

The Messenger

FALL 2025

St. Mark's Episcopal Church 1939



ST. MARK'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Happening This Fall

Parish Picnic

Kick off the fall at St. Mark's with our Parish Picnic and Annual Parish Photo on **Sunday, September 7, at 11 a.m.** Join us for a combined 10 a.m. morning service followed by our Annual Parish Photo and Parish Picnic where we'll enjoy a potluck lunch, games, music, and fun for all ages! Be sure to invite family and friends!



New Worship Times

Beginning Sunday, September 14, our Sunday worship times will be 7:45, 9:15, and 11 a.m., and 5 p.m.

Sunday School Returns!

Beginning Sunday, September 14, our PreK 4 thru Grade 6 classes will be held from 10:15 to 10:50 a.m. For more information, please email joseph.rawley@stmarks-houston.org.



Parish Retreat

From **September 19 to 21**, St. Mark's will spend a weekend away at Camp Allen together to enjoy food, drinks, games, and activities including canoeing, horseback riding, archery, fishing, hiking, bike rides, nature walks, swimming, and more. Visit www.stmarks-houston.org to reserve your space! For more information, please email joseph.rawley@stmarks-houston.org.

Blessing of the Animals

We invite all parishioners to bring their furry, feathered, or scaly pets to a special **Five O'Clock service on Sunday, October 5**, in celebration of the Feast of St. Francis of Assisi, for our annual Blessing of the Animals. We will meet in the courtyard for a service, followed by a celebration with food, drinks, and music. Please make sure all pets are properly caged or leashed.

Evensong

The St. Mark's Choir invites you to Choral Evensong on **Thursday, October 16, at 7 p.m.** in the sanctuary. The St. Mark's Choir also invites you to two combined Evensong events with The Five O'Clock band on **All Saints' Sunday, November 2, at 5 p.m.** and a special **Lessons and Carols on Sunday, December 21, at 5 p.m.** Both will be held in the Sanctuary.



Trunk-or-Treat!

All children in the St. Mark's community are invited to wear their costumes to **The Nine Fifteen service on October 26** and to join us immediately following in the St. Mark's parking lot for our annual Trunk-or-Treat. Adult parishioners are invited to decorate their vehicles and bring treats for the children as they visit from car to car, showing off their costumes for Halloween night!



Youth Group

Our high school Youth Group will meet **once a month this fall from 6 to 7:30 p.m. in the Youth Room**. Students are invited to join for fellowship and dinner as they explore faith topics. For more information, please email joseph.rawley@stmarks-houston.org.

Rector's Bible Study

Led by the Rev. Patrick J. Miller on **Wednesdays from 7:30 to 8:30 a.m. and Fridays from 10:30 to 11:30 a.m. in the Church Office Parlor**, this class will be studying the Gospel of Mark. Please email joseph.rawley@stmarks-houston.org.

Dinner and Adult Bible Study

Returning on September 14, the parishioner-led bible study meets **every Sunday from 6 to 7:30 p.m. in the Flex Space**. Share good conversation about faith over a potluck meal! Please mail joseph.rawley@stmarks-houston.org for more information.

Women's Bible Study

Led by Kate Clark, the **Women's Bible Study meets every Tuesday from 11:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. in the Church Office Parlor**. Email joseph.rawley@stmarks-houston.org for more information.

Christian Meditation

Led by Dr. Linda Schmalsteig, this online meditation offering meets weekly on **Wednesdays over Zoom from 5:30 to 6:30 p.m.** For the link, please email joseph.rawley@stmarks-houston.org.

Religious Studies Class

This parishioner-led class meets every **Thursday from 10:30 a.m. to noon in the Church Office Parlor**. For more information on curriculum, please email joseph.rawley@stmarks-houston.org.

A Word From The Rector

by the Rev. Patrick J. Miller

I first encountered Jerry Reed in the 1977 movie *Smokey and the Bandit*. Jerry Reed played Cledus, a truck driver who had a dog named Fred. The morals of driving a bootleg tractor-trailer from Texas to Georgia is not the question. It is the fact that Jerry Reed was a singer songwriter before he was the truck-driving outlaw named Cledus with a basset hound named Fred. Jerry Reed Hubbard was born on March 20, 1937, and he died September 1, 2008. He had his first success in rockabilly in the mid-fifties. But it is his 1970 *Talk About the Good Times* that has captured my imagination.

*Well I remember when I was just children
A time when people used to treat
the neighbor like a fellow man
And all their singin' and their big prayer meetin's
When a man was proud to walk up
and shake his neighbor's hand*

The few years before *Talk About the Good Times* was released, our country was reeling from the loss of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy. The Vietnam War was a source of national tension. Woodstock, the election of Richard Nixon, riots during the Democratic convention in Chicago, racial division, and more seemed to cloud the national conscience. Jerry Reed sings:

*But the times are harder
and the people are changin'
Today most folks couldn't tell you,
who their next-door neighbors are
All the guns are loaded,
the front doors are bolted
Ain't this ol' world takin' hate
and fear just a little too far*

It seems there is not much difference between 1970 and 2025. Wars, rumor of wars, political division, and more seem to cloud the national conscience. Even the church is not immune from the outside roar of opinion and noise. Jerry Reed sings:

*Well, my old granddaddy,
God rest his soul now
Well we had a big,
long talk together the day he died
He said, "Son this world*

*is so full of hate and venom
An' I can't wait to leave this ol' place
and rest on the other side"*

*Oh, you talk about the good times,
talk about the good times
When I'm gonna see all the friends I knew
in the good ol' days
We'll have a big hand shakin',
sit and talk together
Sit down by the river Jordan
and sing our blues away*

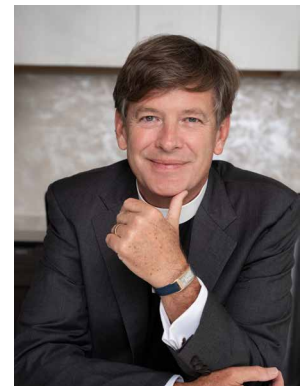
There is a theological sense to the last verse of the song, a time in heaven when friends from the good old days will join together at the Jordan river and sing. We do not need to wait until heaven to do this, because at St. Mark's we already exhibit the vision of heaven that Jerry Reed sings about in his song. You simply need to walk up to our front porch, and you will see it and hear it.

I have served as your rector since February 2008. We have lived a lot of life together as a Rector and a congregation. The Miller children were five and one when we arrived, and they are now in college and doing adult things. We raised our children with many of you. And it seems like yesterday that we were called to serve St. Mark's. There is often a nostalgia that comes to me when I walk across our campus. During the week, our school courtyard is full of young people who are on their own journeys to high school and beyond. During the weekend, our Scouts come and go from camping trips. On Sundays, the courtyard is again full of people of all ages, who are also on their own journeys of careers, school, growth, opportunity, life and, sadly, death. St. Mark's is a full place, full of human beings on the path of life. I have witnessed the people of St. Mark's come and go. I often long to see those that are no longer with us, share a story about the latest trends in the life of our country, our state, our city. Some of them lived through the late 1960s and early 1970s. I wonder what they would say about Artificial Intelligence, or the issues we read about in our paper, on our phone. I wonder what they would make of

streaming services, Instagram, or X, or the latest YouTube obsession. I imagine they would remind me to look at the courtyard of our church and see the gift our parish is to the people who call it their church home. The good times are not in the past. They are right now.

One of the things that energizes me as the Rector of this church is that we do what Jerry Reed sings about. Each day of the week we all come together and imperfectly mimic the heaven we will one day know. Jesus calls us to community, to heal, to help, and to love. We do that. Even though we are human and make our mistakes, we also live into the call of Jesus to reconciliation with each other when mistakes are made. We do not stop at our courtyard. Outside of our campus we strive to make the world a place of care and hope. We do not see the past, except to learn from it. At St. Mark's we see the future, and the many ways we can serve it. We do this all together, with the many gifts we possess as a church community. We do this with our witness, our work, our wisdom, and our wealth. I give thanks to God daily for calling me to be among people who shake hands, sit and talk together, and sing our blues away. We are a church whose mission is the invitation to hear and receive the Gospel of Jesus. We will do this until we can do it no longer, and even then, we might keep coming to the courtyard to see what the next generation is doing with the gift of this place.

*The Rev. Patrick J. Miller is the Rector
of St. Mark's Episcopal Church*



Holy Play: Meeting God in Musical Improv

by the Rev. Deacon Will Parker

When I lived in San Antonio, one day my roommate invited some people over to jam. I thought we were just going to play some music, but then the five of us ended up improvising a musical in our living room. We decided on the spot that we should be a musical improv troupe, and we named ourselves “When Can Do.” The next week, we added a sixth member. For the next 18 months, we practiced weekly and performed improvised musicals at improv theaters around the city. By the end of it, we all agreed that not only had our time together been outrageously fun, but also spiritually transformative.



When Can Do came to an end, as our members, including myself, moved away from San Antonio. I was off to seminary at Yale Divinity School, and as I left When Can Do behind, I had the feeling that my experiences in the troupe were a seed for future possibilities to explore the intersection of musical improv and

spirituality. My second year of my M. Div., I wrote a paper for my Anglican History course, which wasn't about Anglicanism or history. Instead, I wrote about musical improv as a spiritual practice. Although the professor expressed interest in my ideas, I deservedly received a C-. The next year, while completing my M.Div. virtually from Houston due to the pandemic, I turned the ideas for that paper into a thesis about musical improv and spirituality.

My thesis asserts that God calls us to be loving creators. God, who created, made us in God's image; therefore, we are called to create, albeit in an inferior, creaturely way. The Greatest Commandment is to love God and your neighbor as yourself. Therefore, living out our call as loving creators draws us closer to who God created us to be. Also, drawing on work from Erich Fromm and others, I identified five overlapping elements of improv and love. This is not an exhaustive list, but these five elements are key in both. When we practice these elements (skills) in improv, we become better at loving and living out our call to be loving creators.

The Elements of Improvisation and Love

Attentiveness (Listening)

Listening is heralded as the most important skill in improvisation. Without listening, scene partners cannot collaborate and move the scene forward. Without listening, scenes descend into confusion—not a desirable trait for any improvisation. If performers are confused, the audience is confused. Listening facilitates clarity. Listening is also vital in love. Attention is really a form of love. One of the best feelings is feeling truly listened to, and it is key for healthy, sustainable relationships.

Play (Relaxed Awareness)

You cannot improvise if you cannot play. Play is an activity, but it is also a mindset. Play is about being in the moment, in flow, where nothing is as important as what is in front of you. It is also enjoyable and often purposeless but meaningful. Dr. Stuart Brown ascribes these properties to play: “apparent purposelessness (done for its own sake), voluntary, inherent attraction, freedom from time, diminished consciousness of self, improvisational potential, continuation desire.” Play is a vital part of being human, and it is also crucial in love. Relationships without any element of play are joyless. Many of our relationship-building activities are organized around play. Children connect through imaginative play. Dating activities often include things like ice skating and dancing.

Acceptance (Saying Yes)

“Say Yes” is maybe the most popular first rule of improvisation. Saying “yes” is all about accepting what your scene partner offers. It is about agreement. If the players do not agree on what is happening, confusion ensues. Saying “yes” can help us learn to accept unexpected or even undesired offers in life. Acceptance is key in love. No one can love something or someone without accepting it.

Self-giving (Saying And / Reciprocity)

The rule, “Say Yes,” is often followed by “Say And.” Saying “and” is all about adding on to what one's improvisation partner has offered. Not only do improvisers need to accept each other's ideas, but in order for the scene to move forward, they must practice reciprocity. Self-giving is also about supporting one's scene partner—one of the most crucial aspects of improvisation. Improvisers aim to make their scene partners look like geniuses. Applying this

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sense of service to life, we can practice serving others from a place of altruism. Love does not just require acceptance; it requires a response.

Trust (Risk / Vulnerability)

Trust is absolutely vital in improvisation. Samuel Wells defines improvisation in theatre as “a process through which actors seek to develop trust in themselves and one another that they may conduct unscripted dramas without fear.” If two improvisers trust each other, they can be vulnerable and take risks—a constant aspect of improvising, where nothing is planned and anything can happen. When we develop trust in ourselves and one another in the improv studio, we gain the practice that enables us to do the same with people in our lives with whom we want to develop strong, closer relationships.



Musical Improv Meets Liturgy

The work of this M.Div. was mostly theoretical since I had no way of trying out my ideas at the time. Then Cecelia and I moved back to New Haven, and, with help from a grant from the Episcopal Evangelism Society, I started a new musical improv troupe called Public Universal Friends, which practiced spiritual and theological reflection as a part of our process. We formed lasting bonds as we deepened our relationships with each other and God. The seed of When Can Do continued to grow.

But while we discussed the intersections of improvisation, music, and spirituality, I had yet to try bringing musical improv into a liturgical context. Then, in 2023, I went back to Yale Divinity to pursue a Master's in Sacred Theology. Through a second thesis

project, since we were not in lockdown, I was able to try out my ideas of bringing musical improv to church. While there were many experiments, my favorite was two musical improv and spirituality retreats that I facilitated at the Yale Institute of Sacred Music. The retreats involved breakfast (very important), prayer, theatrical and musical improv games, discussion on brief readings, practicing theatrical/musical improv, and a noonday prayer service in which the response to the scripture is an improvised musical scene. I wanted to explore musical improv's accessibility and its ability to connect people to each other and the Divine. Through these experiences, I saw the seed of When Can Do start to blossom. Here's some feedback from the retreats:

“This opened my eyes up to what theology and spirituality could be.”

“I forgot what it was like to feel God's presence, and this retreat helped me re-see that.”

“This has been a kind of olive branch to my own humanity, and it's liberating.”

An Invitation

Much of the feedback I received also emphasized how accessible the retreats felt, even to people with no experience with improv or music. Improvisation isn't about being clever or creating perfect works of art—we are playing. My hope is to bring these retreats and experiences to St. Mark's as part of my ministry over the next two years. I invite you to join me in this holy play.

The Rev. Deacon Will Parker is the Curate at St. Mark's Episcopal Church



All. Together.

STEWARDSHIP 2026

This stewardship season, as we look forward to our 2026 goals, we also look back at the rich history that has brought us to this point. At St. Mark's, we strive to be a joyful, loving church that welcomes all and thoughtfully supports our parishioners and neighbors. In 2026, we will again turn to the great work that God has set before us, to love, to learn, to worship, and to serve as a joyful Christian family. We do this **All. Together.** We hope you will join us, and look forward to seeing you this fall.

Our 2026 stewardship campaign begins Sunday, October 5.

To Worship.

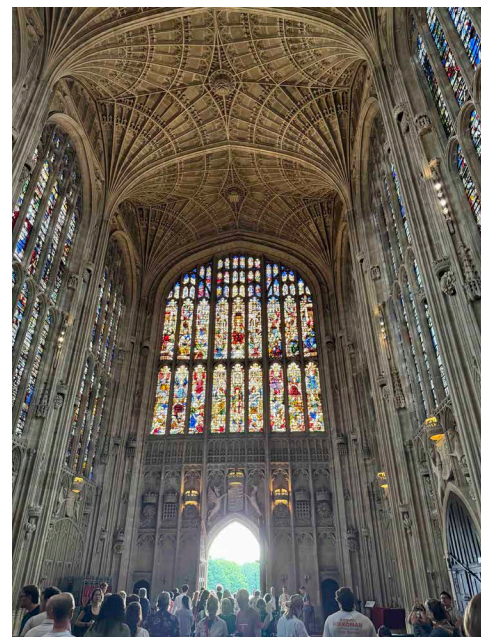
To Learn.

To Serve.

To Love.

My Time in England

by Renee Rybolt, Director of Music



In the beginning of July, I had the privilege of attending the Cambridge Choral Summer Course in Cambridge, England for 10 days. I thought it would be the perfect capstone to my three month sabbatical. Participants of the course were immersed in the life of students who study music and sing together every day. There were 32 participants from all over the United States and even a few from Australia and Greece! Church music directors, school music teachers, and choral music connoisseurs comprised the group that became close like old friends by the end of the course.

We stayed in dorm rooms at Gonville and Caius College and walked all over the town. The walks were picturesque with breathtaking views of ancient architecture, green areas, and the beautiful River Cam. Restaurants, coffee shops, souvenir and clothing stores, along with open air markets made for a bustling tourist destination. We had the privilege of eating in the college dining halls that looked straight out of a scene from Harry Potter.

Some of the greatest choirs in the world can be found in the college town with singing traditions dating back to the medieval period. The University of Cambridge is comprised of 31 different colleges, all having their own unique qualities. Three of the top colleges with long standing music legacies are King's College, St. John's College, and Trinity College. We attended five evensongs, two concerts, and sang our own evensong in Ely Cathedral and Compline at Corpus Christi College Chapel. Some of the most influential choral experts, such as John Rutter, Nigel Short, and Barry Rose provided us with lectures about the history of the English choral tradition, vocal pedagogy, chant performance practices, and conducting. We took a day trip to London to workshop with the world-renowned a cappella choir, Voces8, and attended evensong at Westminster Abbey.

My trip was made possible by being the recipient of the 2025 James Litton Grant for Choral Training from the Association of Anglican Musicians and

generous donations from St. Mark's Choir members. My sabbatical away from St. Mark's reignited the fire within me to create impactful music moments that draw others closer to God. We are all given gifts from our Lord to lift people up, to comfort those who mourn, and spread the joy of His eternal spirit. I am most honored to be chosen to walk in His ways through song, and hope and pray that I can bring beauty to the St. Mark's community for many years to come!

Renee Rybolt is the Director of Music at St. Mark's Episcopal Church





Dear Fellow Students!

This fall, we invite you to rethink what it means to be a high school member of our parish and join us for St. Mark's Youth Group! Through our own experiences as young adults, we understand that the pressures of life can make it hard to maintain a strong connection with God and feel like you are growing in faith. It is easy to get caught up in life and feel alone in your spiritual journey. Even Jesus could not make his journey alone. Whether you are looking to grow spiritually, make new friends, or just hang out and enjoy some food and fun, there is a place for you. We will meet a few times each month to connect, ask questions, share laughs, and support one another. Wherever you are in your own walk of faith, we are excited to welcome you and hope to see you this fall!

Sincerely,
St. Mark's Youth Leadership



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ST. MARK'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

New Worship Times

Starting Sunday, September 14

7:45 a.m.	The NINE FIFTEEN
11 a.m.	The FIVE O'CLOCK