

## Grace Notes

### "God's grace for everyday living" Give me that old time religion

By: Debora M. Coty

It was a cold, damp Sunday morning in late October. The Smoky Mountain mist was bone-chilling at our remote cabin as my family bundled up and filed solemnly outside to our car. My husband, Chuck, flipped on the heater to tone down the bite of the frosty air.

We were on our annual fall leaf-looking expedition to the mountains of North Carolina and as the Lord's Day rolled around, we felt obliged to seek a house of worship.

The church we were headed for was literally over the river and through the woods on twisting mountain roads, a forty-minute drive if the weather held.

The atmosphere inside our car was mostly cloudy as four cold, grumpy people approached the bridge leading to our destination, only to encounter a barricade and "Bridge Closed for Repairs" sign. Chuck turned the car around mut-

tering, "Well, I guess that's out. Any ideas?"

I remembered a weathered church sign peeking through the weeds on the side of the winding road we had just traversed. With no better suggestions (except to return to the cabin and meditate on the warmth of our beds), we decided to give it a try

Turning off the main road, we ascended a hill toward a steeple-topped country church bordered by an enormous hickory tree on one side, a centuries-old cemetery on the other, and a drafty outhouse in back. As we timidly climbed the wooden steps, we were greeted by surprised smiles and heart-felt handshakes as if we were the only visitors this little church had seen in a long while.

My family sat on a polished wooden pew as the entire congregation (all fifteen of them) gathered around an old upright piano in the corner. God's presence filled that place as the off-key choir joyfully and



robustly brought in the sheaves, leaned on the everlasting arms, and claimed their places in line when the roll is called up yonder. I felt like I had stepped back in time. A warm tear ticked my nose when they launched into my long-deceased grandmother's favorite, "The Church in the Wildwood."

I doubted many of the worshippers in my large, urbanized church in Brandon, Florida had ever heard those beloved old hymns, much less felt their hearts transported to God's throne by a group of mountain folks in their best frocks' and overalls. For me, it was truly an unexpected slice of heaven.

Then, when I thought my spiritual temperature couldn't get any higher without bursting my heart right out of my chest, a strapping, young man who doubled as a farmer during

the week and preacher on Sundays strode purposefully to the pulpit. He preached a rousing sermon encouraging his flock to "Walk Close to the Lord," complete with an unforgettable illustration that went something like this:

"When I was a boy, my daddy used to take me coon huntin' after dark. Some nights, the woods were pitch black and Daddy would walk in front of me to blaze a trail. As long as I was right behind him, followin' in his footsteps, I was protected. But the minute I started to day-dream and fall back or stray from the path he'd

made for me...whack! A low branch he had pushed aside would pop back in my face and knock the snot outta me.

"Followin' our heavenly father is the same way. If we don't stay close and follow directly in his footsteps, we're gonna get the snot knocked outta us by the devilish tree limbs of life."

By his simple but explicit analogy, that country preacher translated a profound spiritual truth into terms everyone could grasp and would likely always remember.

In our effort to modernize, sterilize, homogenize, and otherwise appeal to the cultured masses, our churches may have lost something precious. It's that element of "real"... too simplistic and unsophisticated for today's worship services that often come across as *productions*.

Maybe we just need to have the snot knocked out of us once in a while to reconnect with the raw, first-love joy of our faith...and bring in a few of those sheaves ourselves.