

The Vintage Voice

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Begin With Laughter

The Rev. Fred Fenton

An Episcopalian was a patient in an Adventist hospital. Hungry, she asked the diminutive nurse for a steak. "I'm sorry," said the nurse, "We don't believe in steak."

"Then may I please have a Coke?" asked the Episcopalian. "I'm sorry," the nurse replied, "We don't believe in Coke." The Episcopalian thought for a moment. "All right then," she said. "Just bring me a cup of coffee."

"I'm sorry," said the nurse, "We don't believe in coffee." Exasperated, the Episcopalian said, "What do you people believe in?" Pulling herself up to her full height, the little nurse said proudly, "We believe in the Second Coming of our Lord."

"Oh no," cried the Episcopalian. "If he's been here once, he won't be back again!"

Like many retired clergy, I enjoy preaching from time to time. I always begin with a story that produces a laugh. It stirs the air and gains a sympathetic audience for the message that follows.

Standing at the head of the aisle instead of the pulpit, I tell the story about the patient in an Adventist hospital. It never fails to bring down the house. The Episcopalian's retort at the end cannot be anticipated. It comes as a complete surprise. Even dignified parishioners, not used to reacting with more than a faint smile, laugh their heads off.

Having given you my best joke, I want to tell you about the extraordinary man from whom I learned it. Fred Judson put his children through college by augmenting his pastor's salary as a master of ceremonies at trade conventions. The crowds who roared at his off-color jokes would have been amazed to know he was an American Baptist minister.

Fred built Trinity Baptist Church in Santa Monica, California. It is colonial in style and looks like an Episcopal church. That's because he had an aunt he never tired of describing as a "High Church Episcopalian." He "blamed" her for his departure from more traditional, Baptist-style architecture.

I was Fred's ministerial colleague during the 23 years I served as rector of St. Augustine by-the-Sea Episcopal Church in Santa Monica. He helped me found the Westside Ecumenical Conference. Our monthly meetings were enlivened by Fred's presence. Making exaggerated sweeps with his arms, Fred would say, "I like the way you fellows cross yourselves, but I never can figure out how you do it!"

The man was irrepressible. For example, it was impossible to shake hands with Fred. He had a way of slipping his hand past yours when you tried. The impish grin on his face said it all. At the same time, he was a deeply spiritual guy. During one meeting, we heard that a popular community leader had collapsed and died. I asked Fred to lead us in prayer. His warm and reassuring words helped us feel God's love and presence.

Once, I asked Fred to preach at my parish. He began with the story about the patient in an Adventist hospital, adding several more hilarious tales. Then he launched into a Gospel sermon about the transformation of his ministry through a powerful experience of the Spirit. It happened when he was alone in prayer. A hush fell on the congregation. That man could preach!

After he retired from Trinity Baptist after 37 years as senior pastor, a friend of his who owned a gas station in Santa Monica told him he was having a hard time finding someone to handle the full-service pump. "I'll do it!" Fred said.

It turned out that Fred didn't know which end of the car the engine was in. He couldn't find the dipstick or the hole to replace it. The customer was forced to help him. "What happened to the hole?" Fred would ask. "Was it healed?" He always kept the gas caps. He even forgot to remove the nozzle. "That's so they won't run out of gas," he would say.

His friend would have fired anyone else who was so inept, but even though they had to service their own cars, the customers didn't complain. They usually left the station laughing. The other clergy in town felt sorry for Fred. Some thought he must be hard up and offered him money. One said, "I just never thought I'd find you pumping gas."

"Why not?" Fred said, "I've been pumping gas for 37 years!" The station owner bought Fred a standard uniform but had "chaplain" embroidered over the pocket. Fred loved that.

Fred Judson died in 1992. Each time I tell the story of the Episcopalian in an Adventist hospital and hear the laughter swell, I feel that I pass on something of Fred's spirit. I think his High Church aunt would agree.

Martin Luther King had this advice for preachers: "Make them laugh; make them cry; and then tell them what you want them to do." I think he was right. Preachers who lean toward laughter know our spirits need it. If we don't take the risk, we are in danger of forgetting that life can be measured by how many smiles we've given others.



The Rev. Fred Fenton retired in 2001 after 40 years in parish ministry. He and his wife, Billie, live in Concord, California with Brandy, a Tibetan Spaniel. Fred serves as a consultant for stewardship and capital campaigns. He also enjoys doing supply work. Currently, Fred is writing a memoir of his "long, happy life."