

**A Witness to the Christian Gospel
at the Death of Kathleen Everett
Luke 10:25-42
Pastor Phil Thrailkill, Main Street UMC**

Sometimes the most obvious thing is the true thing to say, and that is that Kathleen Everett had a good long life, with a particularly difficult year at the end, a year when- because of frailty- she was separated from her beloved husband of nearly sixty-five years.

I'm told that in their weekly dates at NHC arranged by the family Jim's wheelchair was placed close by her bedside so they could hold hands and enjoy at least one kiss and that his last words before they parted were always the same, "I love you more than anything." *To love and to cherish till death us do part* were words they spoke in 1949 that were fulfilled on Sunday when Kathleen died. One man, one woman living deeply into their vows as Christians until ended by death. Marriage is a good gift of God for this world, and those who knew them saw that Kathleen and Jim were indeed good for each other. It's a good thing to arrange dates for your parents and be their chaperones! Helping others keep their vows alive is itself an act of love and one way these daughters, Lynn and Susan, kept the commandment to honor father and mother. What a delight late Monday afternoon to sit with them and their father in his apartment and hear their stories and the deep appreciation that came out in their remembrances.

Kathleen, I am told, grew up as a Virginia farm girl on a tobacco farm as a tomboy. A favorite picture from those days is one of her holding a basket full of kittens; it was somehow a window into her life for all who knew her, and such was the deep power of her personal influence that both girls agreed that Terry, Rebecca, and Sylvia all share Kathleen's personality in striking ways that glue them together.

Jokes have always been made when the age between a man and his wife has significant gap. The pattern has mainly been for a man to marry a younger woman and to be admired for his taste. But when the wife is a few years older, and Kathleen was four years older than Jim, the smiles and wise cracks are many, "Robbed the cradle, did you?" Today we call them *cougars*. Because our parents and grandparents always seem older and wiser, we forget that they were once young and foolish with an eye out for a pretty girl or a dashing young man. Often in visits to widows or widowers I ask, "Do you have a picture when the two of you were younger?" and

when they point to a shelf or the top of a chest of drawer I go pick it up, make a comment or two, and then just let them talk. Warning! Once they get started it's hard to wrap it up, and sometimes they share secrets not for the hearing of small children. So when I hear something like, "It was his father's Plymouth with a new set of tires after the war, and we were parked down by the river on a Friday night...." At that point I interrupt them, "You may want to push the pause button here," and we both smile. Old people are not dead people, at least not yet! The test of a good marriage is perhaps its effect on grandchildren, as when Rebecca said, "I hope some day to find a man to love me as much as Jim loved Kathleen." The real deal is attractive, and to know what it looks like up close provides a quality control standard.

Now I have heard from reliable sources that when Kathleen and her friends first caught sight of the new young man in the Dan River plant Kathleen said immediately to her friends, "I'm going to marry that man." Their first formal introduction was at a company picnic in July, and on October 15 of the same year they were married. No long courtships or engagement in those years. If you've been off to war and returned, you don't waste time.

Jim was what my father called *a textile man*, and Jim's years were the good years of that industry in Danville and then later here in Greenwood. It was the post-war baby boom, and a new and general prosperity grew across the land. There were lots of children to clothe and lots of linens and pillow cases to make in plants like the ones that dotted Danville and whose empty spaces testify to an old strength now vanished. Those were the years when a professional man could, on a single salary, support a family, buy a car every few years, go on at least one family vacation a year, and not have his wife work. *Housewife* was the title of a noble calling, and if your husband earned enough for you to be full time at it, a status symbol of sorts, not bad for a farm girl who spent lots of time folding pillow cases at the mill. Because Danville hosted several J.P. Stevens plants that rotated executives through Cheraw on a regular basis, I'm sure Jim and I could find some common friends if we had time and could remember their names! I worked in several of those mills in the summers of high school and college and was amazed at the whizzing of the looms, the dyeing and finishing operations, the boilers we worked on, and the hubbub between the shifts with all the clocking in and clocking out of the hourly employees.

In our national mythology we idealize those years twenty or so years after the war, and you can still see the reruns of the shows on TV. An expanding economy, stable employment, nuclear families that went to church together and were involved

in all sorts of civic clubs and community life with full two-day weekends. But it was not the norm. It was a brief bubble, but it left a deep impression on our national imagination. And it afforded some women, Kathleen among them, a level of devotion to family that was remarkable. You have only to ask Lynn and Susan a simple question like, “What do you most admire about your mother?” for the stories to pour forth. “What a great seamstress,” one will say, and then to go on to describe in detail the coolest pair of blue hip-hugger bell-bottoms with all the tailored details that made you- at least for day- the most stylish girl in school. That they were double-knit lets you guess the approximate date, and that I remember working on the round machines that did the knitting also dates me. She even made their prom dresses from fabrics and patterns they picked out together. And if you were in a home-economics class and working on a garment, you might find that your mother had gotten up in the middle of the night to reinstall the zipper so the teacher could be impressed and you could get an A! Such was her commitment to her girls.

Some things were so deep in Kathleen that even the loss of a few brain cells couldn't banish them. One was her *hostess* self. She aspired to it, practiced it with ideas from women's magazines found at the grocery store counter, and loved it. It was her default position, and in these last years her daughters and sons-in-law would watch her, when she was a bit addled, take up her hostess mode at the oddest times, as if some deep program in her soul said, “When you forget everything else, when you're not quite sure where you are or what's going on, you can always play the hostess,” and she did it well. Hospitality is a grace that goes deep, and today we celebrate a simple, straightforward Christian faith that says that our God has shown hospitality and welcome to Kathleen.

There were some things Kathleen was just fierce about, one of them being the Atlanta Braves. Her niece Lynn used to brag to her boys how her aunt knew more about baseball than they did. And how she loved football, especially when some college or pro player broke an open field run. From all over they house they'd hear her shouting, “Run it, boy, run it!” There was something youthful and exuberant about Kathleen that nothing in life could take away. Did you know that one of her weaknesses was that she just *had to know* what her Christmas gifts were, and that during the day when no one was at home she'd open them and peek inside with such care and stealth that no one knew she'd tampered with them? What a sneak!

Now why have I chosen this text today? It's not a traditional funeral passage, but after hearing the family review her life it fits for two reasons. Both girls with

deep emotion spoke of their mother's lap, and later on her shoulder, as the safest place in the world and how it seems there was nothing she could not heal, fix, or make better. She went out of her way to love, sort of like the Good Samaritan in the story Jesus told. Who knows the times she did that not just for her girls but for others in ways we will never know. Every Christian has a secret life with God, and Kathleen had one as well. And secondly, because in her the Mary side and the Martha side had made peace with one another. Attention to Christ led to a well and flow of love and hospitality for others. And so a tomboy with a basket full of wiggling kittens became a woman, a wife, a lover, a mother, a grandmother, and the best way to knit all the pieces together is to recognize that God in his grace was a part of every one. Deep goodness and deep joy, not the surface stuff but the deep stuff, only comes from God, the one who received her after her last breath with a "Welcome home, Kathleen." Is that too much to believe? I think not. We are thirty, and so there's water. We hunger for love, and so there's marriage. We crave to know, and so there's learning and books. And we do not want death to be the end of us. What corresponds to that desire we do not fully comprehend, but if Jesus has promised it and gone before us, we trust him when it comes our time to die and find out.

My visits to Kathleen were part of my NHC route. She'd see the collar and smile, though she could not remember my name. The last time was just about two weeks ago. I'd mention my last visit with Jim, hold her hand and pray for her. Then she'd look up at me and says, "Thank you," and I would reply, "Remember that you belong to Christ and that you belong to us." People need to be reminded they are not forgotten.

Kathleen has left her fingerprints of love over every member of this family. It is important that you remember where all that life and goodness came from. It came from a Father who sent his Son Jesus into our broken and dark and dying world in the power of the Spirit so that through simple faith in him and lifelong faithfulness with others we might have hope in this life and in the life to come. She is no longer with us, is she? Not in the same way she was before. And if you long to see her again, then get to know the One she followed and let Jesus Christ be the shaper of your life and its deepest desires. This great Christian vision makes sense out of life. Get to know it deep enough to change your heart. Amen.
