



November 2, 2021

Together, Let's Restore and Reinforce This Holy Habit

By The Rev. J. Randolph Alexander, Jr.

This past month, like so many other times over the last 28 years, Immanuel shows its mettle as the home of our famous “pumpkin patch.” Parishioners are boundless in their energy and creativity in offering our vast community the best pumpkin outdoor market, with pumpkins, homemade soups, bakery, and crafts lovingly offered.

What an impressive display of Christian faithfulness, love of neighbor, and passion for our outreach ministries. Boundless energy and effort make this happen.

Despite our beloved and successful recent Pumpkin Patch seasons, we know the last year and a half has been a challenge for all of us – for churches, clergy, and other church leaders, as well as parishioners alike.

In several open and honest conversations with parishioners recently, I've heard a similar story – folks truthfully and openly tell me they've gotten “out of the church habit” as a result of the pandemic. We know some of our church family face health issues and concerns that drive their decisions about when to come back in person to church. We hear directly and from our recent surveys how blessed parishioners feel about having the advantage of our online offerings – worship services, Bible study groups, morning prayer and evening Eucharists, forum hours, and children, youth, and adult formation programs. Other families have told us how eager they are to have their children vaccinated, and the important difference that new status will make.

And yet, imagine my surprise to hear from some honest confession that they have just gotten “out of the habit” of attending church services -- planning other things to do during church time.

We nurture and celebrate families spending time together – in nature, on vacation, at weddings, graduations, and holidays, and for so many other important memorable family events.

The pandemic has humbled us and has been a wake-up call for each one of us. It gives Immanuel the push to reflect and return to our parish community's core mission and fellowship – the vital, and not optional, basics of prayer, preaching the message of the Gospels, and sharing our love for each other through our caring concern.

We draw power from the Holy Spirit in our gathering together for worship, to receive the Sacraments, to pray, praise, and sing. We come together for fellowship, to share how we are doing, to support and encourage one another, to tell our hopes and dreams, our joys, and disappointments.

We draw power *together* in learning more of our ancient tradition and in asking how we live into them in today's hurting world. Together, we confess where we have fallen short, in accepting forgiveness, and in stepping out, again, in faith.

We draw power from the Holy Spirit in Baptisms, weddings, funerals, and Confirmations that we share together. We celebrate Christmas and Easter as a devoted and connected church family. We hear the Gospel readings and understand the mirror the Gospels hold up to our lives, as we, *together*, engage our Lord's teachings about what life can and should be.

We live into all of this *together*, over time, and in our blessed church community. It is this collective power that lets us reach out and be the hands and feet of Christ.

We all know the power of a habit, both for good and bad. We know it takes conscious effort to develop or relearn a good habit, just as it takes time and strength of character to break free of a bad habit.

Now is the time, deliberately, consciously, and with firm intention, to care for one another and rejoice in being together as the body of our Lord and Savior. *Together*, we can move beyond the pandemic storm, build back to our pre-pandemic strength, and continue to welcome wonderful newcomers that we will all enjoy getting to know and together serve the Lord.

Immanuel is blessed when all of us who deeply love and care about this special place and the fellowship we share, step out in faith to love and serve the Lord.

As we renew our commitment to Immanuel, let us remember what our Lord has shown through his sacrifice. As Christ loves us and sacrificed for us, we can love and care for our parish community *together* and return, recommit, be present and active, and be a blessing to each other and to all of God's people. We need each other.

Let us rejoice in faith and deep affection and continuing care for Immanuel and each other. Thanks be to God for that and for holy habits that renew a right spirit within us. As the Psalmist speaks to us through the ages:

Create in me a clean heart, O God,

and put a new and right spirit within me.
Do not cast me away from your presence,
and do not take your holy spirit from me.
Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and sustain in me a willing spirit (Psalm 51:10-12).

Let us be sustained by our Lord and the power of the Holy Spirit to serve our world and offer our ministry of being present *together* at Immanuel through a host of life-affirming services and programs. May we restore and recommit to this holy habit of being present *together* in our worship at Immanuel and our faithfulness to God.