

To Preach or Not to Preach: That Is the (Funeral) Question

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In the mid 1960s when I graduated from seminary, the prevailing wisdom among Presbyterian clergy in general and teachers of Presbyterian worship in particular was that there be no preaching at funerals. Funeral services, we were taught, were always to have readings from the Old Testament, readings from the New Testament, and a pastoral prayer. In addition, hymns might be sung and the Apostles' Creed "recited." The passages of scripture to be read should be chosen carefully to suit the occasion, and the pastoral prayer, in addition to petitions on behalf of the bereaved, should include mention of gratitude for particular attributes of the deceased as well as contributions he or she had made to the church or community. Sermons or even brief meditations were to be avoided lest the preacher be tempted, on the one hand, to lapse into a eulogy where the focus would be on the deceased rather than on God; or, on the other hand, be tempted to use the occasion to bring the lost and errant among the bereaved into the fold.

In my ministry, that wisdom went unquestioned for more than a decade. Since that time, however, I have come to a growing conclusion that preaching at funerals is an important act of ministry for those willing to commit the time and energy to do it with theological integrity. Pastoral care in the context of hope-filled worship is, of course, a primary consideration. On the other hand, preaching is clearly not necessary to accomplish that goal. What tipped the scale for me, was attending funerals in other traditions and noting the frightening number of times the sermons preached presented the gospel as a message of easy answers to the often complex questions present at funerals. It now seems to me that those who are willing to grapple honestly in sermons with the mystery of death and the pain of grief in the context of affirming the faith should no longer remain silent.

Writing such sermons is not easy. In the first place, in almost all instances we preachers have to deal with our own grief when conducting the funerals of persons dear to us. Not only that, in virtually every instance, funeral sermons have to be written on extremely short notice. Moreover, the old-timers were, after all, on to something when they said not to preach at funerals. The temptation to lapse into eulogy is very real, especially when one wants legitimately to claim the gift of memory as an act of worship to be tasted in tandem with its partner, the gift of hope.

Writing funeral sermons, then, requires a careful balance. Unfortunately, too often that balance is on the precipice of a slippery slope. Nevertheless, especially if one sticks almost rigidly to interpretation of scripture, the risks are worth taking.

The following three sermons I present as possible examples with the hope that they will be found helpful. The three were chosen because each represents a unique but familiar circumstance. In each instance a "typical" Presbyterian order was followed. After readings from both the Old and New Testaments, the sermons were developed.

Richard Wellington Hussey, May 27, 1937—May 15, 1997

(Richard Hussey, an elder in the Idlewild Presbyterian Church, was a quiet but important business leader in Memphis. He also ran a large farming operation in northern Mississippi. He was killed instantly in an automobile/train accident in transit to his farm. He left his wife and three adult sons, two of whom were married and one of whom was engaged to be married. At the time of his death, he had one infant grandchild and another on the way. The sanctuary, which holds approximately 1200, was packed. The elders of the church, both those in active service, as well as those not in active service, served as honorary pall bearers and, about sixty strong, sat together in the front of the sanctuary.)

Death has come from the blind side

and caught us with our guard down:

The loves of Richard Hussey's life

are left too soon lonely;

The gentle weight of his unassuming mantle

is too soon cast;

The generation just now coming

is too soon robbed of Richard's joyful pride
in its very being.

Gathered, as we have,

to worship

in the wake of Death's abrupt onslaught,

we must here avoid the temptation

to second guess God providence.

In such matters

we always see as through a glass darkly

and today the glass through which we squint

is more dark even than usual.

Rather than God's providence,

we do far better today

to speak in terms of God's presence:

God present at the tracks

first to grieve

and then to welcome;

God present in time

first to bind up the broken hearts

and then give new life;

God present in our worship

first to hear our prayers

and then to speak

the words of truth

so that we can pray again.

We speak words like these

as a familiar refrain
and they are for us
the word of God:

I am with you always,
even to the close of the age.¹

In my Father's house
are many rooms;
I go to prepare a place
for you.²

You shall dwell
in the house of the Lord
forever.³

When on the sixth day
God created human beings in God's own image
and declared us good,
the picture in the eye of God's great mind
must have looked a lot like Richard Hussey.
Because that is so,
there is a second great temptation
that must be avoided in today's worship.
The temptation is
to deliver a eulogy
that would spell out in prolonged detail
the great good of this good and gentle man.
There'll be none of that.
There'll be no eulogy
in the house of the Lord today
first because our tradition requires
that in our worship,
no matter the occasion,
our focus must be on God.
Moreover,
there'll be no eulogy today
because this man,
as a son of our tradition at its best,
never wanted us to know the good he did
and he certainly did not want us
ever to speak of it public.
We shall rather
speak the words of his faith
and try, try to make his faith our own.
Words like these

which for us are the very word of God:

God said, "Let us make human beings
in our image
and let them have dominion
over the good earth
and subdue it."⁴

You are the Christ,
the Son of the living God
says the disciple.⁵

Do not lay up for yourself
treasures on earth
where thieves break in and steal;
but lay up for yourself
treasures in heaven
says the Lord.⁶

If you have done it
unto one of the least of these,
my brothers and sisters,
you have done it unto me;
enter the joy
that has been prepared for you
says the Lord.⁷

What does God require
but that you do justice,
that you love kindness, and
that you walk humbly with your God?⁸

A good name is more to be desired
than great riches.⁹

There is yet a third present temptation
that must be avoided in this worship.

The great congregation of God's people is gathered.

The elders of the church
are seated in the front on one side
and this faithful family
is seated in the front of the other side.

Here in this sanctuary
built of stone carved from the heart of faithfulness,
there is a great temptation to say
let the faith of the church guard you
and keep you from grieving.

Such an assertion would not only be folly,
it would be wrong
and untrue to the faith of the church.
Those who know the joy of believing,
know also the joy of loving;
and those who love much grieve much.

Let us hear, then,
no twisted words of the faith.
Let us hear rather
the words that sustain in grief
and the words that will,
in time,
bring healing.

Words like these:

Do not be ignorant, brothers and sisters,
but grieve as those
who are filled with hope.¹⁰

God will give you a counselor,
the Spirit of truth,
to live with you
and to live in you.¹¹

I am sure there is nothing in life
and there is nothing in death
that can separate you
from the love of God
in Christ Jesus our Lord.¹²

Faith, hope, love abide,
these three,
but the greatest of these is love.¹³

Blessed are those who grieve,
for they shall be comforted.¹⁴

Lucile Barrow Lane, January 2, 1908—June 27, 1998

("Teal," as everybody called her, died full of years, dignity, and grace. She was a saint of the church who enjoyed most of this century and left her church, her large family, and her community much better for having walked and lived among sharing her wisdom and good cheer. I buried her husband, Hunter, five or six years earlier.

Upon hearing of her death, one of her many great-grandchildren proclaimed with certainty that Teal would paint for them a sunset.)

We'll make as little ado of this as possible.
The gift of unassuming shyness must also be honored;
and yet,
some ado must be made.
From our perspective,
the passing of a generation
should always be marked with worship;
especially when the generation passing
had a cherished face
and character borne on the strong wings
of faith and love.

The old preacher
who is said to have written the book of Ecclesiastes,
when he had rehearsed the long litany of time's vanity
saying there is a time for this,
a time for that
and a time for every matter under heaven,
finally said,

“...and yet,
God has put eternity
into the human mind....”

Eternity is in our minds, he said,
but with one caveat:

“...yet so we can know exactly what God has done.”¹⁵

With the sure faith
that Teal now knows eternity's full wide bounds,
perhaps we'll be forgiven
the bit of playful imagination
our limited vision permits:

“Call me a dozen or more of our finest angels,” said the Lord of Love and Life. By my way of imagining things the Lord God made such a command sometime last Thursday or Friday. “Call them from among our most zesty tribe of angels, and tell them to go make ready the place prepared for Lucile Barrow Lane.”

“Who?” asked Simon Peter.

“Teal,” said the Lord of Love and Life.

“Oh!” said Simon Peter. “Why didn't you say so?”

“Tell the angels from the zesty tribe to be sure the garden is trimmed just so, and

to fill the pantry with all manner of preserves and other good things to eat, and to put lots of jewelry of sparkling good taste on the dressing table, and fill the punch bowl with our choicest nog. There'll be a party soon starting in the place prepared for Teal; and have our most hardy tour guide standing by. She'll be wanting a tireless tour of all the heavenly places."

"Right away," said the kind but crusty old disciple who seems never to tire of ushering in the countless hosts. "Let's see, twelve of our most zesty angels, nog in the punch bowl, hardy tour guide standing by."

"Then," said the Lord of Love as Simon turned to leave, "send one of the angels to go find Hunter. Tell him his waiting is almost done; and one thing more," said the Lord and giver of love and life.

"What more could that possibly be?" wondered the faithful messenger.

"Prepare the paints in every known shade of pink. We have received a request that Teal paint them a sunset."

That's not the way it is.

Of course, it isn't.

Eternity is much better

than my puny imagination can possibly see;
but it is a sample
of eternity put into our playful minds.

If you haven't already reveled in such imagining,
you must try it sometime...
sometime very soon.

Playing aside,

this much we do know as a simple fact of faith...
of this much,
with the Apostle Paul,
we are absolutely certain:

There is nothing...
nothing in life,
nothing in death,
nothing in all creation
that can separate Teal
from the love of God
in Christ Jesus her Lord.¹⁶

There is this much more we know
as a sure and certain fact of our bold belief:

Faith, hope, and love
always remain,
and the greatest of these is love.¹⁷

Clothed in such confidence,

we can turn now
to advice suited to the occasion
and appropriate for those left living.
With the strong fabric of Teal's good mantle
now cast gently about the shoulders of her remarkable brood,
listen to the words
selected as appropriate for today's purpose.

The first words chosen for today
are from Paul's love letter
to his dear, dear friends
at the church in Philippi.

I have it on good authority
that it is altogether appropriate
for these words to be borrowed
and used as a love letter
from Teal to you:

Finally,...

whatever is true,
whatever is honorable,
whatever is just,
whatever is pure,
whatever is lovely,
whatever is gracious,
if there is any excellence,
if there is anything worthy
of praise,
think about these things.

What you have learned
and received
and heard
and seen in me,
do;
and the God of peace
will be with you.¹⁸

The second passage selected for today
is from Paul's second letter to his young friend Timothy.

On the same good authority,
I am sure the words can be borrowed
to be from Teal
to all here
who, by her standard,
are yet quite young:

I have fought the good fight,
I have finished the race,

I have kept the faith.
Henceforth
there is laid up for me
a crown of righteousness,
which the Lord,
the righteous judge,
will award to me on that day,
and not only me
but also
to all who have loved his appearing.¹

Henry Collins Matthews, January 14, 1956—May 13, 1991

(Henry Matthews, from all outward appearances, was optimistic and hopeful about his future. In his teens he had become addicted to drugs. After years of therapy and various twelve-step programs, he had, when I met him, finally gotten control of his addiction and had had neither drugs nor alcohol for a number of years. Even the death of his father, whom he loved deeply, did not, as many had feared, cause him to retreat again to drugs. Matthew had a good job and was deeply appreciated and liked by his employer and fellow workers. All were shocked when he was found in his car parked in a motel parking lot. He had taken his own life with an overdose of illegal drugs. It could not have been an accident. His mother, other members of his family, friends, and co-workers were all in deep shock. After repeated unsuccessful efforts to contact his mother to get her permission to print the sermon failed, I elected to change his name.)

The air in these halls breathes
of very little ambivalence today.
Oh, to be sure,
the emotions here are many and,
though one of the emotions may well be unclad confusion,
the emotions themselves are not confused...
neither the emotions nor their thoughts.

These emotions...
these thoughts
are more woven together
like the coarse fabric of burlap
than they are blended
like the swirls of marble.

Anger, fear and bitterness
are the warp.
Sadness...deep, deep sadness
is the weft.
They come woven together in some primitive textile

from which to fashion a cloak...

a cloak
that is more a shroud that chafes
than a mantle that soothes the
mourner.

If we were to try to make
 some sense of this occasion;
If we were to try to find
 some logic that brings us here;
If we were to try to remember
 some rational process for which this is the end result,

then we,
of all people,
would be most self deceived.

There is no reason for this to have happened,
 at least not in the sense
 of some sinister inductive or deductive
 processing of human thought.

We come, then,
 not in search of explanations
We come, rather,
 in search of hope...

hope for Henry and
hope for ourselves.

Raw hope is what we need;
 not some penny-ante wishful thinking.
Raw hope is that hope
 which begins with shaking our fists in the face of God:
 “My God, my God,
 why have you forsaken me?”
Jesus is surely the most famous person
 who was bold to quote that little quoted
 psalm.
He certainly was not the only one;
 but he was on the cross at the time
 which must surely give
 an added measure of honesty
 to his prayer.
The psalm goes on,
“I am poured out like water...

my heart is like wax...
my strength is dried up.”

Sound familiar?

Well hear this:
If such a prayer is all right for Jesus,
it is all right for you...
and for me.

Such honesty of thought and emotion is the beginning of hope.

Hope doesn't end there.

In fact,

if hope ended there
it would be no hope at all;
but without beginning at the bone marrow of grief
our hope might be hope that doesn't matter very
much.

Listen carefully to this:

For the church,

the full expression of hope
is found here in these words,

“Now when (Jesus) rose
early on the first day of the week,
he appeared first to Mary Magdalene,
from whom he had cast seven demons.”²⁰

Seven demons!

Mary Magdalene, the seven-demon woman!
The church believes
that it was to the one most pained
that full hope was first made known.
For a while the others couldn't believe it.
It was the one who hurt most
and grieved most
who believed first.

The others followed soon enough.

In fact, it is was just such raw hope
that prompted the Apostle Paul
to be
so everlasting sure
that nothing can separate you
or Henry...

nothing in life and
nothing in death...
can separate you or Henry
from the love of God
in Christ Jesus our Lord.²¹

I pray, then,
that like Job,
you too will soon be able to pray,

“I know that my redeemer lives,
and will at last...

stand.”²²

Notes

¹From Matthew 28:20

²From John 14:2

³From Psalm 23:6

⁴From Genesis 1:28

⁵From Mark 8:29

⁶From Matthew 6:19-20

⁷From selected vss. of Matthew 25:31 ff

⁸From Micah 6:8

⁹From Proverbs 22:1

¹⁰From I Thessalonians 4:13-14

¹¹From John 14:25 ff

¹²From Romans 8:38-39

¹³From I Corinthians 13:13

¹⁴From Matthew 5:4

¹⁵Reference here is to selected verses from the third chapter of Ecclesiastes.

¹⁶Reference here is to a passage from Romans 8.

¹⁷Reference here is to the last verse of I Corinthians 13.

¹⁸Philippians 4:8-9.

¹⁹II Timothy 4:7-8.

²⁰All four of the Gospels mention the presence of Mary Magdalene at the tomb on Easter morning.

²¹From Romans 8

²²From Job 19