

How should we live? Live welcoming to all. Please.

Good morning. It is my great joy to be with you all again. For those of you wondering who this strange woman in the pulpit is, my name is Allisynn Thomas, and I work for Bishop Mathes. One of the most fun things I get to do is visit different parishes most every week. I get to know all sorts of different folks, and I'm also liturgically confused at all times. If I make a left turn, just bear with me.

Last weekend, I attended a meditation and mindfulness retreat in upstate New York. The basic theme of the retreat is how we deal with fear and anxiety. It was interesting how in God's good time, Kairos time, I had signed up for the retreat in September, but now found myself with about 150 people from all around ... Actually from all around the world, very much aware of not just our own fear and anxiety, but the fear and anxiety going on in the world around us.

The rhythm of the retreat was this: The retreat leader, a woman, would give a talk. We would meditate, and then meet together in small groups to talk about the experience and what came up for us. Then, throughout the three days of the retreat, she would invite people to come to the microphone to either ask a question or to make a comment. What emerged from both the small group work and then the questions and comments made to the larger group was that there was indeed a fair amount of fear and anxiety about how things were going both personally and globally. How could we take what we were learning at the retreat, and then present it back into the world in a way that would help foster peace? What also emerged was that this group, by and large, was on the same page politically, and this came from both once again the small group discussions and then the comments made to the larger group. I would say that was probably center left to far left. Then, on the last day, at the last session, a man came up to the microphone and he said, "I just need you to know that I voted for Donald Trump, and I think I had good reasons for voting for Donald Trump, and I'm happy to talk to any of you about it, and also hear about why you didn't vote for him."

Now, meditation retreats are generally pretty safe places. People who go to them are not, by and large, prone to violence, but nonetheless, this was a very, very brave thing to do, because this man was clearly outnumbered. Anyway, after he spoke the retreat leader thanked him for speaking up and then said that just because this group shared many, many common

interests, we should not make assumptions about how people voted.

The important thing was that we learn to really, really listen to one another. After the retreat ended, I took the train back to Manhattan, where I spent the night before returning to San Diego. As I was walking around the city, just looking at that great press of humanity there, that man at the retreat and what he said stayed on my mind. Upon reflection, and being very honest with myself, I have to admit that when he said he voted for Donald Trump, I felt negatively. This is just speaking for myself, but certain actions of the new administration have caused me distress about the treatment of refugees, or the environment. I'm not saying people on the other side don't have those concerns, but these are mine.

Yet I also thought as I was walking around, "Who am I to make any kind of assumptions about people who believe differently than I do?" Disagreement, even strong disagreement, is one thing. Denigrating the other, that is people who do believe differently from me, is something else entirely. In this week's gospel, Jesus says, "We are the salt of the Earth. We are the light of the world. We are to let our light shine before others." Now, notice how all these statements are in the present tense. They are not statements of things we should do, they're not statements of something we will do, but statements about who we are now. Right now. However, at the same time, it doesn't mean that these gifts from God, of salt and light, cannot be underused, or even misused.

In these troubling times of polarity and clashes of vision, how are we to use them? So many of us are not just afraid, we are angry, hurt, and perplexed. How did we get into this state of affairs? How do we stand up for what we believe in without caving in to the fear and anger all around us? What may be one of the hardest things to face, what have we not seen or even disregarded in the cares and concerns of those who do believe differently from us? Because the truth is, many if not all of us have done just that. In light of this, how are we to have meaningful discourse? Godly conversation? Godly action in the midst of so many strong emotions? Now, I'll be honest. If I had an answer to that, I'd be up for the Nobel Peace Prize, and I'm not.

The truth is, like most of us, I am feeling and praying my way through it as best I can. Trusting that God is in the midst of this and with us. Once again, it is helpful to return to the words of Matthew's gospel. "We are the salt of the Earth. We are the light of the world. We are to let our light shine before others." This is part and

parcel of our identities as followers of Jesus. It is an identity we are called to claim with all the blessings and responsibilities that come with it. Among those blessings and responsibilities is to show the world a different way, even when it's hard. Especially when it's hard.

The Reverend Dr. David Lose, who is president of the Evangelical Lutheran Seminary in Philadelphia notes, "If ever there was a time when we needed to be blessed with the gifts of salt and light, it is right now. Check the headlines. Listen to the news. Glance over the social media pages. There is an unusually pervasive sense of dis-ease in our world, and the divisions evident in our country. But here's what's hard. We won't all agree on what exactly being salt and light looks like. I have pretty strong opinions about that, and perhaps you do too, but my difficulty is that some of the people who feel very differently than I do are people I know well and love. Family members, wonderful colleagues, capable parishioners, and I find it hard to discard their opinions without discarding them."

Once again, what are we to do? How can we be the salt and the light we were created to be, especially in such times? Well for one, we can pray. In fact, we must pray. As individuals and together, because as followers of Jesus, we are called to bring his healing presence and power into the world. Prayer sustains us, and we need that. We must seek to speak the truth in love and act according to the love God commands us to have for ourselves and for each other. What we say and do, and how we say it or do it matters. We have to stay present, in the moment, pay attention, and listen. When necessary, admit to ourselves we're having a hard time, hit the pause button, even if for two seconds, and give it over to God so we can respond to what's happening rather than react.

In what may be the hardest in all these things, especially when we are angry, offended, or just fed up, is to look at the person or persons we are disagreeing with and realize that they too are made in the image of God, and they show us something about God we would never, ever know otherwise. Trust me, there are people I don't want to go there with, but I know I must. I must. We must if we're going to not just believe in Jesus, but believe Jesus.

Finally, we must be kind to ourselves. There'll be times when we'll be able to be salt and light, and others when we won't. For whatever reason, such as fear, fatigue, anger, sorrow, be at peace. Be at peace. God hasn't given up on us, and we shouldn't give up on ourselves

either. You are the salt of the Earth. You are the light of the world. Let your light shine before others, and you will not only be a blessing, you will be blessed as well.