

Henry Sunderman

by Roland Foster

*There are no professionals at the game of life —
those who live joyfully are gifted amateurs.*

The first Sunday we ever went to St. Andrew's Lutheran Church, we were greeted — not at the door; out in the parking lot — by a short man with a big smile, warm words, and a strange handshake. Henry Sunderman had very long fingers for a man his size, and he was missing the ring finger and pinkie and half the palm of his right hand. Shaking Henry's hand was like shaking a snake.

"Hello. Welcome, welcome. I'm so glad you're here." By the time he had accompanied us to the church door, Henry knew our names, including the children's, where we lived, how long we had lived there, where I worked — about as much information as can be extracted in a couple of minutes. The "official" greeters for the day were just inside the door. Henry introduced us to them, then went back to the parking lot to greet some more folks.

Why? Why greet people who were going to be greeted again as soon as they hit the door? My explanation is that Henry was so filled with the Spirit of God that the "living water," as Jesus named it, was sloshing over, and he wanted to splash as many people as he could. He loved God and he loved people with tremendous joy and energy, and it came out as a joyful ministry of welcoming people in the parking lot, lifting their spirits, making them feel welcome and worthwhile and loved.

Henry retired, and he and Mabel moved to Maine, where they had a summer cottage. After one Maine winter they moved to Florida. We kept in touch via Christmas card notes during the next few years. Henry's notes were always hand-written two- and three-page letters, bringing us up to date on their lives and expressing ongoing interest in ours.

Two things stand out in my memory of Henry, both in person and through his notes. First, he never once complained or made a negative statement about anyone or anything, as far as I know. Not even about Maine winters; he just said Florida's climate was better for old bones. He was a thoroughly positive person. And, secondly, he loved people. He didn't exploit them, he blessed them. That was his purpose in life.

When I depart this earthly life, I fully expect to be greeted outside the Pearly Gates by a short man with a big smile, warm words of welcome, and a funny handshake. Then Henry will take me over and introduce me to Saint Peter. I'm looking forward to it.