

The Park Road Pulpit
Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church
Russ and Amy Jacks Dean, Pastors

Al Wilson:
An Oak of Righteousness
April 21, 2010
Russ Dean



*They will be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the LORD, to display God's glory.*

-- Isaiah 61.3

Al Wilson took part in the raising of Wendy Watson, who grew up in this church. When she learned of his death, Wendy called him our mighty oak. I can think of no better description. Two of my favorite memories of Al involve oak trees. It was about our second year in Charlotte that a December ice storm toppled the largest oak in our yard. The small branches and major limbs were fairly easily removed, but the trunk of that tree remained for several weeks. It was nearly three-feet in diameter, and about twelve feet long. Al heard about it and wanted the wood for his fire place. I wanted my yard back, so we set out to work.

One morning he showed up with a handful of steel wedges, a couple of sledge hammers that I could hardly lift, much less swing, and the biggest chain saw I've ever seen. I was 40. Al was 80. And those numbers are a pretty good representation of the difference in his work and mine that morning. Twice as hard. Twice as long. Twice as strong. Sawing. Splitting. Hauling. (Can we take a break, Al!?) Al nearly worked me to death that day.

A few years, and a good many miles later for Al, Bob Clare announced that we would be taking down the two stately oaks that stood in the church yard, in preparation for the construction of a new building. One August morning, as I recall, the hottest of that summer, we gathered to work. A 40-something, a 60-something, a 70-something, and though he'd not been invited... Al Wilson at 84! Al wasn't as steady on his feet as he'd been a few years before, but he still had that massive chain saw. And he was still sharp as a tack. We spent half the day following Al's instruction and sweating buckets in that sweltering heat. The other half the day trying to keep Al in the fellowship hall, in the air conditioning.

At about seven o'clock that evening when Keith called to tell me he'd taken his father to the Matthews Emergency Room I said to Amy, and I hope you can hear the humor now, "If I have killed Al Wilson cutting down that oak tree... no one in this church will ever forgive me." But as you and I both know, had Al died that August day, four years ago, covered in bar oil and wood chips on the church lawn... he would have died a happy man.

Al Wilson was a mighty oak. Like all oaks, he grew tall and strong. His roots grew deep into the soil of family and fidelity and faith. And his limbs spread wide, providing protection for a host of God's smaller, weaker creatures, and a haven of rest and comfort for the weary. The point where the comparison breaks down is that where the oak is hard through and through, on the inside of Al Wilson's strong outer shell, was a soft heart, tender and compassionate. There are 600 species of wooden oaks, but only one Al Wilson: the mighty oak with a pure and human heart.

So the first text for today was obvious. These words of the Prophet Isaiah which were quoted by Jesus. I think as you listen to them, another towering presence will come to your mind's eye:

*The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the broken-hearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;
to provide for those who mourn in Zion—
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the Lord, to display his glory. (Isaiah 61.1-3)*

For the oaks of righteousness, planted firmly to display God's glory – for Al Wilson, thanks be to God!

**A Good Word for Al Wilson
April 21, 2010
Amy Jacks Dean**

There are some folks it's just hard to know where to start. That's how I feel with the task of offering a Good Word for Al Wilson. Where to start - for there are so many Good Words. I'll start with some penned by Tom Brokaw when he speaks of that Greatest Generation: "They won the war; they saved the world. They came home to joyous and short-lived celebrations and immediately began the task of rebuilding their lives and the world they wanted." That's Al Wilson's story, but it's only part of it.

Where to start? I'll start with this story: about the time he served on a pastor search committee here – not ours, that duty fell to his son – but the one before us. The chair of the

committee had fixed up some real nice nametags for them to use to make it easier for potential candidates to remember names. Al's nametag looked for all the world like A-1 – so he would shyly introduce himself each time as “Well, I guess I'm A-1.” So out of character for him to say anything to imply a sense of boastfulness, so I'm told he always said it with a shy, sheepish grin.

Where to start? I'll start with: the picture we have of him around here as always hard working and willing – fixin' stuff, hands-on, hard work kind of stuff. And he brought us Roy Killon, his fix-it man side-kick. Now Roy's way was not Al's way. Roy's way often fell to rigging. Al's way was to get it done and get it done right. Together they made a good team that has saved the church over the years countless thousands of dollars. Buck Blankenship says that he first really got to know Al during the conversion of office space in the Chapel building into the kitchen for the Fellowship Hall. This was a major project done by members and it was there that Buck discovered Al's legendary capacity for work. Having worked all of his life, he knew no other rule than "get the job done" and get it done right. Buck says that Al became one of his heroes during that project.

Where to start? I'll start with this story: Marinn Bengel has the picture of him imprinted in her mind – Al dressed in his shepherd's gear in Tableau and newborn, Chase, just out of his 3 month hospital stay with tubes still protruding from his fragile body. There was Al, this big, hard-working man tending to the baby for the whole evening.

Where to start? I'll start with this story: Al instigating several strawberry picking dates with my sons and I thought maybe it was just the preacher's kids until I heard another story yesterday. Al made a discovery in his garden of a large and colorful lizard – though I have been instructed it was more iguana than lizard – in other words the thing was big. Somehow Al knew

that Ryan Cramer – then a young lad - was interested in lizards. Al called the Cramer household and they promptly went to the Wilson's household where Ryan successfully captured the iguana in the garden. Ryan took the iguana to school, fourth grade I think, and the lizard became a part of the class for years to come and was known as Mr. Wilson. Ryan would keep Mr. Wilson during the summers. They say that Al was tickled pink that the iguana was named for him and he never failed to ask how his namesake was doing. I think it says a lot about Al that he knew enough about one of our church's elementary school children to know who to call for an iguana infestation in his garden!

Where to start? There were the steak dinners in the garage. They really started as Bar-B-Que dinners as a way of bringing the Wilson clan together. But after Al got tired of staying up all night to tend Bar-B-Que, those feasts turned into steak dinners. If your last name is Wilson or if you are married to a Wilson, you know what I'm talking about. If you are from their neighborhood, you may have been there yourself. If you were a part of Al's company, you've shared a meal in that garage. If you were a Sunday School member with the Wilsons or if you have been a deacon at Park Road Baptist, you can picture the feast now. And if you are a pastor, then yes, I have shared in Al's bounty, and it was indeed good.

Well, where to start? I'm on page three and I've not even begun. You've heard from his sister Christine that without Al their family couldn't have stayed together. He quit school, admitting it was the hardest thing he ever had to do, to go to work to help support the family. He was drafted in December 1942 and after rigorous training he was shipped to Saipan and fought in what history records as one of the War's bloodiest battles. His unit was one of several to receive the coveted Presidential Unit Citation for their service in that battle. It was during this combat that Al promised God that he would try to make the world a better place. And in the years I have

known Al, I have known him to be a dutiful soldier who, having known war first hand, adamantly opposed it. But it wasn't his battle stories that anyone ever really heard him talk about. It was the story of finding a little baby abandoned in a cave. Al took that baby and wouldn't let it out of his care until they could get to his commanding officer. He had some evaporated milk in a can. He placed the can on the Jeep's muffler to heat the milk and fed the baby. And when he was sure he had gone as far up the line as he could go with that baby, he handed it over and hoped and trusted that the baby would be alright. I've heard him wonder whatever happened to that baby. I wish that baby could have known the story of the big, strong American soldier who fed it and cared for it and hoped and prayed the best for it. Christine has written an almost 200 page account of the Wilson family. I've really enjoyed reading your story these last few days and I couldn't help but note your personal inscription in the front of Al and Ilean's book: "To Al, Without your sacrifice, there never would have been this story."

Al returned from his tour of duty, where he had fought for freedom, and endured a long letter writing campaign. You see, there was this sweet little thing back home named Ilean that had won his heart and he wrote letters to her every other day. She was writing to him and to a Navy man and to another Army man, but it was Al's letters that finally won her over. She said he was so sincere and so honest and so caring. He was quiet and reserved, but she fell in love with him in his letters to her and they were married on March 3, 1947 with his proposal of "Let's get married." And she said, "OK." A few days after their recent 63rd wedding anniversary when I was visiting Al and Ilean when he was at Sardis Oaks I said, "Sixty-three years is a long time, Al." To which he replied, "It's a good start."

Family was important to Al and I know that adding Keith to their household brought a sense of fullness and joy to Al and Ilean. Keith learned about hard work from Al. He learned

there were 2 ways to do anything – Al’s way or the wrong way. They went deep sea fishing together and they worked together – with Keith earning his own way – no special privileges. I believe Al instilled in Keith what it means to work hard. And you know how I know this? Because of the way Keith, and Kim, have worked hard in caring for Al. Al could be a little stubborn and maybe even a little hard headed. Some of that might have rubbed off on you too, Keith. But the way you have cared for him, and cared for those who cared for him, has shown me a glimpse that indeed you are your father’s son. Keith and Kim, and Ilean, *well done good and faithful servants*. You’ve learned from a master and you “done good.”

As he built a family, Al was also building a business. Everyone assumed that Al was a college educated engineer. He may not have had any kind of degree to his name, unless you count the Diploma of Hard Work or the Bachelors Degree of Generosity or the Masters Degree of Compassion or the Doctorate of Strength. And in my book, those count more than all the frames on my wall because I sure would like to be like Al Wilson when I grow up.

Travel kept him going especially after retirement – especially travel to Hawaii. He fell in love with that place as a part of his army training and Ilean says he always wanted to drag her off and off they would go – even taking his two beautiful granddaughters along for the ride – even for 10 days in Hawaii. What memories. What fun. What joy the two of you brought to him. Al and Ilean would go and stay for long stretches of time and let folks come and visit them there. Ilean is sure that if Al had had his way, they would have retired there. Ilean, I’m glad you won that battle.

Oh, where to start? Everyone in this room knows that I should have started with tomatoes. That’s what he was most known for – for the tomatoes stood as a symbol of his hard

work and his tender loving care; the tomatoes symbolize his generosity (how many boxes full of tomatoes has he delivered to my side office door or left on my front porch over the years); the tomatoes are the perfect symbol of his partnership with God – creating something together that neither of them could have done alone. Ripe, red, juicy, delicious, home-grown . . . tomatoes – one of God’s best ideas, well, next to the idea of a Child of God known as Al Wilson.

Al wasn’t much for talking about his faith. In my estimation, he didn’t have to. He let his life do his talking for him. And I, for one, heard him loud and clear. And I know I speak the truth when I say that this church would not be who it is without him. And today our Blessed Hope is that Al rests in the shade of the Giant Oaks of Heaven and if I know Al like I think I do, he’s already got God’s tomato garden planted. Thanks be to God for Al Wilson. Thanks be to God indeed. May it be so.

Russ Dean:

A Benediction

May the Lord Bless you and keep you
May God’s face shine upon you and may God be gracious to you.
May God give you the grace today to live strong –
 that you may pray with your hands
 live faith with your feet
 love God with the strength
 of a tender loving care.
As you go into the world this day, dear friends
 Go as Al taught us –
 just living with God
 That we might be at peace!
Amen and Amen.