

**A Witness To The Christian Gospel
At The Death Of Frank Hawthorne
Monday, July 9, 4:00pm**

I am at a distinct disadvantage today because I never knew Frank Hawthorne at the height of his powers, and from his wife and family I hear that they were considerable. His legendary impatience, always tapping his fingers on the table when Caroline dawdled and saying, "Hurry up. Let's go!" Wasting time was apparently not something Frank enjoyed, and from secretaries to coworkers at Greenwood Mills it was just something everyone had to adjust to because it was not going to change. I suspect that his legendary golf buddies at the County Club may have used it to their advantage on occasion by waiting too long over a put just to see if they could rattle him a bit.

My relationship with Frank started Tuesday, June 26, the day before I officially arrived in Greenwood as the new pastor of Main Street Methodist. Lee Robirds and I went by Hospice that afternoon- not knowing how much longer Frank might live. But I found him better than expected. After introductions, Frank and I talked a bit about textiles, about golf, about how serious his condition was, and about how wise he was to remarry Caroline two years after Vera's death. He was warm and kind to me as a stranger, and we somehow connected. I then read Scripture, put my hand on his head and prayed a brief prayer that summed up the substance of our conversation and ask for mercy and an extended life for Frank. He lived twelve more days, which I take as at least a partial answer. I am told- though the legend is already growing- that upon my departure Frank smiled and said, "I like that new guy. I think he knows *what the hell* he's doing!" So may the legend grow! But that was Frank, wasn't it. Earthy, a bit salty, loving humor even in trying times, and finding all sorts of way to connect with people.

During the twelve days that followed I think I visited Frank eight or nine times, and it was clear to all of us that he was fading a degree at a time. The kindness and attention of Caroline, the presence of Robert and Ken and their wives who came to Greenwood and set up camp, the care of Rev. Doctor Todd, and the care of the Hospice House and staff were all marvelous resources to prepare Frank for the final challenge of his life- which is to let it go in order to receive the grand gift that is ahead- a new life with Christ beyond the powers of sin and death and evil, there to await with the saints the resurrection of the dead and the ushering in of the kingdom of God upon the earth. More than once that family and I discussed the fact that to die as an aged man surrounded by such care and love and faith is simply as good as it gets in this life. Our God and Savior was kind to Frank.

The church has resources to use at such times. Scripture passages, reciting the Creed together, praying the Lord's prayer, and then- at the end- prayers for the dying. I laughed with the family last night that in my visits I had about used all the resources, and- had Frank lived a few more days, would have had to recycled some of the material, and I know he would have notice and perhaps said, "Preacher, you've already read that one; don't you have something new!" To deal with Frank, even near the end, was to deal with an always aware mind whose mind was always surveying the landscape.

I am told that Elsie Tinkler is here today and that she has a secret little business on the side, that of being a matchmaker for seniors on the look for love! I suggest Wesley Commons as a happy hunting ground! "Caroline," she said on a phone call, "I have this great man I want you to meet- Frank Hawthorne." He called; they met at a restaurant, and today she is his widow because she is his second wife. Marriage is a good gift- at whatever age, and to watch Caroline fuss over him and tell stories was to savor something of the affection and mutual care they shared. Two strong, opinionated people forging a new bond *till death us do part*. Marriage is not forever. It is an earthy institution begun in vows and ended in death. Thank the Lord for Elsie Tinkler and that some have the ministry of holy connections.

There is a story from Frank's young manhood that stands out as singular. One of six children, Frank's mother died when he was twelve. Raising six children on a depression farm was a huge task. What would it mean to lose your mother in the middle of the Depression and to watch your father struggle for every dollar. Frank remembered those times, and I suspect there was more than one employee along the way who was the beneficiary of his compassion because he knew how much a job meant to a family. Then it was off to war and back home again, where Frank began to work in the Singer Sewing Machine factory, that is until Rev. Jamie Pressley of ARP fame saw promise in Frank and said, "You need to go to Clemson on the new G.I. Bill." Not only that but Rev. Pressley personally took him, and- when they discovered he's forgotten to take his high school diploma, drove back and then again to Clemson. That, I submit to you, was a fine act of pastoral ministry. To offer encouragement, to take a young man and- with a swift Presbyterian kick in the pants- to launch him into a new orbit of education, prosperity, and possibilities. God was in it! Frank eventually moved up the ranks to a V.P. level at Greenwood Mills, where he was responsible for the welfare of many other people. It also gave him their leisure to learn and appreciate a game he loved all his adult life, which was golf. I am told he was one of the local legends at the Greenwood Country Club where many of his deepest and richest friendships were born. It was a game whose skill and love he passed on to both his boys. And it is fitting that today his golf buddies are his escorts.

One afternoon, it must have been about visit three, I asked Frank directly and man-to-man, “Frank, you and I both know you are dying. Do you have faith in Jesus Christ?” and- in a very matter of fact way- he said, “Yes, pastor, I do.” He so startled me in his simplicity and directness that all I could do was follow it up with humor, “Well, I think you are going to see him before I will, so please tell him to send help to Pastor Phil in Greenwood who is facing a big challenge.” Frank chuckled.

How different life would have been had Rev. Pressley not been bold enough to lift Frank’s ambitions and believe in him in a way that went beyond what he believed about himself, which is another way a saying the word *faith*. I hope these boys and their sister sometime take a holy pilgrimage to wherever Jamie is buried, there to stand over his grave and to offer a prayer of thanks for that faithful pastor, that switchman- to use a railroad analogy, who pulled the lever that set you dad in a new direction with such good results for multiple generations- including access to the boss’s beach house! And isn’t that what pastors are for: to be there, to know, to intrude, to put a hand on a shoulder and offer a prayer, then to stick a kid in your car for an appointment with a new life.

The grandkids will remember sitting on the floor playing Blackjack with grandad at those memorable Charleston vacations. I was told it was so they could learn to count to 21, and I don’t believe a word of it! Caroline spoke of his integrity and of his hatred of politics, which he always understood as false dealings. Candy remembered the kindness and trust that grew between them when she spent time caring for him in an illness.

Frank Hawthorne was also a sinner who needed a Savior, and none of us will ever know the prayers he prayed at his large textile desk when there were hard decisions to make, or what it was like for him to pray about Vera’s cancer, or the prayers he prayed for his boys and daughter. That is hidden to us, and we will only understand the way he shaped your lives when we see him again. And we will, if we too have faith in Jesus Christ and are found in this life as his followers. Jesus is the only one sufficient to overcome this awful enemy of death, and to him and his church I commend you all, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. And to Ken and Robert a final word. Golf is best played on Sunday afternoon *after church*. And from where you Father now sits, I guarantee you that I have his agreement!

Phil Thrailkill
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