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## PASTORAL LETTER FROM FR. DAVE

*May 29, 2020*

Dear Friends in Christ,

It was a last-minute idea.

As a small team of parishioners prepared for our first fully online worship service on Sunday, March 22, we looked for reassuring sacred objects and symbols to place in the chapel.

There is no more crucial object than our baptismal font, one of the few items to survive the fire that burned down our building in 1879. The font is normally stationed by the West Doors of the church, leading out to Monroe Street, but at the last minute, we decided to move the font into the chapel.



Florida governors and ordinary folks alike have become citizens of heaven through the baptismal waters contained by our font, which was a gift to the parish from Sunday School students in the early-19th century. Having now hoisted this emblem of our faith into place, I can tell you that it's heavier than it looks. Also, when you examine it closely, you see that it has been knocked over a few times. The marble clearly has been chipped and repaired.

Our font represents two key qualities of the people of St. John's: resilience and adaptability. By leaning on the everlasting arms of our God and digging deep into reservoirs of faith, hope, and love, we've resiliently lived into our baptismal vows to walk with Jesus on the way that leads to abundant life. And we've been willing to nimbly adjust to new realities brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. I couldn't be more proud of St. John's congregation, Vestry (especially Doug Sessions, Senior Warden, and Lynn Solomon, Junior Warden), Foundation board, and staff!

Through it all, we've remained grounded in our core values of worship, compassion, openness, community and stewardship. The following, organized under the headings of our core values, is meant to inform and inspire you during this challenging season of life.

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## WORSHIP

It's at the very center of all that we do. Nothing is more vital than our praise of God, especially during hard times. The pandemic has necessitated a move to online worship, which, at first, to be candid with you, drove me crazy. I couldn't stand preaching to a camera rather than real, breathing human beings! But then, through God's grace, I came to a realization: what if the camera was more of a window to God and you? To use a more churchy word: what if the camera was an icon through which I could see the presence of God and God's people?



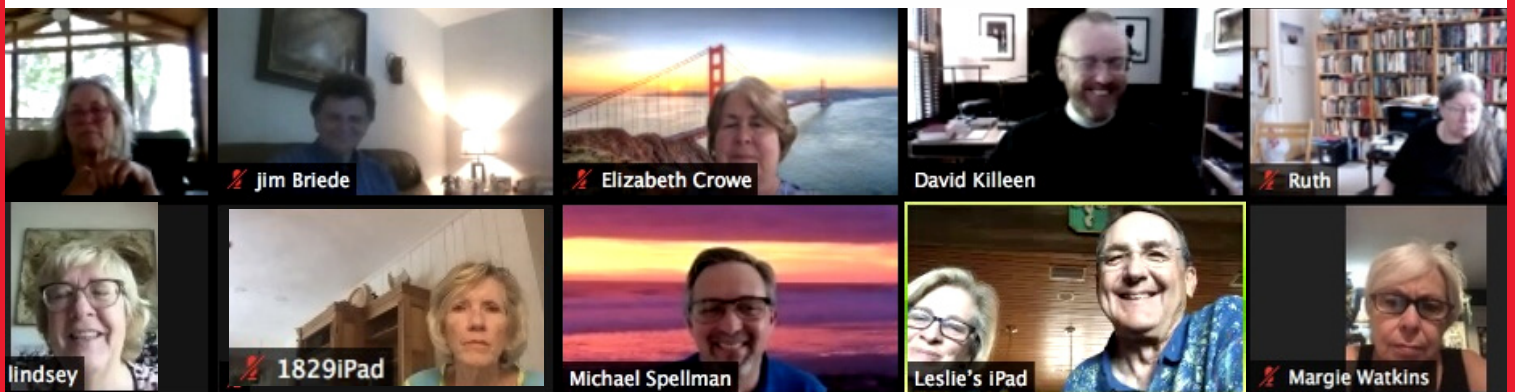
That perspective shift changed everything for me, and now, I actually enjoy worshipping in this new way. It's not the same. Online worship will never replace the in-person experience. But from now on, St. John's will stream Sunday worship. In fact, we're in the process of installing updated cameras and internet capability in the church so that we can stream and archive services, classes and events (including baptisms, weddings and funerals) through our website in the years to come. This project was already a strategic plan initiative; the pandemic pushed us to adapt faster.

I'm sure you're wondering when we'll gather again for in-person worship. At present, I'm not sure, but I can tell you that our COVID-19 Task Force is working hard on a phased approach for the vestry to discuss in June. As soon as we have more information on our re-gathering plan, we will communicate with you.

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## OPENNESS

Members and friends of all ages and stages of life are gathering in this digital age. Every weekday and Sunday offer an opportunity to see or hear God's grace and love through different offerings. Three-year-olds participate in our mid-week Children's Chapel and 83-year-olds are jumping into Zoom Bible studies. And every Sunday, our youth gather for games, laughter, and spiritual nourishment.



Stay tuned as we continue to offer opportunities to deepen our relationship with God and support each other. I'm aware that not everyone is comfortable with computers and technology. Please know that our in-house tech guru, Claire Dodd, is available to assist you in getting online. She can send you one-page instructions on how to meet by Zoom and other resources. You can reach Claire by calling 222-2636 ext. 22. Leave her a message and she will contact you promptly.



## COMMUNITY

Parish leaders are working hard to provide you with the safest ways to assist our community. We've seen so many of you reaching out in love while staying at home. Thank you to the individuals who have served our community as mask-sewers, letter-writers, and Grace Mission PB&J-makers. Many of you have supported our partner agencies by supplying gift cards, while others have written congratulatory notes and made "Donut Drops" to graduating Riley Elementary School students.



Laurye Messer reminds us that "finding ways to be both safe and help our community can be challenging, but an act as simple as saying thank you to the person that bags your groceries, calling to check on a neighbor, or writing a note of encouragement to a healthcare provider shows compassion, kindness, and love."

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## COMPASSION

In partnership with our clergy, rooted in our desire to meet parishioners' pastoral care needs, our Stephen Ministers continue to reach out to people one-on-one. Lynn Bannister shares, "Something good always comes out of difficulty. I enjoyed connecting with friends and am grateful for the opportunity to meet parishioners I did not know. I've enjoyed many delightful conversations with new friends." So far, our faithful Stephen Ministers have made more than 2000 phone calls!

We've also launched a Parish Buddies program, which brings together members in one-on-one relationships of mutual support, prayer, and encouragement. More than 80 parishioners are currently signed up. In the near future, we anticipate introducing a new online (and in-person when safe) small group ministry so that we can stay connected as a community.



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## STEWARDSHIP

Your generosity never ceases! I'm grateful for your faithful gifts of time and talent during this trying time. I'd like to especially acknowledge Skip Foster, chair, and the members of the COVID-19 Task Force who have steered us through choppy waters with wisdom and courage.

My heart is also overflowing with thanksgiving for our Building and Donor Recognition Committees, both of whom have overseen our campus renovation efforts. Capital campaign giving remains robust in this uncertain time, and our year-to-date annual giving is strong. We give thanks to all for adjusting to new giving habits: setting up recurring contributions through the St. John's online giving link, text giving, sending funds through online banking, and mailing checks to the church. Your faithful generosity enables us to keep our ministries vibrant. In addition, we recently received CARES Act funding to assist us in maintaining payroll for all employees.



All of this is good news, but it's critical for us to continue to share our resources for the common good of St. John's and our wider community. When we follow Jesus and give with cheerful hearts, we grow closer to God and our neighbors.

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In closing, I'd like to share some personal news with you. I've been accepted into Florida State University's Ph.D. in Creative Writing program. My studies begin in Fall 2020. This means that I will be a full-time rector at St. John's and a part-time student. My primary focus will remain on St. John's.

In the FSU program, my concentration will be on poetry, and I'm excited to work with extraordinary faculty members such as St. John's-own Jimmy Kimbrell, as well as Barbara Hamby and David Kirby. Writing has been an important part of my life since childhood, and I look forward to honing my craft in one of the finest creative writing programs in the country.

I aspire to fully integrate my vocation as priest and poet. For example, I'm currently leading an online class at St. John's featuring my poems paired with the Biblical texts on which they're based. I believe that my Ph.D. studies will enrich my ministry to you as a priest.

In order to free up time and energy for this new commitment, I am in the process of stepping down from my board leadership positions at Episcopal Relief and Development, The Anglican Centre in Rome, and the Tallahassee Symphony Orchestra. Please hold me and my family in prayer as I begin this new chapter in my journey.

It's a profound joy to serve as your rector. We've been through a lot together these past ten years (and we've been through a lot together since 1829!), yet I'm so excited about what is to come. We're going to get through this tough time together, and when we're able to return to something like normal, this much I know: we are going to celebrate and give each other many, many hugs.

God loves you. Carol and I love you. Keep leaning on those everlasting arms of our God, who will never let us go.

Faithfully in Christ,

*Dave +*

