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Dear Friends,

I hope you have all had a good summer. Whether you were able to get away or not this year, I hope the months of July and August have had a sufficiently different rhythm so that September and the beginning of so many new seasons may evoke in you a sense of expectant anticipation. Were there no rhythm of the seasons, I suspect our lives would be significantly diminished.

We structure our days with a sense of rhythm—routines that mark the early morning, what we do for breakfast, and how we fill the hours for the balance of the day. The ability to choose the structure and content of our days is a great blessing; indeed, that is close to a working definition of “vacation” for many people.

But for much of the time we may feel like we are the focal point for a variety of forces—pushing us one way (job, family, a sense of duty to others) or pulling us another (what I want to do, what I had planned for this evening or this weekend, what I had imagined would give me a sense of joy or delight). If one were to go back to high school physics and draw a vector diagram with all of the arrows of the forces pushing and pulling at each of us, I suspect the resulting image would be complex. Let’s stipulate that no one of the forces is bad in itself—sometimes being pulled between two “goods” is the most difficult situation—but the over-all effect can be, well, overwhelming.

And in September, when everything seems to start up again, along with the sense of anticipation and even excitement, there may also be a sense of anxiety: How can I possibly get through this all? Should I be leaning into September, or bracing myself for impact?

**Skip this Paragraph** My wife, who has on occasion remarked at the length of these articles, may skip this paragraph. I have in our garage a large green plastic bag, unopened, of bulbs and plants I ordered in the quiet months of the summer of 2012 with every expectation of adding them to our garden last fall. I suspect the publishers of plant catalogues have a whole category of customers like me who, in the dry, hot days of summer imagine planting bulbs on bright crisp October days so that they might flower in the ensuing spring. Some years it’s November, or even early December, before I dig a quick trench, toss in the bulbs, quickly cover it, and hope for the best. Last year I did not

even get that far. This year we will find out what happens to bulbs aged for a year before planting. At least that is my plan now.

The fall is my favorite season, in part because there are so many new starts. The fall is also my most difficult season, largely because there so many new starts.

**Problem or Solution?** So is the Church part of the problem, or could we be part of the solution? St. Elizabeth's goes into a very high gear very quickly once Labor Day zips past. We go to our full Sunday morning schedule with Church School—scores of teachers and many scores of children—and all of our choirs resuming. We dedicate all manner of leaders and students, we invite everyone to consider how we might shape our own lives and the life of the congregation by volunteering in various groups, events, and ministries, and we devote considerable time to reflecting on our material resources and how we might best use them rather than letting them dictate to us. For me, it's Halloween, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, the Annual Ingathering, and Thanksgiving, and, before you know it, it's the Advent Craft Dinner, the Greening of the Church, the Advent Concert, the Pageant, and Silent Night by candlelight. I find this to be a glorious and remarkably full, four months.

But is it too much? Do you sometimes just want to, or actually, take a break from it all? By the time Sunday morning comes around, do you look forward to going to Church, or does it seem like one more duty—perhaps a good duty, but still one more item in a week which is already challengingly full?

In my younger days—and I may still do this again at some point—I often swam in the Atlantic off Nauset Beach on Cape Cod (real time beach webcam at <http://www.nausetbeach.org/>) or at a number of ocean beaches on Martha's Vineyard, Long Island, and near Newport. I have been a serious, if not especially fast, swimmer for much of my life, and I have taken great delight in ocean swimming when the waves are up—not hurricane waves, in case Governor Christie ever sees this, but waves high enough to knock you down if you stand up to them. Surf swimming depends on reading the rhythm of the waves, getting through them safely (not always as easy as it looks, and dangerous if you miss), and then getting out beyond the breakers to where the water rises and falls with the swell. Trying to swim against the ocean is not only pointless, it is dangerous in the short term and exhausting in the long. The ocean will knock you down, and worse, if you misunderstand your relationship to it.

In September especially, I wonder if life comes at us sometimes like the waves. We want to swim in the ocean, and it is a little frightening in its unknown elements and its sometimes terrifying power. Standing at the edge where the waves crash is probably the most difficult place to be, but having the strength, the ability, and the courage (for courage alone is inadequate to the task) to dive in at the right time and then swim out is, well, a challenge. But once you are in it, it is an entirely different experience from standing on the shore watching it come at you.

I think that Church can prepare you to make it through the breakers and to swim in the wonderful rise and fall of the water. In Church we learn from the beginning that we are not the center of the universe: we did not make it, we do not control it, we can discern some of its principles, but its ability to surprise us never ends. We start off with humility. We were not partners in making the ocean, we were not consulted in the creation of the waves, we may think they are stupid, unjust, or not what they should be. Such ideas may shape how we approach the waves, but the waves themselves remain what they are. Learning to swim begins with recognizing what is true about the water, the ocean, and the waves. The consequences of acting on what we wish were true or what we think ought to be true can be quite dire.

To swim successfully takes both instruction and practice. A gifted few might be able to figure out how to swim without lessons, but most of us do better with instruction. And when we start, it is frustrating that it takes time and effort and that we are not better at once. To swim well requires some knowledge, but the knowledge only becomes useful through regular practice. There are no theoretical swimmers. There may be people who like the water but aren't really swimmers, but they tend to remain on the shore. Deep water is a lot less scary when you have, through practice, become a swimmer: just because it's deep doesn't mean you have to sink.

St. Elizabeth's exists to strengthen your relationship with God. More than community life, fellowship, and the emotional support we might give one another, more than raising money for good works, more than the aesthetic experience of beautiful music and language, more than opportunities for young people to stand before the congregation and perform, more even than moral teaching, we exist to help people to deepen their relationship with God whom we know through Scripture and seek in life.

Our help, as we say at the outset of the evening service of Compline, is in the name of the Lord. Which is different from saying that our help is in our health, our careers, or our abilities, or in the passage of good laws, in a strong economy, or in our family life. All of those things may be good, but they are not God, which is to say that they do not finally have the power to save: they may, indeed will, all at some point fail us. Our help is in the name of the Lord because we see in history and, once we reach a certain age, experience, that nothing else will stay with us and guide us reliably as we stand at the edge of the water and watch the waves coming towards us, sometimes rough, high, and powerful.

So our goal is that we will all be swimmers. That is different from providing a raft as a temporary resource, or a boat to get us over the water from one point to another. To become a swimmer requires instruction and regular practice. Watching others swim might be instructive, but there is no way to become a swimmer but to swim yourself. Over fifty years ago one of my coaches commented to an exhausted group of young people during an early morning practice that the only way to swim fast is to swim fast. Perhaps the only way to be a Christian is to be a Christian.

The projects we offer at St. Elizabeth—attending worship, teaching, singing, hosting coffee hour, participating in conversation groups, serving in outreach ministries, making a financial pledge, and many more—have as their purpose and goal the transformation of our identity much more than the doing of jobs or the support of institutions.

**Personal growth trumps institutional maintenance** I have become a convert to my predecessor's suspicion of endowments, because our goal in financial giving is the shaping of our individual identities even more than raising money for the parish. As there are no theoretical swimmers, there are no theoretical givers. While it might be tempting to imagine having a large endowment so we could simply sit back and get a monthly check to subsidize all of our expenses, we would be greatly impoverished by that circumstance. If we ceased to be givers, we would start to sink.

In the wilderness the people of Israel gathered manna one day at a time—anything more than a day's supply grew worm-infested and foul. They needed the daily practice of seeking God's sustenance. And when Jesus taught us to pray, he instructed us to seek "this day our daily bread." He could have suggested we pray for a large surplus which we could store up and draw from as we chose, but he did not: the bread is necessary but never the point.

The point is God, as annoying and as tedious as it may be to hear that from me yet one more time. And so our practices will focus on God because that is what we need.

I hope you will take advantage of all of the new beginnings this fall season to seek God and a relationship with God which begins to feel integrated into the deepest levels of your life, character, and personality. Ask yourself what God intends for you this year—what has God given you? to what does God call you? what from God do you seek?—and then come to the many opportunities at St. Elizabeth's seeking guidance and growth in that work of holy discernment.

The Rev. Cn. John G. Hartnett

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