

## **COME ON BACK, ST. STEPHEN**

July 4, 2021 (Guest preacher Ron Hartung)

If you tuned in late: Fear not! Tom Holdcraft is still our pastor! He's just on vacation, and all his pastor friends turned him down when he asked them to fill in on the Fourth of July – so, in desperation, he said he'd give me a box of sparklers if I stood up here today. My name is Ron Hartung, and I'm no pastor – but I've been a member here for nearly 40 years, if that helps.

Last Sunday, when our son Jake came over, he explored our yard and eventually asked whether we had a small clay pot he could use. He wanted to dig up seedlings from the uncommon oak tree by our street. He's one of the landscape pros who oversee the magnificent plants at FSU – and he's begun nurturing seedlings of both rare and native trees to add to those already on campus. In ways large and small, he's rebuilding FSU's forest of the future.

Seems to me that here at St. Stephen, we have some rebuilding of our own to do – and not just up there by the roof. Although God has brought us through COVID amazingly well so far, and our staff and leaders have performed heroically, and our worship team has gone way above and beyond, and YOU've made sure that our bank accounts and repair projects are healthy, the pandemic has caused a major disruption of our worship life together.

Our Sunday-morning routines have been shattered. For more than a year, “going to church” has taken on a whole new meaning. We've had to do without potlucks and Sunday School. Some of our newer members and older members haven't even met. Some of our youngest members don't yet know the thrill of seeing Mr. Karl chase the Reece boys after church. Some of them might not even remember this building.

Throughout the pandemic, a handful of hardy souls continued to worship here in person with Pastor Tom. Most of the rest of us, though, gratefully chose the Facebook Live alternative, which allowed us to stay safe yet still worship – even in our jammies.

In recent weeks, as the number of vaccinations has climbed and the number of cases has fallen, a few more of us have slowly begun to return to worship in person. If you haven't been back, let me tell you that even though this building resembles a construction zone, it's still a sacred space. More important, it's filled with sacred people. Irreverent, flawed, occasionally messed-up people, but sacred in the sense that God created them, pumped them full of remarkable gifts and talents, and steered them here. Those are the people we've missed as we've worshipped from home. This is the sixth Sunday I've been back, and it's been a powerful reminder of what I'd been missing.

I've come to appreciate anew the ways in which people past and present have poured themselves and their spirit into St. Stephen. I COULD name names – you know, like Emory and Ann, Phil and Sue, Susan, Colin, Beth, Terri, Nathan, Martha, Jan, Emily, Ruth, Margaret, Sandy, anonymous donors, Jen and Tom, Cheryl and Steve, Linda and Bob, Denise and Mark, Val and Val. Yes, I COULD name names – but I won't, because I could never name everyone whose imprint is here. So let's try it without names.

Think of ... the people who welcomed you when you first came here.

Think of ... the people who've brought God's teachings to life for you here.

Think of the people here who've listened to you and held your hand when the world was too much to bear.

Think of the people who've created majestic music here.

Think of the people who've worked behind the scenes to set up before and clean up after each service.

Think of the people who've created unforgettable celebrations of holidays, milestones and other special events.

Think of the people who've cared for our buildings and grounds, usually when no one else was around.

Think of the people who donate money, budget money, pay bills and count offerings.

Think of the people who share their little kids with us every Sunday and brighten our lives.

Think of the people you used to sit by during the service and hang out with afterward.

Think of our lay leaders who've devoted so much time and prayed for the wisdom to make sound decisions – as described so well by our president in the latest newsletter.

Think of our pastors – especially Pastor Tom. Before he came here, he wrote: "I have learned that what was taught in seminary is true: Trust in the pastor does not occur overnight. It can take 3-5 years!" Guess how long Tom has been our pastor? Exactly three years this month! Maybe he'd appreciate hearing from you?

Raise your hand if you've ever sat here during the liturgy, felt a rush of Lutheran adrenaline and promised yourself that the minute you got home, you'd write a lovely note to a St. Stephen person who had inspired you.

I confess, I'm lousy at following up on those impulses. I do such a good job of mentally embroidering what I want to say that another part of my brain thinks I've actually said it – and checks it off the list!

You're thinking, "No, that won't happen this time!" But as soon as you leave here, you'll start thinking about what you need to do Monday. You'll lose your warm and fuzzy Sunday-morning high. Maybe you'll recall that sometimes we step on each other's toes here. Maybe one of us let you down. Maybe even a pastor let you down. Then again, sometimes pastors can feel let down themselves as they try to share their God-given gifts.

There's that favorite St. Stephen phrase: "God-given gifts." Yes, God bestows the gifts, but it's up to us – with the nudging of the Holy Spirit – to develop those gifts and talents and put them to use in a way that benefits others. I'm guessing that Isabel and Karl could find other things to do on Sunday morning, yet here they always are.

Why do they do it? Why do YOU do what you do? Why are YOU here? For those of you watching from home: Why aren't you watching "The Great British Baking Show"? I'm not sure most of us could come up with a good answer. Yet here we are.

Back to that rebuilding we talked about before: I'm speaking now to the people who still feel timid about worshipping here in person. The rest of us miss you, and we can't wait to see you here again. It's your call, of course! Only you know your health concerns, your kids' welfare and other variables. And worshipping online sure doesn't make you any less a St. Stephen Lutheran! It's just that we get so much more out of having you physically here.

Yes, video liturgies are amazing inventions – thank God, and thank Paul van der Mark. But they're nothing like seeing each other up close, in person, in three dimensions, kneeling beside each other to take communion, being surrounded by real live Lutherans. There's a bond that connects us all.

Sure, we also bond with our families, our co-workers and our bowling teams. But church is different. When we gather here on Sundays, we're striving to be part of something much larger than ourselves. We're seeking God. We're turning off the TV, putting down our phone, putting aside our snacks, sitting still longer than usual, singing out loud, hoping beyond hope that our pastors will finally, miraculously help us make sense of God's world and our place in it. My sense is that the bond we share is more tangible when we're actually standing beside each other.

Remember how life used to feel here on Sunday mornings. It can feel that way again. When you're ready, when God calls you, we can't wait to welcome you home. Amen.