

BOB

(*The Pastoral Voice of Robert Perske*. Edited by William Gaventa, MDiv and David Coulter, M.D. New York: The Haworth Press, 2003. Pp 171-173.)

By Martha Perske

I met Bob when he was the Chaplain at Kansas Neurological Institute in Topeka, Kansas, and I was a secretary to the principal of an elementary school. We began dating, and I asked if I could attend his Sunday Chapel services at KNI. He said, "Sure," and that's when I discovered that this was no ordinary minister.

The chapel became a happy part of our lives. We were married there in 1971.

I had never personally known anyone with a developmental disability. Even so, I learned a lot from watching Bob conduct Chapel services.

He called everyone by name and reached out to clasp each hand. No one was overlooked, not even those with such poor muscle coordination that it seemed forever before they could place their hand in Bob's. But Bob didn't mind. He just waited patiently as if he had all the time in the world.

I remember watching a teen-aged boy in a wheelchair trying to say something to Bob. His speech was practically unintelligible. I couldn't understand him and it was apparent that Bob couldn't either. I wondered what I would have done in such a situation.

The answer came as I watched the two of them struggle to understand and be understood. Instead of pretending to understand the young boy's words and simply letting it go at that with a non-committal "uh-hmm" (as many of us might have done), Bob leaned closer to him. With his hand on the boy's shoulder, he asked him to try again. Finally, after several attempts—always with a kind "try again" from Bob—the boy's words came through.

I wondered, could anyone not love this man.

Instead of singing the usual hymns that would have little or no meaning for the KNI folks who came to Chapel, Bob wrote simple lyrics to go with familiar tunes. Usually the songs were joyful. For example, when someone was scheduled to leave KNI, it meant leaving friends.

To help calm fears, Bob wrote the following lyric. It was sung by all in Chapel to the tune of "Jeannie's Packing Up."

You are packing up, you are moving out.

***You are packing up, you are moving out.
But as you go, we all will pull for you.
We are proud of you, we are proud of you.
You have been our friend, you have been our friend.
So as you go, we pray that you'll do well.***

When someone new arrived at KNI, the following welcoming song was sung by all to the tune of "Consider Yourself At Home."

***Consider yourself at home.
Consider yourself one of the family.
We want to be--a friend.
It's clear we want you as one of us.***

***Consider yourself—at home.
Consider yourself—with us
For after some consideration we can say
Consider yourself one of us.***

One of the things that made Chapel so welcoming—especially for those who could not see or hear—was the faint scent of peppermint. This was accomplished by a few designated KNI residents who, when the Chapel was empty, would rub oil of peppermint on the benches to dry.

The benches were made of slats, kind of like park benches. The job of applying oil was taken seriously. So seriously that one day an overzealous resident applied too much oil and it didn't dry in time for Chapel services.

Fortunately, no one noticed except those who were dressed in white, as the institution aides were. When they got up to leave, there were yellow stripes all over the back of their uniforms!

Time has passed since those days at KNI, but lucky were those residents who happened to be there when Bob was Chaplain.

I think it says a lot that the people he served there called him "Chapel" instead of Chaplain. It was always "Hi, Chapel Perske," or just plain "Hi Chapel!."

To them, he was the Chapel, and they weren't far wrong.

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