

Black men I've mourned

## **I've preached more than 800 funeral sermons. Many of these deaths have marked me.**

by [Gary V. Simpson](#) in the [July 13, 2022](#) issue



(Photo © 4421010037 / iStock / Getty)

“Where there is love, death always comes at least one day too soon.” I do not know when I started saying these words, but I often find myself rehearsing them at funerals.

I am a Black man, and the older I become, the more I mourn the loss of other Black men. Every death is a tragedy and a trauma for families, friends, and communities, and I am not suggesting that the death of men is more significant than the death of women. (We have had too much of that understanding in 2,000 years of patriarchy

in the church, including in its funeral traditions.) And while the ever-present realities of race and racism loom large, this is not a commentary on the glaring examples that arrest public attention and sentiment for a season (until the next one happens). Death harms and hurts, even without headlines.

Nevertheless, I cannot deny that I am internally shaped by my own grief and loneliness around the loss of Black men close to me.

A few years ago, my physician showed me an online self-check for risk factors for heart disease. Anyone can fill in their vitals—age, height, weight—and their gender and race. A battery of questions follows, and the results are calculated. My doctor pointed out a more brutal truth: keep the vitals the same, change the gender or race, and watch the numbers change. All things being equal, the risk of heart disease is considerably higher for Black men.

Being a Black man in America is a health risk. As of 2020, our life expectancy is 68.3 years—lower than any other gender/race category. My father, a pastor, died at 61. My brother, a physician, died at 51. Today, at 59, I am the oldest living man in my family. I have an almost embarrassingly modest goal: to live till I am at least 62.

The possibility of premature death is a reality that is hard for Black men to ignore. While many of the things that bring us to early death are preventable, many of the leading causes can be traced to the unique stresses of being a Black man in America day after day.

I have preached more than 800 funeral sermons, many of them for other Black men. Their deaths have marked me across the years of my ministry. The Black men I reflect on here may not be famous, but each is a unique and significant marker for a pastor who loves them deeply and is filled with gratitude for the ways they have shaped his life and work.

My first assignment at my first church, not even three days in, was a funeral for an older man. I had not yet established any pastoral relationship with him; I inherited his funeral because of duty and office. Thirty years later I can still remember the judder of burying a Black man with whom I never had a living interaction.

His death came soon after my father's, and his funeral unbalanced me. Shaken from the inside out, I had to work to keep my composure. Memories of my own sorrow flooded me in the middle of the sermon. I got through it, but I have never forgotten

it.

I arrived in Brooklyn at the beginning of both the crack epidemic and the AIDS epidemic. There was such social stigma attached to young, vibrant men dying from AIDS that the cause of death was often buried deep in the obituary. Or it would be coded: he “died of pneumonia.” Churches were in denial. They were too polite, discreet, or disingenuous to say that their members had died of AIDS.

I am counting my losses, facing the sorrow I put on hold to attend to others.

An officer in our church was a closeted gay man who contracted AIDS. He seemed to see his illness and inevitable demise as an embarrassment. Every time I visited him in the hospital, he spent most of the visit apologizing—to God, the church, and me. He had internalized a profound sense of guilt and shame. This was one of the most faithful, thoughtful, and intentional church officers I have ever had the privilege to pastor. In time he was able to reclaim his value and worth, and I was glad to walk with him as he did.

I knew there would be some, both in the church and in the wider community, who would seek to diminish him because of the cause of his death. “I know no man more of a man than he,” I said in his funeral sermon, “strong, brave, bold, and courageous. He faced death and won.” He died more manly than many of the toxically, performatively masculine men so eager to devalue him.

I met Leslie when I was a student minister and he was a member of my youth group. He was a generous and determined young man. What caught my attention was the power and fervor of his prayers. He prayed like the senior deacons who have anchored churches for decades.

Leslie had a series of health challenges that took a toll on his kidney function. A loving mother donated a kidney to him, but he was still on a regimen of painful dialysis treatments. I went to see him once, and he was in so much pain that I knew he did not want me to see him like that.

Acknowledging his pain, I simply asked, “Another day?”

“Yes, Rev, another day.” He waved me off graciously.

Everyone at the church loved and respected Leslie and his determination, tenacity, and faith. Despite his illness, he had managed to finish college and was on his way

to fulfilling his dream of being a lawyer. When he took a turn for the worse, the congregation happened to be in a time of intense internal disagreement, a relentlessly adversarial season characterized by a hostile impasse. He died that summer at age 25. His departure refocused us. There in the sanctuary, Leslie gave us the gift of healing and the presence of love.

Leslie was a fan of a storied pro sports team, and it too was in a rough season. I would rib him about his team's present status, and he would always reply, "We gonna be all right, Rev." Before he died, his team returned to its former glory. They became champions again. Leslie said with joy, "I told you, Rev. We gonna be all right, Rev!"

I declared that joyfully at his funeral: "Leslie told me, 'We gonna be all right!' and I believe him."

This year, I have lost several men from my congregation. I did the funeral of a 48-year-old man whom I will call Sheldon. Sheldon had autism, and he lived in a group home supported by a robust support system of neighborhood friends, family, and church members. He joined the church by baptism in 2006 and was a steady presence there from that time on.

Sheldon was the first person to greet me in the sanctuary each Sunday, an hour and a half before church started. He was already seated in his place as an usher, ready to serve, and when I came in he would ask me something about sports: "Did you see that, Rev?" or "Who are you pulling for today?" Always smiling, always engaging, he was precisely the person any church would want as an usher, as the first line of greeting and welcome into the church.

Sheldon's obituary was relatively short. A few lines spoke of his employment and a note about his surviving relatives. There was a line at the end of that paragraph: "Sheldon was an usher at the Concord Baptist Church of Christ." It was a simple statement of fact, but it spoke volumes. When I preached his funeral, it became my refrain: "Sheldon was an usher at the Concord Baptist Church of Christ!"

The idea of heaven has come to speak to me primarily of God's possibilities over and beyond the inequities and unfairness of life—of an alternative space to the hurts, harms, and horrors we face daily. Not many people would have known Sheldon by name, but they knew him by his work at church. And so the final words of that funeral sermon welled up from the fountain of everlasting hope that receives

genuine, authentic people as they are. “As Sheldon made his way to the promises of our savior,” I said, “two people looked out as he was walking into his promise: *Who is that?*”

*“Oh, that’s Sheldon; he was an usher at the Concord Baptist Church of Christ.”*

At the other end of life’s spectrum was a man baptized at Concord as a ten-year-old in 1951. His parents were prominent lay leaders in the congregation, so much so that when his father died, someone suggested to me that it would not be right if there were not someone from that family on the deacon board. Some of the board leaders had gone to talk to him about it without consulting me.

But I had plans for him to be a trustee. I thought that was a better fit for him. I asked him to come and talk to me, and he thought I was going to ask him to join the deacon board. “I understand that people are hoping that you would be a deacon in homage to your father,” I said, “but I do not want you to serve this church because of your father or mother. I would like for you to consider being a trustee.”

His eyes lit up. All those years, he lived in the shadow of his prominent parents. He just wanted to be himself. He often showed his uniqueness in his style choices, wearing a Panama Jack hat, red socks, and sandals.

That funeral sermon began, “Cedric was his own man.”

I also lost my last blood uncle this year. He was a minister who never had success as a pastor to a congregation but had a significant ministry to people at the margins, some of whom would have upset church members if they ever walked into their pristine sanctuaries. He preached on street corners and to people who were at their worst, people to whom society had not been kind. Sixty years ago, he and my mother lost their sister when she was murdered in a domestic violence tragedy. His ministry included organizing groups of men to help women escape domestic violence situations and find a safe place to live.

As I traveled to the Pacific Northwest for his funeral, I had plenty of time to reflect on how much my understanding of ministry has changed. I used to think, like so many others, that legitimate ministers pastor churches, but my uncle’s gifts and calling took him elsewhere—and he did meaningful ministry there.

While writing this article, I did another funeral for a Black man. Carl lived a full life. He served in the marines and as a New York City police officer before his retirement. He served the church as both a deacon and a trustee. And he was more than any of those roles. He was a no-nonsense, stand-up guy, one who did not suffer fools long and always spoke his mind. I loved his honesty and deeply seated faith. He was a friend and a brother to me.

I met Carl through his first wife, a faithful member of our congregation. She died after a courageous battle with illness, and I did her funeral. Now a widower, Carl began to serve in the church more deeply. After some years, he found new love with one of our associate ministers. He actually asked my permission to date her. I thought that was a telling sign of his heart and spirit.

My last pastoral visit with Carl was on Good Friday afternoon. COVID protocols at the hospital permitted only two visitors a day per patient. But his daughter was not coming to the hospital that day, and his spouse was preaching at church. It was a low-energy day for Carl. We had a heart-to-heart talk, and then I recited some scripture and prayed for him.

As soon as I said, "Amen," Carl began praying for me. He began, "And bless my pastor," and went on with earnest, tender words to God on my behalf. For a moment, I forgot who was visiting whom. That prayer held me close to the heart of God.

As I left, he said faintly, "I love you."

"I love you too, Carl." I sensed he had said his good-byes.

Carl died a month later. His funeral sermon was most difficult. It was the first funeral we'd had in the church sanctuary in almost two and a half years. I had been preaching funerals at funeral homes and on Zoom. While it was good to be back in the comforting familiarity of the sanctuary, I could not find my footing. I remembered the people whose funerals could not be held in the church due to COVID. I stumbled through the service and then headed out to the cemetery, wishing I could get back the time that had been lost.

I also came across a memory that day. I have a letter tucked away from a dear member, written more than 20 years ago. Since then she has moved into a nursing home, and like Carl, when I finish praying for her she starts interceding to God on

my behalf. “Bless my pastor,” she says. “He thinks he’s grown, but he’s just a little boy. Hold him close to You, and when he starts to stray, snatch him, Lord. Snatch him back!” I needed that prayer, that day and every day.

In her letter, after complimenting me on a funeral sermon, she wrote, “What we fail to realize is that for every one of these services, you have lost someone as well. I want you to know I am praying for you as you are called again and again to help us say our good-byes.” Has all of this grieving now caught up with me? I am tired, weary of the constant procession of people I have lost in the performance of community rituals of mourning and loss. Since the start of the pandemic, my church has lost more than 60 members.

Presently, I am tucked away in solitude with my grief. I am counting my losses and facing the grief I put on hold to attend to the sorrows of others. I find myself triggered by the smallest of things. I weep with profound sadness. Of all the ironies of this pandemic, I find myself longing to be alone, with a change of scenery and pace.

I am not totally alone. Each of the friends remembered here has visited me while in this grief retreat, and I thank God for their presence. These short vignettes express why I do not want to bring to a funeral some false hope or preconstructed sermon of consolation. Every life, however blaring or quiet, is a unique expression of the strange coalescence of grace and mercy. Each person who leaves us allows us to pause a moment and think about how God uniquely blessed us by connecting us with them.

[Read the sidebar article about the author’s approach to funeral sermons.](#)

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