

UNFINISHED BUSINESS

July 2019

By all appearances John was as gruff as they come. A seasoned and successful businessman, he had a well developed sense of how things ought to be done, and little patience with those who dared to suggest an unexamined alternative. He was eighty when I met him and had been a Trustee of the church for nearly fifty years. Old school and conservative, particularly when it came to matters of the building and finances, he was a force to be reckoned with. You earned your way with John. He respected good home work, a clear grasp of facts and issues, and an understanding of the implications of a proposal under consideration. You still did it John's way, but sometimes he would incorporate your ideas into his decision.

A bear of a man, he was always in church on Sunday, always in the same pew with his tiny, bubbly wife. He loved music, appreciated a good sermon, and was generous in his support of the church. It wasn't until a 50th anniversary celebration that I discovered that John had never joined the church. I asked around and no one seemed to know why. People didn't seem particularly comfortable talking about it either. They would simply say: "John is John." I had the feeling that I had stumbled into some unfinished business.

A year or so passed. His health began to decline. There were hospitalizations and many pastoral calls. One afternoon John and I were sitting together in his sunny parlor. Our conversations had become easier as we had both come to know each other better. We were able to talk at a deeper level. Finally, I took a deep breath, and said what I had wanted to say for a long time: "John, I've been wondering why you never joined the church. You've been so active, so faithful for so long." And I added, "I'd like to invite you to become a member of the church." He appeared stunned as he looked at me. Then, in awe, I watched as tears began to form in his eyes, and listened as he began to tell his story.

He'd been ten or eleven, beginning the classes that would lead to church membership. A hat had disappeared from church and John was accused by the pastor of stealing it. His denials were unbelievably brushed aside. He wasn't allowed to join the church, and he vowed then that he never would join the church. But he did stay with the church because, even at an early age, he loved music, appreciated a good sermon, and had a generous spirit. Then he told me something that broke my heart. "Dick, that was over seventy years ago, and you are the first pastor who has ever invited me to join the church. Thank you!"

John died several years later. He never did join the church. But that wasn't the point - at the end he knew he was welcome in 'his church.' His Memorial Service was a celebration of a good and generous man. I learned an important lesson. There's always more to a person's story, and often there is unfinished business. We are called to listen, to offer gracious hospitality, and be a community where all are welcomed by a healing presence.