

James & Grover

I first came to Holy Comforter Church, Atlanta, not as its Vicar, but during the church's process for discerning whether I was called to be a priest. I was in a discernment group with nine others. Holy Comforter was our first field placement. Some already knew it as a longstanding mission of the Diocese comprised mostly of people living with chronic mental illness. Most worshippers there lived in group homes and subsisted on a small disability check. Oddly enough, I had never heard of this parish or its mission. Little did I know how much it would shape my future and my faith.

Our assignment was to be present at Holy Comforter each Wednesday evening for ten weeks, as the parish's van brought worshippers from their group homes. We remained through the service and dinner that followed. About 20 parishes in the Atlanta area took turns providing dinner.

On our fourth evening at Holy Comforter, I met Grover. He was about 50, quiet, and soft spoken. As I sat across the table, he told me that he had just gotten out of "detox." He seemed weary, exhausted by the previous ten days, by decades of addiction, and by life itself. He spoke randomly of Westminster School and Northside High School in the posh northwestern precincts of the city, starting to drink as a teenager, drinking while driving, graduating, and finally being too much for his mother to handle. He then sat silent for several minutes, weary and vaguely troubled.

James sat nearby, intently and silently watching. Like Grover, James lived with chronic mental illness. Both had been around Holy Comforter for years. Though neither lived with family, their families attended to their needs through their group homes.

During services, James always seemed happy, often standing before the congregation during singing, waving his hands. His presence increased the joy of my worship. Months later, I would learn that his favorite song was "How Great Thou Art," and I would witness times of weeping during worship. Sometimes he would suddenly stand still and start rocking back and forth. He usually wore a slight, contagious smile. He was often silent, and when he did speak, words flowed out in an unintelligible torrent. Once, however, during a burial service, when I asked the congregation to offer brief remembrances of the deceased, James raised his hand and, in crystal clear diction, said, "She's in heaven."

I sat in silence, feeling helpless to provide the comfort Grover needed. Then, James rose from his chair and stood behind Grover. He patted Grover's right shoulder. Grover looked up and patted James on the back as he returned to his seat.

James didn't explain his gesture, nor did Grover say anything about it. What it meant to them I do not know. What I know is that I saw in James' gesture an act of comfort, his way of telling Grover that he cared and perhaps that he understood and that everything would be alright. What I saw seemed the gentlest of comforts and the simplest gratitude.