this gift that God gives, cannot be overestimated. It has the power to make new seminary graduates leave home and family to venture forth into the unknown. It has the power, as our reading says, to conquer kingdoms, administer justice, obtain promises, shut the mouth of lions, quench raging fires. Faith, as Martin Luther describes it “is a living, busy, active, mighty thing”. Faith gives us courage. It pulls us forward. It ignites hope. It buoys us up and gives us rest. It embraces us with comfort and gives meaning and purpose to our lives, as by faith we trust that this life is not all that there is to life. Faith inspired the founders and students of the Suomi Seminary beginning in 1904, and faith continues to inspire pastors and their congregations today.

By faith, Sarah and Abraham, that is Sarah, Semmler-Smith and her husband Brahm, by faith, they left the familiar of an established hearth and home and ventured forth to a land that God showed them, with a little help from Google, God showed them the land of Hancock, Michigan and the faith communities of Finlandia University and Gloria Dei Lutheran. And yes, I’ll bring this up again at your installation, Pastor Brahm. What else except for faith would possibly possess a family to pull up stakes, suffer the logistics of selling and buying a house, packing and unpacking, hauling boxes and furniture, with no certainty of what is to come? And yet, they are not the only ones to be so afflicted. We are grateful that God has worked in your lives in this way, Pastors Sarah and Brahm. In you we see once again what God’s gift of faith in the risen Christ can do.

Because of course, it is all God’s fault, or rather, it is all God’s doing, God’s action, God’s agency. It is God who has gifted us with faith in Jesus. It is God who has called us here today and into the world for the sake of Jesus. To you who are gathered here today, God’s Holy Spirit has stirred in your heart, whispered in your ear, beckoned you to dare to believe, and coaxed you into a relationship that begins with God’s love and care and continues into eternity. It is all God.

And in case we are in danger of forgetting this, consider again our readings from Isaiah and the psalm for today. I think it’s very good that these texts should be laid side by side with the Hebrews text because these readings will keep us from sliding down a slippery slope. Lest we are tempted to take credit for our own faithfulness, and dare to boast of what we have accomplished because we are soo faithful, we have the prophet Isaiah and the psalmist to keep us mindful of just who is at work here. Isaiah proclaims, “Thus says God, the Lord, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes forth from it, who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it: I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you.” The Psalmist joins in with another reminder, “O come let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the Lord our maker. For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand.”

I’m pretty sure none of us have stretched out any heavens lately. Nor do we hold the depths of the earth in our hands. Isaiah and the psalmist remind us that we are creatures of the creator, and sheep of our shepherd. By putting these texts together, I hear a word from Campus Pastor Sarah, and from Finlandia President Philip, that this challenge of ministry that we strive for walks a fine line. We celebrate what God is doing through us, even as we submit ourselves to the direction God points and the vision God gives. And God uses us, our talents, our personalities, our experiences, our weaknesses, our strengths. By faith, we offer ourselves, who we are in every sense of what that means, to the work that God sets before us. And we are blessed to do so with humility, knowing that we are inadequate to the task, and yet, by faith, God gives you what you need to do the work that God asks of you. We are so blessed, to participate in what God has done and is doing. This is the blessing of faith. God’s train is already in motion, and we are invited to jump on board.

Today, is about what was, and what is, and what will be. In this singular event, we celebrate what God has done in the past through the men of Suomi Seminary who answered God’s call and by faith, with courage followed God’s lead to the land that God showed them and the people whom they would serve for the sake of Christ Jesus. And we celebrate what is, as Pastor Sarah Semmler Smith answers the call to serve here as Campus Pastor and our brothers in Christ from the past Suomi Seminary will help pray God’s blessings upon her future efforts. As we celebrate the 50th anniversary year of the ordination of women in the Lutheran church, I am also glad to welcome another sister in Christ to ministry in our synod. I daresay in 1904, or even 1954 they didn’t/ couldn’t see either one of us coming. God is full of surprises. And I am grateful that God is always declaring new things.

Today we also celebrate our hopes for what will be. God is in the business of new life. As we look to the future, as the church, as Finlandia, as people of faith how do we step forward into that future? With humility? That would be best. With courage? Hopefully. With fear and trembling? Probably. But by faith, we remember that what we seek to do for the sake of Christ, we do not do alone.

I remember, not so very long ago, well long enough, that my husband and I trained and ran in a 10k race. Ok, it was a while ago, but the memory of the end of that run sticks with me. It was only a ten k, but that’s as far as I’ve ever run, even as a cross country runner in school. After pounding the pavement for the better part of an hour, we could see the finish line, or actually, more to the point, we could hear it - The sounds of cheering people, of clapping, of calls of encouragement and support, whoops of celebration. My husband and I picked up the pace. We started to pass people, weaving in and out as our strides lengthened. We couldn’t help it. I started to giggle. It didn’t matter that we had slogged through the puddles and pavement of more than five miles, suddenly we were surrounded by cheers and clapping and we started to race, and I had a euphoric hope that I might just beat my husband. The giggling became louder, laughing even, as the cheers of the crowd propelled us to the finish line, with me just a little bit ahead. Never mind that he let me.

When I think of the cloud of witnesses that Hebrews talks about, I always think of the end of that race. I think of all those faithful saints who have gone on before us, this host of eager supporters, and they are crowded on the sidelines cheering you and me onward and all of us. We do not do what we do alone. God is with us, and so are all those Suomi graduates, so is grandma and grandpa, mom and dad, and how many other faithful loved ones who line the race course and lift their voices in shouts and whoops of encouragement. They are clapping and cheering for you as you venture forth in good courage to do what God calls you to do and go to the land, the task, the challenge, the ministry, the event, the effort, that God shows you. By faith, you answer God’s call on your life. And by faith, you will find blessing and meaning, giving your energy to God’s purposes, and participating God’s vision as God brings forth something new. By faith, together we step into the future that God has planned. Thanks be to God. Amen.