

The Vintage Voice

Serving The Church Pension Fund's Family of Beneficiaries

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Here and There, Now and Then

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I have just recently celebrated the anniversary of my ordination to the priesthood in 1959. And now, more than four decades later, I can say with total honesty I would do it all over again because being a priest of the Episcopal Church is wonderful and I have loved, enjoyed and appreciated every minute of it . . . well, almost every minute! There have been good times and very bad times, happy times and tragic times, times when I could hardly hold on one more day but God sustained me and guided me and worked in and through me . . . me of all people!

When I think back on these more than four decades I remember the words of Paul Tillich, "We want to show you something we have seen and to tell you something we have heard . . . that here and there in the world and now and then in ourselves is the New Creation." Here and there, now and then . . . in the world and in our lives, not all the time but enough of the time for us to know that God loves us and cares for us and wishes the best for each and every one of us. And no matter how terrible the storms of our lives may be, God is there to help us and encourage us and to give us strength.

Some years ago, late one winter afternoon a transient came into my church office. He had been by the church earlier and the secretary had given him a lunch ticket. Now the weather had suddenly turned very cold and it was raining. He needed a bus ticket. I gave it to him. His name was Adam. His wife and young son had been killed in an automobile accident six months before and he was moving from South Florida to Mobile, Alabama. During that six months he had no one to talk with about this tragedy. I listened. Then I had prayers for his son Michael and for his wife and for him. And then suddenly everything changed. He stood up and said, "Now it is time for me to pray for you." And his prayers were in 16th century English which would have made Thomas Cranmer proud! He made the sign of the cross and blessed me. And he started out of the office. "Who are you?" I asked. He smiled and said, "I came to tell you I am glad you are here and there are lots of things yet for you to do. And God will be with you." He left the office and I ran for the door but he was gone. Nowhere to be seen. That word of encouragement came just when I needed it.

These experiences are the Beyond in the middle of human life. That kind of thing happened to me many times. And still does. Angels . . . messengers from God sometimes in human form like in Holy Scripture. It is God working in and through other people for us. God is in our midst. The priesthood allowed it to happen to me. And sometimes, if we listen carefully, we can hear the beating of unseen wings.

I have had two hip replacements over several years. Just before the first one fifteen years ago while I was lying in my bed feeling sorry for myself a young physical therapist came into my

room and began putting up a trapeze over my bed. I told him I was not sure I was going to go through the surgery after all. Then he said, “Look Father, ain’t nothing to it. I had both my hips crushed two years ago and had two hip replacements and I am doing just fine as you can see . . . and so will you.” God had spoken through a young physical therapist. I had the surgery.

These are rare moments to be sure, rare probably because we are not paying attention. And Tillich was right, “I want only to show you something I have seen and to tell you something I have heard . . . that here and there in the world and now and then in ourselves is the New Creation.” So we live in the world but at times God breaks through lifting the veil between this world and the next. Kierkegaard wrote that we can live in the present with confidence because the past is forgiven and the future is assured.

One of my mentors, the late John Claypool, said, “We gather together to tell the story, to break the bread, to drink the cup. We do these things to quieten the terrors of our hearts and lift up our lives to hope.” I thank God for the priesthood and for the community of faith called the Church which includes my wife and sons and their wives and their children, our grandchildren.

And it is the community of faith that nurtures and restores us. We experience God in others, angels perhaps, but we can interpret this only through the community of faith. That is why we gather together . . . as Claypool said. We tell the story and we hear the story told . . . in lessons, in prayers, in sermons sometimes! We gather to eat bread and drink wine. And in these actions God comes to be with us, makes himself known to us, “In the breaking of the bread.”

What a joy and privilege to be able to be at the Table . . . to celebrate, to receive, to give. And the unexpected surprises that take place at the altar. One day a precious little girl, probably about five, was at the communion rail with her family. They were on vacation and came to church. I gave her the wafer and then she took hold of my surplice and indicated for me to wait. She dug in her little pocketbook and handed me an animal cracker. I was moved to tears. I went quickly to the altar and my assistant asked me if everything was all right and I replied, “I just received communion from a child. Yes, everything is all right.” And it was.

We all have our stories to tell and we need to tell them, to write them down, to share them with others. And I learned early on that it is all about love. The priest who presented me for confirmation and ordination told me that my congregation, wherever that might be, would above all things want to love me and they would want me to love them. It is so simple. Theology, good liturgy, programs, and pastoral care are so important but the most important thing is to love and be loved. Thank you Good Lord for calling me to be a priest in the Episcopal Church, and thank you for letting these good things happen to me and to those I love.



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