

A Good word for Hugh Thomas  
June 2, 2011

I asked Suzanne and Mike to tell me about their father. I asked Jean to talk about her husband of 60 years. The truth is, there wasn't much to be said – which is not to say there's little to be said of Hugh Thomas. It is, I think, a testimony to a life which spoke for itself. The few words they offered speak volumes for a life lived, not in the service of accolades or earning faint praise, but for a life lived for its own sake. The quiet and consistent, dedicated and focused way of Hugh Thomas spoke all the words any life needs to speak.

What they did said was, “He was consistent. He was to the point.” We really could go home now. His life has spoken. And those words stand in summation. But such a life deserves a few more words. A eulogy is, by its Greek definition, a “good word.” Let these two words be the good word today for Hugh Thomas: Consistent. To the point.

He was an only child. A graduate of Charlotte's Central high school. He served his country with honor during the second World War as a member of the U.S. Navy. When he told about his service several years ago in an interview that was videotaped and shown for a Wednesday night program honoring our church's veterans, Hugh brought the house down with laughter. His sarcastic wit was clear, and the twinkle in his eye spoke more than needed to be verbalized. I listened again this morning as he told about his service, which he say was more “playin' than fightin.” He was in the Atlantic when the Japanese surrendered, so he turned around and came home. The best part of the interview was his recalling of the time he volunteered to test suits designed to prevent against mustard gas – which Hugh said was a little

bit like catching javelins! Some of the guys, he said, were smart enough to go out back and get a little sunburn, which was interpreted as mustard contamination. They got sent home. “I wasn’t quite that smart, he said... I had to stick around a while!” Two years ago Hugh was one of only two remaining sailors on his last ship. Playin’ or fightin’... doesn’t really matter. He was there, serving faithfully, and he survived to be able to laugh about it all. Thanks be to God!

There is a ship in the Boston Harbor which is now a permanent fixture of that historic city’s storied past. It is the anchor of the well-trod Freedom Trail that wanders through the city’s North End, by the old North Church, and to the water’s edge. It’s an old three-masted sailing frigate, and after more than 200 years its tall spires still cast long shadows across the bay in evening sun. During the War of 1812 the USS Constitution earned its place as one of this nation’s most recognized vessels, because it was notoriously tough. The wood of that ship proved its worth in defending its crew against incoming attack. They call it “Old Ironsides,” and when it was brought into port, given a fitting burial, not at sea, but docked in that harbor to become a kind of living museum... Hugh Thomas was on board. When his family told me this last week, I thought this was a joke, referring to his naval service and his age (you know, old enough to have served in the War of 1812!). But it was no joke. Hugh was a part of the crew that brought Old Ironsides to rest. There’s something that just makes sense about that. Consistent. To the point. Hugh Thomas. Old Ironsides.

After the war, Hugh trained as an engineer and worked, in the same position, out of the same office, for the same company – for 39 years. No one works for anyone for 39 years anymore. But Duke Power knew by his action that those good words were true: consistent, to the point, so they kept him on for an entire generation.

In his younger years, when he wasn't spending his spare time fishing, or hunting with a group of his friends, you would have found Hugh on the baseball diamond. He was a tough Little League coach for many years, teaching kids in Dilworth the fundamentals of America's past time. Mike didn't like to play for his dad. (He's not the first!) Dads can be tough... and Hugh was. Mike said he yelled too much. I can hardly picture soft-spoken Hugh Thomas barking out orders on a baseball field, can you!? The highlight of those years came when Hugh's team, which one of the worst in the league, met Mike's team, one of the best, and in that father-meets-son-showdown... the underdogs came out ahead. I guess Hugh never let Mike live that down!

As a retiree, Hugh never really retired. Remember, he was consistent and to the point. And the point was never to get by doing as little as you could. The point was, as the old preacher of Ecclesiastes said it, *to do with strength and joy – whatever your hand finds to do*, or as Jesus said it, *to put your hand to the plow... and never look back*. So his retirement years found Hugh as consistent and dedicated as had his engineering years. He was active in the photography club at Central Piedmont, serving a stint or two as President. He was an avid photographer, for a time a display of his work graced the corridors of the Charlotte Douglass Airport. He had an eye for detail, put to good use as an engineer, and a creative inclination that found its way to light through the lens of a camera. When he wasn't recording the beauty of this world, one frame at a time, he was putting his love of the camera with an engineer's detailed care to work at CMC Hospitals. For 20 years, prior to the advent of digital technology, Hugh volunteered, assisting doctors and technicians by transferring photographs of surgeries and procedures into slides, which were used for training and in various presentations. That lab work was fitted for his temperament and his quiet intensity.

Hugh and Jean enjoyed traveling together, but not for their first 50 years together – there was just too much else to do. When they would take their annual beach vacation, at least one set of grandparents was always along for the ride. Hugh and Jean were dedicated to their own parents as long as they lived. Sundays were routine, Suzanne says, they always had to go to the grandparents' house to eat. Though this wasn't a very exciting way for a teenage girl to spend Sunday afternoon, it's an example she now appreciates, and it provided memories to live with. Memories to grow into. Routine. Family. The grace of a good meal, together.

When he retired, and when the grandparents were gone, Hugh and Jean saw the world together. France and Hawaii, and then a 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary trip that included Scotland and Austria. It was a fitting celebration for a couple who met on a blind date in 1947 and who proved the truth of their wedding vows for more years than most marriages even survive: for better for worse... till death do us part. Consistent. To the point. I know of no better measure of the presence of God among us than a marriage that survives the turbulence of life for 50 years: work and kids and world events and maturing, changing, aging bodies... And Jean, you and Hugh made it another whole decade. *Well done, good and faithful servants* (Matthew 25.23).

Hugh Thomas's best gift to this world, though, may very well be the living legacy he leaves in the four grandchildren who were dear to him. Courtney and Allison, Kyle and Travis, were all there last week when I walked into the hospital room. They called their grandparents by their first names, which has a certain, appealing charm to it. Not Grandmother and Grandfather (though that may have been what he thought they should have called him) – “Don't make them call us that,” he once scolded. They were just Dick and Jean. I love that. And in that room last

week, the two kids were there, those four promising grandchildren, a wife of 60 years, and it was clear to me that Dick Thomas was at home. He was content with a life well-lived. Not a lot of words, but a lot of consistency – doing the right thing – and a lot of “to the point” living.

The Psalmist said, “*Teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts to wisdom*” (Psalm 90.12). That wisdom was there. You could read it in his faithful living, a life of deep values and simple, quiet faith – lived full and free. His life and his death are testimonies of the hope that Jesus proclaimed: *Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God*. He did. And he does.

It is that hope we claim today, that the consistency which marked 84 years, the focused attention of to-the-point living, continues in the heart of God today, tomorrow, forever.

For Hugh Thomas, thanks be to God!