

**A Witness to the Christian Gospel  
At the Death of Ruple Harley, Sr.  
Matthew 5:1-13, Revelation 21:1-8, 22-17, 22:1-5**

**C**haracter, the old word for which is *virtue*- meaning *strength*, is hard won and easily forfeited. It is built in thin deposits a layer at a time, one decision after another, and as it becomes deeper from each testing and reaffirmed after each failure and disappointment, it increases in strength till it is a solid thing, able to bear the weight of life as a sure foundation.

Character, virtue, excellence, nobility, reliability: these are words rarely used in our time, but when personified in the life of man they are a thing to behold. But as we all know, one bad decision can ruin a substantial reputation. Forgiveness is granted to those who from the heart turn back to God, but a return of the respect and trust of others can be long and hard path. Ruple's was a long walk in the same direction, and when you come back from a war where so many died, perhaps you live with an awareness of what a precious thing is a free country, where a man can carve out a business and enjoy the fruits of his labor. You don't leave the common welfare to others; it is your daily responsibility to be an active citizen as was Ruple whose recognitions and accolades would embarrass him were they to be recited today. It's just what a Christian man ought to do, and be happy to do.

So how does one account for the life of man with so few stumbles and for whom so many had not only public appreciation but a deep and rich affection over the decades? A man, who though a sinner like us all and in deep need of the constant help of the Savior, managed to live with such a constant outflow of wisdom and compassion that his flaws, even by those who knew him best, seemed to have grown small in comparison to his largeness of soul and his delight in all things good. Here was a man who could sing to Billie "Don't sit under the apple tree, with anyone else but me," or to God, "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me," with equal feeling and devotion. AliGrace, Allison and Michael's daughter and Ruple's great-grand, told me just yesterday afternoon how much she loved to hear him sing. Not many men- especially older ones- are singers, but Ruple Sr. was. Perhaps that was because there was a song in heart that had to find expression. Life had not always been easy, but it remained always good.

Think of twelve children in depression Orangeburg. Think of being a medical officer in London for three years and watching the mangled bodies of men his age

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flow in from the hedgerows of France and later the battlefields of Germany. Think of dealing with the grief and loss of others on a daily basis as a funeral director. Being gentle and kind when ornery people made demands that could not be met. How about losing Henry to leukemia as a young man. How about looking daily at a stack of unpaid funeral bills from those who could easily have paid. And then, eleven months ago, losing his beloved Billie after 69 years of marriage and for whom the Christmas gifts also bore a personal note like, “To the most wonderful wife in the world,” “To my sweetheart,” and “To Billie: the love of my life.” I’m told that Ruple III and Allison found great delight in reading such tags when no one was looking. The love of their grandparents was a shady and welcome refuge in their lives, a place to build memories. As was said of another servant he was “a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.” But it only deepened him.

I only met the aged gentleman twice, the last being Monday afternoon a little after two when Carol picked me up at the office. On the phone she said, “Hospice says it won’t be long now.” So we went, and there met Doretta who with the others offered care and grew in love for the man who always said *Thank you* for whatever they did. Gratitude was something worked deeply into this man, and if you’ve practiced it all your days because you know that life is a gift, then at the end when a nurse cares for the most basic needs, you can say without shame, “Thank you.”

There at his bedside I read Psalm 130 where twice it says, “My soul waits for the Lord, more than watchmen for the morning.” I laid my hand gently on his head and commended him to Jesus Christ, to a good death, and to the joy of a coming reunion with the saints and angels. Somehow he managed to rouse himself and say *Amen*. He impressed us all one more time. *Reach deep* was his motto.

I am told that about an hour before his death Wednesday afternoon that Mr. Harley suddenly shouted out Billie’s name and lifted his hand off the covers to reach up for an unseen touch. Could it be? Yes it could. The swing-low-sweet-chariot had come into sight, and one of its occupants come to carry him home was the one he loved best of all. Why should we be skeptical? Why would God not give to some a vision of encouragement in the hour of their departure? Ruple Jr. then arrived at the bedside, and in just a few minutes his father breathed his last in peace to depart this life into the life to come. As funeral professionals this man and his son had seen death come and do its work untold times. But Ruple Jr. said to me with a smile, “It was so quiet and peaceful.” Not all are, but this one was. It was a grace from God.

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I don't think I've ever had two grandchildren write lengthy tributes to a grandfather, but Ruple III and his sister Allison did just that. Ruple wrote:

“I have good memories of their lake house from when I was really young. After they bought the beach condo, the lake house was rented out because the memories they had there with Henry were just too hard. But their love for the water (lake and beach) are obviously ingrained in me. My family and I are very fortunate to be able to now call that little lake house our home.”

A house is a legacy full of memories. But even more the example of a good life.

Allison took the time to organize two pages of tributes under a series of virtues, among them Faithfulness, Love and family, Thankfulness, Humbleness, and Compassion for others. What a deep mark this man left. But it was the last heading- Myrtle Beach- that showed another side of the man:

“He loved Myrtle Beach.. as a child my brother and I spent a lot of time in the summers with them at their beach house. He swam with us and taught us how to body surf. I remember my 10<sup>th</sup> birthday; he took me to a fancy restaurant and we danced. The band cleared the dance floor for us! As a teenager he took my grandmother and me to a shag contest where they danced all night. Everyone on the crowd cheered them on. His favorite thing to do was to sit on the beach, visit with others and eat boiled peanuts.... He loved riding his bike along the beach early in the morning. It was our home away from home. He will be dearly missed.”

Did you know that Ruple wore a suit and tie from dawn till dusk? He even left for vacation in a suit; only when he crossed out of Greenwood County would he give himself the luxury of loosening his tie. Now that's what you call *old school*, but remember, in days past to be a funeral director was more than a business description; it was a title of public trust, much like a law enforcement officer, mayor, or local pastor, the kind of people you could call when something went wrong, even in the middle of the night. You see, if you deal with death, then you can also deal with most of the stuff that fills the lives of people. And in the days before home health services, it was the funeral directors who often provided wheel chairs and hospital beds as a free public service. But to be *on call* was just part of what it meant to serve the public, and for Mr. Harley it was a duty and a calling he carried out with equal regard

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for all. Every free funeral to the poor was a loan made to the Lord who always finds ways to more than compensate his servants.

So what shall we say of a ninety-four year old man who lived and died well in the faith of the church, who probably heard more good and bad funeral sermons than anyone in South Carolina history, who was in church more than most preachers, and who likely grew sick and tired of hymns like *In the Garden* and *Amazing Grace* because of sheer overuse? Did he earn his way by good behavior? No. God is in debt to no one, and surely not to rebels like us. This man's depth of character and heart for service were the after-effects of a faith that was well-placed in Jesus Christ. That is why you can set his life alongside the beatitudes and find so many echoes. Such is the influence on the character of those who expose themselves to the grace of Christ, not only on Sundays but the rest of the week as well.

Perhaps it was a peculiar grace given to Ruple to live in such close association with death and with the worst and the best it exposes in people. For fifty years he had a ringside seat on life's transition point, the lives we live as seen in the deaths we die. It lent a seriousness to his life and a serious commitment to the joys God offered.

A good man, one comfortable within himself and open to the pain of others, is a magnificent thing to behold. Such was Lamar Ruple Harley, a friend to people and an old, seasoned friend of Jesus Christ. He has buried many of your loved ones, and today we come to do for him what he did for others with such grace, which is to praise his God, to commend his body to the earth, his soul to the Lord, and the legacy of his life to all who knew him and reflect upon his loss today.

Be sobered today. Be reflective. Today consider your own death and tremble before the judge of all the earth. Picture yourself lying dead and cold in a box like this one. And ask, What will they say of me? What kind of person am I becoming today? Have I let Jesus in, and have I given him permission to forgive my sins, set up residence within, restore me to God, and begin the deep and long work of making me into a person of real love and of proven character? What he did in and for Ruple Sr. is for all of us. And if we here at Main St. Church can help you in your journey, it's why we are here, and perhaps why you are here today. And the things we just read from the Book of Revelation. They are not myths. One you knew now sees them and is grateful for a church that pointed him to such a gracious and just Lord.

Pastor Phil Thrailkill, October 7, 2012

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