

**Upper School Chapel**  
**May 7, 2008**  
**Headmaster's Remarks**

**Readings:**

**Psalm 103: 15-18**

As for mortals, their days are like grass;  
They flourish like a flower of the field;  
For the wind passes over it, and it is gone,  
And its place knows it no more.  
But the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting  
On those who fear him,  
And his righteousness to children's children,  
To those who keep his covenant and remember to do his commandments.

**Proverbs 29: 18**

Where there is no prophecy, the people cast off restraint,  
But happy are those who keep the law.

**Philippians 4: 8-9**

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

Good morning.

This past Saturday afternoon, I was watching our girls' soccer game against Savannah Country Day and during the first half of that game, I had the privilege of speaking at some length with Hannah English's grandfather, Mr. Bill Bryant. During our conversation, Mr. Bryant spoke proudly to me about Hannah and her sisters Ellie and Caroline—both Lovett graduates. As he spoke, I thought to myself that Hannah, Ellie, Caroline, and Mr. Bryant's other grandchildren are so blessed to have him in their lives. I also thought of my own grandfather—William S. Peebles, Jr.—whom I was so blessed to know and who lived until I was twenty-four. I was reminded of those truly precious and life-changing moments of grace in our lives—moments that we sometimes forget or if we don't forget them, we often take them for granted.

Each of us receives gifts of grace literally every day. These are gifts that we don't ask for, that we don't expect, that we don't deserve. Many times, we don't know we are receiving these gifts of grace at the time they are given to us. And because we don't know we are receiving them, we don't always say thank you for these gifts.

Speaking on Saturday afternoon with Mr. Bryant and hearing first-hand his great devotion and love for his grandchildren reminded me of one of the most wonderful gifts of grace I ever received and that is the gift of having been the oldest of thirteen grandchildren of Sara and William Peebles. I didn't ask for or seek that gift. I know I didn't deserve it and it was not expected that I would say thank you for that gift. That is pure grace and it is that kind of grace that inspires us to remember the steadfast love of God which the Psalmist talks about in one of this morning's readings. Our lives as mortals are finite "but the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting . . . ."

Let me tell you a little bit about my grandfather. He was born March 23, 1899. He was the fourth of five children. He grew up in Lawrenceville, Virginia, a very small town an hour and a half south of Richmond, Virginia, right on the Virginia/North Carolina line. It was a wonderful place for him to grow up and for me to grow up but many people would view it as a kind of backwater. When I was a teenager, my friends and I would refer to Lawrenceville as Hellville because we thought there was so little to do. I did not appreciate at the time the benefits of living in a small, tight-knit community with close friends and an extended family. And, in fact, there was plenty to do.

Because it was only one of a handful of universities in 1919 with an undergraduate program in business administration, my grandfather chose to go to the University of Wisconsin in Madison, Wisconsin. He actually traveled there on a motorcycle with a sidecar. Talk about an adventuresome spirit! Most of the roads he traveled were, of course, dirt roads. The trip from Lawrenceville to Madison took a couple of days and along the way, folks would offer to put him up for the night. This was a different era!

My grandfather was very open-minded and pretty liberal relative to most of his fellow townspeople in Lawrenceville. He was a creative entrepreneur always looking to launch a new enterprise whether or not he actually knew anything about the kind of business he was considering. Granddad went to the University of Wisconsin between 1919 and 1922—a time known as the “Red Scare” in American history. The Red Scare came on the heels of the Russian Revolution of 1917. During this time, there was real fear (not justified by fact but there was fear nonetheless) amongst some people and within our government that Communists were plotting to take over the United States. Wisconsin, as you American historians know, was the birthplace in many ways of American progressivism and liberalism. Robert LaFollette and his progressive followers instituted many reforms in Wisconsin that later spread across the country and were touchstones for the Progressive Movement, Theodore Roosevelt’s Square Deal, Woodrow Wilson’s New Freedom, Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal, Harry Truman’s Fair Deal, John F. Kennedy’s New Frontier, and Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society. My grandfather loved to talk about how especially liberal the state of Wisconsin and the University of Wisconsin were. During the time he was in Wisconsin, he claimed that the University of California at Berkeley fired its president for having Communist leanings and that the University of Wisconsin promptly hired this gentleman. Granddad loved a good story.

In the early 1920s, he returned to Lawrenceville, Virginia to go to work in the general store that his father (my great grandfather) had started in 1891. In 1931, as the severity of the Great Depression grew deeper and deeper, when my grandfather was 32 years old, his father and his oldest brother suddenly died and so my grandfather and his two brothers were left to run the family business. He and his brothers managed to keep the business in tact during the incredible challenges of the Great Depression and indeed, I am convinced that one of the reasons my grandfather was so wise was that the Depression taught him what was truly important—hard work, family, loyalty, God, friends, people, community, principles of right and wrong.

My parents, my brother, my two sisters, and I—after having lived in several places in Virginia—moved to Lawrenceville when I was nine years old. This was 1964 and my grandfather was recovering from a series of heart attacks. He had taken a much-reduced role in the business and had turned many of his responsibilities over to my father though he was quick to tell my dad when he thought dad was making some mistakes with the business. At any rate, granddad, because of his health and because he had turned over many of his day-to-day responsibilities to my father, always had time for me, my three siblings, and the nine other cousins who were all his

grandchildren. I remember so much about my grandfather but several traits of his particularly come to mind—his love, his wisdom, his compassion, his curiosity, and his open mindedness. Let me give a couple of examples of these wonderful traits.

I have shared in a previous chapel talk that my mother battled alcoholism for the bulk of her adult life though before she died in 2001, she had been sober for sixteen years and we were all enormously proud of her for this triumph. During my childhood years, though, mom was struggling mightily with this disease and at one point, she had to enter an alcohol treatment center. Having lived in this very small community (Lawrenceville had only 1700 people and so we knew most of our fellow townspeople and they knew us), she was understandably very concerned about what others might think when they heard she was going into treatment. She was embarrassed. She was humiliated. Her pride was hurt. My grandfather, upon realizing that mom was so nervous about how others would view her treatment for alcoholism, wrote to her in a very loving and personal way and said this: “Connie, your family and friends love you dearly and will welcome you back to Lawrenceville with open arms after you have undergone this treatment. The people who will chat inappropriately and gossip about this business of your getting this kind of help are not the people who care deeply and sincerely for you anyway. Don’t worry about them.” And then he assured her that she would always have his unrelenting love and support and devotion. This letter meant so much to my mother. She remembered it vividly until she died.

In 1976, I was a junior in college and decided to take a year off from school. I was in good academic standing but simply didn’t feel like I was deriving the fullest possible benefit from the college experience. I was just going through the motions and I felt I needed some time away from school. My father was in an absolute panic about my wanting to take a year off because he was afraid (as most parents would be) that I wouldn’t go back to college. But I knew I would go back. My grandfather intervened and told me and my dad that he thought my wanting to take a year off was an excellent idea and that it was a wonderful opportunity for me to grow up and to mature and to get some real life experience before resuming my college studies. My father was flabbergasted and said, “Dad, you would never have let me do this when I was Billy’s age.” And my grandfather’s response was this: “You are absolutely right but I am a lot wiser now.” That ended the discussion and of course, I am forever grateful to my granddad for helping me and my dad get through that tough time.

There are countless other stories that I could share with you about my grandfather’s devotion to me and to his other twelve grandchildren. And any of the twelve other grandchildren would tell you their own stories capturing his love and concern for them. My grandfather made clear to me, my siblings, and my cousins, that his love for us was deep, constant, and unconditional. He always had time for me. He was genuinely interested in me, my plans, my friends, my travels, etc. What an incredible gift of grace his love and concern were and are even after his having been dead almost thirty years.

What were the roots of my grandfather’s wisdom and love? Living through World War I, the Great Depression, World War II, Korea, and Vietnam helped shape his perspective about those things that are truly important. Granddad was naturally curious; he loved people and travel. He was a good listener and had great empathy for others. Because of his ability to listen so well, he learned from other people and that learning in turn helped him grow all the more. Granddad worked hard at his job but he did not let his work swallow him. The great writer and poet Maya Angelou, who just celebrated her 80th birthday, once said that “the ample soul needs refreshments” (Maya Angelou, Wouldn’t Take Nothing From My Journey Now, 1993, Random

House, p. 79). Like Maya Angelou, granddad instinctively understood that he had to feed his soul through ways other than just his work and so he and my grandmother traveled, entertained, were active in their church, and spent a great deal of time with their children and grandchildren. He took us fishing. He took us to get ice cream. He played cards with us and shared magic tricks with us. How lucky were we!

Granddad always encouraged us to pursue our passions. He urged us to find a cause or organization or idea to which we could joyfully commit ourselves. Life is too short—he would tell us—to waste time on things about which we can't be passionate.

He loved his family unconditionally. He loved us simply because we were his grandchildren and he made clear that his love for us would never waiver no matter what mistakes we might make and we made many!

He kept before us challenging principles and values but he was no naïve idealist. He took life on its terms and endured his fair share of heartache and suffering. Two of his children were divorced from their spouses during a time when divorce was much less common than it is today. He had several business setbacks. He had health challenges. There were tensions and conflicts with his own siblings and with other family members. He had his share of the tough stuff of life, but he did not withdraw or turn cynical because of his suffering; rather, he continued to love unconditionally his former daughters-in-law and do whatever he could to be of help to them and their children. While he did not say this to me, he appeared to believe that suffering and tragedy and brokenness are a painful reality of life but can also open up our hearts and souls in ways that allow us to imagine and to live and to love more fully.

My grandfather was a faithful member of his small Methodist church but he was not particularly demonstrative or vocal about his faith. Nonetheless, he believed—and I think this is critical to understanding the roots of his unconditional love for us—that there is a steadfast God of history and justice who lives and loves across generations. In my view, it is that faith in an ever-enduring God that provided my grandfather the energy and ability and soul to love unconditionally.

Let me urge us all to look for and to listen to moments of grace in our lives and when we see them, be sure to name them, to accept them, and to be thankful for them.

I think my grandfather knew how much I loved and appreciated him and the grace he brought to my life. And again, a piece of his grace toward me is the fact that he was not looking for a thank you. Having said that, I wish I had been more vocal in my thanks to him. In his absence, I can still be thankful to his memory but also to a gracious God who, amidst life's inevitable disappointments and sufferings, is constantly bestowing upon us his enduring and loving grace.

When we step back and look at the fullness of life and of humanity, each of us see moments of grace in our lives! Don't let them pass you by!

May we all go forward from here mindful of the presence and the power of grace in our lives.

I wish each of you a great close to Lovett's 82nd year and a wonderful summer!

*Billy Peebles*