How did you know him? How did you know John O’Hear?

Did you know him as husband, father, grandfather, Rector, Prophet, Pastor, or friend?

To know him as husband was to know him has John. It was to know that you, Molly, were living with your best friend, to know that you were adored, and living with a well spring of good will and abundant laughter. And there was depth in knowing him as husband that seldom happens for in the hospital Molly said, “Cal I remember a prayer that John used to love which had the phrase in it ‘faithless fears and worldly anxiety’. John Martiner helped me find it. Titled Trustfulness it goes:

O Most loving Father, who wills us to give thanks for all things, to dread nothing but the loss of thee, and to cast all our care on thee, who carest for us; preserve us from faithless fears and worldly anxieties, and grant that no clouds of this mortal life may hide from us the light of that love which is immortal, and which thou hast manifested unto us in thy son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

To know him as father was to know him as Daddy, a man of infinite patience, abundant love, and a continual gift of laughter. As Ann said in the hospital, “I don’t know what we did to deserve him.” Later she said, “I always felt safe with Daddy. When I was a teenager growing up in the ‘60s he always listened and respected what I said.” And Betsy summed it up well after his death, “To have him as a father was to live with unconditional love.”

To know him as Grandfather was to know him as Papa. As one grandchild says, “My earliest memory is like a small video. I can picture him laughing and telling a story.” Followed by another who said, “And he knew which stories not to laugh at when they were off color or at the expense of another person. He was a gentleman.” Another said, “He always played games with us as children whether Bagatel, which is like pin ball, or gin rummy or other card games.” What a grandfather, what a Papa to know: laughter, a player of games, and a gentleman.

Others gathered here knew him as Rector. Did you?

What we likely don’t remember is that before he came to Christ Church, he was Rector of St. Paul’s Cleveland Heights where he went as the assistant after graduating from seminary. At the age of 31 he was called to be their Rector. While there he transformed the church with rapid growth. He shepherded the building of a large, stunning, modern sanctuary that to this day still has a spiritual feel to it when you walk into it. And as St. Paul’s has just called a new rector whom they adore, John’s ministry continues to this day through his design of a powerful sacred space. In talking with members of St. Paul’s,
know that we are not alone today in our mourning of his passing and giving thanks for his ministry.

And what was it like to know John as our Rector. He was such a gifted leader that it never seemed he was leading.

He took risks that few Rectors would take. After the death of Martin Luther King, the National Guard was on the streets of Wilmington longer than in any other city. John invited the most firebrands of firebrands to use the Parish Hall of Christ Church as a meeting space to communicate their message of despair, anger, and hope.

And before that, John had supported a trip of clergy from the Diocese of Delaware, led by his first Assistant at Christ Church, Ralph Bayfield, to march with Dr. King in Selma, Alabama. In those days the vestry used to meet in vestry members’ houses for dinner followed by the meeting in the living room. As luck or providence would have it, the night the Vestry debated whether to support Ralph’s trip to Selma, the Vestry met in the country at Canfield Hadlocks. During the meeting, it rained a torrential downpour, so much so that every car of every vestry member was stuck up to its hubcaps in mud. The only exception of Ralph’s VW beetle. So three by three, Ralph took the vestry members home. During the ride each was converted to endorse Ralph’s trip to Selma. It is a story for another day about how one Christ Church parishioner lent this clergy group his corporate plane (not a jet because this was in the 1960’s) to get the Delaware clergy group to the Selma march on time. How John used to love to tell the story of the meeting, the storm, and Ralph in his VW beetle.

As a leader John mobilized the lay leadership of the parish to go forth and do good. A number of the organizations that they started still thrive today 30 years later from West Center City Day Care Center to SODAT drug and alcohol rehabilitation. He set the ground rule that Christ Church would always send people as well as money. So if you trace backward from our current important Outreach work, whether here or in the Dominican Republic, you will find the source, the well spring was John O’Hear.

As the leader of the clergy staff, John was constant encouragement and laughter. His laugh would begin with an Oh, Oh and then go deep down. It was Clarence Snyder, our organist at the time, who told John not to sing too near the choir as it would throw them off key. And I remember a Christmas Pageant when John came in late, down the side aisle in the dark, while David Earnest was going into the pulpit which used to be on that side of the church. When John got to the prayer desk, full of the spirit of Christmas, I held out my hymn book to John and pointed to the verse. John said, “That’s OK Cal, you sing badly enough for both of us.” How fortunate Clarence Snyder, David Earnest, John Scobell, Mrs. Jones, Wilson and Robert Davis and many more were to have him as our leader.

Did you know John as a leader of worship? In those days Christ Church was a low church parish. Morning Prayer was the central service on Sunday. Week after week the Chapel was filled to over flowing with the nine o’clock Family Service. The Church was
used for the 11:00 o’clock service. The two things that were most important were preaching and the prayers that were said. The custom was that every Sunday morning additional prayers were added to the Morning Prayer service. One I remember was written by Ted Ferris former Rector of Trinity Church in Boston. It went like this:

   Teach me, O Lord, not to hold on to life too tightly. Teach me to hold it lightly; not carelessly, but lightly, easily. Teach me to take it as a gift, to enjoy and cherish while I have it, and to let it go gracefully and thankfully when the time comes. The gift is great, but the Giver is greater still. Thou, O God, art the Giver and in thee is the Life that never dies.

Every Sunday, as people greeted the clergy at the door, several would always say, please send me that prayer.

There also was a prayer printed in the weekly bulletin. When you went to peoples houses you would see them cut from the bulletin and hung on a refrigerator. I remember in one house I saw the following hung on the exhaust fan over a stove, “Every Monday morning I feel like quitting, but I say to myself, just give God a little more time.” Thus the services became part of people’s lives. It was not until I left Christ Church that I discovered this practice of adding prayers to the service to make them a rich transferable experience was John’s practice, a practice unique to Christ Church, and not the practice of the whole church.

Did you know John as preacher?

I remember during seminary receiving copies of John’s sermons. When he came to a seminary board meeting I saw John and said, John, “You should back off the challenges you are giving the congregation in terms of social action (remember this is the late 60s), a call for justice, and a mandate for giving time and engaging those in our city who were far less fortunate than the members Christ Church. If you keep this up, you are likely to get fired.” John with a twinkle in his eye answered, “Cal, you have to plow the field before you plant the corn.” And his sermons had pastoral depth. As one parishioner from those days recently told me, “After my husband died, I felt like every sermon he preached was just for me.”

And you may have known what it was like to be invited to the Rectory for Sunday dinner after church and experience ‘thirst after righteousness.”

Did you know John as a pastor?

Did you meet with him in his office which was in the Rectory, share a burden, receive wise counsel and know that what you had talked about would never be shared with anyone else? I never heard John once talk about someone he counseled or supported through a difficult time. It was only from the people he helped that I learned what he had done. I remember a couple who gave John the hardest of times on his social action positions and yet John traveled to another city be with them when their child ran into real
difficulties and they found themselves otherwise utterly alone. And in the words of the 23rd Psalm “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death”, John would be there even at the deepest of sorrows when parents who were his parishioners buried their child.

John’s leadership was known far beyond Christ Church.

At General Convention of our national church, John was known as a delegate decade after decade. He would come back from these General Conventions talking about what it was to be in windowless rooms during the heat of summer for a week doing the Lord’s work. Do you remember when he came back from the convention held in South Bend and preached about how the church got a “case of the South Bends” instead of just the bends one would get from rapid decompression?

John walked step by step with John Hines our Presiding Bishop and was ahead of the church on every issue of the day. An example is the ordination of women which gives us today the gift of having clergy like Heather to minister to us.

His favorite organization was the Virginia Seminary where he was a member of the Board of Trustees for 21 years. In those days the Episcopal Church was known officially as PECUSA or Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America and the seminary was officially known as the Protestant Episcopal Virginia Seminary. But for John it was The Seminary or The Holy Hill. The Seminary knew John as its most loyal alumnus. He was so respected that when he headed a search committee for a new Dean, the search committee he led turned the tables on John and elected him Dean. But John decided he did not have the academic credentials to accept.

Yet John’s theological understanding ran deep. Professors like Albert T. Molligen known as Mollie, Clifford Stanley known as Cliff, both of whom were students of Reinhold Neibhbour, Walter Russell Bowie who wrote Hymns # 563 in our Hymn Book, and Jess Trotter who was Dean, the theological giants of his day, knew that John was their equal.

How did John’s nurses and doctors in the hospital know John these last two weeks?

They knew his same good will and sense of humor which he lived his life. When John woke up after his surgery, he said to his nurses, “I like it here”. And later he told the following story to the nurses and doctor who were ministering to him. Noah, John said, was loading the ark two by two and in doing so checked off each animal with its mate. So the giraffe had a mate, the donkey had a mate, the zebra had a mate. Then someone asked Noah, “Where is your mate?” And Noah answered, “I hope to meet her on the cruise.”

Which brings us to today. We have asked how you knew John: husband, Daddy, Papa and Rector, leader of worship, preacher, pastor, board member, and student of theology, or friend.
We have covered all the relationships save one. And that is, how did God know John.

God knew John as his child in baptism, knew him as John Legare, a sheep of his own flock, and marked as Christ’s own for ever. God, I think, knew John as a citizen of two worlds. For while John lived on earth, he always knew that by God’s grace he was a citizen of heaven as well.

In the words of the prayer that Molly remembered John loved so well, “Grant that no clouds of this mortal life may hide from us the light of that love which is immortal, and which thou manifested unto us in thy Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.”

John’s courage, insight, and laughter were all products of having utter confidence in the love of God for himself and every person he met. This confidence, this faith took away any fear John may have had and replaced it with an endless bank account of good will that John spent so lavishly on each of us that knew him. His contagious laughter replaced doubt with hope.

The hard part comes for us now as we say good bye to a dear, dear friend we have known in so many ways.

But we ultimately take heart, that while we are saying good bye, John now is being greeted in heaven by so many friends who are saying here he comes. Picture those on that glorious shore saying we know him well: those he worked with and led like David, John, Wilson and Bill and people he knew and loved so well as parishioners like Pete, Chuck, Ellie, Molly, Jane, and Jane and thousands more. And picture the theologians like Molly, Cliff, and Jess waiting for him with open arms ready to compare notes as to where they got it right and where they under estimated The Lord our God who broke the bounds of death to provide each of us life ever lasting when our earthly pilgrimage is through.

Amen

Let us pray:

We seem to give him back to you, dear God, who gave him to us. Yet, as you did not loose him in giving, so we have not lost him by his return. Not as the world gives, give, you O Lover of souls! What you give, you take not away. For what is thine is ours always. And life is eternal; and love is immortal; and death is only a horizon; and a horizon is nothing save the limit of our sight. Lift us up, strong Son of God, that we may see further. Draw us closer to you that we may know ourselves nearer to our beloved who is with thee. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen