A Witness to the Christian Gospel
At the Death of Vera Johnson Tharpe
Isaiah 55:1-13, Matthew 6:19-21, John 3:13-17

Vera Johnson Tharpe knew the directions to work at the Durst mill and the way to heaven, but as to the direction to any other place on the earth, she was absolutely clueless and a positive danger to any who dared ride with her. When God was passing out compasses, or- in more recent days GPS's, Vera was nowhere to be found. Some are born with no sense of humor, others with no common sense, but Vera- her family is convinced- was born without a map and no ability to use one. Spatial disorientation was her mode of living. Many are the stories of her with grandchildren in tow driving in the wrong lane totally unaware it was her against the world, grandkids in the floorboards crying out to Jesus and screaming, "We're gonna' die! We're gonna die!" But they did not, and neither did she until Tuesday.

For the last five years Vera has been slowly fading from her family into the impenetrable fog of late-stage Alzheimer's. Several years before that the signs and symptoms were increasing. But even near the end her sister Margie could draw a faint smile from her with a childhood memory. It was my privilege to stand at her bedside with Camille and Rebecca- I think it was Sunday evening, to read a psalm, place our hands on her forehead, and pray for a good and peaceful death.

For a hundred years the towns of up and mid-state South Carolina were dotted with textile mills, now being disassembled for scrap by wrecking crews. An era is gone, and with it the stories of tough, proud, faith-filled, hardscrabble women who were weavers and doffers, and those- like Vera's mother- who kept the batteries stocked with bobbins. Vera's father died early, when her mother was only thirty-three, leaving six children under ten in a four-room mill house. Then, when her sister soon arrived with two more, there were ten under one roof. A pot of beans or soup was always simmering on the stove, and with the family cow there was milk and butter to spread on the bread. They got by, and with the help of Mr. Self, who did not normally allow women as head-of-household in his villages, they stayed in the home together. How different life would have been without that bit of kindness. Three beds and a cot per room, and only enough hanging space in the closet for a few hangers per child. I am told that even at a young age Vera wanted more space for her clothes than the others, an act we now see as a prophecy that one day she would indeed become a *clothes and shoe horse* who needed multiple closets in which to hang her bobbles, bangles, beads and bling. The contrast between her years with a simple dress in the mill and her later grandeur could not be more complete. In a late-depression

world where there was just enough to get buy, then in a world at war where everything was rationed, Vera wanted a bit more, but not until after the years of clothing Camille and Mack in the coolest clothes of the early and mid-1960's, Gant shirts and Villager sweater sets, did she *break bad* and develop to the fullest her own sense of style. When her family showed me the *Dolly Parton* look last night, I was astounded. And when they said, "Don't she look like Dolly?" I said with a smile, "Almost!"

Vera grew up a Baptist at Callie Self, but on her marriage to Leon moved up the Greenwood hill to Main Street. Leon died eighteen years ago on Valentine's Day, and it is on Valentine's Day that we say goodbye to Vera. She doted on her daughter and son, and because Mack was such an outstanding athlete, did all she could to make every game. She loved these two when times were good, and when they were not good, she just kept on loving. She and Leon were members of a Sunday School class Fred Alewine taught in the basement, and in was in that adult fellowship and practical Bible teaching that their faith and faithfulness grew. We forget, don't we, how formative those simple disciplines are? To give Sunday morning to Sunday School and worship, to the development of Christian friends and to prayer. Week by week, a lesson at a time, you were shaped into a different and better kind of person, and that- I believe- is how God prefers to do it.

The grandchildren remember years past when *Momma Lee* was full of smiles and laughter, always asking for a squeeze around the neck and a bit of sugar. She was unapologetically a thin woman with big blond hair and lots of sparkles. Angela remembers a big gold ring; Mackenzie remembers a house with glitter sprayed on the ceiling. If she could make it shine or sparkle, she would! Spending the night at her house was always a treat for all the grans.

One of the privileges of being a pastor is to sit with families like the Tharpes and hear such stories as these, and in some cases to laugh until you cry. For some people their faith is like a thing added-on; it never gets down to the operational center of life. But when you consider the toughness of this woman, dragged to the mill kicking and screaming at age 16 for a job, but then what she did with it through grit and loyalty and a love of God and life, you have to admire her. A marriage that went the distance, the freedom of life after retirement to fulfill some personal dreams, among them a week at the beach each year with her beloved sisters. God was good to Vera, and today, with the help of Jesus the Savior, she sees us through his wise eyes and wishes the best for us all, but above all that we will be faithful to Christ and to his church which so shaped her life. What will you do with that legacy? Will you slide, or will you decide? Millions upon millions of yards of cloth passed under her watchful eyes to build the riches of others, but you are her riches.