

Ronald Phillip St. George  
June 21, 1962 ~ March 29, 2017  
St. Augustine's in-the-Woods Episcopal Church, Freeland WA  
May 13, 2017

There's so much to say today about this moment, and this wonderful, shy, introverted, amazingly strong, compassionate, funny man! Where do you begin?!

I remember when Ron first came to this place – “to check you out” he later told me – the “you” meaning the whole congregation. He also said that he'd pretty much decided after his first visit that this is where he wanted to be, because he couldn't remember the last time he'd been welcomed the way he was here.

And once here, he gave his heart and soul to this place! And we all saw it. So I think you begin – where we begin – is with two words: the first is “love,” the second is “friendship.”

For someone as introverted as Ron he sure has a lot of friends who continue to love him! How could you not?! He had that aura around him that's reminiscent of the much-loved teddy bears of our youth! The dry humor that snuck up on you when you weren't expecting it; the thoughtfulness that – because he was an introvert – suddenly emerged full-grown and artfully rounded. And the compassion for others which, I believe, he was born with, and which only grew as he experienced others' compassion for him.

I know that Ron was often underestimated - first, because I underestimated him (though I say in my defense, only once!); then because I watched others underestimate him! Beneath the cuddly exterior was a steely, unbending strength rarely seen, and often misunderstood because it was deployed with respect and gentleness.

I think he would be surprised by how many people love him (present tense). & probably a little embarrassed, too.

Another thing that those of us who worked with Ron will remember was his capacity for getting things done. He did so much stuff around here! But unless you were present to watch it, you'd never know. I worked with Ron when he was on our vestry – our parish board – when he was each of its two vice-presidents, called Junior and Senior Warden, then when he was the parish treasurer. And I watched as he artfully created a local branch of the Episcopal Church's “Integrity” organization – specifically for gays, lesbians, transgendered folk, but open to anyone who wanted to come. He was instrumental in getting Fr. Bill's donated house ready for sale, getting the sound system installed, arranging for replacing our antiquated electrical furnace for this space with a heat pump which - blessedly - also acts as an air conditioner. I could go on, but you get the picture!

In all of these things, Ron never wanted credit, he only wanted community. “It's been an honor to serve” he told me. Today is an outgrowth of that desire for community rather than for credit– he wanted this day to be more about who we are than about who he was. ***I did tell him that would be a little tricky, considering who he was!***

Ron and I spent quite a bit of time on several occasions after his diagnosis talking about this day. He was really clear that this is a good day, that it's a time to celebrate. He was also really clear that he didn't want to fade quietly into the night without sharing with all of you the joy he experienced in living here on Whidbey, and being here at St. Augustine's.

So, first, he said, we should – actually he said “must!” – celebrate the fact that twenty years ago he nearly died – was, he was later told, within weeks of dying – but he didn't. Not only did he not die, he said, he has had (present tense) “a great 20 years” after that day. Yes, physically, there have been ups and downs following that time; but he said he didn't want to be defined by any challenges, only by the joys of these “happy, blessed” years, and most particularly the people with whom he shared them – which includes especially everyone here

today.

Then, he said, he wanted you to hear words of **“tolerance, acceptance, and love”** – because that what he experienced here. I have to say that the way I would talk about “tolerance, acceptance and love” is in three words: “Ron St. George.”

But then, I am the preacher today, so I have to say a *little* more!

His journey as a faithful Christian brought him to St. Augustine’s, he said, and the only way he was leaving was “feet-first.” Then he remembered he wanted to be cremated, so he said, with that impish grin on his face: “Of course, I mean that metaphorically.”

In several different ways, though, he’s not leaving this place – we can visit him out in the columbarium; and he – like all of our brothers and sisters-in-Christ who have gone before us, continues to live on in our hearts. I remember Ron and I talking about a passage from the Letter to the Hebrews that says exactly that a few years ago after an Education for Ministry class. He liked it particularly because the whole passage isn’t passive. Here’s what it says: **“*Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith....*”** (Heb: 1-2a).

Ron is a part of that “great cloud of witnesses” surrounding us now – encouraging us, I have no doubt, to continue running with perseverance the race that’s set before us, echoing those core values he wanted us to remember: tolerance, acceptance, love.

Now for my usual reminder: Everything about this service was chosen by Ron. If you want everyone to have a great time at your funeral, see me to plan it!

So what did Ron plan? Well, we did have some fun doing! He talked about replacing his urn with a jack-in-the-box that should be triggered at the most solemn moment in the service! (FYI we didn’t do that!).

Ron particularly wanted me to thank Brandon, Margaret, and Bev, and all of you who cared for him – especially in the last six months, but also in the last 20 years.

He chose hymns he loved not only for their great tunes, but because of the words – so pay attention to the words!

Then we moved to the readings. He said he didn’t want us to think of his dying as somehow too early, because it wasn’t too early for him; he’d had 20 years more than anyone – including him – expected. Things happen in “God’s time” he said. Hence the first reading from Ecclesiastes. I did tell him that the “not too early” bit would be a hard sell for the rest of us, to which he said with mock offense, “well, it’s my funeral, and I’ll do what I want!” But of course, he knew that it’s our funeral too, and that’s why he wanted us to celebrate.

He chose the reading from Corinthians because – well, you can guess why: love is at the heart of creation and of life, and we too easily forget that. For Ron it was always at the heart of his life, even if, he said, he sometimes failed to live up to that commitment.

And he chose that 1 Corinthians passage because wanted everyone – and especially his family – to know how much he loved all of you, even if – as that famously introverted person he was – it didn’t always express it. **BUT WE KNOW IT ANYWAY!**

And he chose the Gospel passage both for that reason, and because it's a reminder for us that love is a great deal more than the romantic meaning we attach to it, that it involves doing hard things as well as easy ones, that it requires a genuine and intentional commitment to others, even – especially – when they seem most unlovable. He would have been overjoyed to see how this moment has brought back together a community that had some struggles a few years back.

That's a fitting place to move on from this moment, placing love at the center – that's what he wanted us to do, though he probably didn't know (until now) that we'd be celebrating that love because we saw it in him: Ronald Phillip St. George – who we all know *will* rest in peace, *and* rise in glory.

And the people said: AMEN!

Nigel Taber-Hamilton