

Dear Apostles Friends,

I have something a little different for you today. I hope this little story puts a smile on your face. Take care.

Bert

“Honey, I miss our Friday adventures.”

I wasn't sure I had heard Bonnie correctly. We were talking (semi-shouting, really) through the open windows of our respective cars while we waited in the parking lot of our favorite restaurant for our take-out dinners. There was an empty space between our two vehicles, the cars mimicking their owners by maintaining a respectable distance as if to avoid potential contamination from an inadvertent door ding or wiper splash. Like Laurie and me, Bonnie and her husband, Joe, were regulars at this little family-owned seafood house. We knew them well enough to exchange greetings and small talk if the hostess led us past their table on the way to ours, back when we had dinner inside the restaurant. We love this place and the family whose lives and livelihoods are intertwined within. Our loyalty brings us to this parking lot every Friday evening. So, too, with Bonnie and Joe, it seemed. This particular Friday Bonnie and I were making solo runs so Joe and Laurie could enjoy the additional benefit of table side delivery. How odd that my best conversation with Bonnie would be through two open car windows at a distance of 20 feet or better.

Even at this distance I had no trouble seeing Bonnie's piercing blue eyes that gave an indication of the power in her short, slight frame. She was mid-60-ish, but she often bubbled over with the energy and enthusiasm of a teenager. You could hear that enthusiasm in her voice, despite the evidence of many years of cigarette smoking. Her wild shock of grey hair was bound unhappily into a pony tail, but it was obvious the pony did not go willingly. She smiled easily and often, especially when favoring her listener with an endearment like “Honey, Sweetie, or Sugar,” which she did frequently.

“Did you say something about Friday adventures?” I asked.

“Yes, I did, Sweetie. Some Fridays I'd get home from work - Joe would already be home because he got off before me - and he'd ask me what's for supper. I'd say, 'Forget supper! Go throw some clothes in a suitcase. We're going on an adventure!' You see, sometimes I just can't sit still. I just gotta get up and go. There are so many places I haven't seen. And off we'd go for the weekend. Sometimes we'd go to the mountains. Sometimes we'd go to the beach. A few times I talked Joe into taking me to the city. I even got him to go to a play once. Can you believe it, Honey? Well, Joe couldn't either. We went to see “Hair” - you remember it, don't

you, Sweetie? All that great music from the '60s! Age of Aquarius! Of course, Joe grew up on a farm and can't hear too good from all those years on the tractor and then his job at Frick. He thought they were singing 'Age of Asparagus.' Still, everything was ok 'til the end of Act 2 when the whole cast took their clothes off. Joe says I took him to get cultured, and he came back scarred for life."

I knew Joe to be a quiet fellow with an engaging smile and wonderfully expressive eyes that he used to punctuate his wife's monologues. He might roll them, close them and shake his head, or wink, depending on where Bonnie's conversation wandered. I thought I knew Joe well enough to say he was certainly not scarred for life. "What's Joe been doing with himself during this pandemic?" I asked. I had touched a nerve.

"Not near enough, Honey, if you ask me," was her immediate reply. "He thinks the governor has given him permission to sit on his rumpus and do nothing all day. I can't stand it. I have to be doing something. I have always liked to work. I like the people I've met through work, and getting something done makes me feel good. Joe thought that after he retired from Frick I'd retire, too, and we'd spend all day sitting on the front porch watching the dandelions slowly take over the yard. I've already retired and un-retired three times. He had it in his mind that I'd slow down when I turned 65, but I had a little surprise for him. I left work a little early and stopped by the Penn State campus in Mont Alto on my way back up the mountain. When I got home, he started in with the usual 'where you been and what's for supper' stuff. I just laid the course catalog in front of him and told him, 'If you're done working you need to at least keep using your brain. You have an appointment with an admissions counselor at 9 AM tomorrow. If you're just going to sit there, you might as well look through that book and pick out some classes.' Well, he complained like all get out, but he did it, and now he'd be the first to tell you that he loves going to college, Sugar. He likes arguing with the professors and just being around the kids. I think they make him feel younger. Of course, he hates computers, so he's not much on this distance learning stuff." She paused, and seemed to study her darkened dash board for a moment. "I don't think he even logs in anymore."

I almost didn't recognize our favorite server, Christie, in her face mask and gloves as she placed the bags containing our dinners in our respective back seats: two rockfish specials for Laurie and me, crab cake for Bonnie, and chicken Chesapeake for Joe. We had paid for our dinner earlier by credit card. Bonnie seemed to still be looking for answers in her blank dashboard. She made no move to turn the key in the ignition, so I didn't either.

"I was helping a couple older ladies in their homes - helping with medication, bathing and dressing, doing some light cleaning, running errands. Then their kids got really scared about the virus and having someone come into the home. I don't help those ladies very much anymore. I used to help my daughter and her husband flip houses. I'm no carpenter, but I could clean, scrape, and paint with the best of them. Now they just want me to watch my

grandson, Billy, so they can work without taking Billy out anywhere. We used to take him with us and make a safe little area where he could play but not wander off. Now they say that's an unnecessary risk, and it's better to leave Billy at home. 'All help is good help, Mama,' my daughter says, 'and God blesses all helpers. Remember the parable of the workers in the vineyard.' I suppose she's right, and I love my grandson very much, but it seems to me that God blesses the helpers who really put some effort into it the most."

That rockfish smelled wonderful, and Christie was giving me puzzled looks as she weaved her way through the parking lot with more delicious dinners, but neither Bonnie nor I made a move to go. "It will end, you know," I said finally. "It will end, and we'll all find our new normal. I don't know what that new normal will look like, but I believe with all my heart that it will have adventures in it. Tell Joe he better take some language classes because your adventures in the new normal might take you farther than you've ever gone before. "At some point Bonnie had looked up from the inscrutable dashboard and was now staring straight at me. The beginnings of a smile were just starting to turn the corners of her mouth upward. I continued, "The new normal will be a place where you can work as hard as you like for as long as you like at tasks you really enjoy. I firmly believe it. Tell Joe to take some cooking classes so he can ask himself what's for supper".

Her smile got a little bigger. "If he does, do I have to eat what he fixes?"

"I'm afraid you do," I replied.

"Then you're not half as afraid as I am, Sweetie," she said as she turned the ignition switch and reached for the transmission shifter. She smiled as she slipped the car into reverse. "See you next week, Sugar."

*Precious Lord, thank you for adventures and adventurers. Thank you for workers and learners, goers and doers, sitters and watchers. Thank you for helpers, great and small, and especially for helpers who "really put some effort into it." Thank you for my friends, Bonnie and Joe. Please bless, guide, and protect them -and us - as we adventure through life in the new normal. And Lord please, watch out especially for Joe and provide him the strength he needs. I think he may need a lot. Amen.*