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St. Margaret's Episcopal Church  
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### **Edward John Erxleben**

*This land is your land, this land is my land,  
From California to the New York Island.*

Those words were as true of Edward, as of anyone I know.

Edward John Erxleben was born in Elizabeth, New Jersey, in 1933, when America was hitting bottom. Depression was heavy on the land, and war was coming. At that moment, things could hardly have been worse. Through his life, our friend would play his part to make them better.

In 1951, he enlisted in the Air Force. He was seventeen. The service moved him south, north, east and west, criss-crossing back and forth across these United States:

*When the sun came shining, and I was strolling,  
And the wheat fields waving, and the dust clouds blowing,  
A voice was chanting, as the fog was lifting  
This land was made for you and me.*

In 1954, he found Gwyneth. Before you know it, they were facing one another, hand in hand, each vowing to keep the other for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, to love, honor and cherish, in sickness and in health, until they were parted by death. In the old words of the Book of Common Prayer, they "plighted their troth." If you hear that phrase in black and white movies, or royal weddings, and wonder what it means, think of Edward and Gwyneth Erxleben, their life together through the past fifty-seven years, and you will have the picture.

In 1961, after ten years of enlisted service, Edward went to Officers Candidate School and received his officer's commission. In the Cold War, he became a "Launch Enabling Officer" in the Atlas, Titan and Minuteman missile programs. It sounds like Edward had his finger on the trigger, so to speak, of the implements of mutually assured destruction. That must have been a sobering responsibility, to put it mildly.

In 1965, Edward volunteered to serve in Vietnam. He was moved to do that by his sense of duty as a soldier. Outside of the military, we don't talk as much about duty anymore. This is unfortunate, because duty is a good word. As wings are to flying, so a sense of duty is to morals. It gets us off the ground: from doing what we want, to doing what we think we ought to. Immanuel Kant, the great philosopher, taught us the strange truth that to live by what we want is slavery; it is when we get to living as we believe we ought, that we become free. Edward Erxleben was a free man.

In 1972, he retired from the Air Force at the ripe old age of 39, with two medals of commendation. At that point, Edward entered public service for the state of Arkansas.

Pejoratively, people working in the government are called “bureaucrats.” But bureaucrats and public servants aren’t the same. The difference between “public servant” and “bureaucrat” is in that sense of duty.

Dealing with the public, in a political arena, is a morally challenging occupation. When Jesus tells his disciples he is sending us out as “sheep among wolves,” and that we should conduct ourselves with the wisdom of serpents and innocence of doves, he is warning us that Christian duty is not easy, because even the people we mean to serve make it difficult at times. This is true in church, in the military, and in public service.

“As the Father has sent me,” he says, “even so I send you.” Now go and do your duty.

Edward was sent by the Father into the bowels of government where, as I understand it, his job was buying stuff for Arkansas. As Director of State Purchasing, he enjoyed a birds-eye view of four Administrations: Governors White, Clinton, Tucker and Huckabee, successively. That is a colorful line-up. If Edward were a gossip, he’d have had some tales.

In 2000, he retired to enjoy the simple pleasures. His pleasures included, we are told—and I love the phrasing—“the use and care of a well-crafted firearm, and a purposefully stocked tool chest.” Edward was able to savor the look, feel, and smell of things: the smell of gun oil, the weight and feel of wood and metal, the look of the dashboard on an MGB, the sound of shifting gears. That’s how Edward stopped and smelled the roses.

He had girls, two lovely daughters. With daughters, there are special joys and special terrors for a Dad, but the joys outweigh the terrors roughly ten to one (over the long run). The other day I visited a friend who served with my father in World War II, and he quoted me a proverb: “A son is a son until he takes a wife. A daughter’s a daughter all her life.” I hadn’t heard that before, and I can’t totally agree, but I think I see the point.

Our hearts go out to Jennifer and Laurie, now separated from their Dad.

It was Jennifer who first introduced me to her parents. As I remember, that happened because I decided to go ahead and bend a rule. Our policy was that baptisms were held during regular services on certain feasts: Pentecost, All Saints, Epiphany, and the Vigil on Easter Eve. Jennifer asked if we could baptize one of the boys—I’m not sure which one it was—after church on some other Sunday. As I recall, the reason was to make possible for Edward and Gwyneth to be here. I said what the heck, I’ll do it. Duty seemed to point in that direction. After the baptism,

meeting Gwyneth and Edward for the first time, I was very happy to have bent a rule.

When our Rector, Mary, visited with Gwyneth after Edward's death, Mary asked her "how the gospel was revealed in Edward's life," a thought-provoking question. Gwyneth replied with three words: "faith, hope, love." She was citing 1 Corinthians 13, which I might guess was read when they were married. We all know it: "Faith, hope, and love abide, these three. But the greatest of these is love."

When a man's life-companion of fifty-seven years sees his character reflected in Paul's description of faith, hope, and the love that isn't jealous, resentful, arrogant or rude, but rather kind and patient, rejoicing only in the right, what is there to say, but "well done, good and faithful servant"? Edward, take a bow.

John of the Cross, the great mystical theologian, said that the church's work is to position souls to receive the motions of the Holy Spirit. John understood that, as human beings, we are all equipped with an intellect, a memory, and a will. As the writer of Edward's obituary might put it, each of us is a tool chest, purposefully stocked. What happens when the Spirit comes? The tools acquire a certain glow. The Spirit's movement in the intellect is faith, John said; the Spirit's movement in the memory is hope; the Spirit's movement in the will is love.

If a sense of duty gets freedom off the ground, these movements of the Holy Spirit are the wind beneath its wings.

We can especially appreciate today the connection John draws between memory and hope. We remember Edward in grief, yes, but, also in hope. Our memories are glowing.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor who was martyred for opposing Hitler, died while working on a poem he titled "Stations of the Road to Freedom."

In 1939, Bonhoeffer had been safe in America, in the months leading up to World War II. (He was teaching in New York, not far from Elizabeth, New Jersey, where Edward was now six years old.) Bonhoeffer's sense of duty called him home, to Germany, and the danger of imprisonment and death.

From prison, now facing execution, Bonhoeffer writes that there are four stations on the road to freedom: discipline, action, suffering, and death.

Discipline: "If you would find freedom, learn above all to discipline your senses and your soul."

Action: "To do and to dare—not what you would, but what is right."

Suffering: “Helpless and forlorn, you see the end of your deed. Yet with a sigh of relief, you resign your cause to a higher hand.”

And death:

*Come now, Queen of the Feasts on the road to Freedom! O death, cast off the grievous chains and lay low the thick walls of our mortal body and our blinded soul, that at last we may behold what we have failed to see. O freedom, long have we sought thee in discipline and in action and in suffering. Dying we behold thee now, and see thee in the face of God.*