

Mr. Hannes (May 24, 2010)

It seemed like everyone looked up to Mr. Hannes. He was a war hero, flying numerous combat missions in the Pacific during World War II. He was a business hero, successfully leading a local business like a real gentleman. He was a civic hero, active in Rotary, benefactor of the food pantry, and silently helping many others in need. He was a church hero, active in leadership, an expected worshipper, giver of the organ you hear today, adjuster of the thermostat. He was a friendship hero, seeming to know everyone in town, especially those who passed through Circle W, but also befriending Linda, his nephew and brother-in-law, his church friends, and his pastors. And he was a marriage hero, a beaming example of the admiration a husband can have for his wife -- even on the other side of a funeral.

Mr. Hannes was looked up to in every way that one could be, and yet as he neared 95, all the things he did to warrant being looked up to started taking their toll on his body, and he became looked up to in a new way.

See, he always came up for communion by himself. He didn't want to remain in the pew and be served there. He didn't want to use his walker to come up. He wanted to come up by himself. Eventually, though, his pace slowed down, his steps became a shuffle, and he started leaning on the person ahead of him a little, and then, when it came time to receive communion, he would put one hand on the baptismal font and lean on it enough to hear those words: "the body of Christ given for you," and then he would receive the bread of life.

Mr. Hannes went as far as he could muster towards Jesus' presence in worship and Bible study and offering, and then ultimately he simply had to lean on the font. There he had to rely on the promises he received at that same font when he was a newborn: the promises that he was God's fallen yet beloved child, that he could confess his sins and receive forgiveness, that he could experience Jesus' real presence here in God's Word and Sacraments, and that eventually, in the frustrating face of aging and grief, he could trust God's promise of new life.

Many of us had a sneaking suspicion that Mr. Hannes still loved Helen more than all the world. Oh, he liked everyone else well enough, but Helen's death left a hole that would not be refilled. Furthermore, he recently found himself in a physical situation that didn't seem to suit him. He wouldn't want to leave the house with a band-aid on, and yet suddenly he found himself without a leg. It didn't seem quite like the man who would discuss dress clothes and fashion trends with me.

[Gary Pietsch story]

And so, we gather together today, on the eve of his 95th birthday, knowing that he wholeheartedly leaned onto the font trusting that God would be there to support him, and hoping that Helen would be there too.

Because Jesus died for Mr. Hannes, and for you, and for the whole cosmos, and destroyed the malicious power of sin, death, and the devil, those who find themselves leaning on the font find themselves leaning on the promises in God's Word that their tears will be washed away, that the lame will leap for joy, that mourning and crying and pain will be no more.

Everyone will remember Mr. Hannes as someone to be looked up to as a war hero, business hero, civic hero, church hero, friendship hero, and marriage hero, but I also want you to remember the people in the pews who looked up to him for his ability to lean on God's promises to him, confident that God will not let him fall.

Tonight, as the sun sets on Lee County, and the pastures turn a purple black, and the diner's old neon lights go out, and the crickets chirp, and the powerful organ sits silent, and old

men get in worn recliners, and young women sing lullabies, may you who rightly look up to Mr. Hannes in many ways, say a prayer of thanksgiving for him, and look up to the One who he was able to lean on, through it all, and unto eternity. Amen.