

Press-Telegram (Long-Beach, CA) A FATHER'S FAITH

Author: *PROFILES* by **Janet Wiscombe**

Roaring with passion, the Rev. Joe Ealy delivers the story of Job's unfathomable suffering. He speaks urgently of a man who lost all of his possessions, his friends, his health, all 10 of his children. And still he believed!

He thunders into a wireless microphone about the meaning of integrity. He laughs. He scolds. He praises. He shouts. And the 500 worshipers shout right back at him.

Hallelujah!

He asks them to put their hands together.

They clap with abandon.

Praise the Lord!

It's Sunday morning at Gospel Memorial Church of God in Christ in downtown Long Beach and spirits are revved to the rafters. For three hours, members of the fundamentalist Pentecostal denomination have participated in a full gospel worship service.

While patrons of other churches in town have long since gone home after singing a few familiar hymns and praying in silence, members of the jubilant gathering are still at it at 2 p.m., whooping it up for the Lord to the beat of a drum set amplified by mega speakers. Some worshipers have showed up with a Bible in one hand, a tambourine in the other. They are a family that prays together, sways together, waves and claps and hollers out together.

"It's a celebration," Ealy says. "We believe in the speaking of tongues and rejoicing in the Spirit. It's always very emotional. The singing and shouting really motivates people."

By the end of a marathon service, the powerfully built 56-year-old preacher is drenched in sweat. He is a man who gives easily, speaks passionately, loves deeply.

For the past 30 years, Ealy has not only provided spiritual leadership to the 800 members of the congregation, he's created a spiritual hub in the Southland out of the ashes of social upheaval. Following the riots in 1992, Gospel Memorial not only became a forum of interracial, inter religious discussion, it served as a main distribution center for people to drop off food and clothes to those in need.

Ealy sponsored a tutorial program for elementary schoolchildren. He brought teenagers together to talk. He hosted "Gifts for Guns," an amnesty program in which members of the community were given \$100 in grocery certificates, compliments of Ralph's markets, for relinquishing weapons.

Despite a reputation as a showman at the pulpit, he is an unassuming man who doesn't demand or seek attention.

"He's always available and supportive behind the scenes," says the Rev. Ginny Wagener, executive director of the South Coast Ecumenical Council. He very much has an ecumenical spirit. He's a wise and caring person and a very powerful, solid preacher. He's steady as a rock."

Over the years, Wagener has worked closely with Ealy. She serves with him on "Not Even One," an anti-violence project dedicated to confronting issues of race relations and gang violence in Long Beach and Compton. Its name comes from the credo: Not even one child's death by firearms is acceptable or inevitable. Ealy volunteered to serve on the steering committee at its inception in May. Just two weeks later, irony and tragedy collided. On the night of June 5, his 24-year-old son, Errick Lamont Ealy, was gunned down and killed.

The passage of days and weeks has done little to ease Pastor Ealy's grief. "Some days are better than others," he says. "We take it day by day."

He recalls the night of the murder. He and his wife, Betty, had gone to Los Angeles after work to attend a church convention. On the way home, they stopped at Denny's for a late dinner. By the time they arrived at their home on 34th Street it was 11 p.m. A young man from church was waiting outside. He told the Ealys their son had been shot and offered to drive them to the hospital. Ealy thanked him and said he and Betty would drive themselves.

"We drove up. There were hundreds of people from the church in front of the hospital. Hundreds.

"Someone said, 'Pastor, you need to get out and go right in.' "

He pauses. "The saddest thing I deal with is that Errick came home Saturday, and he was killed Monday," he finally says. "I'm the one who suggested he come home to help celebrate the church's 30th annual homecoming. I keep thinking, 'If I'd never asked him to be here, he'd be alive.' "

In recent years, Errick and one of his two older sisters had performed throughout the country in a gospel play, "Only the Strong." The show had not yet come to Los Angeles, and it bothers Ealy a great deal that he'd never seen it.

On the night of the murder, Errick had been talking to friends at Hill Street and Lime Avenue. Jarrod O'Neal, the 19-year-old accused of the killing, allegedly had approached the group, pulled an assault rifle from his jacket and fired. Errick had attempted to flee. The gunman pursued, shooting him five times in the thigh, arm, upper body head and back.

Referring to questions following the murder about his son's possible association with gang members, Ealy says: "Errick had every kind of friend. He was friends with everybody.

"He was a caring and loving friend. We talked about everything. He shared my dreams and goals. I wanted him to get closer to the Lord. He said he wasn't ready to make a commitment, but he would one day join the ministry.

"He was a very funny, a super-funny person. He'd start conversations just to get people involved. He had nicknames for everyone. He called his mother Bettylope. He called me The Rev., or The Reb or just, Reb."

The steady voice breaks. "I always cautioned him about getting in a car with three or four young black men together. I always told him to be careful."

Although he expresses deep gratitude to the scores of people who have blanketed the Ealy family in comfort and love, people also come to him seeking answers to the inexplicable question, "Why?"

It is a question the grieving father cannot answer. "I tell them I don't know. I have to let it go at that.

"I have changed. I have become altogether different. This experience has taught me most definitely how to deal with death. What is important is being there. Just being there. Not trying to explain."

Ealy's best friend, the Rev. Garon Harden, president of the Long Beach Ministerial Alliance, recalls a prayer service with members of the clergy following Errick's death. "We all cried together," Harden says. "Pastor Ealy was the last to cry. He's always the one who steps in to quiet a storm."

Adds Betty Ealy, his partner and wife of 33 years, "Errick's death has been hardest on Joe. He was his only son. They spent a lot of time talking together. They were very, very close.

"Errick was the life of the house. He kept it alive. There is an emptiness in our home now."

Ealy wonders aloud how it is possible that the streets of America could have become so cruel. "What's gone wrong?" he wants to know. "I'm discouraged about the violence. It's terrifying. It seems a never-ending cycle especially with African-American young men. Today, Christian values aren't stressed. If you have no respect for God or for yourself, how can you respect other human beings?"

Church background

There is nothing about violence that this peace-loving student of Martin Luther King Jr. can comprehend. He is the product of a tightly knit family that worked the fields of the South and held prominent positions in their churches for generations.

Joe Lewis Ealy was born in Shreveport, La., March 23, 1939. As a boy, his family moved to Riverside, where his father had a job in a manufacturing plant and served as a minister of a Church of God in Christ, a predominantly African-American sect and one of the oldest Pentecostal denominations.

His first experience at the pulpit was at age 9. Two hundred people had packed the church to hear the Rev. Louis Ealy's son's first sermon. "It was a disaster," he recalls, laughing heartily. "I had stage fright, and limited prepared material."

He also had a mother who believed in him with all her heart. Beginning then and for years thereafter, she spent hours teaching him how to outline and deliver a sermon. Throughout the Riverside-San Bernardino area, he became known as the Boy Preacher.

"I owe everything to her," he says of his mother, who is now 83.

In 1950, Ealy's father got a job as a tool and die worker at Douglas Aircraft Co. and the family moved to Long Beach. His mother worked for years as a dietitian's assistant at the Veterans Administration hospital. Both were deeply committed to their children and their faith.

Throughout his childhood, young Joe Lewis was an all-round good kid. While at Poly High, where he played varsity basketball, he also served as the youngest district youth president of the Church of God in Christ in Southern California.

After a brief stint at Long Beach City College and a job as a truck driver for Abby Rents, he was drafted. He has fond memories of the Army, and wholeheartedly wishes there was still a draft. He was sent to medical school and worked as a physical therapist technician when he and Betty began their married life together in Fort Leavenworth, Kan.

"What young people need is discipline and training," he says.

Though there were separate "colored" water fountains in the rural South when he was a boy, Ealy says he's never experienced racism. His parents taught their children to judge others by character, not by color.

It's a message he passed on to his own children, a message he emphasizes at church.

"Race is the big issue now. Now the church is the most segregated place on the face of the Earth. I think the black churches are more ready to accept others than Caucasians. Caucasian ministers are normally invited to black churches. Caucasian ministers are slow to invite blacks to their congregations. Caucasian ministers fear more of a backlash."

Would he like to preach to a white congregation?

"I would love it," he says without hesitation.

<http://www.lbreport.com/news/nov06/antwar1.htm>

Since his first church appointment at age 26 to a congregation with a membership of seven, Ealy has created a large, respected institution. On Sept. 28, he will be honored with the Gene Lentzner Human Relations Award at the National Conference's annual dinner.

In his church office, there are many commendations and awards. There's also a framed memorial to his son, a collage he designed with a picture of Errick, his driver's license, Automobile Club card, two watches and a \$100 bill.

Since his son's death, Ealy has faithfully continued to volunteer for "Not Even One." He's a man who has dedicated his life to bringing out the best in others, and to healing suffering and hurt.

His own deep pain has not changed his course. He is, above all, a man of faith, a pastor who roars from the depths of his being: Believe in God. He's the source from which everything comes - grace, mercy, truth, salvation. Believe in Him.

The Rev. Joe Ealy at a glance

Name: The Rev. Joe Ealy

Occupation: Pastor of Gospel Memorial Church of God in Christ, Long Beach

Residence: Long Beach

Age: 56

Career highlights: Beginning with a congregation of seven persons, Ealy's church has grown into a congregation of more than 800. He serves as district superintendent of the Church of God in Christ and is the recipient of many awards, including an honor from the Council on Racial Equality. Last year, he was named Clergy of the Year by the South Coast Ecumenical Council. On Sept. 28, he will receive the Gene Lentzner Human Relations Award from the National Conference

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