

## MY FRIEND JOHN

Last Tuesday I received a call from an old friend, John Gurney. He called to tell me that his mother, Virginia, had passed away after a long illness. This moment had been coming some time, and, despite the inevitability and the relief from pain and suffering that she felt, was still deeply painful for her family. About 5 years ago her husband died, and she had struggled with that loss herself, always longing to be with him. Loss always hurts regardless of how expected it is. Throughout the remainder of the week I couldn't help thinking about John and his family. I have known John and his twin brother Reed since I was about two years old. Now, I don't remember that far back, in case that crossed your mind. But I have a very old photograph, taken by my grandmother, showing the three of us sitting on the front porch of her house. It is one of the few photographs of me as a child that I am not embarrassed by. If you were raised by camera toting parents, you know what I'm talking about.

While John and I have been friends for a long time, I cannot imagine two people as different as the two of us. But we kept crossing paths, and ultimately a "passing" friendship became "old friends." John was born and raised here in Myrtle Point, returned after college, married his college sweetheart, taught school here, and retired here. I, on the other hand, moved just about as often as the seasons changed, a pattern established by my father's military career. But in 1960 my parents returned here and settled permanently. In High School John and I were occasional friends, socializing some and studying at his parent's house before math exams. In college we were roommates during our senior year. He went to one college; I went to four before finally graduating. After college I returned to the gypsy pattern in my life, and have not figured out what to do long enough to retire from it. Over the last few years I've made it a point to visit he and his wife Karen whenever I get up this way.

In all the time I've known John I've never heard him utter a cross word or criticism about anyone (Yeah, yeah, I know, another big difference.) He has a way of asking about someone he may be upset with, as if he were authentically curious whether their behavior was acceptable or not, yet he would never dare say their behavior was bad. I've never heard him say he didn't like anyone, and he always considers that another may have a reason for his or her questionable behavior. In essence, John is truly the nicest person I have ever met, and I know that it is authentic because he has been that way his entire life. He thinks well of everyone, and would never dream of any harm or retribution coming to another for harm done by them. He never presumes to know more or be more gifted than anyone he encounters, friend or not. He's also the best fisherman in the universe, though he would never brag. And finally, he's a great guy, and everyone who meets him likes him.

I could say more, but its getting a little irritating. When I think about these differences, it's beyond humbling, it's downright embarrassing. Most days I don't think too harshly of myself, but when I use John as a standard I'm out of luck. I am truly humbled by his humbleness, and consider myself uniquely blessed to have him as a friend. (As well as I know him I can probably never let him see this, as he would feel totally embarrassed. He would never want himself on the skyline of anything.)

He does have two faults, though. When he gets nervous or distraught he goes fishing or cuts firewood. In a 365 day period he has probably been fishing 350 of those days. Some guys may not think that the fishing thing is a fault, but the firewood thing, my gosh. His entire backyard and about half of his driveway are covered with neat stacks of wood, catalogued by age and type (hardwood, fir, cedar, etc.) When he has something troubling he wants to talk about he

will call and ask if I want to cut wood. We'll cut and split a little, then talk a little, then cut and split a little more. An interesting form of therapy, but it seems to work.

Humor aside, this is a man whom I truly admire, and I count myself uniquely blessed to have him as a friend. I have, by far, been the most rewarded by the renewal of our friendship this past year and the time we have spent together, even if we just cut firewood. This time when John called, though, he didn't want to cut wood. He wanted to tell me about his mother and thank me for being his friend through some of his anguish over her prolonged illness. He had been severely saddened by his father's death, and I don't believe he had quite gotten through grieving for him, so his mother's death just seemed to deepen his sadness.

Last Saturday, as I observed John, his brothers and sisters, his family, and other close friends and relatives at the crowded funeral it finally struck me where people like him come from. He was just like his mother and father. His dad was a small town doctor who loved raising his family. His mother, who John was most like, was also someone who never spoke ill of anyone, who dearly loved her children, and who looked for the beauty of God's creation in everything. Her outlook on life impacted everyone around her and was passed on to her children. The service commemorating her life was held at the little Presbyterian Church where she faithfully took her family to worship throughout her adult life. This little structure had seen the baptism of all her children and the commemoration of her husbands passing, as it had done with many families since it was built. I noticed the sign above the small front entry indicated that the Church was established in 1890. Amazing how long good things last.

Another revelation that struck me was that I have only been looking at things when seeking to see God's hand at work. Things like trees, rivers, sunrises, sunsets; you know, nature and stuff. Yet right in front of me, and probably in front of all of us, are people, human beings, who put the lie to all the secular cynicism about mankind and God's relationship to us. God created us to love Him, to love one another, and to share this wordless experience with whomever we come into contact with. It is inevitable that we will all err from time to time. We will sin, and we will fail to use sound judgement or exhibit ethical character. But it is not inevitable that we all must morally implode, and utterly destroy the lives God gave us before we see the benefit of His saving grace. Thank God, in fact, that some see by His grace to kneel down and accept salvation even when they are children.

Proverbs 22:6 says: *Train up a child in the way he should go, even when he is old he will not depart from it.* (NASV) Although I thank God constantly for the gift of His salvation to the worst of us, even to tired, old, formerly apostate pastors like myself, I also thank Him that all of the wisdom of the Bible is true. In this instance I have seen it in the life of one man who was raised and trained by loving parents who followed and taught the instructions of their heavenly Father. And I thank Him for my friend John.

Be Blessed, BZ