
Playing Music in A Different Key

**An article from the *Cathedral Times*
by Dean Sam Candler**

This first week in August, in the year 2020, I have so many things to say to you, the Cathedral parish and community; and yet I have so few things to say. The only two things to say, really, are: I love you. And I miss you.

A few nights ago, I had a dream that represents my bewilderment in this time. I was at a piano playing a lovely piano piece, a piece which has always been, and always should be, in the key of F major. In my dream, the piano piece had no name; it was simply supposed to be played and heard in the key of F major. But the fiendish part of the dream is that I was having to play the piece in the key of B major. (Musicians among you may realize the difference between those two keys; the devil's triad!) It was awful. It was not making any sense to me, and I was having an incredibly difficult time of it. Parts of the piece worked, and I could recognize some sort of general structure of the piece; but, to me, there was little musical about it. To me, there was no music.

I understand that dream to represent how badly I am dealing with this pandemic isolation and social quarantine. There have been some measures that have worked. I am thankful for some dear moments, even peaceful moments, with family and friends. But, as for the structures of life, and the responsibilities of vocation and service, I am playing the piece in a key that is unknown to me, and incredibly difficult.

Ordinarily, in this first week of August, many of us are gearing up for another school year, re-arranging our households, and fortifying them – perhaps taking a last vacation trip. At the Cathedral, we would be excitedly planning our Homecoming Sunday, preparing to pack the parish hall again! This year, obviously, almost every one of those routines has been dramatically re-arranged.

Still, there are some things worth saying. I do have a couple of notes to play. Here they are. First of all, I really miss you. I miss seeing you, and hearing you, at church, in the hallways and classrooms and parking lots and streets. I miss seeing you in the neighborhood, at meetings, at cultural events like concerts and art exhibits, at sporting events. I am missing a critical part of our common humanity, which is our social character.

Yes, I have enjoyed some beautiful times with my closer family members and some friends, during this quarantine and social distance. But I miss the social gatherings with strangers, where we gain so much knowledge without realizing it: at restaurants, for instance, with people I don't even know but from whom I learn something. That is often the kind of social community that church provides: an experience of being with people we do not know, but with whom we share something in common. We support each other that way. In situations like that, we learn to love.

The Cathedral Parish of St. Philip is still not conducting "in-person" worship services on Sundays. We are restricted by several directives and guidelines (governmental, ecclesiastical, public health) about how we can resume Sunday "in-person" worship. Schools that are re-opening are doing so with stringent conditions, such as signing waivers and pledges, taking temperatures and wearing masks, managing where people can walk and sit, limiting numbers of people, and being willing and able to enforce those requirements. The Cathedral may find a way to gather on Sundays, in the midst of those conditions, but we are not able to, yet.

I miss that Sunday experience tremendously. I believe that we all still need it, even if we have also managed well with Sunday "online" worship. We need true group time, open time simply to see and to hear and to notice each other. Those are the occasions in which love grows in us.

In particular, we need time to be with each other without having to write it down or record it. I sense that human characters need truly informal and non-official and “off-the-record” time. One of my worries in this season, for instance, has been the over-amplification of judgement. It is unsettling to have our opinions and off-hand remarks and declarations and questions raised to permanent levels of judgement.

Healthy social time involves the freedom to be “off-the-record,” the freedom to make mistakes, to try out opinions and questions with people who are not our family and closest friends. As I have mentioned before, this is where our social media outlets and even our regular media outlets, fall way short of what humanity needs. If our every random or experimental thought is stored up in a giant database that defines us forever, then very few of us will be healthy and free. Worse, we will have been unable to have open conversations and honest discussions with people who differ from us. Then, we will have missed the occasion of learning to trust others, learning to trust others who are different from us.

Trust happens when others give us a break. The best church communities are those where we learn to give each other a break. We often call that action “forgiveness.” And many of us, so many of us, are tired of giving others a break. Yes, we have been patient and kind and forbearing. But, now, without community, we might be forgetting how to forgive.

Oh my! Too many words! I have written too many words, when the advice I have often been giving others in the last four months is: Try not to tell others what to do! In the last four months, every single one of us has been forced to do things we do not want to do. We are tired of being directed and told what to do. We long for a new kind of freedom. Thus, my advice to myself and to others: Try not to judge! Try not to tell others what to do!

So, I apologize if I have used too many words in this article, or appeared too directive, or somehow taken away your agency and freedom. We all need responsible and safe freedom. There are really just two things I want to say, two notes I want to play. They make sense in any key: I love you, and I miss you.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sam Candler". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal line extending from the end of the name.

The Very Reverend Sam Candler
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip