

Lessons from a Life Well Lived

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I am so very pleased to be here among you this morning, on this most special occasion for the MacNeill family and this marking of the importance of this place in our lives and in the life of my father. For us this is very personal- very close to our hearts. But I lift up to you also this morning the importance of this place, Beth Eden, to each of you and to this community of Waltham. Even if you never knew- or don't remember- my father- after all he is 95!- this is personal for you, too. We celebrate this morning how a faith community like yours can help shape a life- many lives- and teach lessons to each of us who pass through its doors- lessons in relationship, in human being; lessons in how to be a better person, a person of integrity, a person of faith. Lessons in how to be in relationship with God, and right relationship with each other. So, I thank you for allowing us to be with you here this morning, and I thank you for the great honor it is for me to fill your pulpit today. I would also like to thank those guests this morning who have come to take part in honoring of this special man, Harris Harold MacNeill, and this place which took a part in forming him, leaving a legacy of compassion and faith, as well as a capacity for fun- a life well lived.

We are here together this morning, gathering as you do each week in this space on what the world is calling Super Sunday. And I imagine that many of us are excited by the prospect of our professional football team, the Patriots, playing in the Superbowl way down there in warm New Orleans, maybe even with a chance of winning this time! I know I will be watching along with untold thousands later this evening. But I put before you the thought right now that every Sunday that you make the effort to come to this Church- or one like it- is a Super Sunday. A Sunday that helps build you into a better person, that builds a better community and a better world. There is a place for the fun and excitement of sports, that's for sure. But there is a place here to sing the old familiar hymns; to take communion together, to minister to each other, and to celebrate landmarks like we do this morning- a life begun here in Waltham in 1907, shaped by this community- these people and this faith- a life well lived.

I am the founder and director of the Wayland Golden Tones, an the elder chorus which has become my ministry, in which both my parents participate. I have learned a lot about folks as they age during our fourteen years together, by studying, as I have these last years at Andover Newton Theological School, but mostly by just being with folks. When people reach the age of 95 or 100, especially when they are in relatively good health, folks want to know the secret of how they accomplished this amazing achievement. When I announce during our concerts before my father sings his duet, *Let the Rest of the World Go By*, that he is turning 95 years old, people invariably gasp! How was he able to do this? I joke with our audiences that time does have a way of going by- if you wait long enough it will happen: you will be old! Of course good genes have something to do with it. And living in a country like ours where we have good medical care and proper nutrition have something to do with it. But, in my Dad's case, I think that a lot of it has to do with what I affectionately call my Dad's 'terminally positive attitude', complete with an outstanding sense of humor. And a lot of it has to do with his strong Christian faith, which I believe is the source of that positive attitude. That faith was nurtured in his family and in this community of Beth Eden Baptist Church.

In his recent book, *Open Secrets*, Lutheran pastor and teacher Rick Lischer tells how "an aerial photographer once remarked that from the air you can see paths, like the canals on Mars,

that crisscross pastures and fields among the farms where neighbors have trudged for generations, just to visit or help one another in times of need. These...are the highways...grooved into human relationships.” Lischer goes on to say that “the word religion comes from the same root as ‘ligaments.’” He says, “These are the ties that bind.”ⁱ The blessed ties that bind of the old hymn. It is that fellowship of kindred minds that the hymn talks about, that sharing of mutual woes and burdens, that sharing of tears in times of trouble and sadness, laughter in times of joy, joined with a very personal faith, that my father has based his philosophy of life upon. In these most unsettled times in which we have found ourselves in this year, in our pluralistic world with its breathtaking array of possible choices, perhaps the first lesson from a life well lived might be to return to those teachings which are foundational to the Christian faith and certainly to my father- those lessons on love and forgiveness- on what the gospel of Matthew calls meekness and mercy. Certainly the Beatitudes of our reading this morning, the centerpiece of the Sermon on the Mount, are foundational to the living of a Christian life and if we follow their teachings, they can be the source of life transforming power- the ultimate attitude adjustment. With the love commandment, the beautiful Hebrew Psalms, and the Beatitudes, who needs all those aisles of self-help books in the bookstore?

Yes, my father has a terminally positive attitude, and, as Karl Menninger has said, “attitudes are more important than facts!”ⁱⁱ How is that so? Obviously, facts are important. There are certain underlying truths. Surely the eight Beatitudes count as these. But life is all in how you look at things, at least it is for my Dad. Nowadays folks talk a lot about whether you see a glass half full or a glass half empty. People who look at a glass that is filled up half way can look for what is there or look for what is missing. For my Dad, the glass is always half full; he never focuses on what is missing but is grateful for what is there. The fact is that there is the same amount of fluid in the glass whether it is half full or half empty. That is the fact. But the difference in attitude towards that humble glass shows a world of difference in an outlook on life.

How can we develop an attitude like that? An attitude which is based on gratitude for what has been given and on an expectation of abundance, or at least of needs being met? How can we have an attitude like that in the tough times we weather? My Dad has had the same tragedies and difficulties that all of us have as human beings. After all, in 95 years he saw everything from two world wars, the Great Depression, and the flu epidemic to the normal ups and downs of human lives. And, of course, he was not- and is not- perfect, much as his four children liked to think he was when we were little. So how did he develop this attitude? How can we? I know that for my father, his faith was his touchstone; from this faith he could not- and can not- be moved. As Bonnie and I were reminiscing this week as I was preparing these remarks, she said that what is remarkable about our father is how he truly lived his beliefs. And what is even more to the point I think is the what she said next: that “he taught by example even more than by word.” And he continues to do so.

As many people do as they age, my father reflected back over his life and spent a number of years writing a book which the family had published privately several years ago: *A Century of Change: My Story*.ⁱⁱⁱ What a wonderful gift to us that many of the stories we heard growing up are written down, so that they can be passed on to our own children! But there is more to his reflections than stories of how he and his father and brother started MacNeill Engineering Company. There is more than stories of “great air shows, amateur theatricals, the big bands, and boating on his beloved river, the Charles.” The forward begins with this sentence from the Hebrew book of Proverbs: “Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will

not depart from it.” (Prov. 22.6) And here lies the crux of the matter. Here we gather this morning in the most important location of that “training up” of my father- and so many others: the Beth Eden Baptist Church.

Just as Bonnie, Heather, Harris and I grew up thinking our parents were unbeatable, at least until we were teenagers, my Dad starts the chapter in his book titled “My Family” by saying this: “Most kids naturally believe their parents to be the greatest ever and I am no exception. When I look back and see what my father and mother did for us kids despite all of the financial hardships that befell them, I just marvel at my good fortune. I firmly believe that any success you may be blessed with in this life can largely be attributed to the love, knowledge, and assistance that you received from your parents.”^{iv} So this is foundational, a lesson for us- respect for our parents, for sure. But also, again, here is this attitude- this attitude of appreciation of the blessings we receive- that glass half full. There certainly is a reason that one of my Dad’s favorite hymns is *Count Your Blessings*. He has never stopped counting them. He has never stopped marveling, as we have sung together, at what the Lord has done by the many blessings, despite and all the while knowing life’s billows and tempests. For my Dad, that glass half full is in fact overflowing with blessings.

My father’s father worked for many years at the Waltham Watch Company, whose buildings I drove by on my way here this morning. At one time it was the center of all activities on this side of town, and its executives had a hand in building this very church we are in this morning. Dad tells how “most special activities were centered around the church. In addition to Sunday services, there were meetings for the young people, prayer meetings, choir practice, a drama group and sports teams.”^v I am sure some of you remember all that activity. These activities which were no doubt taken for granted as “just what we do around here” at the time, turned out to be activities informed by faith which shape a life. They are all part of the sacred life of the living church.

I’d like to read you a passage straight out of the book, from a chapter in which Dad considers his religious upbringing and life of faith.^{vi}

My life has always been centered around the church, thanks to the early start that my mother gave me. She was always much concerned with our upbringing and especially with our affiliation with a church. The Beth Eden Baptist Church was near our home, so my mother decided to take us there. The pastor there was Mr. Robert B. Pattison, who later became a national leader in the Baptist denomination. A close relationship developed between the MacNeill family and Mr. Pattison, which lasted for many years.

We lived almost a mile from the church and, from my youngest days, I can remember my mother and me walking together to attend the morning and evening services. We always sat in the same seats about half-way down the center aisle to the left. I always attended the Sunday school classes at noon. When I was older, I went to Christian Endeavor for the young people. This was held at six in the evening which meant I spent almost all of every Sunday in church. They also held prayer meetings every Wednesday evening and a sort of family party or social once a month. It was only natural that we developed very close ties with other families that would last a lifetime.

I can well remember the church outings that we held back then. Even though my dad was not much of a regular church goer, he always came through with outstanding refreshments for the whole crowd and made gallons of home-made ice cream that was the talk of the neighborhood. Dad's cream of tarter biscuits were the tastiest I have ever eaten. I am afraid that I did not inherit his love or ability for cooking....

That gives us a glimpse of how things were around here; there is much more in his book. I'm sure some of you have memories to share, and we look forward to hearing some of yours at coffee hour. And you should count your blessings that you are making new memories and building and renewing faith as each of you take your part here this morning.

I would be remiss if I left out some of the other lessons we as a family have learned from our Dad. Both of our parents have modeled for us Christian Charity and the willingness to help others. This is one of the ways my parents have taken the Christian life seriously, often putting their money where their mouth is, but also help others help themselves, as they did with tutoring folks through the Laubach Literacy program. For my parents, the Christian life is not only about believing, but it has always been about entering into the kind of relationships to which the Christian tradition points, as they both continue to do at age 95 and almost 89, bringing music and joy to others with their work in the Golden Tones.

It is the quality of those relationships with people that point us to another lesson. In Unitarian Universalism, the association which will ordain me in June, one of our principles is the inherent worth and dignity of all beings. This principle and the love commandment of Jesus I learned from my father- not in so many words, per se, but by the example of his being. He always has genuine interest in all he meets and, as Heather put it on the phone this week, he is never condescending. He really is interested! He really does care! In this cynical world, that is such a gift.

Enthusiasm! And a great sense of humor. I think my Dad is one of the most enthusiastic people I know, even now when he is often enthusiastic about napping! "Sleeping is the best thing I do!" Each of us "kids" have our stories about his enthusiasm for our various projects. Brownies from a Betty Crocker mix became "the best brownie's ever!". At Thanksgiving, there was always "the best turkey ever!" Even now he often says, "I'm a go-go guy! I may not know where I'm going...but I'm going!" And he has always brought that enthusiasm for living, for caring and for loving to his faith.

At the end of his book, Dad offers some final thoughts, starting with quoting yet another favorite hymn: "All things bright and beautiful, all creatures great and small, all things wise and wonderful, the Lord God made them all." He then reflects: "This says it all"- God made all creatures, all that is wonderful and wise- "but", he goes on, "but who or what is God?" He then says, "Of all the billions who have lived on this earth, the only one who can answer this question is Jesus. 'For God so loved the World that he gave his only begotten Son that whoever believed in Him should have eternal life.'" What follows is a statement of my Dad's faith, one he surely built in this very place. He says: "This is the good news! Jesus told us that we shall be with him in paradise for 'in my father's house are many mansions. If it were not so I would have told you.'" Dad states his faith: "Jesus in the One in whom we can surely believe!" Then he gets into the quagmire that those of us who attend seminary wade around in. He says: "If Jesus was not God he was certainly the most remarkable man who ever lived and has left the impress of his

name upon the world in a way that no other many has ever done. The whole period of life from his day until ours is stamped with His name, "The Christian Era."^{vii}

So even my Dad hasn't figured it all out, how it all works. But he took what is foundational from this place and these people, the cloud of witnesses that the Apostle Paul speaks of in Hebrews and let it under gird his life, with enthusiasm, with honesty, with compassion, and a great sense of wonder at the blessings of this life.

I would like to end with a poem that he ends his book with, which I think sums up this attitude of being blessed and where one can depend, while the tempests and the billowing of life take place:

Each morning I awake I say, "I place my hand in God's today."
I know he'll walk close by my side, my every wandering step to guide.
When at day's end I seek my rest and realize how much I'm blessed,
My thanks pour out to Him and then I place my hand in God's again.

ⁱ Lischer, Richard (2001). *Open Secrets: A Spiritual Journey Through a Country Church*. NY: Doubleday, 81.

ⁱⁱ Schuller, Robert (1996). *The BE Happy Attitudes: Eight Positive Attitudes That Can Transform Your Life*. W Publishing Group, xi.

ⁱⁱⁱ MacNeill, H. Harold (1998). *A Century of Change: My Story*. Charlestown, MA: Henry N. Sawyer.

^{iv} MacNeill, 17.

^v MacNeill, 59.

^{vi} MacNeill, 29.

^{vii} MacNeill, 178.