What I left out of my mother’s funeral sermon

I told the truth about her but not the whole truth.

by L. Roger Owens in the July 13, 2022 issue

(Pexels photo by Pavel Danilyuk)

At first, I was pleased with the sermon I preached at my mother’s funeral almost two years ago. To begin with, I made it through without breaking down. I’d let myself weep a few days earlier as I was writing it alone in my office so I could manage my emotions later when people were in the room.

When the time came in the service for the homily, I sidled past my wife and siblings out of the front pew and climbed the stairs toward the pulpit. I turned and looked at my family, some of Mom’s old friends, and a few church members who had last seen me here 30 years ago preaching on youth Sunday or singing a solo.

I spoke on a passage often read at weddings: 1 Corinthians 13. It was one of my mother’s favorites; a blanket bearing those well-known verses—love is patient, love is kind, and so on—draped her chair in the family room for as long as I can remember. Paul’s words reminded me of her, of her fierce love for her family. “Mom

loved us by doing for us," I said, and then I listed some of the ways she showed her love: making peach pies, running to the pharmacy for my grandmother, enduring a million Little League baseball games her grandsons were playing in and her teenage sons were umpiring, staying at the side of a dying sister, sitting by the bed of a dying husband. "It was all love," I said.

Then I turned to the text from Corinthians. I said that Paul was personifying love to remind his readers of the story of the life, ministry, and death of Jesus. It was love that cried in a manger; love that fed multitudes, healed the sick, raised the dead; love that endured all things, even death, for us. "It was all love," I said.

Throughout the sermon, the congregation nodded in recognition, suggesting I'd captured my mom's character. They laughed at the right times. They wiped wet eyes and blew sniffly noses. When I was finished, I squeezed back into my pew, satisfied with a job well done. If I'd been one of my preaching students, I would have given myself an A.

"It was all love," I said from the pulpit. My brother's ex-wife disagreed.

Then, after the service, while I was lingering in the sanctuary, my oldest brother's ex-wife sauntered my way with a wry smile on her face. "While you were saying that stuff about how with your mom it was all love," she said, "I was thinking of the time she stood in my kitchen and said to me, 'You're a horrible mother,' and I told her to get the fuck out of my house." As she spoke her smile never slackened.

So maybe I didn't capture my mom perfectly in the sermon after all.

"Well, some stories are good for the funeral service, and some are better shared at the get-together later," I said, trying to keep things light.

Surely I was right, wasn't I, to ignore the flaws in my mother's character and stick with the good, to foreground her undeniable love and leave the baggage for another day?

As my former sister-in-law walked away, I formulated in my mind what I began to think of as Roger's Rule for Funeral Sermons to justify my omissions: in the funeral sermon, you have to tell the truth, and nothing but the truth—but you don't have to tell the *whole* truth. Or do you?

I'd thought about this encounter occasionally since then, mostly convinced that Roger's Rule remained sound. And then two things happened.

First, my family visited my brothers and sister in Iowa and Indiana. As siblings do, we talked about our mom. But we didn't reminisce about her peach pie, those baseball games, or her selfless trips to the pharmacy. We talked about how much she angered us. We talked about how she deftly employed shaming tactics to control my sister as a child, about how she'd mastered passive-aggressive behavior to get her way or to guilt us when she didn't. We used terms like *narcissist* and *martyr complex* to name the ways she hoarded attention.

When we gather, these stories are for the most part shared with laughter. But they harbor a darker subtext: if it was all love, why don't we ever talk about that?

And then, two days after we arrived home, I was cleaning my study in the basement when I found a few letters Mom had written to me around 20 years ago, tucked into an apology card. These were artifacts I'd gathered as I was preparing to write Mom's funeral sermon so I could include concrete details, like her bowling scores one Tuesday morning (125-118-116) and her praise for the fried chicken she'd get for lunch at the old Amoco station (so good!). But one letter I didn't use in the sermon had a phrase that hinted at an argument. "Sorry if I was short with you yesterday but I felt I was on 'systems overload.' That happens you know," she'd written. And I didn't quote the apology card either, which she sent one year after I'd visited home for Christmas. It read, "I'm very sorry. Love, Mom."

Finding these with the other items I'd gathered reminded me that I *had* planned to mention them. I'd wanted some way to allude to a reality that those of us who lived with Mom knew: there were ruptures in our relationships with her, some of which she sought to repair and some of which she never did. Holding these letters, I remembered my intention to name the truth of memories that needed to be seen in the light of God's grace and healed.

That intention was inspired by Paul, who didn't write the 13th chapter of 1 Corinthians in a vacuum. There were divisions in the church at Corinth: lawsuits against one another, sexual improprieties, economic injustice on display at the Lord's Supper. Only after recounting these things does Paul extol the beauty, patience, and selflessness of love.

Rereading Mom's apologies and recalling the hurt of that season 20 years ago reminded me that I had wanted to acknowledge that pain in my sermon, if only obliquely. But in the end, I ran out of time, or my word count was creeping too high, or some unconscious inhibition blocked me—and I didn't do it. Now I wonder how the message of Christ's life of love would have landed differently for the congregation that day if I'd been more truthful. Would my brother's ex-wife have remembered that argument in the kitchen differently?

I chose to keep things sunny, and it felt good to me. But by doing so I rendered a disservice to those gathered.

Not because I didn't tell the whole truth about Mom. You can't tell the whole truth about a person in 15 minutes—or 15 hours—because only God knows the whole truth of another. But by choosing not to acknowledge that there were reasons to say "I'm sorry" on both sides of the relationship, I couldn't speak the whole truth of the gospel.

The job of the funeral sermon isn't to capture perfectly the character of the deceased; it's to narrate truthfully the character of God. This side of eternity, we can only understand God's character in relationship with creation—with us. As John Calvin attests in those first, famous lines of his *Institutes*, knowledge of God and of ourselves are braided together. We approach a truthful apprehension of a patient and loving God only when we can begin to tell the truth of our own lives and relationships. The latter is what Paul courageously does in his letter to the Corinthians, even though the truth was unpleasant. But that honesty is what allows his picture of patient love to shine as an image of Christ's own character.

Funeral sermons do need to tell the truth and nothing but the truth. They certainly can't tell the whole truth. But they should do what I had intended—and failed—to do: acknowledge hurt, pain, and brokenness when appropriate, and with pastoral sensitivity.

God's love can't be reduced to free-floating aphorisms sewn into a blanket. It's an active, redeeming love, its beauty most luminous in relationship to our flaws, shortcomings, and sins, which it forgives and heals. If that harder subject matter is off-limits in a funeral sermon, then so too is the deepest truth of the gospel.

Those pages from Mom's letters are sitting in front of me as I write this. Seeing them, I can imagine her sitting on her front porch in her bathrobe, a lap desk

balanced on crossed legs as she writes. Her letters are full of the tidbits of information you would only share with the people you love. Who else would care that you've already put a chuck roast in the oven or that you're going to have chicken livers for lunch?

If some stranger were to read these letters in the distant future, the way we read the letters of Paul, they might try to decipher who they were to and what they were about. They would be able to learn from them some of what we learn from Paul's: in life together there's a lot of love, but it's not all love. This is a truth that highlights what Paul wanted us most to grasp: with Christ, it is all love; with Christ, there's nothing else.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "The whole truth?"