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St. David's Episcopal Church

Greetings to you from Virginia Beach! I send God's blessings to you both friends that I have known and friends that I have yet to make. I am sorry that I am not able to be with you in person today, but I am called away by work, and have thus entrusted the reading of this epistle to my husband, Rob.

I am profoundly grateful for the opportunity to write a letter to the people of St. David's. I have been a letter writer for 55 years. I was raised writing thank you letters for every gift I ever received. I then had a career in fundraising in which a big part of the job was writing thank you letters as well as letters soliciting donations. I like to think that I am a surprisingly good letter writer having raised a few million dollars during my career! But most importantly, I have maintained a dear friendship writing handwritten letters back and forth for over 50 years! I treasure reading old letters that I have saved. They bring back wonderful memories and sometimes make me cry. I recently reread a letter my mom had

saved that I had written soon after starting grad school in Virginia. This letter announced that I would be coming home after the first semester as I was terribly homesick, and I didn't think Virginia was for me. I am glad my parents didn't take that letter too seriously!

I am grateful that our priest Elizabeth, and our Bishop Susan took my letter of request to be a lay preacher seriously. It has been a goal and a dream of mine since taking classes at a local seminary to be able to write and deliver sermons. I love exploring the appointed readings. I love hearing the Holy Spirit as it guides me in what to write. And, I especially love the way that you ALL have encouraged me as I live out this dream.

St. David's is a special place filled with gracious people who allow each other to grow and change. This has been especially true for me. I have had the chance to serve on the vestry, teach Sunday School, serve as a reader, on the flower guild and even took a year off church! I have had the chance to discover my spiritual gifts and use them – or not – and you have welcomed me through it all.

In 2012, our St. David's family helped our family through a most difficult time when we lost Rob's father and my son's father within a few months of each other. In 2018, when I had my back surgery, the pastoral care team and pastor Elizabeth were by my side for two weeks in the hospital and the months long

recovery. The care and prayers we have received over the last 18 years has been extraordinary, and I, well WE, thank you.

I am also grateful for the way this church has deepened my appreciation for the Episcopal liturgy while nurturing my growing relationship with Christ. I have learned the meaning of the word exhortation at St. David's. You all have lifted me up in so many ways.

Letters are a special form of communication. I miss the days of looking through the mail for a letter bringing news from family and friends. But letters carry more than news. Letters can give the writer the opportunity to share thoughts that wouldn't come out as easily face to face or in the spoken word. Letters make up most of our New Testament! Twenty-one of the 27 books of the New Testament are letters of one kind or another! This is pretty remarkable considering they were written at a time when letter writing wasn't easy and there was no mail service.

The first epistle in the New Testament is Paul's Letter to the Romans. In the year 386, two verses from this letter (Chapter 13, Verses 13-14) were responsible for Augustine's conversion to Christianity. Over 11 centuries later, in 1515, the Protestant Reformation began with the meditations Martin Luther, an Augustinian monk! Luther later called the letter, "a gate of heaven" and testified that through

reading it he had felt himself “to be reborn and to have gone through open doors to paradise.” Paul was writing his letter to a specific group of people at a specific time, and yet of his letter has mean meaningful to congregations and individuals throughout the ages.

The epistles became the first sermons of the day, sharing theology, words of encouragement and sometimes messages admonishing poor behavior. Imagine gathering in someone’s home to hear what the newest letter, each one bringing insights into this new covenant with God and deeper understanding of Christ’s sacrifice and resurrection.

In today’s epistle reading, Paul is telling the new Christian’s in Rome to live a life in which they welcome the Holy Spirit into their lives. This message is as relevant today as it was thousands of years ago. If we focus our attention on God, and truly welcome him into our hearts and our minds, then sinful actions will not be a choice for us. We will know what we are called to do, and we will do it because our inner being will be so filled with the Spirit that sin is no longer an option.

Let God live in your heart and the rest of life will fall in place. There is a wonderful book called “I am Third,” by Gale Sayers. This book was the inspiration for the movie “Brian’s Song.” The message of the book is that Sayers had learned

to live an ordered life in which God was first, Friends and Family were second and Self was third. If we invite the Spirit to take up residence in ourselves then we will be able to live this kind of life. What freedom this would bring. “God is First, my Friends and Family are second, and I am Third.” Sin does not have a place in this life. What a profound concept this would have been to people who had lived life subject only to the law and not to love. For truly that is the new covenant. We are now subjects of love – love of God, love of our neighbor, and love of self.

Thank God the letters of Paul and the other apostles still exist today for us to read and study. We are the beneficiaries of these treasured treatises. The God-given messages carried within will sustain us all our days and the days of our children’s children. These letters continue to be radical, life changing words that can lift us up when we are down, give us direction when we are lost, answers when we are confused and hope when we have none.

Each week, we read an excerpt from an epistle along with the Old Testament, the Psalm and the Gospel. Each week, I encourage you to listen to the epistle as if it were a letter written to and for the people of St. David’s. What message do you hear? What does it call you to and how will you respond?

Who knows, Martin Luther started a reformation when he heard the epistle. What will it say to you?

Again, I thank you for the opportunity to be your Lay Preacher, even when I am not able to be with you. Peace and joy in this new week to you, my friends, old and new. I look forward to seeing you next week.

God's blessings to you! Your sister in Christ, Tammy