

The Vintage Voice

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Amazing Grace: An Early Ministry Revisited

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“This is a voice from your past!” That’s how I began a phone call to former parishioners, whom I will call Bob and Jen. I hadn’t seen or spoken with them for thirty-two years.

I asked Bob if he knew who I was, and — after two wrong answers — his third one was, “our former priest who lives in Vancouver, Washington!”

His wife Jen soon joined in on the conversation, and we shared health and family issues, and news of grandchildren. I asked for and received a brief summary of how the parish I served in the 1970s in an exciting time of transition was doing in yet another time of transition. Later in the conversation, my wife Ann spoke with them and happily recalled our six years with their parish.

Ann and I thought often of that parish, and of Bob and Jen. It was the first parish I served as rector. When Ann and I arrived, I was five years out of seminary and a young-looking thirty-three. Right at 200 communicants, the parish was located in the middle of Georgia, in the suburbs of a moderately sized city. I came upon the scene at the beginning of a time of significant change. They were considering a change in location and building; the purchasing and selling of property; merging with a smaller mission congregation. A lot was going on in their community. I was excited by all the challenges but also worried about whether I was up to them. Ultimately, Ann and I acquitted ourselves well, I think. But then time moves on, and one is never sure about one’s legacy.

After all these years, I had begun to think that Bob and Jen were no longer interested in hearing from us. A few years ago, we had emailed our annual Christmas letter to them, but they had not responded. However, it turns out that they had lost our email and mailing addresses but recently found them with the help of a tech-savvy son who managed to track us down online. Jen had then written us a newsy letter, enclosing a family picture, taken at Bob’s eightieth birthday celebration.

What I want to share most about this long distance reunion is the contents of an email Jan sent in the week following our phone conversation. In it, she shared Bob’s and her gratitude for how I had been an instrument of God’s love, helping to bring them to a closer, more personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Jen still attends the annual Daughters of the King spring retreat at the diocesan camp. More than a generation ago I had encouraged Jen and six other women to seek renewal at this Spirit-filled weekend. It turned out to be a life-transforming experience for

her and the six other women. I now recall the sheer joy that they couldn't wait to share with me just an hour after they arrived back.

In the same email, Jen apologized that they had not shared their gratitude while I was their rector. She wanted to make sure I knew how much my time with them had been an agent of change and Christian growth in their lives.

She also mentioned the two Faith Alive weekends in the parish while I was their rector, and reminded me of the Christian witness given during one of those weekends by a certain businessman, whose words brought Bob to claim our Lord as his personal Savior. Jen also remembered the weekly small group Bible studies I led in the parish library that helped further deepen their faith. My faith in hiring Jen as the first Executive Director of a new Voluntary Action Center (which had its office in our parish) bolstered her self-esteem with new energy and purpose.

Of course, I was deeply moved by their gratitude, which led me to look more positively on my earlier years as a parish priest. I recalled how Ann and I returned to this church a year after we accepted a call to another parish. At a potluck supper in the parish hall, I had thanked them for putting up with my mistakes and personal shortcomings. Now, I can see how they looked beyond these and loved me as I was (and in many ways still am).

I hope this memory helps other retired clergy, whether or not they were praised and thanked during earlier years of parish ministry, to see that their work meant a great deal to parishioners. We were all instruments of God's love, peace, and forgiveness. There's a real possibility our parishioners appreciated and accepted us more than we then realized.

This shared experience of ministry reminds me of the words of St. Paul to the Church at Corinth. In his second letter, he wrote, "he [the Lord] said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.' So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. . . . for whenever I am weak, then I am strong." (2 Cor. 12:9–10 NRSV)

When we thought we were at our "weakest" in a parish ministry, our Lord's power was the most at work.



Don Greenwood and Anna, his retired neurology RN wife, live in southwest Washington State, just across the Columbia River from Portland, Oregon. They moved there from central Ohio ten years ago, to be near their now six grandchildren and three sons. Don is an active volunteer for the Clark County affiliate of NAMI (National Alliance on Mental Illness), having served as board member and president. He currently leads two monthly support groups for family members of the mentally ill, and annually teaches a NAMI Washington State sponsored "Family to Family Education Class." Ann and Don's oldest son has struggled with mental illness since his early teens.