

Reflection given at the Celtic Service, Sunday, February 10, 2019
St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Richmond, Virginia
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Growing up, I never got the chance to have strong relationships with any of my grandparents. One died before I was born. Two more were gone before I could form any meaningful memories, and the last one was always far away. Fortunately for me, I have a guy named Jeff Kitross...something like a substitute granddad. Jeff is my father's older cousin's husband. I'm not sure what that is genealogically. He's not related by blood...which means he's from what my family calls our gene-enhancement pool. I didn't meet him or his wife Emily until I was in middle school, when my family started going to the Kitross house for Thanksgiving holidays. They lived in the NYC suburbs, and even though I have fond memories of these holidays, they were hectic, and I was in my own teen-age adolescent haze, so I didn't really connect with Jeff back then.

But when I turned 22 years old, after having learned all I could as a ski lift ticket salesman out west, I decided to kick start my career ambitions by moving to New York City. I had no savings, little applicable experience, no job prospects or even a real idea of what I wanted to do. After a week or two of sleeping on friends' couches, I quickly realized this undertaking was going to require a bit more time and preparation. For the first time, the reality of being an adult with responsibilities and obligations truly set in. New York City, or just Life in general, was slapping me in the face. I needed a temporary home base, so I turned to Jeff and Emily, asking if I could stay with them.

They graciously said yes, although I'm not sure how excited they were about the open-ended nature of my stay. During that time of figuring out what I wanted to do, doing the sort of networking that's required, going into the city for interviews, I remember how helpful it was to have Jeff there for advice, whether it was how to answer a certain resume question, or how to iron the crease in my suit pants. When I think back, it amazes me how clueless I was, and getting pushed around by New York City definitely bruised my ego, but having this granddad-like figure there to guide me was special. We would watch sports together, he introduced me to the West Wing, we'd argue about politics, discuss books – and at the end of those conversations he would usually say something about questioning my upbringing. While the anxiety of trying to get a professional foothold might not have been so much fun overall, I look back fondly on the time spent with Jeff.

Once I finally did get a job and an apartment, it was Jeff who helped me move into the 5 floor walkup studio...that might say more about his desire to get me out of his house than any sense of compassion and consideration, but I like to think it's the latter.

It was during those weeks together that I came to admire Jeff, and to start thinking of him as more of a role model. Here at St. Stephen's, one theme I hear our leaders talk

about often is the importance of seeing the spirit of Christ in those around us. It gives us the guiding light for how we ought to live together, and with that in mind, I want to share a little more background on Jeff.

Born in 1933, Jeff grew up in Queens, NY. His dad was an avowed socialist, left of the far left. His mom was a conservative Barry Goldwater fan, and actually ran for state office – at a time when society was much more patriarchal. So it's clear how Jeff came to be somewhat hard charging and argumentative in his own right. But he is also very compassionate, and loyal.

After almost failing out of William & Mary, he served in the army for two years. He wasn't a great soldier, but he remembers helping some of his mates read the letters that were sent to them from home, because they were illiterate. Sometimes he would write their letters home for them because they couldn't write. Seeing how happy some of these guys were just to have three meals a day and a place to sleep, put things into perspective for Jeff and he realized how fortunate he was to go back to W&M.

After the army straightened him out, Jeff promptly became one of the top students in his graduating class, and went to law school

Along the way, he met Emily, and two weeks after meeting, they were engaged to be married. That was over 60 years ago, and most of the time since has been spent happily.

Jeff practiced corporate law in NYC for a long time. He and Emily raised a son and daughter in the New York suburbs, and he was actively involved in the nearby Episcopal church. Then, when he was at the height of his earning power, he took an abrupt left turn, quitting his job, and taking a senior administrative role in the Diocese of New Jersey. I often think about the courage it took to quit a high paying gig in Manhattan so he could make considerably less money supporting the Church's poverty relief services in Newark, New Jersey. A few months ago when I asked him about this, he said it was Emily his wife who had to make the greatest sacrifice. He added that while you can choose what you're going to do, you seldom get to control the timing around when that choice must be made. Jeff loves to quote Yogi Berra, and in this instance his favorite saying that "if you don't know where you're going, you'll wind up somewhere else" seems appropriate.

Jeff is sometimes guilty of using words that are too fancy for casual conversation, like "avuncular," or "pusillanimous." But he can also make up for it with ridiculous sayings like "you ain't got no couth," when he's referring to someone who's been crude.

Jeff is 86 now, over twice my own age. He had a stroke last year and is dealing with kidney issues. But when I call to talk, his avuncular voice still sounds the same and he's always happy to chat on whatever it is that I want to ask him about. Seeing the spirit of Christ in others, and consequently in myself, is often hard for me. But Jeff is one of those people who makes it easy.