

A Sermon by Alex Evans
Blacksburg Presbyterian Church, Blacksburg, VA
From Sunday, October 14, 2007

Ephesians 4; I Corinthians 13 (selections)

“A Legacy of Love and Life”

My great-grandfather, on my father’s side, Erasmus Hervey Evans, was born in 1861. That is the same year as the start of the Civil War.

This great-grandfather lived most of his life in and around Laurinburg, NC, which is between Fayetteville and Charlotte in Scotland County, in the southern part of the state. He was a tutor. He was a farmer. He also worked other jobs, even sometimes in Florida, to make a living. But most of his life was lived around Laurinburg, and his legacy lingers there.

My great-grandmother, Mattie McNair, was born in 1871. She also lived mostly in and around Laurinburg, NC. She grew up in Laurel Hill, outside of Laurinburg. She was a member of three Presbyterian churches – the Old Laurel Hill church, the First Presbyterian Church of Maxton, and the Laurinburg Presbyterian Church.

Next Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday, I will be in NC, preaching and teaching in and around Laurinburg. I have been invited to give the Memorial Bible Lectures there. Back in 1960, my grandfather established these Memorial Lectures in honor of his parents – my great-grandparents – E.H. Evans and Mattie McNair Evans Patterson. Every year, a preacher or teacher is invited by these three churches to come, to preach, to lead a seminar for pastors, and to give three lectures during the evenings across three days. So I will be preaching at the Old Laurel Hill church next Sunday morning, and then doing lectures at Laurinburg Presbyterian Church in the evenings. My topic is the development of a series of sermons on Moses that I preached here last spring, combined with insights and experiences from the tragedy at Virginia Tech. My emphasis will be lives of trust and discipleship: how do we live faithfully with the challenges that come our way? How do we live with faith and love amidst the ups and downs of life?

It is a special honor for me to give these lectures in Laurinburg. I come in a long line of preachers and teachers every year since 1963. Previous lecturers and preachers put the pressure on me! They include such names as Elton Trueblood, George Buttrick, Robert McAfee Brown, John Leith, Will Willimon, Donald Shriver, Tom Long, Isabel Rogers, Shirley Guthrie, Doug Oldenburg, and many others. I do not pretend to bring that depth of scholarship and name recognition, and I am humbled to be on the list with them.

I am also honored to do these lectures and sermons because of the legacy of which I am a part – a descendant of my great-grandparents, for whom the lectures are named. We do not get to pick the families into which we are born. I have been richly blessed to be born into a family of faithful Presbyterians – my parents, my grandparents, my great-grandparents – all of whom have sought to live faithfully, to love deeply, to give generously, and to serve God in all things. This does not mean they always did it, but they sought to live this way. And I also know that all of us are challenged – and I am especially challenged to live out of my heritage - and to live into a good legacy, especially when it is about loving God and serving God with our lives.

Today, I want to share a bit of this heritage and this legacy in hopes that all of us might be inspired to live with more faith, more love, more focus in our call to be disciples, and toward a rich legacy that honors God.

In January, 1976, a shoebox full of letters was discovered in the attic of one of the Evans family homes on Main Street in Laurinburg. These letters in this shoebox were written by my great-grandfather, E. H. Evans to my great-grandmother, Mattie McNair, from August, 1897 to October, 1899. That means the letters were more than 75 years old when they were found. All we have are his letters, not her replies, with the exception of a couple of her letters soon before he died. In fact, my first cousin, Hughes Evans, used these letters in her thesis for her history major at Princeton University in 1980.

These letters move from the beginning of their relationship, when they had not actually met, when he was hoping that they could meet, all the way to the early months of their marriage, when he was in Florida in 1899 trying to make some money. And these letters depict a kind of affection and care, a kind of grace and charm, that seems unfamiliar in these days.

Bear with me a bit as I share a few excerpts:

This is from December, 1897, when he was still trying to wedge his way into her life, win her attention: “Do you know that my tender feelings of tender affection for you are predicated on my appreciation of your purity, devotion to principle, truth, honesty, piety, and a thousand other virtues I see in you. It makes me want to be rich and honored and handsome and great and good, that I might offer these to you... I am pleased that you will see more of me and give me an opportunity of trying to interest you.”

Those virtues that he admires and names seem to be virtues that do not receive much consideration or discussion in these days: purity, devotion to principle, truth, honesty, piety, and others. Our culture tends to be more impressed with wealth and fame, not purity, devotion to principle, and piety.

Here is another excerpt from Feb. 1898 – “Can it be that it was only last Sunday that I went with you to Laurel Hill church? It seems almost an age. I told you I was crazy by reason of love for a woman once. Well, I am getting decidedly that way again. Did you ever have a little child put his arms around your neck and squeeze and grunt and say ‘I love you so good’? Well I love you ‘so good’, and my love is as pure and simple and whole as that of a little child.”

That reminds me of those words of Jesus: “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” And he took a child and said “unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom.”

It is indicting to me that so much of our talk with each other may lack the kind of care and compassion and grace that children can show. And Jesus invites us to think about these things. It is inspiring to me that my great-grandfather was so open with his affection and care, so willing to speak words of devotion and grace. We are getting a glimpse of his life and legacy more than 100 years removed from him.

By March, 1898, here is what my great-grandfather was saying to the woman he hoped would be his wife: “You are the sweetest little woman in the world. I love you better every single day. I will wait a week for you to make up your mind that you will

marry me. If you won't, I will go to church this Sunday and flirt with your sister Mary for the delectation of her friends of the Laurel Hill congregation."

I think he was pretty confident that he was winning her love and would soon get a favorable reply to his marriage proposal. He continues with this: "We have lived without each other long enough – let's live for each other from this day forth forever. We will both be happier and there is none too much happiness in our old world anyway."

As the generations rise and pass away, the challenges obviously continue – how do we find life? What do we focus on? How do we talk to each other? With grace and kindness and affection? How do we relate to each other? How do we live well?

I am so grateful to read these words of compassion and care, of companionship and love, of life and light.

After two years of writing letters, of courting and dating, of going to the old Laurel Hill Church mostly so Hervey Evans could see Mattie McNair (he said the people were getting tired of seeing him there, even the railroad conductor was tired of seeing him going always to Laurel Hill), they got married in June, 1899. Here is what he wrote in that month: "With such a good home and parents and family so dear to you, the fact that you are willing to leave them and go to live with me is evidence of your love superior to anything you or anyone can say. And I am so grateful, and my soul is filled with humility and thankfulness. Yours is that beauty which can never fade away, beauty of the soul."

This is a beautiful and humorous and engaging saga. There are many letters across those 26 months at the close of the 1800's. But there is a sad piece of the story too. E.H. Evans and Mattie McNair Evans lived just one year together, and some of that time they were apart, as he was in Florida trying to earn a living. He died in June, 1900. Their only child, my grandfather, was born that August, 1900.

That means that my grandfather never knew his father. So when these letters came to light in 1976, just months before my grandfather died, you can imagine how much it meant to my grandfather to see deep into his father's heart: love, feelings, fortitude, and faith are all so evident in these letters. So the legacy of his father only broadened. His sense of the legacy and grace and faith of his mother only deepened too.

And as they should, these letters inspire and challenge me. How much do our lives sow seeds of love? How might our lives leave a legacy of care and devotion, or affection and grace, of faith and compassion? What will each of our legacies be? Will it be about compassion, or something else? Will it be about faith and family and genuine care, or something else? Will it involve stories of making the world a better place, of strengthening the church, of following Jesus? This is worthy of sincere thought and action.

The Scriptures today remind us, challenge us in how we might live, and leave a rich legacy: Ephesians urges to "lead a life worthy of the calling to which you are called – with humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love." 1st Corinthians reminds us about the depth and breadth of real love – love is patient and kind, not envious or boastful. Love does not insist on its own way, is not irritable or resentful. Love bears all things, believes all things hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends."

What is most important to us? What will our legacy be?

Jonathan Sacks is one of my favorite writers. He is the Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom, and one whose writings and thoughts keep my attention. This is what Sacks says about life, love, and legacy: “the deepest insight I received into what makes life worth living was not at university, but when I began my career as a rabbi and had to officiate at funerals. They were distressing moments trying to comfort a family in the midst of grief.” But this is what he said he learned so well: Every family he encountered in these moments of grief (and I have this experience too) wanted to talk about their lost loved one and the relationships and loving activities of his or her life. “The person had been a caring and supportive marriage partner, a devoted parent. He or she had been a loyal friend, ready to help when help was needed. No one ever mentioned what they earned or bought, what car they drove, where they spent their holidays. The people most mourned were not the most rich or successful. They were people who enhanced the life of others and made the world better, brighter, more hopeful. They were kind. You could rely on them. They had a sense of responsibility. They gave time and money to voluntary causes. They were part of a community, living its values, sharing its griefs and celebrations.” They were ones who led a life worthy of the calling to which they were called. (see J. Sacks, The Dignity of Difference, p. 80). It had little if anything to do with the values of a market economy, or climbing a ladder, or getting ahead in life, and everything to do with moral principles – good deeds, caring relationships, a willingness to make sacrifices, belonging to a community dedicated to God and God’s purposes.

These are the very things we have celebrated today with the Miller family. These are the very things we seek to keep building on in our VT community to prove that goodness is stronger than evil, life is stronger than death. These are the things that we keep talking about in the face of setback and tragedy; we affirm in our love and relationships that light is stronger than darkness, and love is stronger than hate. This is what life is about. These are the things that give continuity and dignity and hope to life. This is the way we are called to focus our lives, and build a legacy of love and light, and honor God. This is the way we “lead a life worthy of the calling to which we are called.”

Last month, Ginger and I were in California for some time away. On one day, we made a pilgrimage to Muir Woods, a national monument in Marin County, north of San Francisco. Muir Woods, as some of you know, is essentially a cathedral of huge, redwood trees. These trees are hundreds of years old and they tower hundreds of feet into the sky. Their size and height creates a kind of sanctuary; and the forest, in the shade of these huge trees, is a wealth of moisture, nutrients, and life.

In one spot in Muir Woods, one particular grove of redwoods caught our attention. There in the forest was a circle of medium sized redwood trees. In the center of the circle, there was a black, burned out shell of a tree. It appeared to be dead and useless – soot-covered, the remnant of a burnt tree trunk. But there was the vital secret of the redwood tree. Only half of the tree’s life is spent standing tall. The other half is spent on the ground, seeding, offering nutrients, replenishing the soil for its descendants. The large tree in the middle had stood tall and lived well, but its legacy continued, even through a burnt and seemingly life-less shell. The formerly massive tree in the middle had seeded all those medium trees around it.

It was really the picture of a family, of God’s family. It was really a reminder of the importance of our lives and our calling to sow seeds of life and legacy as well as we

can. We are each invited to lead a life worthy of the calling to which we are called. We are each challenged to live with humility and kindness, patience and forbearance, striving to serve God through love.

What will your legacy be? What can you do to make it about love and life, care and compassion, hope and peace? What seeds are you sowing for all those who might come after you, in your family, in this church, in this community, around the world? What will our church's legacy be? What can we do about it to be sure it is about God's things? Each of us has been given a life. It is full of ups and downs, joys and heartaches, loves and losses. Each of us will have a legacy too. May we lead our lives that our legacy indeed honors God, generates love, builds relationships, promotes life, makes the world better, and facilitates the coming of Christ's reign – a reign of peace and justice and joy everywhere. Alleluia. Amen.

Prayer: Your love is so grand, Gracious God. Your love is always at work and never lets us go. Today, in your Spirit, with your abiding love, we commit our lives to loving and serving Jesus Christ, creating a life and a legacy and a hope in all times and places. Amen

This sermon was preached as a part of regular morning worship at Blacksburg Presbyterian Church, Blacksburg, VA on Sunday, October 14, 2007 by Alex Evans, Pastor. This is a rough manuscript.