

The Episcopal Diocese of Southwest Florida

April 2, 2020

My dear friends in Christ,

I had the distinct honor of serving the Church as Rector of Trinity Church in New Orleans before being elected the Fifth Bishop of our wonderful diocese. Every time I stepped into the pulpit at Trinity Church, I looked to my left and saw a marble grave marker that had been discovered and placed in the church as a memorial. It was dedicated to the Rector, The Rev. A. F. Dobbs who died in office in 1853, serving the congregation and ministering to the sick during the ravaging Yellow Fever epidemic. This virus, called Yellow Jack in New Orleans, was finally practically eradicated with vector control and vaccinations. I rarely think about Yellow Fever now. The approach to medical care and eradication was not known in 1853. This priest served in uncertain times and gave his life in the Lord's service. I saw that every time I preached.

We are in new uncertain times and in the midst of it, God's people still serve empowered by the Hosts of Heaven and the Saints who have gone before us. As we now enter into Holy Week and the beginning of Eastertide, I am deeply mindful of the abiding commitment of so many to their faith in God and the practice of their faith.

Yesterday, Governor DeSantis issued Executive Order 20-91 regarding Essential Services and Activities during the COVID-19 Emergency. This Safer At Home order directs senior citizens and those with compromised health conditions to take all measures to limit the risk of exposure and stay home. The order continues with, "all persons in Florida shall limit their movements and personal interactions outside of their home to only those necessary to obtain or provide essential services or conduct essential activities." Houses of worship are considered essential under this order.

After discussion with the Chancellor of this Diocese, Mr. Theodore L. Tripp, Jr., Esq. it is appropriate to state that the previous instructions given by me regarding no more than ten people in any of our church facilities, for any purpose, still remains in effect. This is now extended until at least May 1st. I want to emphasize this, people who are senior with particular compromised health issues ... people like me ... should take special care to protect themselves and others by working Safer At Home. This, I know means many other clergy members and lay leaders in this diocese. Your work is essential, and yet so are you. You are to serve compassionately with your care for each other and be careful with your compassion.

For the clergy, please be mindful of the ordinal which requires, “You are to love and serve the people among whom you work, caring alike for young and old, strong and weak, rich and poor.” For all of God’s people remember the Baptismal Covenant, in particular the question of how to use your personal will....” Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?” Note that we are all required to love our selves too! Your work is essential, and yet so are you. You are to serve compassionately with your care for each other and be careful with your compassion.

I am immensely proud of the life giving and creative work being produced and offered in every area of the Diocese of Southwest Florida. Thank God for Technology! I am grateful for the loving energies being abundantly poured out by the clergy of this diocese. I am so humbled and proud of the thoughtful leadership being offered by our Standing Committee, the Diocesan Council, my staff working so diligently from remote locations, and the leadership of my friend and bishop, the Presiding Bishop Michael Curry.

Please take every measure to reach out to those who are particularly isolated. Offer worship and prayer in safety and beneficial technology. Call on each other if you need help. Pray for those who suffer. Mary and I have a particular concern for a family friend who is a young pharmacist who is now in Intensive Care isolation with Coronavirus. I know all of us have particular concerns. In the words of St. Paul, “Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.” (Romans 12:15) For our family friend my heart weeps. For the love I see being poured out daily in this diocese giving deep compassion, my heart rejoices.

This time of terrible uncertainty will end. I never worry about Yellow Fever. Yet I personally think almost daily of the loving service of The Rev. A.F. Dobbs in the 1850’s giving his whole life because he loved Jesus. I am certain that he worships in eternity now!

For our time now of uncertainty we have better knowledge, better technology and the same challenge to live our faith in practice facing the unknown. And I am so thankful for your powerful expressions of faith. Thank you and God Bless you.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Dabney T. Smith', with a small cross symbol above the first letter 'D'.

The Rt. Rev. Dabney T. Smith
5th Bishop of the Diocese of Southwest Florida