

A Good Word for Aline Mullis Allen
September 7, 1914 - December 26, 2006
December 28, 2006

On April 26, 1934 a young couple stood before their minister. The groom was handsome and strong. The bride was, well let me just tell you in the words of the groom, “she was a purty thing!” This handsome couple stood before the minister as countless thousands of good-looking and promising twenty-somethings have done down the centuries, and in those hallowed moments they spoke those familiar words: “for better, for worse, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part.” There would be no way to count the number of couples who have stood at the marriage altar and repeated those words, but few, very few indeed, have put those words to the test like Aline and Carson Allen have.

For 72 years – (Most folks in the world don’t even live that long, Carson!) – for 72 years, Aline and Carson tried those words – and were tried by them – and like few others before them (in all of history) and, undoubtedly, few who will follow, they proved those words. In so doing they proved the beauty of that scriptural affirmation which the Apostle Paul makes explicit: *love never ends* (1 Corinthians 13).

Carson and Aline married during the great depression, perhaps a fitting timing for a life that would weather nearly every storm that life can throw at you. Carson spent 28 consecutive months during the Second World War in India, a world away from his beautiful bride. According to Carson, he wrote her nearly every day for that more-than-two-year period. The happy years following his return were scarred by one of life’s most difficult experiences – an experience which their love had to withstand twice. First they lost little Sylvia at 11 months and 10 days. Less than two decades later a beautiful

teenaged daughter named Gail was taken from them.¹ The pictures of their beloved girls still grace the walls of their home.

“For better, for worse.” (Who could ever say it more than these two have?)

Aline and Carson suffered and survived the expected illnesses of living and aging; in the last few years Carson became a caretaker as much as a partner, meticulously documenting the dosage and administration of numerous medications, keeping up with doctors appointments, attending to every need. Every day he made the short trek over to their favorite breakfast stop (it was the key to his long-life, he says), and placed their order. The cashiers at the drive-up window at Bojangles could all repeat it for him: “two sausage biscuits and a Senior Coffee with cream and sugar.” Their life was marked by a faithful consistency.

“In sickness and in health.”

She was his “shorty” – the always stylish woman that he first fell in love with at a Square Dance. The floor of an old store on Idlewild Road was cleared for the dance and Aline and her sister showed up. Aline was, in her own words, “neither Idle nor Wild,” but her home was there, and it was at that old store – just watching her move to that country

¹ Though I did not share this reflection in my eulogy, it is appropriate to note here that the day after Aline’s death, as Amy and I sat talking with Carson, there came a knock on the door. Carson rose to answer, and quickly embraced the man who greeted him there. Carson introduced us to David Smith – the once-boyfriend of their daughter Gail. David was a passenger in the car in which Gail had been killed more than 40 years ago. The fact that David has remained in contact with the Allens over these years is remarkable, and speaks well of him. But, more remarkable to me is the way in which Carson and Aline surrounded David, and the young man who was driving the car in which the three were riding at the time of the accident, with their forgiveness and their obvious, firm affection. Carson and Aline could have been resentful or bitter, their grief could have over-ridden any ability to forgive, or maintain any meaningful contact – and everyone would understand such a response. However, Debbie Russell, their niece told us that they had “dedicated their lives to making sure those boys never held themselves responsible for Gail’s death.” I have never known of a greater testimony to the power and practice of forgiveness.

music – that Carson fell in love. (“I didn’t dance,” he told me, “I just watched her across the room!”) It is clear, in hearing him talk of her, that he never tired of watching the girl he first fell in love with more than seven decades ago.

Despite their life’s difficulties, they knew how to have a good time. They traveled together in a little travel trailer and then they stepped up to a motor home. Up and down the coast, the beaches of North Carolina and Florida were their favorites. From the “Sugar Shack” on Oak Island to Cape Canaveral, they visited friends and were, I’m sure, the life of the party. Aline’s late sister, Wilma (the mother of our own Jim Russell), once offered the good-spirited complaint that as they were growing up, she was always in the kitchen cleaning and cooking, while Aline spent her time primping. (Wilma once baked a wonderful pie for the young men who were on the way over, and had to scold her sister for eating half of it before they got there!) You never saw Aline Allen that she was not fashionably coordinated; the beauty of her inner strength radiated even into the clothes she wore and the way she maintained herself.

Their marriage of 72 years was not a relationship of convenience or propriety or duty. In all of the conversations I have ever had with them, the clear affection they shared for one another was evident. Even though Aline was frustrated and confused in her last days, wanting Carson to take her home, she said to Amy in her last visit, “I love him. He’s a good man.” And through tears yesterday, Carson said, “I’m losing my baby.”

“To love and to cherish.”

A eulogy is, literally, a good word. Generally when we speak eulogies we speak them about individuals. But I found that difficult to do today. For in their 72 years

together, Aline and Carson Allen have proven another scriptural affirmation true: *and the two shall become one flesh* (Matthew 19.5). As we talked about her yesterday, it was hard to separate them. As I tried to think of Aline, I could only write of Carson and Aline. She was her own person, of course, always fashionable, with a perpetual twinkle in her eye and a smile on her lips. She was kind and gentle. She was a loving mother and a caring friend. But it was her life as a devoted wife that marked her for him and him for her. *“For better, for worse, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part.”*

There’s deep truth in those marriage vows. Truth that Aline and Carson have plumbed beyond what most of us can even imagine. But if our scripture can be trusted, and I’m persuaded that it can be, then the vows are wrong in their final petition. *If love never ends*, Carson, not even her physical death can separate you. Our faith in the God of love, revealed in the witness of love through Jesus Christ, lets us say that even today, her love lives. It lives in your memories. It lives in your heartaches. It lives in the life you two built together. And it lives now and forever in the eternity of the heart of God.

“Love never ends.”

For Aline and Carson Allen, thanks be to God. Amen.