

SNAPSHOT MEMORIES
The Reverend Raymond P. Jennings, Th.D

I think in pictures. Can't help it; it is just the way *I'm wired*. I am typing with a computer monitor before me but the screen is filled not with words but with a succession of memories much like flipping the pages of a photo album. I have tried to avoid this moment of remembrance since learning of Ray's death. I believe it will bring me both tears and smiles as I share with you what he meant to me as mentor, friend, and colleague.

The first picture that comes to mind is that of a black felt hat, a classy chapeau, with his business card stuck inside the clear plastic headband. Ray and Irene had traveled to Syracuse, NY for the big interview with the Search Committee and to meet the staff. I liked him right away and so did the others. After the visits, I noticed that he had left his hat on top of the coat rack. I had already discerned that he was very smart and now I wondered if maybe a bit forgetful! When he and Irene arrived on the scene a few months later, I inquired about his leaving the hat behind. He laughed and said, "Oh, I did that on purpose. I wanted everyone in the office to know that I was coming back to Old First!"

The second picture that pops up on my mental screen is that of my baptism. When Ray suggested that I was a candidate for ordination and that First Baptist should ordain me, I was thrilled by the prospect but I felt unworthy. Not because of my training, preparation and sense of Call, but because I was still a Methodist! I knew that if I were to belong and serve in the Baptist tradition than I needed to identify fully with it. This meant baptism by immersion. So, Ray taught me most of what I know about being *Baptist*. I remember being supported by his strong arms as I came up in the water. It is an analogy of how wonderfully he supported me throughout my ministry with his spiritual care peppered with just the right amount of wisecracks, jokes, writings and flying ash and sparks from his pipe. I can't remember a shirt, tie or suit that didn't bear the marks of his love for that pipe! I was glad he gave it up for the sake of his health but, you know, I kinda missed it, too. Often, when I peeked into his office to see if he was free to talk with me, I'd see him fully engrossed in his concentration on what he was typing with the pipe smoke circling his head like a halo.

Two other mental pictures are that of following him around a funeral home and making hospital rounds. I had never prepared a funeral meditation nor did I know the protocol and routine with the director and family. I remember him asking the family members for bits of information like scripture, songs, poetry, movies, pets, hobbies, etc. that the deceased liked. I was amazed at how well he drew conversation out of the grieving folks before him and how much he picked up about that the themes that made that individual's life complete. The process was a form of grief therapy and their brokenness was made whole in that moment of sharing the life of someone they love. The other was in a hospital room. I watched him pray with a patient in such a tender and reassuring manner because he opened with the petition that the hospital room become a sanctuary in which he or she would always feel the nearness of God. For thirty years, I have employed that

simple request in my hospital prayers. It always takes my spirit to the throne of God's heart as I hold the hand of the one for whom I pray.

The snapshot memories come quickly. I can still see him and Irene standing at the grave of Mom Hallstrand as he spoke words of appreciation and assurances. Ray was a faithful friend as well as pastor to many of us.

There is a photo I came across in one of my bibles recently. It was the last Easter we were a team at First Baptist. I had just been called to the Oneida Baptist Church. Irene had made the pulpit hanging and Ray and I were standing behind the pulpit. I looked so young! So did Ray! The year was 1978. He had helped me develop my skills in preaching, teaching, pastoral care and administration. He had made me his full partner in ministry over a five year period. I was ready to leave the tutor and grow on my own. As I look at our facial expressions, I see us looking into the future with excitement that God was already there! The work each of us was to be given would be exciting; the friendships abiding; the challenges engaging and the ending satisfying.

These are just a few of the many snapshot memories I have been enjoying in reflection. I miss him on this plane but I still feel his influence and can see him in what I do and say as I minister. Ray never retired from ministry; he kept it going in retirement.

My father preached my ordination sermon using as his theme, *God is forever beginning*. Ray liked it. Along with this idea, he wrote in the May 17, 1976 issue of Tower Topics, the newsletter from First Baptist, Syracuse, NY the following, "*Nothing is quite as difficult, perhaps, as the process of "becoming"... developing...changing...experiencing what my grandmother called "growing pains." Life is always moving...life means change. ... It is so much more secure to feel that one has 'arrived.'*" The Apostle Paul shared his view of what it meant to die as a person of faith in Jesus Christ. He used the expression in I Cor. 15:51-53 "that in an instant, in the twinkling of an eye, we are changed into what is immortal." So quickly for a lifelong process of becoming a whole person with a mature faith! ***Ray, dear friend, you have "arrived" and heaven and earth celebrate you and welcome you to the fellowship of those who are forever beginning with God!***"

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