

## **“Barroom Buddies”**

My favorite video lasts 12 seconds, its protagonists Barry and Jim Bob, their stage the dining hall of the Friendship Center at Holy Comforter, Atlanta.

Barry wears his dark green Seedtime & Harvest hoodie. He’s a gardener in the Friendship Center. Jim Bob wears a light gray sport coat and a tan polo shirt. Its collar is, well, disorganized. Jim Bob has been a woodworker in that day program, turning rough blocks of wood into delicate bowls. As his health declines, he spends most of his time sitting around with his friends.

Both have shiny bald heads, tanned by the Georgia sun. Jim Bob is almost six feet and Barry a few inches shorter. Barry’s round face is framed by bushy, white sideburns that almost join at his chin, and is otherwise clean-shaven. A tint of brown trims his uncombed hair. Jim Bob’s face is smooth, his grey-specked hair cut close to his scalp. Both sport big smiles. Barry’s reveals a missing tooth. Jim Bob’s is toothless. They have been friends for more years than I know.

Barry loves country music. Sometimes, eyes sparkling, he tests me with trivia questions about the genre and its practitioners. Occasionally he treats me to a rendition of a favorite. Jim Bob, a cradle Episcopalian, migrated to Atlanta from Detroit. He hugs like a bear and sings like a bullhorn, always jubilant, hardly ever in tune.

Both live with chronic mental illness and have spent time in mental hospitals. Walking the streets, they might appear homeless, but they live in group homes. Theirs is life at the margins, always vulnerable, often exploited. Yet, they exude joy and warmth.

One afternoon, I walk into the parish hall, and there they stand, just inside the door, forehead to forehead, nose to nose, in mock quarrel. In rapid give and take, Barry peppers Jim Bob with questions, and Jim Bob fires back:

Jim Bob:        Hey!  
Barry:            Wha’ cha lookin’ at?  
Jim Bob:        You!  
Barry:            Wha’ cha lookin’ at me for?  
Jim Bob:        We’re buddies!  
Barry:            I ain’t your buddy!  
Jim Bob:        We’re buddies!  
Barry:            Who’re you? ... Who’m I? ... Who’re we?

They pivot to face me, arms around each other’s shoulders, and smiling broadly, they sing: “Barroom buddies!” Once I can stop laughing, I ask for a reprise and reach for my iPhone.

They have gone to be with Jesus, their deaths early, like many affected by mental illness and its shadows of neglect and poverty.

They live in memory, in digital video, and forever in the heart of God.

Mike Tanner