

The Vintage Voice

Serving The Church Pension Fund's Family of Beneficiaries

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Don's Retirement

Joyce Anderson Jackson

Retirement for Don came after forty-six years as a priest.

From St. Basil's, where Don had been rector for the last seven years and priest-in-charge for the previous three, we moved the sixty-five miles back to our home in Tulsa — a large, lovely home we had bought twenty-eight years earlier, when our children were fifteen, thirteen, eleven, and nine.

Retirement. The word conjures up visions of a smiling, fit-looking couple lounging on the deck of a cruise ship. Sometimes health problems and/or an inadequate pension income make that vision only a dream.

The other day I came across Don's Church Pension Fund pocket calendar for his last year in the active priesthood. He was seventy-two on December 11, 1998. The entry for Wednesday evening, December 30, said, "Last service at St. Basil's," and on the space for January 1, 1999, he had written, "Retirement. Free at last!"

Retirement/freedom was a two-edged sword. Despite frail health, Don had an indomitable will, and for three-and-a-half years after retirement he was a supply priest and had regular Sunday services at a small mission thirty-five miles away — partly because of his strong commitment to continue functioning as a priest, and partly because we needed the income.

That indomitable will earned him the nickname "Father Phoenix" from his fellow retired clergy three years ago when, after a life-threatening illness and long stay in the hospital, he recovered and resumed most of his activities. A little over two years ago he made what was to be his last trip. We went to Austin, Texas, so he could baptize our son David's newborn twin boys.

The year 2003 had been in our minds since August 1, 1953, when we were married in Trinity Church, Tulsa. Dr. Eckel, the rector, who had come to Trinity when I was two months old, performed the marriage ceremony assisted by three priests, one of whom, Al Persons, is still active and well in Colorado. Dr. Eckel and his wife, Emily, gave us a Revereware double boiler for a wedding gift with a note attached on which Dr. Eckel had written, "Happy 50th wedding anniversary — August 1, 2003."

Don and I were making plans in 2002 to celebrate that day, have a party, and invite friends and relatives — despite his increasingly fragile health. The year 2003 was one of celebrations. On April 7, 2003, Don observed the fiftieth anniversary of his ordination to the Diaconate. Later in April the General Theological Seminary Class of 1953 held its fiftieth anniversary, and although Don had hoped to go, he was not able.

On May 1 he fell at home and got a brain concussion and sub-dural hematoma by falling backwards from the next-to-bottom step, onto the entryway floor. He was critically ill, but after a week in the hospital appeared to be recovering and plans were beginning to be formulated for when he left the hospital. (The Golden Wedding plans had not been shelved.) At the hospital he fell and broke his hip — rails not being up as they should have been, nurses not hearing him call for assistance, and the fracture not being diagnosed for nearly forty-eight hours.

Don died on May 12. He had seemed to be gaining ground, so his death five days after the fall came unexpectedly. The Death Certificate said death was caused by an accident: "Pulmonary embolus caused by blunt force trauma of a fall at the hospital."

In those two-and-a-half months leading up to August 1, I ran the gamut of emotions — sadness, anger, disappointment, frustration, good memories, bad memories, grief, “things left undone” — and I have felt at times like a tennis ball bouncing between two walls. Our children, their families, and my sister were wonderfully and lovingly supportive.

At my request we planned a family dinner for the wedding anniversary. Although three of our children — David, Peter, and Margaret — were not able to be in Tulsa, they phoned and expressed love for Don and me, and hopefulness for present and future days of joy and peacefulness. The anniversary dinner at our daughter Elizabeth’s house, with my sister there as well as another family close to ours, was indeed a joyful, peaceful, happy occasion. They gave me wedding anniversary cards, which acknowledged Don’s presence, yet acknowledged the fact that I now live alone.

I had wondered if I might receive wedding anniversary cards in the mail, yet knew that most people are fearful of “upsetting you” by mentioning the dead spouse or sending a card to mark an anniversary. What I did receive in the mail, exactly on the day of August 1, was a letter from a long-time, but seldom seen, friend that touched me very deeply.

Dear Joyce,

I am mindful of you and Don as the time of your 50th anniversary comes. I am deeply sorry that it is not possible to celebrate it together with family and friends as you had hoped. You came so close. At the same time I realize it is not the length of time spent but the quality of the relationship, the support and the devotion that was day in and day out, the nurturing and acceptance of one another, and the fine children the two of you raised to be capable and caring adults. These are the things to be honored, celebrated and rejoiced in for they are the things that truly matter. They are life-giving beyond any one person’s span of years. So I celebrate the gifts of your lives and your relationship with both hope and joy and pray that you may also.

*Love and Best Wishes,
Anne*

That letter brought me comfort and peace, partially because it acknowledged the loss and the grief. Too often, people tend to say, “Yes, but . . .” when they talk to a bereaved person. “Yes, but you had such a long time together.” “Yes, but you wouldn’t want him to linger and suffer.” “Yes, but it was his time to go.” We all try to do our best when we talk to a bereaved person, but we’re often uncomfortable ourselves, so we insert the “yes, buts” in our comments. Anne didn’t do that. Her ability to acknowledge the loss, yet give me hope and joy, was a gift from God. When I read it over the phone to one of our sons he was moved by it and asked for a copy. I read it to our group at the anniversary dinner, and it moved and strengthened all of us. I felt that day, and feel now, “Thank you, Anne,” and “Thank you, God.”

And I find myself thinking of Don and of his pocket calendar and of his death, and thinking, “Retirement. Free at last!”



Joyce Anderson Jackson is a lifelong Episcopalian. She enjoys frequent contact with her four children and eleven grandchildren, continuing to lead a full and active life since Don’s death in May 2003. She is actively involved in Trinity Parish and St. Aidan’s Mission in Tulsa. Her interests include music, genealogy, historical research, reading, landscape design, gardening, and English cookery.