
First, No Judgement

“First, no judgement.” As some of you know, I have tried to observe that maxim while navigating through this past pandemic year. And, like you, I’ve been forced to do a lot of navigating. I have navigated my family life, my friends life, my business life, my political life, and—perhaps most challengingly—my own personal life.

In these times of stress, and in these times of true trauma ([see my article of last week](#)), our inclinations and tendencies towards judgement have been severe. Under pressure, we tend more quickly towards critique, towards reactive opposition, towards judgement. Then, the person or entity we judge returns the judgement. One of us, one of the parties, has to be the one to break the cycle, to refrain from answering judgement with judgement.

“First, no judgement.” I have not always been able to follow my own principle. Still, I remain convinced that it is the healthy way to plod through these strained times. And, as I alluded above, one of the persons I try to keep from judging is myself. Under pressure, it is easy to judge ourselves too quickly, to critique our own weakness, to focus on our own fallenness.

For me, the antidote to judgement is grace. And it is grace, more and more grace, that our churches are called to deliver during these pandemic times. We are not out of the woods yet! There are still opportunities for people to critique each other: for being too careful, for not being careful enough, for seeming not to care for the wider community. We are still navigating this pandemic. Lord, please give us the grace to stay patient with each other, and with ourselves.

For all of my ministerial life, I have tried to correct two false perceptions of “Church.” The first mistaken perception is that the church is some sort of insurance agent. The unhealthy perception is that the church can guarantee us salvation and heaven if we just say the right things and pay the right price, that being a Christian guarantees us escape from hell. “The Church as Insurance Agent.” In our personal lives, of course we need insurance agents! And insurance agents offer us important services! However, that is not the ministry of the church. Further, I have been sad to sense the institutional Church in bondage more and more to insurance protections as our guides! (And I believe in the institutional church!)


The second mistaken perception is that the church is some sort of police officer, telling us what to do and what not to do, and generally trying to enforce some outside law upon us. The Church as “Police Officer,” or the Church as “Scolding Parent.” Again, we need police officers, and we need parents! But I do not believe the church is at our best when we are in the role of law enforcer, when we are keeping score, when we are scolding. For instance, the sooner the church can move out of the business of pandemic protocols, the better all of us will be. (Last week in one conversation, I compared the reading of pandemic protocols to the reading of the Book of Leviticus – all sorts of contradictory purity laws about how we can be clean!)

Yes, I know. There are times we need critique, and even judgement. There are times we need good insurance. There are times we need law enforcement. The glorious and life-giving ministry of the Christian church, however, soars far above those necessities. The ministry of the Christian church is to offer grace and not judgement, to offer risky courage and not insurance, to offer freedom from the law instead of bondage to the law.

Meanwhile, here at the Cathedral, we were overjoyed to hear our choir singing last Sunday! Safe protocols allow choir members who are fully vaccinated to sing together. Please know that all members of our choirs who are singing in the Cathedral are fully vaccinated (and they have been, for some time!) And, last Sunday, we came to the altar rail for communion! It is glorious to receive notice that fully vaccinated people can safely gather together without masks!

However, please understand that not all members of the Cathedral community are even eligible to be fully vaccinated. I am speaking of our members who are under 16 years old. Some of those young members have been incredibly faithful these past few months! They were among the first to gather safely outside at the labyrinth last fall. They have tended fires and read lessons outside! They have kept coming safely to church inside, with masks on, and in social distance. They have carried crosses honorably. Yet, they cannot be fully vaccinated yet.

Therefore, with the sensitivity of a loving community, I encourage all of us to continue wearing masks in our inside worship services, except when we are speaking from the lectern or pulpit or steps, even if we have been fully vaccinated. I preached on Easter that the Resurrection is not real yet, until it is real for everyone. And, as a community, we are not fully vaccinated yet, until all of us are fully vaccinated. And, as a community, we are not safe and healthy, until all of us are. May grace be with us all. No judgement, but grace.

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

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