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“This Is Our Story” Service

March 16, 2019

A Verse From Psalm 27

Verse 11: You speak in my heart and say, “Seek my face.”

*Your face, Lord, will I seek

I have seen the “faces of God” many times in my lifetime. The following are but a few and this is “my story.”

I was born in the small nearby town of Contoocook, NH in 1950 . We lived on a farm. It was a cool place to play as a toddler with open space and many animals. I remember we had about 2000 chickens and a huge garden but the demands on my grandparents and parents got to be too much so they sold it and moved to the even smaller town in Warner, NH.

At age 6, it was still an cool place to be with the railroad train running behind the house a couple of times a day and 2 lakes nearby for swimming and fishing and just doing little kid stuff. It was especially fun in the summer because one of the lakes had a great place for swimming, roller skating and bowling. I later went on to work there summers for the next few years. When I started school there I would hear a few other kids talking about this thing called “**going to church**”

on Sunday's with their parents but I never put much thought into it nor was it ever encouraged in our house. My mother's parents were something they called Catholics. I didn't know what that meant and when we went to visit them in Massachusetts I remember seeing a church right across the street. I do know that my mother had been married and divorced previously and that she and my sister lived with them at one point. My sister told me they all went to church every Sunday. It sounded like my grandparents were very strict about it.

My father's parents lived in a trailer next to us in Warner. My mother worked nights as an attendant at the NH State Hospital. I remember her wearing a blue uniform, white shoes and white cap. She always looked beautiful and everyone loved her. I have a poem a fellow employee wrote about how gracious and elegant she was. My father was a heavy drinker and went out most nights so I stayed with my grandparents at night unless my mother was off. This went on for several years until my mother changed jobs. She worked days with weekends off, however, my father's routine remained the same. I then started staying with my parents. Looking back, it was a pretty abusive environment for my sister, my mom and I. There was a lot of drinking, arguing and domestic issues. My sister married and left at 17. I believe her main reason was to get out of the house. She later went on to have 3 children, divorced twice and also entered the NH Hospital for treatment. She lost 2 grandchildren to SIDS and a son to suicide. She regained her strength, went on to achieve her associate and bachelor's degrees. She would go on to help people with mental health issues for the next 30 years and continues to do so today. She would later become what I realized was a "face of God" to me.

I remember asking my parents about church around that time because I had heard about something called “baptism”. The answer given to me was that there was much turmoil between our families when my father and mother married, and that because of that they were married both protestant and later catholic secretly. They told me that they wanted me to choose my own path when I was older and when I knew what I wanted in faith. So that was exactly what I did. It was out of “sight – out of mind.” I knew a little about Christmas, who the characters were and what this “Jesus” guy was supposed to look like but there was no face to me for this person called “God”. Little did I know, I wouldn’t figure it out until decades later. Home life stayed the same for the next several years. After my sister had left, my mother and I formed an even stronger “**alliance**” or maybe it was “**a reliance**” as I look back. I remember bringing home pizza from Concord at night because there were no Pizza Parlors in Warner in the 1960’s. My mother would be sleep on the couch. I would open the box and place it under her nose and a smile would come upon her face. We would eat pizza and sit and talk for hours. I always had a great respect for my mother and the values she represented. My greatest fear was to disappoint her. Later on I would realize she was the first “face of God” I would ever know and recognize. I miss her every day. Although I would see many faces during my lifetime there would be 2 more who stood out most as a representation as a “face of God” to me.

I attended college after high school for a **very** short time. Commuting to New England College from Warner was **NOT** for me. Not feeling like a member of the college community was very detrimental and I felt very much out of place. They all seemed so worldly to me. It was hard to fit in as a “**towny**”. I went on to work on a poultry farm for the next few

years. The infamous Woodstock Music Festival was taking place during that time. A friend and I were going to go but we chickened out. It was probably a good choice on our part. Again, I didn't do much about my faith for the next few years but decided to enter the National Guard when I was 20. I remember when they asked for a religious affiliation for my dog tags. Short of what to say and to avoid embarrassment of not having one I said "protestant" not really knowing what that was. I was good for me to go to basic training. It allowed my parents to get to know each other again without me there; then all they had was each other. It also allowed me to grow as a person. You see, diversity did not exist in the small town of Warner in the 1970's. My exposure to South Carolina and Alabama was a real eye opener. I made some great friends of all colors and races. I was sad to leave them behind when I came home. Willie Whetstone, Daniel Weiland and Calvin Calsbad were good friends. I knew I would never see them again and knew some would never return from their next assignment which was Viet Nam. My conscience tears me a part to this day **and** as I speak; knowing I was never there with **and** for them. Several of my friends and classmates who were wounded or maimed told me I didn't miss a thing but that pain and guilt never goes away. It's a pain and guilt I've carried for 50 years and I will probably take to the grave. You'd have to be me to understand that. These men also would become the "face of God" to me and probably would be with him long before me. Upon returning home on Thanksgiving of 1970, I found things were different at home with my parents. **It was a good different.** I knew, however, it was time to move out on my own. I worked several jobs and saved up enough money to buy a home and make the move.

Life went on and again I paid no attention to my faith or the lack of it. I entered law enforcement for a few years working part time and then later full time for the town of Bow. It was always my vision as a child to do good things and hopefully make the world a "better place". It also gave me the opportunity to experience the reality of life's challenges that people face every day such as death, sadness and anger as well as despair and joy. I think I became very cynical and negative which made me distance myself from the thought of even believing in God or wondering how could there be a God in such a "bad world." By this time I had a family and had adopted the mindset of my parents regarding faith and passed it on to my children where it unfortunately continues today.

I left law enforcement and went on serve on active duty for the National Guard for the next 22 years serving in many capacities such as recruiting, supply, training and my last assignment was as a Flight Platoon Sergeant in a helicopter medical evacuation unit which I enjoyed very much. I went on numerous rescue missions during my time there. I remember shortly after I started there as a young soldier, I was once bumped off a mission by, Fred, a more senior soldier who was killed on the mission and never returned home to his family. I remember him telling me before takeoff that I would have plenty of opportunities later in my career to go on these missions. I felt very badly for him and his family as well as some guilt. Such is the life of a soldier but it didn't seem right. Little did I know that 20 years later I would also put my life in the hands of several other men on a helicopter in the White Mountains attempting to retrieve a lost hiker on a rescue hoist and bring him to safety. I felt a bit vindicated that day but will never forget losing my friend Fred.

One day I was asked to go on a flight to a catholic camp called Camp Fatima in Gilmanton, NH. It was a camp where people ages 6-60 with disabilities and challenges could see our helicopter. They could sit, touch and enjoy the experience. I found it very moving. It compelled me to come back as a volunteer counselor which I did for the next 15 years. I found it very rewarding and challenging to work for a week, 24/7, with campers experiencing Down's Syndrome, mental challenges, autism or spine bifida to list a few. We would have a mass daily somewhere at camp whether it was at the chapel, the beach or the woods. I think that was about the time I started my faith journey. These people, beloved by God, carried a burden that the rest of us would struggle to bear. These people were truly the "face of God."

I went on to night school and received my associate and bachelors degree during my time in the military. The next decade was very trying for me and once again my faith was placed on hold. I divorced, retired from the military, started a new career and finished raising my children mostly as a single parent and sent them off to college. Alcohol, rugby and following my children's college athletic careers became my faith and passion.

I still maintained a close relationship with my parents and supported my children through their years at New England College and attended all their college sporting games wherever they might have been in the northeast. It was nice in that I seemed to have been adopted by my kid's friends and fraternities which gave me a sense of being. I coached the men's and women's rugby teams a year or 2 and even played a game or 2 with the men's team. They got a kick out of it and I think they were surprised that I could hold my own at the tender age of 55.

Both my parents died in early 2004. My mother died of breast cancer and my father from an internal bleed. I remember asking my mother in the emergency room why she never told us of her cancer. Her response was “**I ain’t no ----- (expletive) whiner.**” You see, she was my father’s caretaker and nothing was going to interfere with that. That’s the way it was back then. I never had a chance to say goodbye to my father but at least we had a chance to reconcile before they passed. I was lucky enough to meet his doctor who is a member of this parish and he has become a good friend of mine 15 years later. After their passing, my world became very small. My children were grown and out of school and life started to consist of bars, Old Men’s rugby games and nights alone at home. My lifestyle continued for several more years until around 2008. My daughter and her friend had introduced me to her friend’s mother. She was a beautiful woman that I had seen before but did not know. She pursued **ME** for several months, but I was a little slow on the uptake, but finally, through a chain of events, we ended out together on that date on September 6th, 2008 at 8:01 PM (to be exact).

She **too** at one point in her life had lost her faith and after some conversation, we decided to try several different churches. She and her family had always been members of St. Paul’s and we ended out here. I felt I had found my faith and a greater purpose and so did she. We continued our relationship, attended St. Paul’s and on May 23, 2010, I was baptized and confirmed by Bishop Robinson and asked Kathy to marry me in the St. Paul’s garden that afternoon. It was great day!!! The following year we were married at St. Paul’s by Rev. Kate on February 19th.

My journey at St. Paul’s has taken me down many paths and ministries. The more I got to know people here, the more I was driven to become

more involved whether it be alter guild, acolyting, painting bathrooms or working in the Food Pantry which is and has been the most rewarding position I have ever held of my life. Most clients we serve at the pantry have been new to me and some I have known for decades or generations during the course of my life socially or professionally. Regardless, whoever they are, I have grown to know that they too represent “the face of God.”

Little did I know that during this time I would also have the opportunity to get to know so much more about Kathy and her mother, Genevieve, and the challenges they endured throughout their lives. Challenges that very few could or ever should endure. These 2 women have **also** become the “face of God” to me. I’ve come to admire their kindness, courage and selflessness. I feel this way through experience and not because of kinship. Anyone who knows Kathy will tell you that she is the kindest person you could know. Unfortunately, we lost Kathy’s mother several years ago but not before she was able to pass on her qualities to Kathy.

The last event that helped solidify my faith was a major heart attack in late December of 2017. I remember many things about it and the effect it had on me. Reverend Kate took time from her busy schedule to see me and offer prayer in the emergency room and all the support I received from the pantry volunteers. One volunteer affectionately and jokingly even refers to himself as one of the “pantry minions”. Each took on some aspect of my duties to keep it all going until my return several months later. All of these people truly represent “the face of God. I was also very blessed to have Kathy by my side with love, understanding and compassion to say nothing of putting up with my

frustration and grumpiness in the healing process. She'll never know how grateful and indebted to her I am.

Throughout my life I have seen "the face of God" in many forms. Socially, professionally and every day I walk out the door **and** into this glorious place of worship. Good people, rich people, poor people and people whose intentions need to be redirected, **including myself**, as I have made my fair share of poor decisions in my life that I have regretted.

I will conclude by saying that the women I have mentioned; my mother, Gertrude, my sister, Sandra, my mother in law, Genevieve, and wife Kathy have best represented the "face of God" I have come to know. They have endured, carried the cross, fallen, risen with strength, kindness and forgiveness and they have sacrificed themselves for so many others.

I would like to refer you back again to Psalm 27.

Verse 11 "You speak in my heart and say, Seek my face

*Your face, Lord, will I seek

AMEN

