

Kernel of Wheat

John 12:23-26

First of all let me say how happy Donna and I are to be back at Nyack.

I attended public school for 8 years here at Nyack, 5 years of college,

I found Christ as Savior here on this campus at age 9 and committed my life to Him as Lord at age 16.

Donna and I met, courted and married here at Nyack.

Our first child, Jennifer, was born here.

We spent four furloughs on the hillside here at Nyack. So for two MKs without a stateside hometown, Nyack became home to us. It's great to be back home!

In fact, we were living here at Nyack on our second furlough when we received the sad news about the Tet Offensive in Vietnam.

And today we return home to Nyack to commemorate the 40th anniversary of our 7 fellow alumni's martyrdom at Banmethuot, VN.

As a missionary to VN, I knew and loved each one of them

Throughout Vietnam, *Tet*, the lunar New Year is like Christmas, Easter, Thanksgiving, New Years and your birthday all celebrated in one day. According to the western calendar *Tet*, the "Year of the Monkey" was to be celebrated on January 30, 1968.

It was so important to the Vietnamese that a truce between warring parties had been proclaimed, hopefully to bring a holiday of happy celebration.

In the highland town of Banmethuot, rumors that the communists would try something big were confirmed when harmless firecrackers were suddenly replaced by the deafening *Boom! Boom!* of mortars and the *rat-a-tat-tatting* of enemy machine guns.

Cautiously, Alliance missionary nurses Betty Olsen and Ruth Wilting crouched on the floor of their Vietnamese-built house fronting Highway 14.

Across the highway, which connected with Saigon 200 miles south, was the steepled Raday church and the main CMA compound backing up a South Vietnamese military base.

Here, trapped in their two-story Italian-style villas, were the Bob Ziemers, the Ed Thompsons, and father-daughter Leon and Carolyn Griswold.

Caught in the fighting between the two armies, seven of these eight valiant missionaries sacrificed their lives for the advance of the Gospel.

One of them—Ed Thompson—my brother-in-law, after graduation from Nyack and before departing for Cambodia, often spoke to Alliance churches about his and Ruth's missionary vision, task and commitment from John 12:24-- Unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains alone, but if it dies, it produces much fruit.

Little did he realize at that time how prophetic that verse would become.

Who were the 7 alumni and how did they die?

Bob Ziemer, class of '41 lived and ministered in Banmethuot with his wife Marie and three children, Beth, Tim and Miriam,

Frequently and passionately he labored 17 to 18 hours a day translating scriptures, teaching in the tribal Bible School, preaching in local Raday churches and even serving for a time as Tribes Mission Field Director.

So good a preacher was Bob that, while on home leave, Bob was asked by the large Toledo Gospel Tabernacle to take his dad's place as senior pastor.

Bob replied, "God wants us in Vietnam. We are needed more there."

Early that Tet morning, a thunderous explosion blew up the Ziemer house that showered debris into the bunker where Bob and Marie were hiding.

North Vietnamese soldiers swarmed over the grounds attacking the South Vietnamese camp behind the mission compound.

Bob scrambled out of the bunker running toward them, hands in the air, crying for mercy.

As bullets slammed into his head and chest, Bob fell dead over a low clothesline.

Though severely wounded, Marie survived to tell the story.

Bob's body was brought home to Toledo and I was privileged to be one of the pall-bearers at his funeral.

Bob meant a great deal to me as a young missionary because he was on my ordaining council and preached at my ordination service.

Ruth Wilting, class of '48 went from her home church in Cleveland, Ohio, to Vietnam in 1954 to serve as a missionary nurse assisting Dr. Ardel Vietti at the jungle leprosarium near Banmethuot.

She shared with three other missionary nurses making regular mercy missions to nearby villages.

Licensed as a midwife, Ruth also taught classes in midwifery for the Raday girls.

In 1961 Dan Gerber, a Mennonite volunteer arrived to help tribal workers at the leprosarium grow better crops.

A romance developed and in less than a year Dan and Ruth announced their engagement.

However, one evening in late May 1962 while the couple went for a stroll, some Viet Cong soldiers bounded from the jungle, tied Dan's hands and led him into the jungle with Archie Mitchell and Ardel Vietti.

That was the last time those three missionaries were heard from and the last time Ruth saw Dan.

Six years later, during the vicious attack on Tet morning, Ruth ran to a nearby clinic for medical supplies.

As she returned to the bunker for shelter, she got caught in the crossfire, and fell dead into the bunker where her body was finally left for burial.

Leon Griswold graduated from Nyack in 1919 but a growing family and business commitments prevented Leon from missionary service.

"You go in our place," he and his wife told daughter Carolyn.

Many years later, after his wife's funeral, Leon said to Carolyn, "Could I be of any help at Banmethuot?"

"I'm retired, have my pension and am in good health."

"You know I've long wanted to be a missionary."

Carolyn smiled, "We'd be delighted to have you help with bookkeeping and other office work. Contact our foreign office."

The Alliance gave Leon the green light. He closed out his business affairs, paid his own fare to Vietnam. His son Bob recounted the day his dad said goodbye at the Palm Beach Airport. Walking out to the plane, Leon said to his son Bob, "Son, this is the last time you'll see me." When he reached Banmethuot in April 1966, he and Carolyn occupied a pink two-story villa next door to the Ziemers.

Two years later during the Tet Offensive his life and ministry ended when a violent explosion that blew that pink villa apart crushed him and Carolyn.

His last words: "Help me! Help me!" preceded a glorious entrance into heaven to receive his eternal reward.

In 1953, Leon's daughter **Carolyn Griswold**, Class of '49, a tall, vivacious and chic brunette joined the corps of Alliance single girls in Banmethuot.

She became secretary to the director of the mission station, taught in the Bible School and went on evangelistic trips into the tribal villages.

"The belle of Banmethuot," Carolyn's first love was the Raday youth. She led the youth choir, organized parties, visited their families and even gave the girls beauty hints.

About 3:30, the morning of the Tet Offensive Carolyn and her dad heard loud raps at their front door. At gunpoint they were ordered upstairs.

A few minutes later violent explosions blew their house apart. Father and daughter were pinned underneath heavy beams.

While her father bled to death, Carolyn was carried to servants' quarters behind the house,

When fighting ceased she was flown in critical condition to a hospital in Nhatrang.

There she breathed her last and was later buried with her father In White Plains, New York.

Betty Anne Olsen, Class of '62, was born in the Ivory Coast, West Africa and after college went to Vietnam. This missionary nurse. with reddish-brown hair was welcomed to Banmethuot by the single girls.

"We're glad to have you on the team," one cracked, "but a bachelor would be a lot better!"

"Come, we'll show you the leprosy clinic. You'll see why we're here."

The girls then took her to her new home, a small house down the hill from the mission compound.

After getting settled, Betty joined them in the clinic and on regular mercy missions into Raday villages.

Later, in the midst of the hazardous Tet Offensive Ruth Wilting and Betty made a dash to the clinic behind the Raday church for medicine and plasma to treat critically wounded Carolyn.

Instead of returning, Betty said, "I'm going for a car to get Carolyn to the hospital."

She found a car but before she could move it a bullet smashed the windshield.

NVA soldiers pulled her out of the car and pushed her down the hill to a tribal house where Mike Benge, Hank Blood, a Wycliffe missionary and Pastor Y Ngue were and then led all four into the jungle.

Later Hank died of malaria.

Several weeks later, just three days after her 35th birthday, Betty died in a jungle hammock of dysentery, but not before she had led Mike to faith in Christ and asked God's forgiveness for her captors!

Ed and Ruth Thompson, graduated from Nyack in the class of '45.

Born and raised in Vietnam, my beloved sister Ruth felt the call to missions early in life.

But when Ed committed his life to missions at age 15, his unbelieving father ordered him out of his home.

With all his earthly belongings in a hatbox, young Ed moved into his Sunday School teacher's attic.

Then while finishing high school, he worked in a hospital and steel mill.

On Ed's way to Nyack by train a thief stole his savings, but standing in line to register, he received word that a legacy had been left to him.

When he learned that classmate Ruth Stebbins also felt the call to serve God in missions he started dating her and married her on graduation day!

In 1952, Ed and Ruth were appointed to Cambodia. First, they had to study French and Cambodian.

For 14 years they served Christ in Kratie where they raised five beautiful children: Judy, David, Dale, Laurel and Tom. Though, at that time, the Alliance limited missionary allowances to only four children, because Ed was such a moving missionary speaker, he was able to raise more than enough for their fifth child!

They found the Cambodian people to be extremely unresponsive. In fact, after 14 years they could count on one hand the number of people who came to Christ.

Hence, just before departing for furlough, they started reaching out to some nearby Mnong aboriginal tribal people in the highlands.

In 1966, while home on furlough here at Nyack, Ed and Ruth learned that Prince Sihanouk had just closed Cambodia to American missionaries.

Undaunted, Ed and Ruth asked to be appointed to Vietnam so that they could serve across the border from Cambodia and evangelize the Mnong people in the Quang Duc province near Banmethuot.

Their request was granted and they began packing their missionary barrels.

This meant, of course, they had to face with their five children the grave danger of a country at war!

A Pastor friend and his wife, who were also Nyack grads visited Ed and Ruth at Nyack to caution them about the risks they were taking and to dissuade them from going to Vietnam.

Ed was heard to respond, "Friends, we appreciate your concern for us. But we are immortal until our task is done. When our task is completed, God will take us home"

Watching Ruth pack clothes in steel drums, the pastor's wife reached down into the drum and started pulling clothes out of the drum saying,

"Ruth, I won't let you go to Vietnam! If you go to Vietnam, you'll get killed!"

Putting the clothes back into the drum Ruth responded, "It's okay if I get killed. I must go to Vietnam!

Then the pastor's wife shouted, "Ruth you're crazy!_You're absolutely **CRAZY!**"

Looking into the pastor's wife's eyes, Ruth responded calmly, "I'm not crazy. I'm constrained by the love of Christ to go."

Not long afterward Ruth and Ed arrived in VN and were appointed to Dalat Language School to study a third language—Vietnamese!

A year later they moved to Banmethuot and though past 40 years of age started to study a fourth language so they could minister to the Mnong Montagnard tribes people!

On February 1st, the lunar New year called Tet, Ruth and Ed went down into the make-shift bunker, formerly a garbage pit, which Ed and Bob had made over into a bunker.

As Ruth Wilting ran to the bunker for cover, the North Vietnamese soldiers focused their machine-gun fire on her and she fell dead into the bunker.

To make certain that Ruth was dead, they threw a hand grenade into the bunker killing Ed and Ruth.

When peaceful order was restored in Banmethuot, Gene Evans and Reg Reimer flew up from Saigon to uncover the bodies of Ruth Wilting and Ruth and Ed Thompson and found Ed's arm wrapped around Ruth's body.

While Gene and Reg stood at the bunker grave, they found that the wind had blown a piece of paper to their feet from the rubble of the three mission residences.

Picking it up, they found it was a page from the Alliance hymnal. On one side was the hymn, "If Jesus Goes with Me I'll Go Anywhere." On the other side was another hymn, "Anywhere with Jesus I Can Safely Go."

Considering the decomposition that had taken place and the loving position of Ed and Ruth's bodies, Gene decided to cover them over and convert the bunker into a gravesite.

At the time, Judy, their oldest, was a student at Nyack College.

When she heard the news of her parents' death, she came down the hill to our missionary cottage and said, "Oh I'm so glad they died together. That's the way they always said they wanted to die.

When David, a pre-med student at Geneva College in Pennsylvania received the news, he boarded a train for New York to be with his sister. I met him at Grand Central Station as he walked from the train in shock, looking at the photo of his parents on the cover of the NY Daily Mirror.

Of course, in the days that followed, Donna and I did everything we could to comfort Ruth and Ed's two oldest children.

The younger three—Dale, Laurel Jean and Tom—were at Dalat School in Malaysia and were adopted by Ruth's older sister, Harriette Irwin.

At the time Donna and I were spending our furlough living in Wheeler Cottage at Nyack.

Had we been in Hue, VN, where we had served for 3 years before furlough, we certainly would have been killed.

That was because during Tet '68 the communist troops rounded up every foreigner plus 3,000 others in Hue, forced them to dig their own graves and to kneel down at their graveside.

Then they shot them in the back of their heads and shoved their bodies into a common grave.

Instead, my life was spared and I was scheduled to speak that very night in a church up the river from Nyack.

When I received the news of the seven's martyrdom, the Lord immediately laid upon my heart a statement Jesus made regarding his approaching death in John 12:24.

"Except a kernel of wheat fall into the ground and die, it will abide alone. But if it die, it will bear much fruit."

I didn't know, at that time, that brother-in-law Ed had preached upon that text before leaving for the field the first time.

But when we returned to Vietnam we were flown in a military aircraft by a CMA chaplain, Jim Edgren, to the bunker grave site where we put a marble gravestone with that verse engraved on it:

4 facts jumped out at me as I read those words over and over:

1. Loving Jesus, they **followed Him** to their mission field...
2. Like Jesus, they **faced death** realistically and courageously
3. Like Jesus they **fell into the ground** and died
4. But also like Jesus they became **fruitful beyond words**.

Let me expand on the fourth fact set forth in this verse: Christ's promise of fruitfulness.

As I stated earlier, during 14 years of life and ministry in the unresponsive land of Cambodia, Ruth and Ed could count the fruit of their ministry on one hand. But through their death their fruitfulness multiplied beyond their imagination

About 6 years ago, a VN named Le The Dinh, missionary to the tribes in Banmethuot, came to the US and told me that since the fall of SVN to the troops from the North, over 40,000 Mnong had come to Christ. "How do you explain that," I asked.

"The death of the missionaries convinced them that what they preached had to be the Truth. Any message that people were willing to die for MUST be the truth!"

Friends, students, fellow alumni, faculty, our 7 Nyack alumni, our 7 Alliance missionaries in VN did not die in vain. Their witness in life and their witness in death has had an eternal impact on thousands upon thousands of people both in VN and around the world!

Today, all 5 of the Thompson children are walking with God. The Thompson's youngest is here with us today.

Another son, David Thompson is serving as a missionary doctor in Gabon, Africa and through his mission hospital is seeing thousands come to Christ every year!

A grand daughter, Rachel Thompson, is serving with unusual fruitfulness with the Alliance in Kratie, Cambodia, the very town and province where her grandparents had served for 14 years.

Even our eldest daughter, Jennifer, was impacted by her Aunt Ruth's untimely death. When she heard the news from Banmethuot, she immediately fell to her knees and received Jesus Christ as her Savior!

In April 1975, when Donna and I, together with all the other Alliance missionaries, were forced to leave VN, we left behind a strong indigenous (self-governing, self-supporting, self-propagating) church of 50 to 60,000 believers. But, praise God, without one Alliance missionary, without one Alliance missionary dollar, that church today has exploded to the incredible number of one million!

Indeed, the blood of the martyrs has become the seed of the church!

As we honor those 7 alumni who shed their blood and sacrificed their lives for Christ's kingdom, it behooves each one of us to ask, How much has my faith in Christ cost me? What am I willing to sacrifice for Christ's kingdom?

May God today raise up Nyack students who in their lifetime will be willing to put life and ministry on the line for the extension of Christ's kingdom in the yet un-reached parts of our world!

Christ is building His church and nothing, no enemy attacks, not even the gates of Hell, can withstand the marching armies of our Lord. All glory and praise to our wonderful God and Savior, Jesus Christ!