



Thoughts on the Journey...

Suanne Gettings—Pastoral Associate - October 27, 2019

Being a Catholic all of my life, I have had a number of opportunities to celebrate and serve with different priests, religious, and lay ministers along the way. Most of these people were a pleasure to worship with and to share community; they had a sense of who they were in relation to the God they were serving. Even though most understood what 'servant' meant, there were a few stand-outs throughout my history who did not grasp the concept of servitude; their arrogance and sense of self-importance created hardship, division, hurt feelings, and fear. Their attitudes were a distraction for the community causing some people to leave and others to remain in frustration. This kind of thing is not exclusive to Catholic communities, but rather exists in all faith traditions because of the human condition. Sometimes it's easy for people, when given a taste of power, to lose their sense of servitude along the way.

However, when thinking about stand-outs in the servitude department, I would rather focus on the positive. I've been blessed to know so many good and faithful servants, but none quite like Brother Ralph Riehle. The first time I met him, I was being introduced to the staff and parish council at St. Christopher's Church in Claxton, Georgia. His tall, very thin frame entered the room just before the pastoral council meeting began. Brother Ralph looked like he stepped out of Mayberry, RFD. Try, if you can, to imagine a cross between Andy Griffith and Barney Fife: tall but lanky, a strong hair line with a caricature face, protruding teeth that made the rest of his face disappear when he smiled, a presence in the room because of his stature but diluted a bit because of his humble posture. When he walked into the parish hall he wore a green plaid long sleeve shirt, a pair of high-wasted blue jeans and work boots that sported red Georgia clay around the heels. Ralph was accompanied by three little giggling children who belonged to the council members present. They were hanging on Ralph like he was a jungle gym and everyone seemed amused by the scene. I couldn't help but notice the kindness in his face as he mingled with folks before the meeting began. It was my first encounter with Ralph but certainly not my last. Ralph was a Glenmary brother who served the Claxton, Georgia community as a carpenter. Together, he and Brother Tom Kelly worked together with the poor fixing substandard housing and being a spiritual presence to those they served. Ralph lived the vow of poverty with a charismatic joy that made you want to be with him; he was a gentle

humble presence with a corky sense of humor. By day he worked with his hands bringing hope to God's poor and in the evenings, he and Tom would open their home to anyone who stopped by. Ralph became a big brother to me. I felt peace when I was with him because I felt drawn and embraced by his own sense of inner peace. I used to think that this must be what the apostles felt like having Christ as a friend. If there was someone in my life who most represented Christ, I would have to say it was Brother Ralph. About two years after sharing community with Ralph, he developed a brain tumor and returned to Glenmary headquarters in Cincinnati for treatment and to live out his days.

In the Gospel of Luke this Sunday, Jesus tells a parable to those convinced of their own righteousness, saw themselves as superior and looked down upon those they judged not to be as 'good' as they. Jesus told them,

“...whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”

Jesus' message is contrary our secular understanding of holiness. The real face of holiness is wrapped in humility and servitude, knowing our place in relation to our Creator, acknowledging our sinfulness and kneeling before him with true contrition. What defines us as true followers is just that: being *followers* of Christ, not supplanting his authority. It's not how we appear to others while we're praying, or what we wear that sets us apart or makes us superior, but how we are seen through the eyes of Christ, like the humble tax collector. My experience in life confirms Jesus' message; the greatest people I have known have given their life in love and service to others, never flaunting their goodness, never believing they are favored above others in the eyes of God. As for Brother Ralph, he never returned to Georgia, but he handled his suffering and death with the same obedience and grace that he accepted his servitude in life. His funeral was a celebration of the gift he was to everyone who knew him. At his graveside, the air was crisp, the sky was blue, and a beautiful white dove hovered over his grave as our prayers floated on the breeze. The peace that Ralph always exuded in life pervaded me once again. I couldn't help but rejoice that this great servant friend of mine was now in the arms of his Servant, Savior, and King.