



Trouble with Funerals

Eulogy Overload

Boosting Harry into heaven

You are in the pew at Harry's funeral. The pastor welcomes everyone and announces: *"We are an Easter people and Alleluia is our song. We are here to celebrate Harry's life."* A hymn is sung. Scripture is read. And then the eulogies start.

A grandson goes first. He chokes up. Then breaks down. He is haltingly, tearfully effusive about Grandpa: "We just know Grandpa is in heaven. He was such a wonderful Grandpa." It goes on and on.

Then Harry's sister gives a eulogy about how wonderful Harry was as a brother, son, and father. It goes on and on.

Then a colleague from work stands up for Harry, citing all his good deeds at work and all his good works in the community. It goes on and on.

Then it is the pastor's turn. He praises Harry's many good works in church. The pastor talks about the stages of grief. Finally he mentions that God is a God of life, and we celebrate life, and we celebrate Harry's life, and yes, Harry knew his Savior.

You go home depressed. **The Gospel was there, but it was just around the edges.**

And think of all the fringe Christians and others who only go to church for funerals. What kind of message did they get from this sentimental celebration of Harry's "good works"? When funerals are like Harry's funeral, the church has failed to preach the Gospel and thus failed both the living and the dead.

Funerals are NOT therapy

"We're here today to pay homage to your loved one and to help you in the grieving process." To the contrary, a funeral is **not** group therapy, **not** counseling from the pulpit. A funeral should **not** be tailored to the deceased the way a wedding is tailored to a couple being married.

Rather, a funeral is a worship service, and its proper focus is the Christian hope. In the midst of death we are called to bring hope, as Paul writes in I Thessalonians 4:13b: "[We do] not grieve as others do who have no hope."

The service is for the living, not the dead. The living need to hear the Christian message of hope. This Word shapes not just the sermon but also the welcome, hymns, and prayers.

While circumstances vary from funeral to funeral, the basic message does not. **Every funeral proclaims the Christian hope in the face of death and leaves the rest to the Lord.**

Eulogy overload

Grieving families often want multiple eulogies. To allow this opens a Pandora's box of problems: Speakers are often too emotional; they talk too long; they tell inappropriate stories; and the deceased rather than the Gospel becomes the center of the service.

Many church leaders are working to fix these problems. For example, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops recommends dioceses place strict limits on eulogies. Many dioceses now allow only one eulogy. A handful of dioceses forbid eulogies altogether.

(continued on page 2)



(continued from page 1)

How can pastors say “no” to several eulogies when pressured by grieving families?

A pastor should not have to face these emotionally charged situations alone. He or she needs to be backed up by a funeral policy established by the church council.

A family service can be held the night before the funeral where family members have a chance to let down their hair, weep, and eulogize about their loved one.

The next day at the funeral a single, five-minute eulogy may be included in the service. Because anguish can easily undermine the message which ought to pervade a Christian funeral, it often works best if the pastor reads the eulogy.

At the reception following the service a microphone can be provided for others to eulogize. PowerPoint presentations about the deceased, if desired, are appropriately included in this setting rather than at the funeral.

CrossAlone Lutheran Churches are centrist Lutherans affiliated with Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ (LCMC).

Editorial Team

Don Johnson
Meg Madson
Mark Richardson

Cost: \$10.00 a Year
(Six issues per year)

Contact Us

Subscriptions, information, and back issues:
Jane Hussey Larson
Tel: 952/442-4134
Fax: 763-476-6110

Mailing Address

424 South Olive
Waconia, MN 55387

Visit Us Online

www.crossalone.us

The Church's song

The church's song is what-God-in-Christ-has-done-for-us. Therefore a congregation ought to have a policy about hymns at funerals and the pastor ought to have final authority in hymn selection. Secular songs, such as *Somewhere Over the Rainbow*, *Memories*, and *My Heart Will Go On*, are not appropriate even if the deceased requested them.

What not to say

• *His time was up. His number was up. God wills it.* The famous words from Ecclesiastes 3:1-2: “For everything there is a season . . . a time to live and a time to die” – are often misunderstood to mean that there is a kind of fate involved in death when actually that passage is simply observing the fact that life has certain patterns.

It is important to point out that God does not will evil or do evil. Rather, God's original plan, “Plan A,” for a world without sin and death did not work out. Sin came into the world (Genesis 3) and that meant that God went with “Plan B” – in short, he solved the terrible problem of sin on the cross, by himself, without our help, and it is finished (John 19:30). God does not will evil; he overcame evil, sin, and death on the cross.

• *We are here to celebrate life.* We do not deny death or regard it as natural or as our friend – or even as part of God's plan. As Hebrews 2:14 states:

“Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same nature, that through death he might destroy him who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong bondage.”

Death is “the last enemy to be destroyed” (1 Cor 15:26). We follow the New Testament in identifying sin and death as two sides of the same coin: “The wages of sin is death” (Rom 6:23). “The sting of death is sin” (1 Cor 15:56).

Our Christian hope

1 Peter 1:3: “We have a living hope” – because Christ lives, as we sing at Easter: “The strife is o'er, the battle done; Now is the victor's triumph won!”

When a Christian dies, his strife is over, his battle won because the Christian is baptized into Christ's death. Only in this light can we speak of death as good.

When someone dies, we point to the promises of God in texts such as these:

• Romans 8:32: “He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all things with him?”

• Romans 14:9: “For this reason Jesus Christ died and rose again that he might be Lord both of the dead and the living.”

• Romans 6:5: “For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.”

• I Cor 2:9: “But, as it is written, ‘What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him.’”

• Revelation 21:4: “[H]e will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away.”

In sum: Funerals fail when the eulogies are the main thing and the gospel is just around the edges.

A funeral is a worship service, and its proper focus is the Christian hope. It is a service for the living, not the dead.