

# The Vintage Voice

Serving The Church Pension Fund's Family of Beneficiaries

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## The Blessing of Weakness

*Jane Sigloh*

Before television, summer play lasted late into the evening. We played capture-the-flag and kick-the-can and hopscotch. The girls made necklaces out of clover leaves, and, invariably, the boys wrestled, pinning each other down and rolling over to escape the hammer lock. The one who thought he was the champion would insist that the other say “uncle.” Give up.

And that’s really what we have to do when we retire. We have to say “uncle” and give up — give up power. We claim we don’t have any, but we do. It’s a power that most of the world’s population has never dreamed was possible — a power to influence people. It’s vested in title, office, income, and authority. As for the church, no matter how “mutual the ministry,” or how “integrated the authority,” there’s power in the Word. And when you’re the one who carries the Word in your hands, holds it up in a leather limber bible, or proclaims it from a pulpit text, you’re endowed with power.

I could feel it. I had ascended the stairs of the pulpit Sunday after Sunday, and there they’d be, some of them hugging the aisle, some in their “reserved seats” on the fourth row, epistle side, and some in the back where no one could see their kid make paper airplanes out of the bulletin.

I knew where I could look for a bit of laughter, which eyes would easily fill with tears, and which ones would catch me if I rambled. “Bring it home, Sister.” They would all be looking up at the pulpit as if I had an answer.

I’d often return to the sanctuary, long after the pews had settled back into place. There I’d kneel, and pray to be stripped of any claims to power: “Not mine, O Lord, but thine.” But usually, within a few days, I could feel my head inflating like a hot air balloon. I think I rather enjoyed the floating effect. I didn’t want to give it up.

And when you retire, it’s not just power that you have to give up; it’s community — colleagues, office personnel, friends who gather at the same well. I really didn’t want to give up my community. They were such good people. Together we had learned to forgive and bless and laugh and sing and celebrate. How could I give them up?

But I was tired. Some call it “compassion fatigue.” And I was getting old. My bones told me it was true. So did my driver’s license.

So do you accept or resist? Say “uncle” or roll over to escape the hammer lock? I wrestled with the decision for months, night after night, trying to pin down an answer, just the way Jacob tried to pin down the mysterious stranger that night on the banks of the Jabbok River. He wrestled until dawn. And in a way, he prevailed. He held the God/man in a hammer lock, and said, “I will not let you go unless you bless me” (Genesis 32:26). Say “uncle.” And Jacob, the trickster, once again elicits a blessing.

But it wasn't a blessing of strength; it was a blessing of weakness. The stranger threw Jacob's hip out of joint. He would limp into the future with an arthritic reminder that God is God. But what a blessing that was. And what a future there would be.

I don't know how I finally knew for sure that it was time for me to say "uncle." Maybe I saw the dawn break in streaks of light over the Jabbok River. Or, maybe I heard that earthly hum — deep in its resonance — that tells migrating birds when it's time to go home. Whatever. After months of wrestling I finally announced my retirement. Then it was too late to change my mind.

We planned a ritual for my leave-taking. After all, we have rituals for life's other passages — baptism, bar mitzvah, graduation, marriage — so why not one for retirement? It's just as critical a juncture in life. We leave something behind that we can never go back to, any more than we can go back to our college glee club or Saturday night at the bistro. And ritual has a way of voicing closure with words, music, movement, feasting, dancing. It kicks you out of one place and sends you sprawling across the floor to another.

We celebrated the Eucharist. And the end was a beginning because the service included the baptism of a child who was still blinking at the brightness of being. I returned the gifts of the church. "Receive this book and continue as persons of prayer." "Receive these keys and let the doors of this place be open to all people." Then we were blessed — our whole family — and dismissed. "Go in peace to love and serve the Lord."

There was a grand feast following the Grand Feast, with tables laden with chicken casseroles and gelatin salads and homemade breads. There were toasts and laughter and farewell gifts. And lots of memories. About the time the Christmas greens caught fire and Bart Hansen had to leap over the choir rail to put them out. And the time I tried to rope off the back pews, so the worship space wouldn't seem so cavernous and got slam dunked by the residents of the rear. They removed the ropes and wrapped them as a retirement gift. Lots of memories. About sputtering candles and fainting acolytes, and yard sales and parish picnics.

When it was over, I turned off the lights and started to lock the front doors, until I remembered that I no longer had keys to the church. Indeed, I was one of the few people in Augusta County who didn't have a key to that church.

They gave me the flowers from the altar and we drove away. It would be fun, retirement. Really nice. I could do all those things I never had time to do when I was working. Things like golf, and fishing, and travel. I could even learn the art of Asian cooking. Yes, it would be nice, really nice.

I had some leftover pound cake in my lap. It would last a few more days.



Jane Sigloh is a priest in the Episcopal Church, and in her retirement, she serves as a retreat leader, teacher, and preacher. She lives with her husband in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains where the two of them are laborers in a small home vineyard. They have six children and fourteen grandchildren. "The Blessing of Weakness" is from her book, *Like Trees Walking*, a Cowley publication about the second half of life.