

What makes a tree grow tall and healthy?

The Danville News

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“Jury Duty”

Word Count: 750

On February 25 the letter arrived. I filled out the form that accompanied the summons and mailed it on February 27. I had been summoned “to appear as a prospective juror for Montour County” on April 12. The two page summons explained the details of this summons: juror’s rights, parking, attire, \$9 a day, what happens if the summons is ignored, requirements for exemption. Prohibited were electronic devices, newspapers, coffee and doughnuts too. We were warned against bringing into the building scissors, knives, firearms, chemical sprays, box cutters, knitting needles. A notebook and a book would suffice. I’m not leashed to a cell phone anyway.

Now that I’m officially retired, I had been expecting to be summoned. I’d visited courtrooms often enough in my profession, more often to minister to church members who had been accused of something, but never as a juror. Several times I was asked to supervise juveniles who were sentenced with community service. Seasoned pastors are familiar with courthouses. Those in my profession, however, often are excluded from jury duty. Some suppose it’s because pastors are regarded too lenient and merciful. Others suppose the exact opposite, that we relish how fire and brimstone can persuade wicked miscreants to atone for their sins. The banal reason is because we’re self-employed, never congregational employees. Should a parish emergency occur, we’re obligated to leave the jury box.

Given the busy and erratic nature of my lack of retirement despite my retirement, I phoned the Jury Clerk to gain a clearer perspective on the time commitment involved. She returned my call, explaining that after arriving by 9 AM, jurors would likely be selected from the pool by noon. She couldn’t sketch out the time commitment should I be invited to sit in the jury box.

Come April 12th, the parking lots were full by 8:30 AM. The summoned entered. The friendly guard inspected our bags as we passed through the magnetometer. The second floor courtroom filled up by 8:55, ten pews averaging five persons per pew. The clerks asked everyone to sit. I read a Mark Twain short story while waiting. Finally, one of the Clerks welcomed us, spoke about how to process necessary forms for employers, then, after reminding us about the daily \$9 plus mileage, took the roll call. Our name was called. We replied, “Present,” and mentioned how many miles we drove. Five names did not say, “Present.” Their absence was recorded. I continued reading. The Judge’s door opened and the Clerks were invited into the chambers. I read on. The Clerks returned. The roll call ended. I continued reading.

Bailiff entered. He announced: “All rise.” We did. Judge Gary Norton, properly robed, entered. I wear one too. Common origins. We were invited to recite the pledge of allegiance. Almost everyone did. Judge Norton proceeded to thank us for complying with our civic duty. He extolled the virtues of a fair jury of peers and our rights under our Constitution -- although for some strange reason he failed to mention that the Presbyterian Constitution shaped both the form and spirit of the US Constitution. I felt it my duty to remind him of that. We the people reject coronations and royalty. The law is our king, wrote Paine. He could have added how rights require moral responsibilities. The second amendment comes to mind.

Norton continued, explaining when a defendant sees over fifty persons prepared to sit in judgment, where the defendant would have to “look us in the eyes,” often enough they plead out. A jury, he said, requires defendants to “put up or shut up.” Judge Norton then announced we would have the rest of the day off.

I put my book into my zippered portfolio, waved to a familiar clerk, mentioned that Presbyterian thing to the judge, and went home for another cup of coffee.

Citizenship is indeed a remarkable gift. And responsibility. And privilege.

Tomorrow is Arbor Day, inspired by the editor of the Nebraska City News. On April 10, 1872, Nebraska City celebrated the first Arbor Day by planting over a million trees. Its story spread. Others followed their example. President Teddy Roosevelt issued his Arbor Proclamation to all school-children. Nixon signed it into law as a national holiday, along with his other environmental programs.

What makes a tree grow tall and healthy? Sunlight, water, space, nutrients from the soil. What makes our nation grow forth healthy and tall? Sunlight of truth, water of law, space of freedom, and the nutrients of citizenship.