

## A Good Word for Chet Helt

May 15, 2017

I've been dreading this day for a long time. It's not that I've been anticipating Chet's death for so many days, it's that we've been the pastors here a long time, and Amy might be right in saying this is one of the reasons most pastors don't stay in a place for 16 years. It's just too hard. People aren't just parishioners, faces in the pew, supporters or critics or contributors... they become friends.

Sue was on the Search Committee that called us to Park Road in the summer of 2000, and on one of those interview weekends, at a social gathering planned for Search Committee members and their families, I met Chet Helt. I'll never forget it. He was drinking a glass of wine that night through a straw, because he had just had that surgery on his eye in which they insert a little bubble of gas, which has to rise and press on the back of the eye to keep pressure in the right place. For a couple of weeks you cannot raise your head. So, when we met I got on a knee and looked up to Chet to say hello.

I come to this moment in that same posture, taking a knee as a gesture of honor and respect, and bowing to his experience and wisdom. I take a knee today to give gratitude to one who was my teacher and mentor and friend. Chet and I have travelled many miles together since that night. We have agreed often, strengthening one another's convictions and resolve. And we have disagreed just as often – but I have never have a moment to doubt Chet's respect for his pastor, his devotion to me, his purest friendship, his supportive love. I take a knee today to honor my friend. When I met Chet, I was looking up to him. I always will.

When I think of Chet Helt I will always think of the word “responsible.” It was the philosophy of his life, central to his convictions in theology and in politics, for his personal morals and his business ethics. He started as a kid, with a paper route. Rain or shine, he was out delivering papers, and in those days he was also responsible for collecting the money for the papers he delivered. Early on, Chet was responsible, and in his respectful but forthright way, he tried to hold other people responsible, too.

He was diligent, meticulous, hard-working. He kept detailed records at home and organized files, folders and sub-folders, of all his projects. Not long ago he brought me the file from his office of all the architectural work he's done for the Deans over the years. It was half-an-inch thick! Amy always has a wall she wants knocked out, and she assumes I've got the tools to do it. In Chet, we finally had an architect who was always eager to listen, always excited about helping us with our ideas.

I have to tell you this funny story. We moved into our first house 16 years ago and immediately began some demolition. Chet had said the wall was not load-bearing. A few men from the church gathered to help. I remember Mark Cramer and Richard Weaver with hammer in hand. After we tore out the molding of two doors and ran a circular saw down the wall between them, ready to pull out the wall board, I noticed Chet standing on a ladder nailing a series of holes in the ceiling. When I inquired what he was doing, he told me, a little hesitantly, that he was trying to locate the joists above. I assumed he'd already done that! A few minutes later he admitted... "OK, the wall is half load-bearing"! Being responsible didn't keep Chet from admitting when he was wrong. That house is for sale now, and that little series of nail holes is still visible in the dining room ceiling!

Chet was responsible for himself, and out of a conviction he learned from his parents, and from his faith, he was responsible for a lot of other people, too. Chet's philosophy centered in this idea that people have to take responsibility, but one thing I loved about him is that Chet always did the right thing, even if other people did not. Chet was never willing just to stand back and let people fail because they had not been responsible for themselves – even though he so strongly believed this. He had his priorities in order. His conviction of faith, that taught him, yes, we are *our brother's and sister's keeper*, this conviction and his deep compassion always reigned supreme.

His family called him a provider. Ellen knew Chet as her brother-in-law, but says he was really a brother... and at the same time, he was a father figure. "If I needed help... he was there. Chet was a safety net."

To so many people he was a safety net. You do not know all the people Chet helped. Probably no one does. He did the right thing for the right reason, not so he could tell you about it, and draw attention to himself. Chet was responsible, and he was faithful, which made him a provider, in the most careful, most sincere way.

That impulse to responsibility spilled beyond his personal life and his business life, and into his spiritual life. To the Old Testament prescription to *love God with heart, soul, and strength*, Jesus added: and *love God with all your mind*. Chet wanted to love with his mind. He devoured the newspaper over a cup of coffee every morning. Cam says he started on 1A and didn't stop. He wanted to know what was happening in his community and world, so that awareness could lead him in concerned action. And Chet was always interested in reading and studying theology. Never satisfied with the easy answer, Chet wanted to love God deeply. He was a life-long learner. Not too many years ago he signed up for a course at Central Piedmont to better learn how to use his computer and email. He inspired his pastors and so many others with his unquenchable appetite for Truth – and a conviction and a courage to follow that truth, wherever it led him.

Maybe the most obvious thing to say about Chet Helt, though, is that he was an architect. He loved his work. Architecture was his career, his passion, his hobby. When they visited Europe he took pictures... mostly pictures of the corners of buildings, windows, archways, doors and designs. Three weeks ago he came to our new house and took measurements. That next Sunday he had a sketch to share with me before church started. Though none was designed by Chet, every building on this campus has some mark of his careful architectural eye. They bear the marks of his creativity, his economy, his industry.

Architects are people of special vision. They see and create. They take invisible ideas and form visible places of meaning and purpose. They take ordinary shapes and create sacred space. Chet was an architect, and in bridging the invisible and the visible, eternal ideals and mundane materials, concepts and construction, he embodied the work of God among us.

Each of us can be grateful to have known him, for our *hearts* have been inspired by the care he has provided, our *souls* have been nurtured by the love he has shown, our *minds* have been engaged by his faithful discipline, and our own strength has been empowered by his untiring, indefatigable spirit.

For Chet Helt, provider, disciple, architect and friend, thanks be to God.

Call to Worship

Thank you for being here this day as we celebrate the life of Chet Helt and worship the God who filled Chet's life with such passion and joy.

Chet and I had a lot in common. On the top of that list is that Chet would cry at the drop of a hat... and I don't even need a hat! Yesterday morning, during our Deacon Prayer session before church, Amy, who rarely cries in public, stood to speak about today's service, and, unexpectedly, the tears just gushed forth. Not long ago I heard a pastor talking about getting herself emotionally ready for a funeral service, because, you know, it's not professional for pastors to cry.

That may be so. But I'm not standing before you today in any professional capacity. I'm standing here as a friend of Chet Helt and his family... and I want to proclaim that any tears that are shed, from pulpit or pew, are memorials to honor our friend.

Thank you for being here. Let us laugh and cry and worship and celebrate together, even as

we begin now by singing our opening hymn of praise. Please stand.

Prayer of Thanksgiving

God of Great Grief, we have shed our tears today,

and there will be more to come,  
for our loss is large, the impact deep.

But because of who he was and how he lived  
We can also stand in your presence, God of  
great comfort

And laugh and sing and celebrate

For his discipline. Thanks be to God.

For his compassion. Thanks be to God

For his vision and wisdom. Thanks be to God.

For his strength and courage, his commitments  
and convictions,

For his family and his faith. Thanks be to God.

For all that Chet was  
and for the life that continues in your eternal  
grace  
and in the legacy that he has left with us.

Thanks be to God.

May our gratitude continue each time we think  
of him

And even now as we pray, as Jesus taught us