

**A Witness to the Christian Gospel
at the Death of Ed Shelley
John 6:35-41, 66-69
Pastor Phil Thraikill, Main Street UMC
May 7, 2013**

In the last three days the life of this family has been shattered by Ed's death at his own hand, how unnecessary it was and how it's left this family bewildered and angry and in shock and pain at the loss. And to the questions all of us are asking, What did I miss? and, What could I have done? there really are no satisfying answers since the signals were mixed and none of us had access to Ed's desperate feelings and distorted thinking as he neared the end. He has inflicted a wound on his wife, his three children Laura, Greg, and Byron, his grandchildren, his friends and his church that will have effects for the rest of our lives. And for Christ's sake and our own healing we will have to forgive him his frailty and his independence and his bad judgment, and yes, his sin, however clouded he may have been at the moment by anxiety and depression and fear. We make humane allowances, but we also hold him accountable. And every time the pain wells up afresh, we will have to tell him how hurt we are and then forgive him again and again till we see him face to face, each in his own time, and only then will the pain be gone. We have power to influence one another, and we need to be very careful how we use it.

What Ed did to himself and to all who loved him was just plain wrong and selfish. He just didn't have the right to check out this way and leave us to pick up all the broken pieces. Didn't he know he was loved? And why didn't that matter more? And why did he say an inward No to the help God was offering to persevere and lean into the strength of others? But such is the terrible power of human freedom and the choice of the will we all share. And in this sense, though we have not done what Ed did- and hopefully never will, we are just like him. We are sinners making bad judgments, and so as long as we live we need the mercy of Jesus and the kindness of others, or else we cannot survive the trials of this life.

The sixth commandment against murder also applies to the self. Life is not ours to take, not another's in anger or rage, and not our own in whatever desperate state of mind applies. And I suspect that the moment after it happened, when he stood in the light of truth and love that is Christ's presence, there was the immediate shock

of deep regret when he saw the damage he'd done and the lie he believed that there was no solution to his dilemma but this one. Others would have helped him care for his wife. A man does not have to be good at everything to be faithful. It's OK to say, "This scares me, and I don't know what to do." But for a man his family agrees was *a stickler* and could be so stubborn about standards, it was a hard admission. It's not the way you want to end your life, but neither does it of itself separate a person from God's grace, God's healing, and life with God for eternity.

Before Sunday the focus of energy was on Barbara, how to get her the care she needed to hopefully make a comeback to former strength, and Ed was a part of that team, though it was hard for him. There were doctor visits, brief hospital stays, and the frustration of never being able to get quite a clear picture on just precisely what was wrong because it wasn't just one thing but an accumulation of issues. And to this complicated illness has now been added the weight of one of life's biggest losses, a husband of sixty-three years this last September 23. And when on Monday we took out the yellowing wedding album and looked at the wedding photos from Sandy Plains United Methodist Church just across the road from where Barbara was born and my Grandmother Lida Lewis was baptized, I was struck by the contrast between that happy day and this sad and solemn one. I chuckled when I noted Ed's thick, slicked back hair which he kept to the end. It was Vitalis that kept everything well-oiled and in place. Elvis hair is always an asset for an older gentleman; some of us are not so blessed.

You see, I have many connections with Ed and Barbara. Ed grew up at Aynor UMC where my great uncle gave the land for the first church. Only two weeks ago I pulled rank on Ed when I said, "Ed, you owe me. You were baptized and believed in Jesus on Lewis land!" In a home visit two weeks ago Ed reviewed the outlines of his life with me and proudly displayed a Bible in the New Jerusalem translation he'd recently finished reading cover to cover, so his faith was real and living, though at a point of desperation it proved weak. Barbara used to pick up two of my cousins for MYF, and the younger one- Luke Nance- was ring-bearer in her sister Hattie's wedding, and Hattie the family historian is here today. She called me several weeks back to make sure I was visiting Barbara like a good Methodist pastor ought to, and her first words on the phone were, "My name is Hattie, and I know all about you." I thought to myself, "This is a formidable woman," and when I said that to Greg and Laura Monday afternoon, they replied, "You don't know the half." When I wrote Luke on Sunday of Ed's death, he wrote back yesterday with these words:

“Barbara was a beauty queen and basketball player at Aynor High. I think they won the state title when she was playing. Her dad was superintendent of the Sunday School at Sandy Plain, farmer, and rural mail carrier.

Our mail carrier *Jenks* was Barbara’s brother, and when my mother Eva or my Aunt Alma didn’t come to the door, he’d come by at the end of the route just to make sure they were OK.

I think Ed and Barbara were high school sweethearts. I saw them at church and when both we and they visited mama in the nursing home.”

When you add the fact that Barbara’s niece Lynne is also my cousin on the Lewis side four generations back, you see how thick it gets. Our links go back to the early 1850's when Horry County was still something of an independent republic. It’s why I make it a habit whenever I’m down that way to turn off the highway at the big white Holiday house at Galivant’s Ferry and make my way down to a little white church now closed and shuttered. I walk among a graveyard of confederates and families named Lewis and Best and Altman and Edwards. And as I stand there I thank God that Mr. Holiday and Mr. Lewis decided their community needed a Methodist Church and agreed upon a time to start walking towards each other from their farms till they met in the middle, and that’s where the church was built. And four generations and a century and a half later here I am as a Methodist preacher of the Christian gospel dealing with the same families and affirming that the bonds that hold us all together in the love of our great God are so strong that not even a bad decision like Ed’s can pull us apart and tear asunder the ties that bind, not just place and soil and history and kinship and friendship but the strong net of Christ’s love in which we’ve all been caught and pulled into this boat called the Christian church.

Barbara told me Monday she first met Ed when she was only nine or ten there at the church at a summer youth event for children in the early 1940s; she then added, “I loved him from that very day. Later on, when I was a cheerleader and he a football player, I remember how happy I was to be asked to sit by him on the bus after the game.” And when I said, “You enjoyed sitting beside a dirty, sweaty, football player?” she smiled a big smile, and I knew she meant it. Puppy love got married!

Folks, this is not a faith we created; it’s something we inherited from families who themselves received it and passed it on, and that long process goes eventually

all the way back to the beginning, back to Jesus and his disciples, and what a marvelous and powerful thing it is. That it reached from old Jerusalem and an old rugged cross and an empty tomb all the way to out-of-the-way places like Galivant's Ferry and Greenwood, South Carolina so a scruffy bunch like us could be restored and given hope in this life and the life to come. And it's still spreading wherever love and witness come together, like today. This faith big enough for the whole of life.

As I sat down with the family to plan this service, many memories were shared with laughter and tears. Like why it took Ed so long to take a simple family picture and how he kept calling on everyone to look at him and focus when it was him who was holding the camera! Or how tight he was with a dollar and how happy to corner the Levi's jeans market early in Greenwood. Or how, when there were two empty lots next door, the kids had to keep them mowed, even though someone else owned them. Till near the end Ed was still mowing the lawns of three neighbors and using his considerable *fix-it* skills to help them, and gift from which Greg has crafted a living. This family remembers happy summer days at the Cherry Grove beach house and a Canada vacation when Ed thought he could cover the vast northern regions in a short time. "Hit-n-go" is what he called it, and it wore everyone out! National Lampoon could have made a movie of it, *The Shelleys Go Canadian!*

But there is one story they made me promise to tell. It's recorded in the book *Out of My Life and Reflections* by Hattie and titled "When the Moment was Right, Barbara was Ready."

After an afternoon of fishing, Ed and Barbara came back to the Irving's Fish Camp landing late in the day as dark was descending. Ed was a little uncertain about Barbara's boat ramp skills and a bit edgy because another boat was waiting in line. In a voice of authority- the children called it dad's *mean voice*- he gave explicit directions how she was not to back the van into the water but at just the right moment gently release the brake and apply the gas. The hill was steep, and Barbara was well instructed and eager to please. And when Ed gave the signal she was ready. She and the van and the trailer jolted forwards with power for which Ed's grip on the trailer was insufficient. Off came his glasses, and down he went off the back of the trailer into the drink, and at the top of the hill she heard him whimper, "Get a flashlight, and help me find my glasses." He was scuffed up, and she laughed all the way home. Fishing continued, but never again did he ask his girl friend to help load the boat.

In the Gospel of John is a great promise of Jesus which today we claim for Ed and ourselves, “All that the Father gives me will come to me; and him who comes to me I will not cast out.” Today we see this quote is not just another Bible verse. It’s a life line for Ed and an anchor of hope for this family and friends. Hear it again, “All that the Father gives me will come to me; and him who comes to me I will not cast out.”

Ed is not cast out of the Father’s house or out of the circle of his love and forgiveness. It’s OK to be mad and hurt and disappointed at Ed’s short-sighted actions. Take your pain and questions to Jesus Christ. Learn from him a faith that can take whatever life gives. Let him announce to you his great victory over sin and death and evil. Let him speak peace into your troubled minds. Believe in the future he promises and the effects that hope has on our present living. And let us pledge ourselves in light of this tragedy, that with God’s help we will be a people of love who pay attention to the ties of faith and affection and family that hold us in this good web of life. We will value the precious gift of life and we will encourage one another every single day. We refuse to become bitter and hard or to blame God. We take all that we are, and all that we are not, and present ourselves to the Lord for healing.

We are hurt and angry, Ed, but we entrust you to one more-merciful and more-truthful than any of us, the one who knows the secrets of every heart, the one who first claimed you in baptism, Jesus Christ your Savior and our noblest friend. Amen.
