A Good Word for James Worth Foster

Jim Foster spent 86 good years living well, living full, living up to his name. As anyone who knew him would attest, this one who passed from our presence this week was a man of great Worth.

I chose to read the Markan passage today quite specifically, even though it is hardly a funeral text, for in this text, a scribe comes to question Jesus, and the repartee between the scribe and the teacher itself reminds me of Jim (that is, of both the one who had the questions, and the one who knew the answer). And I chose this text because it seems to me that the answer Jesus gives to the life question of the scribe, “What is the greatest commandment?” may very well serve as a kind of metaphor for the Worthy life that Jim Foster lived. Love God. Which Jim did. Love God, with all that you are: heart… soul… mind… strength…

Jim loved with the strength of who he was. He served his country well as a part of that generation that Tom Brokaw has wisely named “the greatest.” He served as the Army Air Corp as a meteorologist and navigator. He gave a career of physical strength to the Duke Power company, working tirelessly as the Vice President of Distribution Engineering – which is just a very glamorous way of paying a man for getting up in the middle of every stormy night, whether wind, or snow, to supervise the repair of our city’s broken down power lines. Jim worked hard for a lifetime, loving God with the strength of focus and passion which was his birthright.

Jim loved with the depth of his ever-probing mind. It was this aspect of Jim that I first came to appreciate. Somewhere early in our ministry in Charlotte, I came to know that Jim thought about the faith he lived. And thought deeply about it. When Amy and I were ordained to the ministry, the professor of systematic theology who had become a personal friend and mentor challenged me with the words, “never forget the importance of disciplined thinking.” Disciplined thinking was characteristic of who Jim was. He practiced this discipline when he listened to sermons. He practiced it when he prepared the Sunday school lessons he taught for so long, using all of the tools of the trade to dig into a text with the eye of an historian, a sociologist, a theologian, a father, and a friend.

That Jim loved God with his mind was apparent in all the marks of his life. Throughout his career, he thought his way through problems and solutions. And in his retirement, that probing, digging, questioning, never tired. His girls could virtually see the wheels turning as their father dug into one hobby after another. When he made the stereo system for their home, the wheels were turning. When he built furniture and created that in-home distillery, for a little home-brewed beer and wine the wheels were turning. And surely they were fully engaged the day that thing exploded in the back hall closet! His daughters laughed when they told of Jim’s efforts to repair things in the home. Efforts that were sometimes thwarted, one of them said, because she thought he could not see the “forest for the trees” – that perhaps in some way, Jim was over-thinking the repair. Isn’t that characteristic?

He loved God through a stint at gardening, and astrology, and genealogy, and a fascination for bio-rhythmic cycles… In his love for travel, which took him on a decade of exploratory trips, often with one or more of his daughters, Jim was exploring the world, with a mind that simply never tired of learning. As son-in-law Paul puts it, “Once an engineer, always an engineer.” Jim never stopped evaluating and analyzing and making connections and working things out in his mind. He loved through his joy as the librarian at Sharon Towers, and for many in that community he became the “source of all knowledge.” Even in the health care center he wanted his computer, because he was always looking up the answer to some requested information. Jim loved God with the gift of his mind.

Jim loved God with his soul. He came to faith as an adult. Raised in a multi-cultured, religiously-varied Chicago neighborhood, his life experience coalesced into a considered decision for faith, after he met his beloved Florence. His daughters remember the day he was baptized in Charlotte’s First Baptist Church, and his mature influence on them, and all those who knew him was always informed by Jim’s thoughtful faith – an intellectual pursuit of religion that was made accessible, warmly human, by Jim’s zest for life and his wonderful, wry wit.

You could just see that twinkle in his eye. Jim’s humor was never very far from the surface (though it may have gone over your head, sometimes undetected!) It seems to me that the gift of laughter is a gift that comes from our souls – for only in that depth of who we are can we learn not to take ourselves too seriously, and never to be arrogantly mired in our own presumptions and pieties. Jim’s quiet laughter was a mark of his deep faith in some overarching connectedness of God’s infinite cosmos, and the way that an individual life can touch this.

Jim loved God with his heart. Which is to say Jim loved, and knew how to love, even though the verbal expressions of this love may have been characteristically quiet. For the last decade of her life Jim cared for Florence, proving his conviction to the words they spoke together for nearly 50 years: “for better for worse, in sickness and in health, till death do us part.” Jim loved his daughters and adored his two grandchildren. Jim’s spirit soared on the sounds of classical music, which was a window into a heart, which loved beauty in all its forms. As the poet John Keats has said, “Beauty is truth, truth beauty – that is all ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.”

And so it was for James Worth Foster, who lived a life of love. Who loved God by loving this world and by loving and caring for and respecting the people of this world.

As a navigator in the Air Corp, Jim learned to navigate not with the tools of an electronic trade, computers and Global Positioning Systems, but by triangulating the stars. They call is celestial navigation, and so it was that by this navigation, and another “celestial navigation.” that Jim plotted his course in life. I believe Jesus would have said to him, as to that questioning scribe, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” Surely he was not. And this day we celebrate a life well-lived, well-loved, a life which surely has brought him into the eternal arms of the One he spent a lifetime loving: You shall Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength.

And he did. For James Worth Foster. Thanks be to God.