

The Vintage Voice

Serving The Church Pension Fund's Family of Beneficiaries

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The Beggar — Revisited

The Rev. Timothy C. Eberhardt

Among the many listings I entered in the parish register during my almost thirty years as Rector of St. John's in Randolph, Vermont, one is particularly troubling. There in the "Burials" section — after I had entered a name and date, as usual — I came to the "Cause of Death" column, and for the first and only time I had to write the word "Murder."

That entry came back vividly to me after reading a *Vintage Voice* piece last August by the Rev. Frank E. Wismer III, recalling a sad story from his early days of ministry as Rector of St. Mary's, Northfield, twenty miles up the road from me in Randolph. Frank wrote about a mysterious village character who made the rounds in Northfield, begging door to door. But this beggar did not beg for whatever the mostly obliging townspeople might offer; instead, he begged with a demanding specificity, right down to the brand of soap or cereal he required. What no one knew, as Frank related it, was that when this mentally infirm, almost childlike man returned to the couple who were his state-assigned guardians, he would face a beating if he had not filled their precisely prescribed "shopping list." I quote from Frank's article:

One day he returned home without a particular item on the list, and the couple beat him to death. The news of his murder shocked and sickened everyone in Northfield. Had we only known, had we only been more aware of the situation, had he only been able to tell us, we would have been more than happy to give him exactly what he requested. More than thirty years later, it still grieves me to recall his tragic death.

Subsequent correspondence with Frank verified what I already suspected: the murder I had entered into my parish registry was the same one Frank had written about. But beyond that tragic ending, our relationships, Frank's and mine, with this child of God were very different — a counterpoint of darkness and light.

I first encountered Lewie under what seemed like relatively normal circumstances. I was visiting inpatient parishioners at Gifford Medical Center in Randolph, and because Gifford serves a large part of Vermont, including Northfield, Lewie happened to be an inpatient there also. I do not recall why he was there or even how our meeting occurred. Did a nurse suggest I drop in? Was he the roommate of a parishioner? In any case I immediately sensed an alluring and sincere sweetness in this man. We chatted, and the relationship grew easily as I made it a point to stop in over the next few days.

Our conversations never touched upon the dark places: the beatings and abuse I would learn about later. Rather, the subjects of faith and church came up, and Lewie expressed an interest in baptism. He would check with “his folks,” he told me. And maybe I could help arrange baptism either here in Randolph or up in Northfield where “that Rev. Wismer seems like a pretty nice guy.”

Lewie left Gifford but was back a week later. In retrospect, I wonder whether his sudden return was the result of chronic abuse. All I discerned at the time, however, was Lewie’s usual childlike enthusiasm. Would I baptize him? “Sure, why not,” I responded. It was fine with his folks, he assured me, and they had confirmed that he had not been baptized before.

Thus, the parish register of St. John’s shows that, less than one month before I inscribed Lewie’s name one final time, I wrote that he was baptized in his room at Gifford Medical Center on Wednesday, March 17, 1982. Joining us that day were a nurse, Lewie’s roommate, and the elderly rector of nearby Christ Church, Bethel, who also was visiting the sick that day. And so, with my home communion set, Holy Baptism and the Eucharist were duly celebrated and shared, indeed as “at all times, and in all places.”

Holy Week and Easter were coming up, and I did not get around to alerting Frank about his new brother in Christ, who had just returned home to Northfield. Lewie had seemed quite eager to meet with Frank and begin his Christian journey, but none of us could have realized the kind of Holy Week that was in store for him. Only the following week a nurse called me and asked, “Did you hear that Lewie was murdered?” I had indeed heard a report of a local murder, but I had not made the connection and knew nothing of the brutal circumstances. A contact at a funeral home let me know that the state was in charge of Lewis’s burial on Saturday April 3 in the back plot of Pleasant View Cemetery in Randolph. “Could I do the funeral?” I asked. “Of course!” And so, with the undertakers and a few parishioners, graveside burial rites were performed. Palm Sunday followed the next day. It was already Easter for Lewie.

In his *Vintage Voice* reflection, Frank wrote that Lewie’s death had inspired him thirty years later to treat another beggar to a full dinner in a Subway sandwich shop one winter afternoon in New Haven. In my subsequent letter to Frank — sent to verify that *my* Randolph Lewie was indeed *his* Northfield Lewie — I ended with this Easter wish for all of us: “I think if we reach heaven, I will seek out Lewis among the saints and borrow a bar of soap (any brand will do) so we all can clean up and join our old buddy Frank for a “cold-cut combo” at Subway. I’ll treat us all in thanksgiving for the grace of our sacramental sharing.”

*To read “The Beggar,” the August 2011 Vintage Voice by the Rev. Frank E. Wismer III, go to www.cpg.org/vintagevoice and click “archive” under the heading **View All Articles**.*



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