

# The Elizabethan



The Newsletter of St. Elizabeth Episcopal Church    Burien, Washington

July 2019

## From Fr. John: How to support people in mourning

We seem to be in a season of death at St. Elizabeth. They happen sometimes. People in the parish find themselves mourning for parents, spouses, cousins, grandchildren and friends. We can shoulder each other's burdens if we take a little care in supporting those who are suffering from the loss of a loved one. We don't have to be trained grief counselors to be a non-anxious compassionate presence. And that begins with keeping our focus on the grieving person's experience.

When we gather to offer a Requiem Mass for the repose of the soul of a loved one who has died, we use a chanted preface with the words, "For to your faithful people, O Lord, life is changed, not ended." That phrase covers not only the people who have gone on to greater glory, but those who are grieving. And because their lives have also changed, it can be difficult to know what to say or do. Grief often comes with a shifting constellation of intense emotional responses – some painful, like depression, anger, guilt or sadness, and some that may seem strange or disrespectful, like relief, joy or happiness, even laughter. Because these responses shift and vary in expression and intensity, they can make people around them uncomfortable about offering support.

In our discomfort or anxiety, we tell ourselves that our attempts to help will just be intruding or that, in our awkwardness, we'll just say the wrong thing or make those who are grieving just feel worse. We may think there's nothing we can do to make things better. All that is understandable. But we don't have to let that keep us away from people who need support, perhaps now more than ever. If you really care for a sorrowing friend or relative, and you are willing to enter gently into their burden, you are qualified. You don't need to have answers or advice. Nothing you say or do will make their grief go away. If you can remember that their life has changed, your caring presence will help as they learn to navigate the change in their life.

Here are some suggestions that will guide you in being a graceful companion:

There's more than one way to be supportive – Remind yourself early and often that everyone grieves differently and for different lengths of time. You can prepare yourself best by really taking to heart that the only expert on grieving is the person doing it. With that understanding, you are about as well-equipped as they need you to be.

There are countless ways to grieve – Grief rarely unfolds in orderly, predictable stages. It can be an emotional rollercoaster, with unpredictable highs and lows, and even what appear to be setbacks. Grief may involve extreme emotions and behaviors. Feelings of guilt, anger, blame or fear can mix with their sadness. There are some situations

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*("mourning" continued)*

where the grieving person's emotions don't seem to make sense to you; they may express relief or contentment or serenity. Some are angry at God, some begin to obsess about death or lash out at loved ones. What they feel is what they feel, and it's not helpful to be judgmental or take their reactions personally.

Accept the mourner's feelings without reasoning with them over how they should or shouldn't feel. Some people cry, some will express anger and others may have reactions that catch you off-guard. For example, people who come from highly abusive relationships may actually be glad the person is gone, or they may have ambivalent, even conflicting reactions. Grief is a highly personal experience, so we serve each other best by simply receiving whatever they offer – no matter how irrational it may seem to us – without fear of judgment, argument or criticism.

There is no set timetable for grief – For many people, recovery after bereavement takes 18 to 24 months, but for others, the grieving process may be longer or shorter. Don't pressure your loved one to move on or make them feel like they've been grieving too long. This can actually slow the healing process. That holds true for material things as well. Many people find that letting go of clothing is the hardest part of the process. (My father died four years ago and I still keep one of his albs in a dry-cleaning bag.) Another person may choose to sleep with a spouse or partner's pajamas under the pillow or wear a sibling's clothes. What may seem morbid to you may actually be healing for someone else.

There are some who want to talk and some who don't – You don't need to have answers or theological insights to acknowledge the loss a grieving person is feeling. We can easily assume that people don't want us to talk about the death or to change the subject when the deceased person is mentioned. Saying something like "I'm sorry that this happened to you" may be all they need. But if the moment seems right, you might try some asking if they want to talk. People in mourning often find it helpful to discover that what happened is not too terrible to talk about and that their loved one won't be forgotten. By listening compassionately, you can take your cues from the grieving person. Learn from them; don't instruct them.

Never try to force anyone to open up. Some extroverts may want to talk a lot and introverts may prefer your silent presence, but both are important ways of listening. It's important to let your grieving friend or loved one know that you're there to listen. Talk candidly about the person who died and don't steer away from the subject if the deceased's name comes up. Some folks need to tell the story over and over again, sometimes in minute detail. Be patient. Repeating the story can help them process and begin to accept the change in their new reality. With each retelling, the pain can become more manageable. patiently and compassionately, you're helping your loved one heal.

There are some things NOT to say – Be genuine in your communication and express your concern without minimizing their loss, providing simplistic solutions or offering unsolicited advice. Again, grief is an intensely individual experience and so, even if we have experienced something similar, we can't really claim to "know" what the person is going through. Probably better to just listen or simply admit: "I'm not sure what to say, but I want you to know I care." In the same vein, there are things  
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## Congratulations!

Our own Josiah Volkmann is headed to the University of Alaska in Fairbanks. Josiah, a parishioner here at St. Elizabeth's for the past five years, plans to drive to Fairbanks this August to begin his four-year degree in their firefighting program, the Number One program of its kind in the nation. His long term goal is to be a smoke jumper. And, as Josiah says, this four year degree will also give him broader career options.

Josiah graduated from high school in 2018 and has spent this past year volunteering for the Mt. View Fire & Rescue, King Co. #44 division. He has been doing wilderness firefighting with them, which is his main career focus.

As a young teen, Josiah has been interested in the outdoors, hiking and scouting and reached the rank of Life Scout as a Boy Scout. He has also been in leadership training with the Explorers. Josiah is the oldest of three and attends church with his mother, Cynthia and sister, Ruth.

He regularly ushered and volunteered to help. We wish God-speed to Josiah in his studies and travel, and are sending him off with a small token of our appreciation for this fine young man. (If you would like to add to that financial gift, contact Fr. John.) We will miss him!

## The Elizabethan

*The Elizabethan* is published monthly by St. Elizabeth Episcopal Church. The deadline for articles is the fourth Friday of each month.

Articles, calendar items and ideas may be mailed or emailed to the addresses below or left in *The Elizabethan* box in the Parish Office.

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Fr. John Fergusson

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**Admin Assistant:** Celeste Alfred

*("mourning" continued)*

that church-folks say that are not only theologically questionable, they sting because they are directed at our own discomfort and not to the person mourning. Like "It's part of God's plan." Yikes. God's plan for their spouse, their child, their friend is mostly a mystery and never involves bringing people together in loving relationships so that they can be cruelly ripped away from each other. We like to say things like this because it helps us feel like someone is in control, but it makes the mourner feel like you have no idea what they are experiencing.

"He's in a better place now," "It was never meant to be" or "God needed her to be an angel." Again, not helpful, not to mention theologically wobbly. The "better place" was by the side of his beloved. And for a very long time. A miscarriage was the gift of a child that was absolutely "meant to be." It didn't happen. God creates angels without bringing death to people. Regardless of our personal beliefs, these are all statements that discount what is actually happening to someone who may not share your beliefs or need to hear about them right now. "I don't know why God let this happen" at least has the advantage of being true.

"Look at all you have to be thankful for." They know they have things to be thankful for, but right now those things can't be top of mind. This and others like it ("It's all behind you now," "It's time to get on with your life") are not much more than a request for the person to stop having intense feelings in front of you. The same is true about trivia offered when uncomfortable emotions or prolonged silences show up. "How about those Mariners?" or "Think these gray skies will ever clear up?" can easily be interpreted as signals that you are done listening.

There is a road ahead. Your loved one will continue grieving long after the funeral is over and the cards and flowers have stopped. The length of the grieving process varies from person to person, but often lasts much longer than most people expect. Your bereaved friend or family member may need your support for months or even years. Keep in touch with the grieving person, periodically checking in, dropping by, or sending letters or cards. Once the funeral is over and the other mourners are gone, and the initial shock of the loss has worn off, your support is more valuable than ever.

The pain of bereavement changes who we are and the world we live in. Sometimes a little and sometimes a lot. Life may never feel the same. We don't "get over" the death of a loved one; we learn to become someone new without the physical presence of someone we love. Eventually, people's emotional and spiritual wounds do become scars. By that I mean that the intensity of the pain is absorbed by the love that the person carries, but the combination can change the person who does the carrying at their deepest core and forever.

Offering a little recognition on special days helps. All the "firsts" are potentially rough: first birthday without, first Christmas without, first anniversary without. In fact, the whole round of "seconds" without is no picnic. Even "tenths" without, come to that. Let the bereaved person know that you're there for whatever they need. A cup of tea. A card. And don't worry, you'll do fine. Support is more than following rules and even when we are clumsy, the intent is usually enough to make a difference.

## Helping Hands within St. Elizabeth

One of our parishioners is in need of a few basic household items.

- Vacuum Cleaner
- Twin Cotton Sheets and pillowcases
- Standard Bed Pillows
- Mattress Pad
- Room Fan



If you have new or gently used items that you can donate, they would be greatly appreciated. Please contact Fr. John, Celeste Alfred or Linda Knutson and they will coordinate delivery of donations. And thanks!

## Community garden work party

Mark your calendar! On Saturday, July 20<sup>th</sup> from 10:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. we will be joining with folks from the King County Conservation District to set up our south garden for the benefit of our Neighborhood House pre-school families. We have raised beds to construct and set up and then fill with good soil. Come (with a shovel if you have one) and join in or bring cookies to feed our workers or help set out food and clean up after. All are welcome.

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Thanks to many folks we have a colorful and welcoming exterior this summer: Sue Chamberlain, Barbara Zimmer, Danielle and Brian Butz, Martin Frisvold, Kathy Hollo, Bob and Linda Knutson, Sue Kaas, Carolyn Terry and Celeste Alfred!

## Education for Ministry classes at St. Mark's Cathedral

Registration is now open for 2019/20. Do you want to go deeper into your faith in an intense, ongoing way? Do you want to form lasting connections with others who also seek that connection? Consider registering for EfM at Saint Mark's Cathedral.

EfM is a four-year program for lay people to study scripture, church history, and modern theology. Classes connect the material with church tradition, personal experiences, individual beliefs, and current events. Three different classes meet weekly September to June at Saint Mark's: Sundays, 6:30–8:30 p.m.; Mondays, 10 a.m.–12:30 p.m.; or Mondays, 6:30–8:30 p.m. Each class is limited to 12 people; enrollment starts now and ends in early August or when classes are full. Tuition, including books, is \$375.

Please inquire by contacting The Rev. Cristi Chapman, [cchapman@saintmarks.org](mailto:cchapman@saintmarks.org), or class mentors: Sunday evening: Penelope Jackson, [pbjackson@mac.com](mailto:pbjackson@mac.com); Monday morning: Maria Coldwell, [mvcoldwell@hotmail.com](mailto:mvcoldwell@hotmail.com); Monday evening: Tom Hayton, [tomhayton@yahoo.com](mailto:tomhayton@yahoo.com).

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**ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED**

"Hope is not a fragile thing, afraid to show her head when the days get hard and the nights go on forever. Hope is a veteran of many wars, many disasters and even more heartbreaks. She is a skilled nurse, a wise counselor, a tough sergeant who has kicked quite a few of us in the backsides to keep us moving when we were ready to surrender. Hope is a devoted friend, a fellow survivor, someone who knows our story even if we have trouble telling it. When your days get hard and your nights get long, trust in hope. She will be there. And she won't run out when you need her."

**~ Bishop Steven Charleston, citizen and Elder of the Choctaw Nation**

## **What's your story?**

How did you come to find St. Elizabeth? From where? More importantly, what keeps you coming back? Please give some thought to writing a few paragraphs about your history and experience with St. Elizabeth. Write down your story and send it to Fr. John or let us know that you'd like some help and we'll provide an interviewer!