

A MEMORIAL MINUTE FOR THE REVEREND THEODORE STILWELL ATKINSON  
 GIVEN BY THE REV. ROBERT D. YOUNG, H.R.  
 AT A MEETING OF THE PRESBYTERY OF DONEGAL, JUNE 15, 2004  
 GUINSTON PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, AIRVILLE, PA

The Rev. Theodore Stilwell Atkinson.  
 August 27, 1944 – May 15, 2004

Ted Atkinson entered Brandywine Hospital last September for what was supposed to be routine surgery. Instead, doctors told him his condition was terminal. He gave his wife, Kay, a request. Bring me my copy of John Donne's poems, Dante's Paradise, Karl Barth's Church Dogmatics, Vol. 4, Part I, and a hymnbook. These were favorites, his current reading and tools he needed for a self-imposed project. He was writing a hymn for the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Oxford Presbyterian Church, where he was pastor for 18 years. Ted finished the hymn, and continued with his scholarly interests. A month before he died, April 24, 2004, he sent me an essay, "Jesus, the Way to the Father". He had prepared it for the Pastor/Theologian program, sponsored by the Lilley Foundation for selected pastors across the land. This group met periodically at the Center for Theological Inquiry in Princeton. "Bob, he said in that April memo, I have written this for the next meeting at the end of May." Ted never delivered it. He died on Saturday, May 15<sup>th</sup> at 2 p.m.

Ted's scholarship was well known, but what marked him as a special agent of God's good news was the way he shared his prognosis with the congregation. In October of last year, he returned to the pulpit, to tell the congregation that the news was bad but manageable, and that his life was "in God's hands". He insisted on preaching last Christmas and again on Easter, and told the congregation that he was looking forward to an "exciting adventure". Everyone's hopes were raised during this time that the adventure might be earth-side. A second opinion and new surgery at Johns Hopkin held promise of a reprieve from cancer. However, the news everyone wanted was denied. The final verdict from the doctors, "there's nothing more we can do".

This verdict was given during the first week of May. On Friday of that week, he arrived home. On Saturday, he sent me an e-mail with his order of service, plus the text of the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary hymn, plus a John Donne poem he loved. Such attention to detail was nothing new for Ted. Kay said that 28 years before he wrote their wedding service in exactly the same detail. On Sunday, still the first week of May, just 10 minutes into the service, he appeared on Kay's arm, went up to the pulpit to say how much he loved the congregation, how grateful he was for their faithfulness to him and his family, and then said goodbye. Here is an eye-witness account from a member, written to a group of friends who were not there:

"At the end, he just stood up and gave his last benediction, holding his arms up high and his voice coming out really strong...Then, he asked to talk to everyone, so they got him a comfortable chair and a long line formed and for the next hour he said goodbye to every single person there, calling them by name and telling them what he remembered most about them and that he loved them. Of course everyone was crying, but it was a most amazing gift he gave to us and it was obvious that everyone realized that...I was working the food/drink tables and the things people said were just awesome. When Adam went to Ted. Ted told him he was proud of him and loved him so much...and Adam told him that he planned on staying on the right track so he could see him again. Ted thought that was great!... When everyone had gone and Kay pushed him past us who were still cleaning up from the reception, he waved goodbye and had a really nice smile on his

face...I don't have the appropriate words to share the experience adequately, but it was so grace-filled."

Ted died the following Saturday. One of his three sons remembered a quote from the American humorist, Will Rogers" "So live your life that at your funeral there will be Standing Room Only! At the funeral/communion service on May 23<sup>rd</sup> at the Oxford Presbyterian Church, 950 squeezed in: congregation, community leaders, fellow pastors and friends.

On Monday of the week he died, one of Ted's last lucid days, he told me that he took each day since the first news of terminal illness as a gift. I had just returned from a graduation at Wooster College in Ohio. I remembered words of the President which he spoke to the graduating class. He reminded them how they met four years before and that they would scatter for all sorts of adventures. Then, he pointed to a sundial on campus, given by the class of 1907. It had these words on it: "United in Time, Departed in Time, to be Re-United When time Shall Be No More". And I thought, Ted has graduated too, a wonderful testimony to the power of the resurrection.