

A Good Word for Ed Thomas

February 28, 2012

*“For thus said the Lord GOD, the Holy One of Israel:
In returning and rest you shall be saved;
in quietness and in trust shall be your strength” (Isaiah 30.15).*

Ed Thomas was raised in the church. With the right forensic science, his footprints could still be tracked all over the property of Enderly Park Baptist – where the shadows of his childhood are cast permanently on holy ground. The sage of our good book says, *“Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it”* (Proverbs 22.6) – and though it took Ed a while, his life was one more proof that the book of Proverbs got it right. Though he went away – he never departed his faith.

When he was 18 years old, the US Air Force took him to Amarillo, Texas, for four years of duty-bound service. That experience unleashed a spirit that was aching to soar free – maybe even from a mother’s religious apron strings, not just her maternal ones. When Ed soared from Charlotte, though, he also flew from the church – as too many do. I have a growing commitment to the many free souls who leave the church because of the church, and there must have been something about that sad reality in Ed’s experience. Though Enderly Park Baptist Church and Christian parents raised Ed right, there was something confining, restraining, limiting in an experience of a faith that is supposed to set us free. It took him many years, like the Israelites wandering in the wilderness, but *when he was old, he did not depart from his mama’s ways!* Park Road Baptist Church gave Ed Thomas a spiritual experience he could really claim as his own, and with Joyce by his side, virtually every Sunday for the last decade of his life, he was here, faithfully.

After that experience with the Air Force, he found his career in the trucking industry, where another mark of Ed's life was made manifest. If Ed Thomas was anything, he was consistent, and that consistency proved itself in a long career, first as a dock worker with Pilot Freight, and then as an office manager with Johnson Motor Lines. Good employees are hard to find. Dedicated, faithful, consistent employees who work hard and who are honest are not a dime a dozen, and Ed was a good find for those two companies.

He didn't have any hobbies, Joyce told me, but as we talked we both realized that wasn't really true. No, he didn't golf or fish, nor did he spend his money on an inventory of tools for the garage or on the latest electronics gadget, but he was a sports fanatic. He wasn't a fair weather fan, but he would watch most anything. And he especially loved football and baseball, those quintessentially American pastimes. After work, you could usually find Ed in front of the TV watching a game.

And he loved to read. What a great hobby – and how much better shape our world would be in if everyone gave themselves to reading and learning, to the study of history and politics, as Ed Thomas gave. He loved John Grisham novels and war stories and he loved the newspaper. From the front page to last, Ed read for the details, not just to see the funnies, or to get the scores from the last game. He was keen on world events, and like too few people these days he knew the inside of the library. He wanted to know our history and to remember it. I think Ed knew, instinctively, the truth of George Santayana's now-famous line: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." Ed remembered. Every December 7, the date which will live in infamy, and every September 11, with all its painful images, Ed remembered. And he wanted to talk about these difficult days, even if Joyce didn't!

If Ed ever missed church (occasionally he'd just take a Sunday off!), "Meet the Press" was probably the culprit. He loved politics and keeping up with all that was happening around the globe and in our own backyard. And his opinions weren't always what you'd expect from a boy of modest means, who was raised in the deep south, on the heels of the second great war. He didn't believe in capital punishment – a conviction which kept him off jury duty at least once! And though he knew it may have served the world, he didn't want to see people cheering the death, even of a terrorist like Osama bin Laden. I think it was that deep-seated Christian conviction that wouldn't let Ed go. God is the judge. "*Vengeance is mine, says the Lord*" (see Romans 12.19). Ed knew the Bible, and though he was not a book-toting Bible-thumper, the message of grace and goodness, of love and forgiveness that all good Baptist children learn from Jesus, stayed with Ed and influenced his every thought. (Just like faith out to do!) Ed had strong opinions about things, but he wasn't the kind to pick a fight or be noisy about his agreements or disagreements. Maybe one more Bible verse was at play in this aspect of Ed's quiet confidence:¹ "*Speak the truth. In love*" (Ephesians 4.15). Ed always spoke his truth just that way.

When he came home from Texas, his sisters got him a job at the chemical company. That job didn't last too long, but one good thing did come of that experience: her name was Joyce. Patsy introduced them, and the first date Joyce remembers was seeing the movie "Tony Rome," together at the Charlotte Town Mall Theatre. That was the beginning of a 43-year romance that did not part – even when Ed took his last breath. *Love never fails* (1 Corinthians 13.8). And this one will not, either. They were always affectionate, Joyce fondly remembered – another thing

¹ In addition to Psalm 23 and select verses from 1 Corinthians 15, before beginning the eulogy I read one more text, which I said reminded me of Ed: "*For thus said the Lord GOD, the Holy One of Israel: In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength*" (Isaiah 30.15).

southern men aren't always known for! So I guess it's a good thing Joyce said to him that day at Cherry Grove Beach, "Well, why don't we get married!?" Ed himmed and hawed a bit, she said... but the ring he gave her on July 31 was evidence he was glad she asked! The perfect circle and the precious gold of that ring were the symbols they should have been, signifying a love that lasted through "good and bad... in sickness and in health."

Joyce and Ed had planned to travel. They wanted more time. In a day when too many couples can hardly stand to be in the same room together, they wanted more time together. Ed had beaten cancer and survived a terrible car accident, and they were looking forward to a few years of peaceful retirement... but the 43 wonderful years you had together will have to be enough, Joyce. 43 years and all the memories which you can live over and over. "Laugh and cry and laugh and cry and laugh and cry."² And let your mourning bring you comfort.

As well as any family we have known, this family was there, faithfully, to the bitter end. To you all, we can say, "*Well done, good and faithful servants*" (Matthew 25.23). You were there, to be by his side, and to make perhaps the most difficult decision any family member ever has to make – but you were following Ed's wishes. And love always means letting go. "If you love somebody... set them free."³ And you did. And in faith we can now claim the assurance that Ed Thomas, who flew free from home so long ago... but returned... has flown free again, to return home again. To that final home, in the eternal heart of God.

"Train up a child in the way he is to go, and when he is old he will not depart from it."

And Ed Thomas did not. Thanks be to God!

²Amy Jacks Dean has begun to make, as regular encouragement for her pastoral care around funerals, these words: "You'll laugh and cry and laugh and cry and laugh and cry – this is how you're going to make it through this!"

³ The title song from Sting's debut solo album, "Dream of the Blue Turtles," refers to a quotation from Richard Bach: "If you love something, set it free; if it comes back, it's yours. If it doesn't, it never was."

Amen!