

*Why Preach at Funerals?**

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The tendency of some pastors and priests to omit the preaching of the Word from the funeral liturgy makes this question appropriate. The fact that so much of the preaching that is done on these occasions may be ineffective or destructive makes the query pressing.

Many of the objections raised to funeral preaching are familiar. Adequate responses may be less so.

A Liturgical Perspective

The family may request that a sermon not be included. In a liturgical tradition accustomed to relying on the liturgy alone, such appeals may be frequent.

Without riding roughshod over the feelings of these mourners, the minister is in a position to provide real leadership. The order for burial is a service of the church and is under the direction of one called to liturgical leadership by the congregation. While it is important to ascertain (and address) the desires of mourners, these should not be determinative.

Historically, it can be asserted with some confidence that preaching was a part of funeral worship in the early church. With the Edict of Toleration (AD 325) a liturgy in the public worship building either preceded or followed a procession to the grave. This liturgy used forms similar to those of the Sunday celebration. Prayers, appropriate readings, preaching, and finally the eucharist filled out the service. This worship event became a service of Word and Sacrament.

To be sure, in the Middle Ages the monastic orders altered this primitive pattern. In these communities several of the services that marked the hours of the day and night were transformed into the vigil office of the dead.¹ Offices which featured psalmody and prayer had no real place for preaching.

Therefore, some church groups that developed their funeral liturgies on a medieval office pattern came to view a sermon as unnecessary. The Roman Catholic Church highlighted the importance of preaching only after Vatican II. Because the *Book of Common Prayer* followed the medieval model, many American Protestants who duplicated its structure and forms, had burial rites that were very office-like (whether or not a sermon was inserted).

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A stress on the importance of preaching has characterized many periods of liturgical reform. For example, while Martin Luther never produced a burial rite to serve as model, his conviction that the nature of the Word of God requires preaching as well as scripture reading caused him to insist that every service include a sermon. Thus, among Lutherans, a homily in the house of the deceased, at the church, or at graveside, became standard.

In this age of growing ecumenical concerns in matters liturgical, a service of Word and Sacrament again forms the basis of burial orders (or services for trial use) in a variety of church bodies. The sequence of lessons, gospel, sermon, creed has found its way into liturgies of Presbyterians, Methodists, Episcopalians, Lutherans, Roman Catholics, and others. The recognition that the sermon is part of a total service, whose effectiveness is diminished without it, has led to a return to funeral preaching.

A family member may observe that the human words of a pastor are less comforting than passages from the Bible. This is difficult to answer for ministers reluctant to measure their words against the inspired depth and eloquence of Romans 8 or 1 Corinthians 15. Yet this argument, if followed logically, rules out preaching at *every* service.

It would be important to remind mourners that much of the New Testament grew from and is the repository of early Christian preaching. However, for that preaching to be clearer and more effective today it must be proclaimed in the language and images of this age. In addition, messages directed originally to the situations of first century people must be redirected to speak to the anxiety of contemporary mourners.

Effective liturgy is a blend of fixed and variable elements. Predictable services give people a sense of security when their worlds tumble. Ritual gives connections with the past, and therefore with events of a similar character and with those who have already passed through the same experience. The bereaved are linked in a chain of generations with those who have survived loss and rediscovered hope.

Yet at the same time, for liturgy to communicate it must be fitting and harmonious to the occasion.² Many will desire to customize the service to fit the idiosyncrasies of the deceased or the family. Mourners who won't go that far will welcome a sermon that addresses their own specific needs.

A Theological Perspective

Some lay persons object to sermons at funerals, because they have experienced so many that smacked of dishonesty.

First, many thoughtful individuals feel that old-fashioned eulogies are out of place today. They are quite willing to admit that the lives of some believers are such outstanding examples of the working of God's grace that they serve to inspire others to a similar surrender to God's will. However, lauding the dead and urging the imitation of their lives in funeral sermons is subject to obvious abuse.

Lay people are frequently embarrassed by preachers who overstate the goodness of a person's life. They know the individual far better than the pas-

tor. Rather than assisting them to deal with the loss, the minister's embellishment causes them distress.

It is fine if the preacher can give thanks for what God has been able to accomplish in and through the life of the deceased. However, the preacher should be sure that God is the one eulogized. Honest reflection on the life of the dead person can be helpful in suggesting that his/her morality, conduct, and piety are neither a condition for entrance into the kingdom nor a reliable mark of membership.

Further, when the dead person's life and conduct are described accurately, this remembering process is helpful psychologically. Remembering the person is one way of coming to grips with the reality of death. Remembering is at the basis of *good* grief.

A second bid of dishonesty tends to make thoughtful mourners uneasy. Church members have endured too many sermons blighted by a "chirping optimism" that fails to take death seriously. Ministers and priests must learn to deal forthrightly with the fact of death. Shallow "cheering up" is an insult to mourners.

Observant parish clergy continue to note that most grieving persons are ready to accept the reality of death. While a ministry to *dying* patients will encounter mechanisms of evasion (on the part of patient, family, and medical personnel), once death occurs this denial tends to dissolve. More often than not, those who feel the loss most acutely are able to face loss and grief head-on.

Another related form of clergy dishonesty is reflected in sermons that "preach the dead into heaven." The Bible does display, almost side by side, statements suggesting immediate entrance into God's presence, with others stressing future glorification. This already/not yet tension in Biblical eschatology is not susceptible to simple resolution.

Preachers should recognize that dissolving the paradox, stressing only that the deceased is with God *now*, does lead to a subtle denial of death. When the uninterrupted line from our time to God's "time" is overemphasized, the reality and finality of death are called into question.

The liturgy and sermon are invaluable for confronting mourners, simultaneously, with the reality of death and the hope of new life. Existence is a struggle between these forces. Death is tangible, observable, final. Facing it is essential to the emotional and relational health of believers. Hope also is essential. When it ceases, people give up, lapse into depression, bog down in grief. Death and life contend for mastery. An adequate worship experience will draw worshippers into experiencing both realities and the conflict between them.

In many eras the liturgy above has been a feeble vehicle for enabling the confrontation of reality and hope to occur. In the Middle Ages judgment and hell became dominant themes and notes of Easter joy were suppressed. The office of the dead stressed the penal nature of death. Some contemporary liturgies tend to the opposite extreme. The fact of death is downplayed; even references to the cross and redemption are limited. If a funeral becomes too bright and joyous, faith may be turned to sight prematurely, and emotions accompanying the loss of a loved one might be repressed.

However, a sensitive pastor can prepare sermons that take into account

the location of key mourners on the continuum of grief. If a death has been sudden and tragic, with the anesthetic of shock working its protective magic, one aim of the sermon may be to assist listeners to face death and begin to grieve. Conversely, a protracted death may bring to family members a sign of relief. Yet such feelings come laced with guilt. A carefully crafted sermon can take guilt into account while proclaiming the gospel of release. The funeral sermon, as a malleable element within the liturgy, can target the particular feelings and questions of mourners.

A Pastoral Care Perspective

The family may suggest that a particularly grief-stricken wife or husband, parent or child, may not be able to tolerate a funeral sermon. This sort of observation is difficult to address, because it arises from a profound desire to spare closest relatives further pain. Perhaps the memory of other preachers who took this occasion to berate unbelievers or evangelize a captive audience is partly to blame.

Mourners can be helped to understand that funeral preaching is therapeutic in purpose, that it aims to heal. "Healing means becoming whole."³ Beginning with this simple assertion, profound in its implications, Seward Hiltner goes on to further define healing as "the restoration of functional wholeness that has been impaired as to direction and/or schedule."⁴ Obviously, in the case of a mourner who has lost a "significant other" through death, restoration cannot mean resuscitation of the corpse (a Lazarus event). Rather, what is restored through the grief process is the functioning of the person, psychically and in community. Even functioning is not equivalent to what it was before impairment. If a man loses his wife, he may go through a grief process in which guilt and anger give way to hope and renewed life, yet the wholeness realized as a widower is quite different from what he experienced when his wife was alive. Therefore healing implies a direction and not a recapitulation. Healing means the emergence of a new person.

We must be careful not to make extravagant claims for the therapeutic value of preaching. A broad definition of healing will include sustaining and support, the pastoral "first aid" that follows an accident. Yet sustaining is apt to be more effective if wholeness remains the pastor-preacher's ultimate goal.

The funeral sermon is most effective as a key public response in a continuing pastoral relationship. Intense contact with bereaved persons often begins *before* the funeral and tapers off as the mourner passes through the phases of grief to reintegration and new life. The funeral homily may be less effective when this pastoral contact is underdeveloped or nonexistent.

A casual pastoral relationship is frequently deepened in crisis. A counseling process with the family may ensue beyond the normal ministry of prayer and consolation to the dying member. At least the crisis of death will generate one pastoral visit (hopefully two) prior to the funeral, in which opportunity is given for the family to vent emotions and time is provided for planning the liturgical event. On these occasions a baffled struggle with questions of life, death, and God's justice may be apparent.

Thus, when the pastor preaches at the funeral, the questions mourners appear to be asking can be reflected in the sermon. If the detective has misread the evidence, the sermon may miss the mark. However, as only one dialogical moment in a continuing dialogue, the sermon does not bear the total weight of communication. Private pastoral contacts after the funeral will give opportunity to clarify concerns and set the conversation back on track.

The family concern that close relatives in distress will not be able to listen to even a brief sermon has a basis in fact. Grief and loss can shortcircuit mental processes. Blockages can occur. The attention span is affected.

Yet many writers mention what Howard Stone calls the "heightened psychological accessibility of an individual in crisis."⁵ Mourners may be emotionally ready, open to dialogue and growth, in a way that secure individuals are not. With life in chaos, and their need to restore vital balance, defenses are down. It has been the experience of clergy that greater vulnerability leads to heightened receptivity more often than to stubborn defensiveness.

Of course it must be remembered that while proclamation may begin with the reality of death, while it does take into account the specific needs of mourners (else it is not preaching in the deepest sense), the heart of the sermon does testify to God's action. "The funeral is kerygmatic before it is therapeutic, certainly in the order of thought."⁶ Some aspect of the gospel of a crucified Lord whose death and resurrection are (proleptically) the "death of death" (Jüngel) is proclaimed. It is in the subtle juxtaposing and interviewing of the Christ story with their own stories by a pastor who has taken time to know them, that sufferers come to perceive the event of death in light of the good news.

A Personal Perspective

I have come to believe that the preaching of the good news in the face of death may be the ultimate test of the messenger and the message. As a beloved teacher of mine put it, "the Christian ministry is at all times to the dying."⁷ Thus preaching in the shadow of death is not limited to funeral sermons. At the same time, preaching at burials may be the litmus test of both the herald and the proclamation, since in that context death's threat is ominous.

An informal survey of congregational members in the supporting synods of the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia indicates that funeral sermons are expected by the overwhelming majority of these Lutherans. When they expect the pastor to "say a few words" at the funeral and the pastor says nothing, the clearest message may be that the pastor has nothing to say. The questions of early believers were conceived in their frustration with the Easter hope. Luke's traveler asked, "Was it not necessary that Christ should suffer these things and enter into His glory?" (Luke 24:26). Likewise, the question "why" is reborn today in the continued contradiction between a resurrection faith and the dismal facts of life and death. I believe that to stammer in the face of these questions, or to stand mute, is unthinkable.

NOTES

¹ Geoffrey Rowell, *The Liturgy of Christian Burial: An Introductory Survey of the Historical Development of Christian Burial Rites* (London: Alcuin/S.P.C.K., 1977), pp. 66, 67.

² Edward Fischer, "Ritual as Communication," *The Roots of Ritual*, ed. James Shaughnessy (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), pp. 183, 184.

³ Seward Hiltner, *Preface to Pastoral Theology: The Ministry and Theory of Shepherding* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1958), p. 89.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

⁵ Howard W. Stone, *Crisis Counseling* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), p. 22.

⁶ Paul Waitman Hoon, "Theology, Death and the Funeral Liturgy," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (Spring, 1976), p. 172.

⁷ Martin J. Heineken, "Who Calls the Shots?," *Dialog*, Vol. 16 (Summer, 1977), p. 211.