

## SERVING AT THE ALTAR OF FORGIVENESS

It was the summer of 1962. I had just turned eight when my family and I moved from Duncan to Victoria. I was the Rector's son, moving from a small town, to what seemed a large city, and a strange church. I was small and scared. So I became tough and wild.

Almost immediately, it was realized that I could not be contained with the other children in Sunday school. Some wise person decided I should become a server and I was moved from children's lessons to serving lessons. Being elevated to the adult world of vestry and sanctuary appealed to me. The meticulous choreography of serving settled my restless spirit. The company of men much older than myself made me feel mature and responsible as I shadowed the thurifer carrying my little silver "boat" full of grains of sweet smelling incense.

I was placed under the tutelage of the head server. He was probably two decades older than I, but treated me with respect and affection. He approached his position with the utmost care and seriousness. We all knew that his was important work and we felt honoured to share in it with him.

We had servers' meetings at the Rectory with cheezies, chips and soft drinks. We had servers' practices concluding with "Compline" in the chapel. I still hear my father's voice leading us singing "Before the ending of the day Creator of the world we pray." There must have been many "Compline" services as the words I have not heard for thirty years ring now in my ears. As a reward for our labours, we had servers' hikes that Dennis planned and led with the careful attention to detail that seemed to characterize every part of his life.

By the time I was eleven, I had progressed through many of the positions a server could fulfill. I had learned the art of lighting the charcoal for the incense to produce the maximum amount of smoke at just the right moment. I had carried the candles as an acolyte and served the bread and wine at the altar.

As a server I learned that religion was serious business. I came to understand that there was nothing trivial about faith. I remember that sacred moment before each service. We stood in our appointed places ready for the procession. The sounds of the organ came muffled through the vestry door. We waited silently to play our appointed parts in the unfolding mystery in which we were privileged to share.

By the time I was twelve I discovered another mystery. There was a dimension to serving which never appeared in the sanctuary. The head server, and his closest assistant, liked to have sex with boys. I was one of those boys. These men introduced me to the mysterious terrain of sexuality during the uneasy years of my adolescence.

I do not know that it seemed terribly wrong at the time. There was such a divide between my two worlds. On Sunday I was the devout little blond haired server, moving smoothly through my paces in the adult world of religion. During the week, some of these same

adults who taught me the mysteries of faith, introduced me to other mysteries about which I knew to keep silent. God and religion had no place in this other adult world. I learned to keep secrets. I learned to keep much of myself invisible.

But I also learned lessons it has taken many years to uncover.

I learned that the fact that bad things happened to me did not make me a bad person. I learned that, even the fact that I might do bad things, does not make me a bad person. We are all wounded. At times our wounds will wound others. Human beings are deeply complex. The head server was a good, kind and gentle man. He cared deeply about the conduct of reverent worship. I believe he cared deeply for me. He certainly respected my decision and honoured my choice when I made it clear I no longer wanted sexual contact.

Life involves pain. The important question is how I choose to respond. I can allow my pain to define me, or I can affirm that there is something deeper, more real and more lasting than my pain. My experience as a server at St. Barnabas exposed me to pain and shame. But, my experience in the sanctuary also introduced me to a reality greater than my experience of the shadow side of life.

I remember getting up in the middle of the night to go and kneel at the altar of repose on Maundy Thursday. I felt the terrible conflict of that dark and lonely night. I sensed the failure of Jesus' friends. The confused darkness of my own spirit rose up inside of me. It was a time of desperation and despair. But past years had trained a deeper part of my being to know that something else was coming. I knew that on Saturday evening, we would gather and light a large candle. I knew that this candle would be carried into the darkened church and that we would hear the words ring out, "The light of Christ." And I knew that at that moment I would kneel and respond, "Thanks be to God." The darkness was pushed back. The sadness, the shame, the hurt were not the final word. There was a truth that I could fall into with all of my chaos and confusion. That truth would hold me.

Life did not always have to make sense. Things did not always have to go perfectly. There was a greater reality. And so I could tell my own truth. I could acknowledge sad things, bad things, wrong things that had happened to me and wrong things I had done. Those things could no longer hurt me. I could practice the forgiveness I saw in Jesus who looked down from the cross upon his abusers and prayed, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."

Forgiveness means letting go. Forgiveness means surrendering my need for the world to be put right. It means no longer needing to be vindicated. Forgiveness knows that only truth can set us free. This freedom was born in me in those serious and confusing years as I began my transition to adulthood. I am thankful for those years and for the part that St. Barnabas and serving played in my formation.