

## Eulogy

*prepared for the life celebration of*

### **Merritt Eatherton**

November 24, 2010

Today we celebrate the life of a saint, one set apart by God. As I reflect on my years of knowing Merritt Eatherton, I immediately think of a man who loved God, his family, the body of Christ, and was a great Sunday school teacher and faithful prayer warrior.

I first met Merritt at a meeting of the Ohio conference of the Churches of God. I was a new pastor and seminary student at Winebrenner Theological Seminary and Merritt was an elder at the Wharton Church of God. We immediately experienced a bond of the Spirit, rooted in a love for Jesus Christ and the gospel. As a result, I was invited to preach at Wharton Church regularly, having great times of fellowship with Merritt and Maxine. I also developed a deep and lasting friendship with their son, Bob, when we were students together at seminary.

Later, as vice president, I was asked to suggest names for board membership and tops on my list was Merritt. He served with distinction and was supportive of me when I became president. From that time on he prayed for Linda, me and the seminary twice a day.

Recently I was awake early in the morning, struggling with some issues and feeling alone. In that moment God reminded me that Merritt was awake early as always and was praying for me. I was definitely not alone. Those prayers from earth will be missed greatly. However, I'm sure Merritt is one of the great cloud of witnesses that cheers us on saying, "You can finish! I made it and it's more than you can imagine."

Merritt can't come back to us. I'm not sure he would want to. However, I believe he would want to say to all of us, "You can come to be where I am through my Savior, Jesus Christ."

Thanks be to God for the life of this saint, Merritt Eatherton.

**David E. Draper**

President

Winebrenner Seminary

*These thoughts were sent electronically and unfortunately did not arrive before either service. They are gratefully included.*

## **Personal reflections of Dad**

shared by

**Bob Eatherton**

November 24 and 27, 2010

It may have been at the end of an excruciating day: on the job, at home, or possibly even in a relationship. You may have heard it said, maybe you have said it yourself: "I didn't sign up for this job." That's the way I feel this morning! I am standing here ONLY because it was my Father's request

After Dad left the farm he worked over 30 years for a Jewish gentleman. That lengthy relationship with Mr Cobey, significantly impacted his life, and the lives of our extended family; as well as additional families in our home church. Mr Cobey believed it was his calling to provide jobs for those that wanted to work. During his life he did that, and often provided much more. In the Jewish tradition (and in some other cultures), it is the role of the oldest son to provide personal reflections at a time such as this. I certainly don't do this on my own, but in the strength of the One we serve. I come armed with way too many memories to share, and a provided packet Dad assembled after a sleepless night several years ago.

Unfortunately, at that time, I never explored the package beyond the cover letter. I wish I had. It was not what I expected at all. There were NO directions. No numbered bullet points. He didn't tell me what to do. He simply provided for me a voyeur's opportunity to look at some parts of his life. Most of the content was letters he had written: to friends & coworkers going through catastrophic times, there was a letter to a seminary professor affirming his giftedness as a teacher; there were expressions of gratitude for those who had provided an important impact on life. The one time I might have actually welcomed Dad telling me what to do, he surprised me. This once hard disciplined WWII survivor chose to simply, but vulnerably, bear a part of his heart and allow me to choose.

Dad was not a perfect man, and didn't come from a perfect family. It takes no more than a cursory reading of the obituary, and a little between-the-line imagination, to see a lot of family "intrigue." Dad had been in church 3 times (2 funerals & 1 wedding) before age 15 when he met Mom. She rejected his invitation to a movie, BUT suggested he might take her home after church. Dad always said he became a Christian because of some people, and in spite of some people.

Beyond my mother, a primary "because of" person was a short, fat, people oriented pastor named Bob Fast. He lived his last name and died very young. Dad has his Bible. Dad's name was on Bob's prayer list. Bob always made it a point to warmly greet my father (when others were crass enough to tell him Mom deserved something better). BUT when exiting one particular service, Bob put his arm around my Dad and said, "Merritt somebody loves you!" Dad said during his life he had developed defense mechanisms against all kinds of things, but he had NO defense against genuine/real/life changing Love. The Transformation (when Dad asked Christ into his heart) was significant enough for him to believe he looked different. Annually for years after, his "New Birth" date was celebrated as much as his biological birthdate.

*So what are the key elements we remember this day?*

**He was a veteran, and proud of it; but he talked about it very little**

He didn't run, hide or wait. He enlisted at 17, sometime after our country was pulled into WW2. Two things I remember about that time in his life came from SS openings, or guest speaking: 1) He talked about reading his Gideon NT before he was a Christian. Most often when the ship was at risk and the watertight doors were sealed by sections in case they were struck by torpedoes, mines or other such devices. It was during those times, knowing they were willing to sacrifice some for the good of the whole, he wondered if he would ever see any of his family again. 2) He could never seem to understand why he had the good fortune of surviving the war and was allowed to marry and have children, when so many of his friends did not.

**Dad attempted to discern God's will in every major decision (and most small)**

I witnessed the wrestle, heard many of the prayers, and saw the outcomes. One illustration was the rejection of the employment invitation of a large corporation, only to work at a much smaller company for substantially less money and twice the drive. Maybe it was the military background, growing up during the depression, an expression of a work ethic we seemed to have lost, or just a loving response to God's grace. For Dad, even with the one hour drive to work one way, anything less than a ½ hour early, was considered late.

**The Church was not a segment of Dad's experience, it was the essence of his existence**

His faith was not a military like duty, but a debt of gratitude. When the church doors were opened, we were there. If we had to, we milked early or late, but we didn't miss church. I remember riding on a Farmall H with a heat-houser, busting through drifts to get there on belligerent cold snowy Sunday mornings. His response to Mr Cobey's encouragement to relocate closer to his work, was met with, "I'll quit my job, before I'll leave my church or home."

Much like his love for country, Dad had an incredible loyalty to the church that was God's primary agent for his life transformation. Even after moving to Indiana in his late 70's he still got up most mornings at 4:30 AM and began his day reading several "back home" newspapers on-line, just to keep up with the people. This practice caused me at one point to say, "Dad you have relocated, but you've never moved." After he read the news, he daily opened God's Word, and then spent time in prayer. You might argue about the order, but it made sense to me. His early morning ritual produced insightful prayers based on current needs, filtered through God's Word. Family did NOT get general blanket prayer, but informed specific coverage by individual name and situation.

**Dad was a hungry learner.**

He had NO formal degree work beyond High School, but out read most people I know. Often gifts for him at Christmas, Father's Day, and his birthday were books. Typically those books were read by the next day, or within 2 or 3 days at the most. In spite of his lack of letters behind his name, he served on many leadership teams and management boards. Later in life he took classes at Winebrenner Seminary to deepen his understanding of God's Word (which I thought he already knew better than most) so he could be a better Sunday School teacher. He ultimately served on the Winebrenner Theological Seminary Board of Trustees.

**Dad was a giver.**

Sharing in a host of ways those things he held in high value with others. Be it money, (the tithe always came first), his home (rustic farmhouse or brand new home), or prized tickets to the Columbus, Ohio Horse Shoe (with graduates from Purdue). He gave his best, off the top, not his leftovers.

**I had the privilege of watching my Dad become “color blind.”**

We were raised in a small rural WASPy (white/Anglo-Saxon/protestant) environment. Before Dad was 20, he was trained to help kill Japanese, but for over 40 years he and mom have supported missionaries to Japan. Although he grew up in a culture where blacks were often distained and seen as inferior, they were welcomed in our home. More recently when April introduced us to Steve (whose roots are in India), he was not only accepted as part of our family, Dad wrote letters of affirmation and support to the officials in immigration. Our lives have all been enriched because of his open willingness to change; I believe to better reflect the heart of the God he sought to serve.

*One more attribute and we save the others for some kind of a more enjoyable family reunion:*

**Dad Loved ONE woman, for ONE lifetime.**

From the time he first saw her when he moved back to Wharton at 15, through the war, to a 1947 marriage that lasted more than 63 years. It was a shining testimony of his love, his Faith, his promised commitment, and his daily practice. WE are all grateful for his model.

Most of our family has been pretty driven by nature. For most of our lives, time off and vacations were non-existent. BUT through a couple of wake-up calls, the free gift of friends, and the encouragement of others, (for the last decade) we have taken regular times away with as many family members as we can for a time of rest, relaxation and reflection.

During those travels at Christmas, Dad would always read the Christmas story from Luke. Then one by one we would share our gratefulness for a God who sent a Savior, and our thanksgiving for those individuals that have been a major influence in our lives. The times have been rich and filled with impressions that are long lasting.

We learned something at the beginning of that decade with its new traditions. Almost NOBODY vacations at Thanksgiving. I pressed the salesman saying, “It is one of the highest travel days of the year.” His response was simplistic and clear. “Travel IS high, but virtually nobody vacations, Everybody GOES HOME.”

If you are young, it’s maybe in the musical group: “Mike’s Chair”, if old enough, maybe Longfellow’s Resignation, and the line about the empty chair. There will be one empty chair this Thanksgiving at our house, and we will be sad, but not laden with despair. Based on our understanding of scripture: Paul’s “absent from the body, present with the Lord”, Jesus words to his troubled disciples, “I am going to prepare a place for you”, His statement to the repentant thief on the cross, “TODAY you will be WITH ME in paradise”.

The empty chair is not nearly so much a vacancy, as a testimony that Dad, on this THANKSGIVING has beaten us all HOME.

We come today NOT to say good bye, but SEE YOU LATER!