



ST. STEPHEN THIS WEEK

St. Stephen Lutheran Church Newsletter



'PRAYING FOR IMMIGRATION JUSTICE'

By *Sylvia Smith*

Locally, there are two ongoing ways to join others in prayer, song and advocacy around immigration justice issues. Every Sunday from 4 to 5 p.m., an interfaith prayer vigil occurs on the steps of the Old Capitol. Participants sing, testify and pray – rain or shine. There is room on the top landing for some to sit protected from rain or sun, there is some seating on the sides of the staircases, and also room to set up chairs. The Rise Up singers lead several songs, and representatives of local churches offer testimony and prayer. There is an open mic during the program for others to offer prayer or comment. St. Stephen has a text group you can join to find a “buddy” to attend with or carpool with. Pastor Tom participates regularly and will be there this coming Sunday.

Additionally, each Tuesday through Thursday during the legislative session, a silent protest of current immigration policy and enforcement occurs at the Capitol during the day. Participants hold memorial posters of those who have died in ICE detention, along with other messages to raise awareness and call to action around closing the detention camps, rescinding 287(g) requirements [involving law-enforcement agencies' agreements with ICE], stopping state funding for ICE work and ensuring transparency and accountability. To sign up, click <https://form.jotform.com/260186294560056> or visit Indivisible Tallahassee on social media online.



'LOVE, EQUALITY AND SOLIDARITY START LOCALLY'

By *Ron Hartung*

For those of us who knew Gaines Street Pies owner Jeremy Matlow only from news stories about the City Commission, his St. Stephen talk last Sunday was a revelation. He was the keynote speaker for the 2026 Ministry of Reconciliation program, organized by Dave Suhrweir. The commissioner's topic was "Love, Equality and Solidarity Start Locally."



His official online profile states:
"Raised on Tallahassee's south side with a passion for the public good, Commissioner Jeremy Matlow believes that citizens and neighborhoods should drive the priorities of City Hall. By bringing more people into the political process and advocating for the concerns of everyday people, Jeremy is committed to building a city that works for everyone through dedicated public service."

Beyond that bio, though, Jeremy has a compelling life story to tell. This candidate for mayor grew up in a single-parent family, often went to bed hungry, encountered violence even at home and left home when he was still in high school. His mother did her best to teach him compassion, and the family who later took him in showed him what a loving home looked like. He came away convinced that we all have a

moral responsibility to do more for those whom prosperity has left behind. "All I knew," he said, "was that local government wasn't fulfilling its responsibilities."

So in 2018, even though "I didn't know anything about politics," he decided to run for a seat on the Tallahassee City Commission. Talk about a squeaker: He won by a mere 332 votes. As he said: "Don't ever say, 'My vote doesn't count'!" (For the record: In 2022 he won re-election by more than 4,000 votes.)

When asked Sunday how he could jump into elective office with virtually no experience, especially at a time when state officials have tried more and more to control local governments, Jeremy responded that it's all about moral accountability. "Don't be afraid of state government," he said. "We can't control what punishment might result. Stay true to your values and let the chips fall where they may." As he put it: "Local government is five people." That is, the five city commissioners. So if he can persuade two other commissioners to buy into his vision, he can do a lot to help the people who need it.

Those of us who follow the news know that, fairly often, Jeremy has been on the losing end of 3-2 decisions at City Commission meetings. Yet he doesn't lose faith. When he announced his run for mayor, he said: "From the south side to the suburbs, I ask you: Can we be a better city than we are today? And if your answer is yes, no matter your background, we need you and want you on this campaign." Now that we know him better, we St. Stephen voters will follow this campaign with increased interest. And we'll remember the morning when he joined us in worship.

'YOUR SUPPORT CHANGES LIVES'

An equally compelling speaker was Janel Diaz, executive director of Capital Tea, Tallahassee's nonprofit transgender support group. (Jeremy had designated Capital Tea to receive offerings generated by Ministry of Reconciliation Sunday.)

Janel's speech about her tumultuous early years was personal and heartfelt. She expressed her gratitude for St. Stephen's warm welcome, and particularly appreciated the invitation to take communion – because, she said, she'd been kicked out of church long ago. As Dave said afterward: "I notice how much the two speakers' messages were aligned: that a challenging life during youth can produce a compassionate adult."

Below is the text that Janel prepared before her visit, when Dave asked her to describe Capital Tea in a nutshell.

Capital Tea is a transgender-led nonprofit based in Tallahassee, created out of necessity, love and survival. We exist because too many transgender and gender- diverse people are forced to navigate the world without safety, stability or support — and because our community deserves so much more than that.



At Capital Tea, we believe that trans people shouldn't have to choose between being themselves and being safe. Our work is rooted in community care — showing up for one another when systems fail us. Through monthly support groups, education, advocacy and mutual aid, we create spaces where trans people are not just tolerated, but truly seen, affirmed and valued.

One of the most urgent needs we address is housing. Trans people experience homelessness and housing instability at alarming rates, often because of family rejection, discrimination or violence. In 2022, Capital Tea opened Tallahassee's first known safe house for transgender women — a place where residents could finally breathe, rest and exist without fear. For many, it was the first time they had ever felt truly safe in their own home.

In 2024, we expanded this vision by launching our trans-masculine safe housing program, ensuring that trans men and trans-masculine individuals also have access to affirming, secure housing. These homes are more than roofs over heads — they are lifelines. They offer stability, dignity and the chance to rebuild after being pushed to the margins for simply being who you are.



Capital Tea's work has been recognized locally and nationally because it is deeply human. In a time when trans lives are being politicized and attacked, we respond with care, compassion and action. We build safety where there was none. We create family where it was lost. And we cannot do this alone. If you believe trans people deserve safe homes, supportive communities and the freedom to live authentically, we invite you to stand with us. You can donate or learn more at <https://capitaltea.org>. One of the most powerful ways to support our work is by joining the Fabulous 100 — our continuous donation partners. By committing to a monthly gift, Fabulous 100 members provide the steady support that keeps our housing programs open, our support groups running, and our doors open to those who need us most.

Your support doesn't just fund programs — it changes lives. It means someone sleeps safely tonight. It means someone feels hope instead of fear. It means trans people in Tallahassee know they are not alone. For more information, to donate or to become part of the Fabulous 100, visit <https://capitaltea.org>. Together, we are building a future where trans people can live, heal and thrive.

To watch the videos of both speakers, visit our [Facebook page](#) and look for "Stream for RIC speaker."

IT'S NOT TOO LATE TO DONATE

As of Monday, Pastor Tom said that we had raised \$537 for Capital Tea. And that's just a start! If you're able, between now and Feb. 8 — and especially this Sunday, during our Noisy Offering — please make your donations for Capital Tea through St. Stephen. Whichever option you choose, make it payable to "St. Stephen Lutheran Church" and designate it for "Capital Tea." You may deliver or mail a check; use the Venmo app @stephen-saint; or use PayPal. After Feb. 8, you may donate directly to Capital Tea at <https://capitaltea.org/>.



THANKS FROM DAVE TO...

- Margaret Bowers and Carol Santos, who volunteered to create our new Reconciling in Christ paraments. They purchased all the materials and personally worked on their creation. Carol also made the decorations for the luncheon tables.
- Lawana and Sandy Lamb-Daniels, who set up the luncheon tables and food and also led the cleanup.
- The Care and Hospitality group, the Altar Guild, Pastor Tom, Rita Ford and Ron Hartung, for their extra effort to achieve a successful event.



FRESH LANGUAGE IN OUR LITURGY

Not often, but sometimes the language of the liturgy can seem stiff. Most of us excuse it because, well, we're used to it and find great comfort in it. But to new ears, it might sound foreign – and it might not speak to them.

Not so with last Sunday's liturgy. Did you notice that some of the readings contained contractions? "'Come, follow me,' he said, 'and I'll show you how to fish for people.'" Even the Creed took on new life: "We believe in you, O God, who spoke all life into being, author of heaven and earth, architect of time, quilter of the cosmos. You shape our bodies from the dust of the ground, and by your breath we are given life."

The words of consecration, too, took on new energy: "Blessed are you, O God, Creator of this wild and wonderful world. In the beginning, you called forth light from the shadows; You filled land and sea with life; You filled us with your own Spirit. You so loved your own creation that you set your bow in the sky; You promised life in a world that brings death; You sent Jesus, your Son, to gather us close to you."



It even found a way to say the most famous Christian prayer without using the words "Father" or "Kingdom": "Heavenly God, giver of life, holy is your name, your realm come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial, and deliver us from evil. For you reign in power and glory now and forever. Amen." All in all, it was a Sunday to remember.

SPEAKING OUT, STANDING UP

Excerpt from Pastor Tom's sermon

The kingdom of heaven is being seen in real time, on the ground, right now. Be they in frog and unicorn costumes standing in front of armed and masked men, or seen kneeling in prayer in the streets, and in prayer vigils at the Capitol. The reign of God is present when we act and advocate together. Differing faiths uniting in shared values. Religious and non-religious people speaking out and standing up together even when guns are thrust in the face. "The kingdom of God has come near." Where God is seen as people protect innocent people, no matter the threat.

A SAVE-THE-DATE REMINDER

On Saturday, April 11, we'll gather at a local venue (to be determined) for a gathering led by Jacqueline Bussie, an award-winning author, professor, public theologian and "student of life in all its messy beauty." Among the books she has written are "Outlaw Christian: Finding Authentic Faith by Breaking the 'Rules'" and "Love Without Limits: Jesus' Radical Vision for Love With No Exceptions." The next day, April 12, she will be the guest preacher at our liturgy. Registration will come soon. Right now, turn to April 11 on your calendar and write down "Church retreat."



BEFORE YOU GO...

- Need the contact information for a St. Stephen member? Use your digital directory. Don't have it on your phone? Office Manager Rita can fix you up.
- Please remember that you can look up past sermons or newsletters that you missed. Visit our website: <https://ststephenlutherantly.com/>.
- If you have an anniversary, birthday, special memory or special St. Stephen person or program you'd like to honor, celebrate by sponsoring



the altar flowers for our service. Sign up on the flower chart, out by the name tags, or ask Rita to sign you up. Include the \$40 with your regular offering. And then take the flowers home!

- And here is the classic car of the week, a 1948 Porsche. Mmmmm.

SERVING THIS WEEK

Pastor Tom Holdcraft, Preaching and Presiding; **Beth Alexander**, Assisting Minister; **Lorraine Sundberg**, Cup Minister; **Violet/Mark Greeley**, Lector; **Audrey Post and Cindy Suhrweir**, Tech Team; **Beth Alexander**, Altar Guild; **Margaret Bowers and Patricia Handschy**, Counters; **Rudy Hehn**, Cantor; **Denise Bookwalter**, Announcements

COMING UP

Today:

10:00 a.m. - Bible study

Noon - Al-Anon meets in Pastor Emory Hingst Memorial Fellowship Hall, aka Hingst Hall (HH)

7 p.m. - AA meets in HH

This Friday:

9:30 a.m. - TOPS meets in HH

This Sunday:

9 a.m. - Bible study

9:30 a.m. - Choir

10 a.m. - Worship: Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

Monday, February 2:

5:00 p.m. - TIMA meets in HH

Tuesday, February 3:

5:00 p.m. - NA meets in HH

Wednesday, February 4:

5:00 p.m. - TIMA meets in HH

7:00 p.m. - Choir

Thursday, February 5:

10:00 a.m. - Bible study



UPCOMING BIRTHDAYS

Jennifer Buchanan - 1/29

Graham Hackley - 1/30

Jayden Schiffer - 1/31

Gabbi Oates - 2/2

Barb O'Donnell - 2/5

Ben Bush - 2/11

Chris Reece - 2/15

Patrick Kennell - 2/18

Jackie Mustian - 2/25

Lisa Medley - 2/25

Judi Duffy - 2/27

Rob Schiffer - 2/28



If you have news or photos to share,
please send them to Rita at
sslc@ststephenlutherantly.com.

Don't forget our Facebook page:
<https://www.facebook.com/ststephentallahassee>.

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, ELCA