Speaking to mourners: The evolution of funeral sermons

by Lucy Bregman in the November 1, 2011 issue

When Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's *On Death and Dying* burst upon the world in 1968, hospital chaplains and those who trained pastoral counselors were among the first to endorse it. The psychological framing of death and dying with labels such as "denial" or "depression" was not a problem for pastoral counselors well accustomed to Carl Rogers.

Almost immediately after the publication of *On Death and Dying,* the pastoral care and counseling experts moved into the area of grief and loss. By the mid-1970s, works such as *Death and Ministry: Pastoral Care of the Dying and the Bereaved,* edited by Donald Bane, and *Pastoral Care and Counseling in Grief and Separation,* by Wayne Oates, showed how smoothly the basic framework of Kübler-Ross could be adopted by clergy.

Eventually, this perspective required a more sustained theological treatment, and the fine 1983 work by Kenneth Mitchell and Herbert Anderson, *All Our Losses, All Our*

Griefs, tried to provide this. Mitchell and Anderson began from the recognition that loss and grief had not been Christian topics, had in fact been ignored or denied in favor of a focus on death. Yet for them, "death is only one form of loss," and so following the lead of the death awareness movement and earlier pastoral care appropriations, they center on loss, offering both psychological and theological perspectives.

> Society does not encourage awareness of powerful loss feelings. . . . This is a Stoic position; it represents in our view one of the most powerful anti-Christian stances in our society. It is apathy or indifference which breeds a callous disregard for the sacredness of all life. Loss is inescapably painful precisely because attachment is a human necessity. . . . To be human is to be a griever for all kinds of losses.

To subsume death under loss in this way would have been unthinkable for Christians half a century earlier. Death was, and had always been, utterly special, absolute and ultimate; it was not "only one form" of anything!

Meanwhile, Mitchell and Anderson also looked anew at what space was given to grief at funerals. Alas, when it came to preaching a funeral sermon, they thought, pastors could find little or nothing that would truly help them address the experience of loss.

At the time, many preachers were influenced by the work of Swiss theologian Oscar Cullmann. Writing in the mid-1960s, Cullmann argued in direct opposition to an earlier generation of pastors who, in the face of death, had consoled grievers with notions of natural immortality. For Cullmann, such an approach to death was more Greek than Christian. Christians see death as the enemy, Cullmann insisted, and the only thing that defeats death is resurrection by God, a totally miraculous event.

The tone of funeral sermons influenced by Cullmann was relentlessly and abstractly upbeat. Unlike sermons on natural immortality, Cullmann's message of victory over death could not be bolstered or fleshed out by allegories of natural transitions, of sailing or returning home. Christian hopes were discontinuous with any natural views; God had reversed, not fulfilled, normal human responses.

While Cullmann himself wanted to restore a sense of death's intrinsic "horror," this element does not appear in funeral sermons that are obviously based on his ideas. Rather, Christian funerals became occasions for affirming Christ's conquest of death and the joyous shared certainty of resurrection. The proclamation of "victory" and

"resurrection" became the norm. According to this theology, it was wrong to be sad at a Christian funeral.

This emphasis was surely a denial of the sadness felt by the mourners. Indeed, complaints about revised "resurrection-filled" funeral liturgies poured in to the church bodies that authorized them.

For Mitchell and Anderson, the Cullmannesque sermon about victory represented a new kind of denial of death. "The theological assertion is accurate, but from a pastoral perspective the theological priority has been misplaced."

By the time the death awareness movement percolated through chaplains and pastoral caregivers into the general sensibilities of the public (and this happened very rapidly), leaving space for grief, rather than denying it, seemed honest and necessary. So in a 1989 anthology of funeral sermons, one finds this example:

> We have gathered as members of the Body of Christ . . . to share the heartache, the faith and the hope of the S_____ family. The pain of grief is always heavy; so our acts of friendship can help to shoulder their sorrows. In these moments when they can feel bewildered, our faith bolsters theirs. And when the tragedy of it all clouds their way, our presence can brighten the horizons of their days. (*We Are the Lord's: An Anthology of Select Funeral Messages*)

Here the presence of other human beings serves as a sign of the continuing presence of God. What people in this situation need to hear is what Paul proclaimed in Romans 8:35-39: God will be with you in the midst of life and death. God will never abandon you, even when you are sure you are alone.

In other examples of anthologized sermons from this period, the pastor's own reactions and feelings model how important an honest expression of the full range of grieving should be:

> My first reaction was one of anger when I heard the news. When the hospital called to tell me that _____ had died of a massive heart attack, it seemed so unfair to me that I couldn't even begin to think about what I would say until my own angry feelings had eased. (*A Time to Die,* by Kent Richmond)

The assumption here is that if Christians are forbidden to be sad at a funeral, the message will not offer a joyous hope but instead convey the sense that our real

emotions do not matter one bit to God.

Mitchell and Anderson's point has been heeded. Indeed, a more recent author noted how by the 1990s omission of the resurrection altogether had become one liturgical pattern. Pastoral care author Gene Fowler, in *Caring Through the Funeral,* warned against this move, but noted how it was justified by a sincere desire to curb avoidance and denial of the reality of death. Although he disapproved, the arguments for and against this approach reveal the triumph of pastoral over strictly theological approaches in the discussion.

There was still another, less direct reason why "victory over death" did not work well in the setting of the 1970s and later. The death awareness movement drew attention to the plight of terminally ill hospital patients whose basic condition was one of "acceptance." Yet patients were pressured to "keep fighting," and the military model of medicine was so pervasive that patients, doctors and everyone else had bought into it uncritically. It was assumed that doctors fight to win the war against death, and when the patient dies, that war is lost. Kübler-Ross and her cohorts in the death awareness movement insisted that this military "battle against death" was itself born of denial, and for patients the battle could be a disaster. They were not "giving up" or losing a war, said the death awareness movement; they were truly "in a state of acceptance" and should not be forced to endure further treatments. Often the major reason for further interventions was not the betterment of the patient, who would die soon anyway, but to bolster the doctors' sense that *they* at least had "kept on fighting."

Although no one could reasonably blame Cullmann himself for advocating overtreatment of the dying, or any of the practices the death awareness movement condemned, it appeared that his heavy-handed vision of "death as enemy" made his ideas look just like what the new death awareness movement protested. Cullmann could bolster the idea that the authentic Christian response to death was to fight and postpone it, at all costs, in all contexts, without limit. It was this relentless battle against death as enemy that made dying in a high-tech hospital a worse human experience for patients than old-fashioned dying in one's home.

We may ask if this is indeed a valid conclusion to draw. Support for unlimited medical intervention is not found directly in sermons with the explicit theology of "victory over death." There is, most professionals and experts recognize, no absolute Christian mandate to extend the lives of the terminally ill by futile and

uncomfortable treatments just because the defeat of death is what the gospel message is about. But ordinary Christians certainly have drawn this conclusion and insisted on medical interventions for a family member on this ground, even when informed by doctors that such treatments would do more harm than good. Many of my Christian students assume that their faith requires them to be so consistently "antideath" that no withdrawal from treatment should be allowed. The language they use is not that of formal medical bioethics, Catholic or Protestant. It is streamlined Cullmann all the way.

By 1985, pastoral care author Robert Hughes's excellent handbook, *A Trumpet in Darkness: Preaching to Mourners,* could assume that "the mourners are the target of the [funeral] sermon." No longer treated as an assemblage of the future dead, the congregation is regarded as a community touched by grief, experiencing a natural and appropriate sorrow in response to loss. So an appropriate theological message must be given to comfort mourners. While not denying death, the sermon should not merely repeat the message of psychology. The text from Romans 8 was one answer, and it is now among the most popular sermon texts. Nothing can separate us from the love of God, even at a time when the weight of separations and loss dominates our immediate feelings. Nothing can separate us even when God does not appear as present or in control.

Note that in this passage, as it is now understood and used for sermons, there is no promise at all that nothing can separate us from the dead. The dead are gone, absent; the funeral does not promise eventual family reunions or any sense of immediate intuitive spiritual presence or nearness. Nor is there any reference at all to their or our future state; nothing can separate us even now, when we hurt. But the one to whom this refers is God alone, who is always present, even if hidden, in the midst of our sorrow.

The older message was that the deceased "is with Jesus," once again returned "home" or now set sail to encounter his or her Pilot face to face; so where will we soon be? It is we, the future dead, who must be made aware that we will follow the deceased. Today, the focus is on death as the occasion for grief, opening up a gap or hole in this world that seems impossible to fill.

But when the focus of the funeral is on the mourners, and they are promised that God will never be lost or separated from them, there may still be a role for the deceased. It is true that the funeral is for the living, not the dead. After all, the

funeral home deals with the body, say authors of contemporary manuals, while the minister focuses on the needs of the living (*not* on the "souls" of either). And yet, there is more. John S. Mansell, in *The Funeral: A Pastor's Guide,* says the pastor should ask himself, "Am I doing right by the departed?"

The funeral sermon is a time when the faith community weaves fitting words of faith around the life of the departed. During the funeral sermon, the life of the departed is remembered in ways that convey Christian caring and respect for the bereaved.

The purpose of the funeral is now defined by this strong sense that the living owe the dead person something, as a primary obligation of our role as mourners. Nor is this a debt only for those who are mourners in the psychological sense. Perhaps the pastor represents the entire Christian community, or all of society and humanity, in fulfilling this duty to the dead. A funeral that "does right by" the deceased will leave everyone with a sense of completion, if never happiness. The living owe the dead the honor, the recognition, that a good funeral provides.

It seems legitimate to wonder if this newer view is Christian. Its advocates, unlike earlier generations of manual authors and anthologists, are not worried by "pagan" remnants and influences in the Christian funeral. Their worries are about denial and about false and useless theologies that could make mourning worse. One of these false theologies is the belief that this particular death was directly "the Lord's will" in its manner and timing. The current view is that no preacher should include this idea in his sermon, and it is pastorally inappropriate to encourage it privately—unless it is clear that this is the only means by which the family can make peace and sense of the death.

Other theological messages to avoid, according to recent literature, include any focus on afterlife, heaven and the happiness of the dead, which now appears to cruelly disregard the real sorrow of the bereaved. Absolutely no more children playing in the streets of Jerusalem. For contemporary writers, the death of a child is automatically in the problem category for theological as well as pastoral reasons. Sermons with titles such as "My God, Why?" are a direct expression of this current atmosphere and understanding.

> We come together at this time for various reasons . . . to pay tribute, to take time to remember Tina . . . to express our feelings to those who most deeply mourn . . . and we come to share our faith. . . . But if we are honest, we have to

> admit we have also come to this place to ask, "Why?". . . But there are no easy answers to the question of why. We cannot give the reason for this turn of events. We can only join the very human question of the moment, "My God, my God, Why?" (*We Are the Lord's*)

The funeral that works, however, not only "does right by" the deceased but, it is argued, should be a "celebration of life" in his or her memory. This for many funeralgoers and pastors may be the best purpose of the funeral. While earlier authors wished to distinguish between "Christian" and "humanistic" funerals for the sake of eliminating pseudo-religious in-between ones, later guides intentionally avoid such a division, grounding all funerals, including Christian ones, in the work of celebrating the life. Someone, a human person, was here and is now gone. To this, the preacher must convey the presence of God in the midst of exactly this human sorrow.

But it seems reasonable to ask what makes "celebration of the life of _____" a Christian goal, even when this is presided over by a pastor in a church setting. Perhaps it could be fulfilled better by the family and friends themselves, in an intimate memorial service. Perhaps it belongs in the funeral home, as a theme for the viewing, not at the funeral or burial.

I am not suggesting that such a "celebrating the life" statement of the funeral's purpose is pagan or secular. These pastors, following Seward Hiltner's lead from the mid-20th century, would criticize the restriction of Christian topics to those that looked explicitly "religious." This would be a new version of compartmentalization. If the pastor can counsel a woman whose son is in trouble at home and at school, then surely the pastor can honor the life of a dead member of the congregation by celebrating this person as an individual. Christian faith is no longer to be defined by otherworldly goals, ideas, and images; it is a living relation to God through Jesus Christ here in the midst of life, and in the midst of sorrow when someone loved has died. For those who write and preach funeral sermons today, to "do right by" the deceased, to celebrate his or her life, is fully compatible with a sense of God's presence and concern and love for all. It is compatible with a vision of God suffering along with us, rather than ordaining particular deaths at particular moments.

But if funerals that celebrate a life seem to fall short of an earlier era's main ideals theologically, there is also another perspective from which to evaluate these attempts to celebrate. This revisioned purpose and message for funerals may not

really express what the death awareness movement had as its goal when it looked at the anguish and loneliness of dying hospital patients and grieving families. It is possible that the movement's original agenda could have been expressed and appropriated in a manner that led Christian pastors and preachers in alternative directions. We need to ask how loss became celebration. And perhaps, just perhaps, loss is too narrow and too normal a category to mark off a death appropriately.

This article is excerpted from Preaching Death: The Transformation of Christian Funeral Sermons, *just published by Baylor University Press.*