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About Vintage Voice

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VINTAGE VOICE



The Sometimes Associate

The Rev. Hartshorn Murphy, Jr.

“Sometimes, it’s not about you!”

I remember my mother using these words more often than I cared to hear them — which made them more than likely the truth I needed to hear.

My decision to take early retirement from a parish I had served for nearly 14 years, and which I loved desperately, was not because I was bored or burned out or discouraged, or any of the other well-known maladies of ministry in this new century. After all, we had come through the challenges and frustrations of any downtown parish and we had celebrated some major victories. I have been told by long-time members that the parish, at my leave-taking, was healthier than it had been in a long time. At age 61 then, I could have stayed to age 65 and beyond, with grace and well-deserved returns for years of faithful struggle. So why leave?

To be blunt, I felt that the church deserved someone different, and hopefully, better, to lead them into their next phase of ministry. It wasn't about me, but about them. It was time. I saw my retirement as a gift to people I cared for deeply.

What I was not prepared for was the grief this choice caused my wife, for this was her community as well. But in my previous position as a diocesan executive, I had suggested a policy which prohibited clergy from visiting their former congregations for a minimum of three years and, after that time, only with the express permission of the incumbent — and this extended to their spouses as well.

The grief was mine too, as living into this policy meant missing funerals and weddings and baptisms of people I knew better than the new rector did. I had not anticipated how pervasive and deep that grief would be, and the fact that it was my retirement, my retirement policy, that was the source of this pain made it even worse.

Over the subsequent months, I visited a variety of churches, few of them Episcopal. I discovered a norm across many denominations; namely, “Church is the place where all are welcome and none are spoken to.”

My visiting was more voyeuristic than anything else. Having served in our denomination for some 40 years of ordained ministry, it was a confectionary delight to see what other folks were doing, and attending sporadically and anonymously was a good thing. But novelty wears thin.

I discovered that I missed the Episcopal world. Fortunately, a colleague called and asked if I would be willing to serve on Sundays while he was on sabbatical. I readily agreed.

In a way, it felt like coming home. The rhythms and shapes were known to me. But more profoundly, I had come home to myself.

In our ordination ritual, we proclaim that we are “priests forever after the order of Melchizedek.” And in spite of biblical silence about who he was or what he actually accomplished beyond an amazing name, we get it. Ordination involves an ontological shift of identity.

The Alban Institute once suggested that clergy should have the words “Resident Holy Person” imprinted on their business cards under their names. Although such blatant language is embarrassing, they ring with a deep truth.

Not only did I miss the sacraments, I missed presiding at their administration. I do not think this is about ego needs but about charisms of the priesthood itself.

Following my sabbatical supply, I contacted one of my former associates who was now serving at a parish some safe distance from my former place. I recalled prior ministry settings as the single cleric, preaching without relief Sunday after Sunday for years. It can be lonely. I asked her if she might be interested in having assistance one Sunday a month at no cost to her parish. She was delighted.

As I entered her community, she asked me what title I would prefer. I chose “sometimes associate.” I preach, do some teaching with the men’s group, and make hospital visitations when her folk are ill and when asked to do so. (I do not do vestry.) And it has been a great joy and satisfaction to serve again.

Are there learnings here? Perhaps. I certainly did not anticipate the grief for me and for my spouse that my retirement would engender, a grief which only began to lessen some two years and more after retirement. I have no idea if this is true for other families, but the issue needs careful attention before that “last Sunday.”

I also suspect that I am not unique in the need to serve God’s people sacramentally.

Some years ago, a cleric somewhat older than I retired, and I asked him what he intended to do. He replied, “Well, I know what I’m not going to do. I’m not going to church. I’ve been getting up at 5:00AM for four decades now and I’m planning to sleep in!” Within a few weeks, he was volunteering at a parish every Sunday. I often joked about him among my still-working colleagues, saying, “This man has failed retirement.” I apologize. Now I get it.

There are many heroic, isolated, and exhausted parochial clergy out there, and there will be many more as congregations age and financial resources decline, the average age of ordination rises, and buildings crumble. (These are not complaints, only data). These clergy deserve and need the support of their retired brothers and sisters, who, in turn, may wish to perform sacerdotal ministries.

I am blessed to be figuring it out, but I know now that it does take a bit of grace — because sometimes, it is about you.



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