Graveside hope: A passion for funeral ministry

by John Fanestil in the March 6, 2007 issue

When I tell other pastors that I hate weddings and love funerals, they smile knowingly. Of course, the dark humor rings true with them—every pastor I know can tell a "wedding from hell" story, and all pastors can think of a few funerals at which they'd love to preside. In my colleagues' smiles I also see an understanding, born from firsthand experience, that funerals—and the events that precede and follow them—present some of the most meaningful opportunities for pastors to witness to the grace and love of God.

My passion for funerals has led me to research the historic Christian practices of marking the arrival of death. Since so many generations of Christians lived before dying people were confined to hospitals, they spent their entire lives surrounded by death and dying. As pastors we can draw on their wisdom in ministering to modern people, who struggle so mightily when confronted with the reality of death.

As a shorthand expression for an authentic Christian ministry at the end of life, I have come to embrace familiar lines from the fifth verse of Charles Wesley's "Christ the Lord Is Risen Today!"

> Soar we now where Christ has led, Alleluia!
> Following our exalted Head, Alleluia!
> Made like him, like him we rise, Alleluia!
> Ours the cross, the grave, the skies, Alleluia!

"The cross" speaks to me of ministry with the dying and their loved ones; "the grave," of ministry with those who gather for funerals; "the skies," of ministry with those who must live on after losing a loved one to death.

Hospice physician Ira Byock, author of *Dying Well* and *The Four Things That Matter Most*, observes that in the modern medical worldview death is considered obscene. This understanding has a hold on the hearts and minds of most Americans, but a

number of developments have begun to loosen its grip—most notably the spread of the hospice movement, but also the public spectacle made of deaths like that of Terry Schiavo, the Florida woman who lived for 15 years on a ventilator before dying in 2005. More and more Americans are realizing, even if they cannot articulate their reasons, that the prolonging of biological existence is not in and of itself an adequate goal for decision making near the end of life.

Christians have an important witness to make in the midst of this conversation. The idea that deaths can be inspirational—even redemptive—almost never enters modern conversations about death, yet this understanding lies at the core of the Christian gospel. For two millennia, across cultures and generations, Christians pondering the end of life have looked for guidance and inspiration to Jesus, who went willingly to his death on a cross because he perceived that by doing so he could become an instrument of blessing for others.

The idea that a “good death” can be a blessing to others suggests that a primary goal for Christian ministry at the end of life is to foster encounters between those who are preparing to die and those who love them. Christian pastors can remind parishioners that as they are preparing to die, they are in some mysterious way being joined spiritually to Christ, who also suffered and died. Without burdening them with expectations, pastors can also tell parishioners that even as they are dying they can still be instruments of God’s grace for others. Once their pain is controlled (as it can and should be through palliative care), I tell the dying, “Even as your body is failing you, you can still fulfill what Jesus said was the greatest commandment in the law: you can still love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and strength, and you can still love your neighbor as yourself.”

Pastors can also teach this to the friends and families of the dying. As they gather around the deathbed they are being given the opportunity to become more like Christ’s disciples, who also had to learn what it is like to follow a loved one to his death. By seeing to it that these encounters are marked by the rituals of the church—the reading of familiar scriptures, the singing of favorite hymns, the praying of well-known prayers—pastors can help lead the family and friends of the dying down the path that leads to the cross of Christ’s redemption. When someone asks me what they should do when they visit a dying friend, I offer simple instructions. “Take your Bible and hymnal with you,” I tell them, “and turn off the television.”

On a recent swing through New England I stopped at a bar in Hanover, New Hampshire, for a beer. I began talking with a man there, and when he learned of my interest in death and dying, he asked if I had ever heard of a woman named Bathsheba Wallace.

Wallace, who lived from 1752 to 1831, is a legendary figure in the history of East Thetford, New Hampshire, and neighboring towns. She is credited with attending some 1,666 births throughout 42 years of practice as a midwife. When Wallace was dying, the people in East Thetford shut down the shops and schools and gathered with their children around her bed to send her off with scripture, song and prayer. She died surrounded by a large gathering of people, the majority of whom she herself had ushered into the world.

I love this story because it demonstrates that our ancestors knew intuitively that being born and dying are somehow related. None of us is alone in our being born. Neither are we alone in our dying; no matter how desperate the circumstances, God’s spirit is always present. As the story of Bathsheba Wallace beautifully illustrates, and as every pastor knows, the presence of God is felt most powerfully when the whole company of disciples is gathered at the foot of the cross.

The circle of people who gather around the deathbed will almost always grow in the days after death (sometimes dramatically). Whether the Christian funeral takes place in a viewing at home, a wake at the mortuary, a memorial service in the sanctuary, a gathering at the cemetery—or any of these in combination—it is an assembly of Christ’s entire company at the side of the grave. Across cultures and generations, our Christian ancestors understood that three things must happen during this time: the deceased must be honored, the reality of death must be recognized, and the praises and promises of God must be sung.

At the heart of most Protestant funerals is a time of eulogy, when the deceased is named and honored by family and friends. Inspired eulogies often come easily, even joyfully, at the funerals of those who lived full and faithful Christian lives. There is something natural and fitting about honoring people whose lives have witnessed to the love of God; in fact, this practice of eulogizing the dead (with both spoken and written word) is among the most ancient of Christian practices. From the early church’s tales of martyrdom to the hagiography of Roman Catholicism, Christians have understood that the stories of people who lived faithful lives and died faithful deaths offer instruction and inspiration to those who live on.

The reality of death must also be acknowledged. I find dramatic representations of burial most persuasive in this regard. Whether in the funeral home or at the front of the chancel, I prefer an open casket (people choose whether or not to approach the casket), and when it's time to close the casket, I prefer that it be done with great respect and solemnity. I also like to make it possible for people to stay at the cemetery if they wish to see the casket lowered into the grave. As scriptures are read and prayers are said, I place a handful of dirt on the casket, concluding with that most frank of prayers: "This body we commit to the elements—earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust."

Having acknowledged the power of death, the pastor's next job is to present the ancient Christian understanding that this power can be and will be defeated. This work is especially important when there is someone present who has never heard a compassionate Christian message (a common occurrence). Even regular churchgoers are more inclined to self-examination during a funeral, and more open to the possibility of amending their lives than they are on a typical Sunday morning.

The most persuasive argument against the power of death is one that draws plausible connections between eulogy—good words about the deceased—and doxology—good words in praise of God. At the graveside people will be reflecting on the ways in which their lives have been touched by the life of the deceased—the pastor's job is to help them see that in this their lives have been touched by God. By rehearsing the great and mighty acts of God in salvation history, the pastor can assure people that God will remain active in their lives, too. This is the heart of the gospel—in Jesus Christ, God has chosen to act decisively for the redemption of God's people in history. Those gathered at the graveside should be reminded that this promise of God's redemption does not expire with the end of any single human life.

When the graveside service is over—and in the days and weeks and months that follow—pastors can invite those who live on to lift their eyes to God's horizons. The first "sky" the grieving are called to consider is the sky that Christians have always called heaven. The second is the sky of future possibilities.

Most modern American Christians—especially educated ones—have great trouble acknowledging that heaven might even exist. Most are shaped by a thoroughly materialist understanding of the universe and will resist simplistic portrayals of heaven. But many can still find some comfort in symbolic representations, especially those that refer to God's created universe. As Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang

conclude in their magisterial *Heaven*: *A History*, “There is a long tradition in Christian history which acknowledges that glimpses of heaven can be experienced on earth.”

Rather than trying to steer clear of the topic and accede to the dominant reservations of the modern mind, pastors should openly acknowledge people’s doubts and uncertainties and then invite them to engage their hearts and imaginations. Most often—in the course of planning the funeral, if not from a prior pastoral relationship—the pastor can easily discover those places in the world that the deceased considered most sacred—the beach, the forest, the river, the mountain. Conjuring up images of these favorite places can lead into a conversation about eternal life. But instead of saying, for example, “Rick must be up in heaven surfing”—leaving some people to think that the pastor is naive—the pastor might say something like, “I don’t know what heaven is like, but today let’s pretend it’s like the ocean,” and then challenge the mourners to engage their own imaginations: “If you can imagine that in your mind’s eye, I bet you can catch sight of Rick, riding a big wave.” This kind of talk will not win over radical skeptics, but it will invite thoughtful Christians and others with open minds to ponder the mysterious possibility of an eternal life.

The work of finding what I call “the sky of future possibilities” takes time—in some cases even years—but it is right and good to name this goal as the gathered company prepares to disperse. What moves us toward the goal is grief work, of course, and pastors must take care not to pretend that the clouds darkening a mourner’s skies can be wished away. Good pastors know that after the hustle and bustle of funeral time, the skies can seem to close in around the grieving.

Some wonderful resources exist for helping people through their grief—too many to name—and a deep discussion of grief is beyond the scope of this article. Suffice it to say that this is one place I cherish contemporary wisdom as much as if not more than the wisdom of the ancients. Across the ages many Christians have been so fixed on heaven, and on the expectation of their own deaths, that they failed to develop a theology of possibilities for life on earth. Christians from earlier generations sometimes became so heavenly minded that they overlooked the possibilities for doing earthly good. That said, we should remember how privileged we are: living in the “first world” in the 21st century, we have good reason to hope for a long life. Few of our Christian ancestors could claim this hope. Perhaps it is easier for us to recognize that the loss of a loved one need not cause us to give up on this life.

The work of a pastor is especially difficult amid the experience of declining membership. Many pastors I know preside at more funerals each year than they do at weddings or baptisms. In the midst of working for congregational renewal, they face the daunting task of keeping spirits up—their own and their parishioners'. One way to do this is to embrace the church's ministry with the dying, and to recognize it as a source of great potential blessing. Without being heavy-handed or manipulative, pastors can minister to families whose loved ones are nearing the end of life in ways that invite the living to lead lives of deeper faith and more faithful practice.

Personal experience has taught me that a funeral can be an instrument of great blessing. My grandfather, Harry Smith, worked at a Texaco service station in the small town of El Dorado, Kansas, for almost 40 years. At his funeral the pastor told a story that I still remember vividly. The story was about how one Sunday as my grandfather walked out of church, he mentioned to the pastor that the license-plate frame on the back of the pastor's car was loose and jangling. The pastor laughed and told my grandfather that he had known about it for some time and that he kept intending to fix it but didn't have the right sized screw. My grandfather chuckled and wished him a good day.

That afternoon, as the pastor sat eating his Sunday afternoon meal, he heard a noise outside his house. Getting up from his kitchen table he looked out the window to see my grandfather bent down on one knee, putting a new screw into the license-plate frame on his car. By the time the pastor got his shoes on and went out to thank him, my grandfather was gone.

Years later I remember this image, planted in my distracted, 18-year-old heart and mind by a pastor who was simply going about his business, doing ministry at a funeral. I cherish the image, and blend it routinely with other images I hold dear. As I close my eyes I see my grandfather kneeling in a driveway turning a screw with a screwdriver. I also see my wife as a young mother, bending over to pick up our fallen child. I see Jesus, squatting and washing his disciples' feet. I see a pastor at the altar clasping the hands of two people who have just exchanged wedding vows. And yes, among these other images, I see one more: a pastor reaching down to pick up a handful of dirt and throw it into a grave.