He was sitting on the back porch of his snug little cottage on Virginia Road in Montreat, North Carolina. It was August 8th 1956. While sweltering just a few miles away, Montreat was always nice and cool in the summer – under a thick canopy of giant old trees and tucked up in an elevated cove of the Black Mountains. The little brook that ran under the porch babbled away, making it seem even cooler and refreshing.

Jack Redhead, senior pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in Greensboro, was enjoying his usual two months away from the pulpit. That morning he played golf with Billy Graham. Presbyterian minister friends with pulpits in Macon, Georgia, and Vicksburg, Mississippi, made it a foursome.

As they walked the fairways, those four clergymen discussed the theme of spiritual greatness. Even Graham, the passionate evangelist intent on saving souls, said, “We can’t just get people into heaven. We need to prepare and inspire people to live at the highest level of moral integrity. Without moral greatness, we are doomed as a nation and as a church. The Lord doesn’t care about heaven seekers. The Lord wants people hungry to transform the earth.” It was a turning point for Billy Graham, and Jack Redhead took note that he may have just witnessed an historic shift in American theology on the eighth green at Black Mountain Country Club.

Getting ready to turn fifty, John Agrippa Redhead, Jr. was at the height of his powers. Not only did he pastor one of the largest and most prestigious congregations in the South, he also was well known nationally and internationally as the most frequent speaker on The Protestant Hour, a radio program out of Atlanta that broadcast to over six-hundred stations and nine-hundred Armed Forces networks, reaching fifteen million listeners.

A part of each precious day in Montreat would be spent preparing notes for future sermons and talks on The Protestant Hour, actually only thirty minutes long with fifteen minutes of sacred music and a fifteen minute message. The Protestant Half Hour just didn’t have a good ring to it. Jack sat in a wicker chair enjoying some iced tea before lunch. His wife Virginia could be heard in the kitchen cooking up some fresh vegetables and cornbread for a light lunch. That evening they were invited to the home of Eugene Carson Blake, another Presbyterian clergyman and currently the president of the National Council of churches. Rev. Blake had promised a
substantial meal of steaks, lots of summer vegetables, and peach ice cream hand churned on their large screened porch with its nice view of Lake Susan.

Jack couldn’t help but marvel at how his life had turned out. He grew up on a farm in the small town of Woodville, Mississippi, between Natchez and Baton Rouge, in the southwest section of the state. But when he was only fifteen he experienced the clear but alarming call to the ministry while at a YMCA camp in Swannanoa, North Carolina. Riding the train all the way back to Mississippi he kept saying to the Lord, “I will be a dedicated churchman, even superintendent of the Sunday school, but not a preacher. Please not a preacher. I am a shy quiet man. It just won’t suit me!”

But after college at Southwestern in Memphis (now Rhodes College), Jack knew the call was still there, and off he went to Union Seminary in Richmond. Just after finishing seminary, he was invited to preach at a vespers service at Farmville State Teachers College (now Longwood University), and there playing the organ was Virginia Potts. That very evening they truly fell in love at first sight – each at the time engaged to someone else. He thanked God every morning, noon, and night for Virginia; God’s greatest blessing to his life and ministry.

And now, wow, he had three children – Julie at Randolph Macon, Virginia Ann at Agnes Scott and young John headed out in the fall for Woodbury Forest School.

He lived in a very nice manse at 704 Dover Road, had a cottage at Montreat, and played golf regularly with Billy Graham, surely the most famous preacher in the United States if not the world. And though he would never admit it or allow himself to consider it, some said he was at least in the top five of influential preachers in the mid ’50s.

Perhaps only Fulton Sheen the Catholic Bishop and Norman Vincent Peale the author of The Power of Positive Thinking were more well-known than John Agrippa Redhead, pastor at First Presbyterian Church, Greensboro, North Carolina.

While Greensboro was a small town compared to Atlanta or Richmond, it was a powerhouse of commerce and industry – Jefferson Standard, Pilot Life, Burlington Industries, Cone Mills, Guilford Mills, Bluebell, Carolina Steel, and Vick Chemical, to name a few. Many of these captains or former captains of business were his parishioners; Chick Holderness, Spencer Love, Will Preyer, Nat Hayes, Walker Fry Rucker, Ralph Price and others.

And if all his blessings of pulpit, family, and fame was not enough, the Good Lord gave Jack Redhead athletic ability as well. Although he didn’t know it in 1956, when he reached his ’70s he started regularly shooting his age and before he died in 1997 (he was born in 1905) he shot his age two hundred thirty eight times, had four holes-in-one and two double eagles.

Virginia called from the kitchen, “Jack, lunch is ready.” They took their plates to a simple card table on the back porch where they could watch the birds and hear the water in the
stream moving over the stones. With only the forest and the lush rhododendrons on the cool shady bank of the brook, there was complete privacy. On his plate was fried okra, lima beans with chow chow, sliced tomatoes and cucumbers, and a round of cornbread just out of the cast iron skillet. This was the right sort of meal for the day. He would enjoy his steak and ice cream that evening at the Blakes. Now he might avoid after lunch drowsiness and get some reading done. There was much research to be done on The Ten Commandments, his sermon series for the fall. However, being in the sun all morning playing golf had tired him some. After thirty minutes reading a not very interesting book by a German Old Testament scholar, he gave up and took a wonderful siesta on the old brown sofa on the back porch, delighted yet again by the soothing sound of water moving over rocks.

While everything might seem to us soft and easy in 1956 – families stronger with far less divorce, children better behaved, drug addiction rare, churches full and growing and not struggling, this is our uninformed nostalgia. In 1956 Allen Ginsberg’s now famous poem, Howl was published, it’s first lines:

I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving, hysterical, naked, dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix, angel headed hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night...

1956 was the year of The Fall by Albert Camus and A Walk on the Wild Side by Nelson Algren. But also the year of Old Yeller and 101 Dalmatians, popular books yet to be made into Disney films. The King and I with Deborah Kerr and Yul Brynner was the big film. Marilyn Monroe married the playwright Arthur Miller, who wrote Death of a Salesman. GE invented an alarm clock with a snooze feature. Gamal Abdel Nasser, President of Egypt, nationalized the Suez Canal. Soviet tanks rolled into Hungary. President Dwight D. Eisenhower authorized, “In God We Trust” to be our national motto. A future associate pastor of this church, Neil Dunnivant, was born in November. And here in Greensboro there were racial tensions. Some members of this church strongly wanted their pastor to join the efforts for civil rights and others strongly did not. Desegregation of the schools created volcanic divisiveness.

That evening at the Blakes there was serious conversations about world and national events. Blake later became the leader of the World Council of Churches. There was the great threat of Communism. Even then there was much talk of a decline in moral values. Conservative standards threatened with Jazz and the Beatniks and early Rock and Roll and existentialism.

After such heady talk, the two couples took a break and watched Jerry Lewis and Dean Martin perform their last comedy show together at the Copa Cabana in New York on the Blakes new RCA television.
As they were standing at the door saying goodbye, Gene Blake said to Jack Redhead, “Jack, I know this sounds too lofty and contrived, but on behalf of our nation and on behalf of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, I want to thank you for what you are doing.”

“What’s that?” Jack chuckled, “playing golf, reading obscure German Bible scholars, and taking naps? All the while you are circling the globe promoting Truth and Justice and bringing warlords together to sign peace treaties.”

“You are dramatically inflating the importance of the National Council of Churches,” he said with perfect deadpan seriousness. “Look Jack, don’t ever underestimate the importance of what you do. Be assured it is the local pastor who is least likely to strain gnats or swallow camels, if I understood our Lord’s words correctly, doing things that are both ridiculous and extremely dangerous. Trivial and highly sinful. While I’m gallivanting around with dignitaries and, let’s be honest, often spinning my wheels, you are in your pulpit Sunday after Sunday giving the word of God to people you love and know. That’s where real change takes place. I have come to see that a Sunday school lesson or a women’s circle devotion or telling Bible stories to children is more important than United Nations conversations and resolutions. And just think how many thousands and thousands of churches there are all across our nation preaching sermons, teaching Sunday school, holding summer camps and conferences. That’s what I think is so important.”

“Well, thank you Gene, I appreciate your kind words of encouragement. I really do. Words like these keep us going. Though I deeply appreciate what you do as well and consider it very important.” Virginia and Jack held hands and walked back to their cottage, the trees alive and noisy with millions of summer insects.

That night there was a great storm. The rain came down. The water in the little brook rose. It no longer babbled. It roared. The winds blew and beat upon that house. But it did not fall because its foundation was on solid rock. Jack awoke and walked slowly out to the back porch. He had never seen the brook so high, so ferocious. The strong wind had the trees swaying and green leaves were falling on the roof like they do in autumn. A gutter was clogged – a fountain of water splashing into the yard, tearing up moss and grass and ferns. But he was up high, well above the torrent, safe and dry, out of harm’s way.

In a week he would return to his beloved Greensboro. He would return to his beloved ruts. He would make his appointments, attend his committee meetings, visit the sick, spend long hours pouring his mind and heart out on the Sunday sermon and rise early Sunday morning to put the words of the sermon into his heart so notes were rarely needed and he would preach the gospel to the spiritually hungry and thirsty. He would preach it straight and true and clear with great passion and polish.
He would play golf on Monday and then Tuesday start the cycle all over again. The pattern of his life. The shape of his days. Week by week, slowly, surely, helping people build their houses on rock, avoiding straining gnats and swallowing camels. Amen