***Al Wilson:***

***An Oak of Righteousness***

April 21, 2010

Call to Worship

In December of 2001, after fifteen months as your pastors, we had conducted 18 funerals. After burying so many people we did no know, or barely knew, in an ironic bit of somewhat dark pastoral humor, Amy said “I can’t wait to do a funeral for someone we know!” You better be careful what you ask for… for in recent days we have conducted funerals for people that we know. And as we know, we have some difficult ones ahead, as those who formed this church, and made it the community we inherited a decade ago, breathe their last breaths.

This is one of those difficult ones. As we have walked through our words for today, in preparation, Pastor #2 is not the only one who has shed a couple of tears and choked back his emotions. It is difficult because we have lost a piece of us. All of us. The footfalls and fingerprints of Al Wilson are all over this property. There’s not a one of us who has not been touched by his strength and his smile, his tough and tender spirit. His presence will be missed, but his legacy will live…

So may God be with us as we celebrate the 88 years of a mighty oak called Al Wilson. And as we worship God together.

Scripture

Al Wilson took part in the raising of Wendy Watson, who grew up ion 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;   
2to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour,  
   and the day of vengeance of our God;  
   to comfort all who mourn;   
3to 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 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.