

# ***The Ritual of Remembering: Funerals and Memorial Services***

**Psalm 16:1-2, 5-11; Romans 14:7-9**

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Today we begin the season of Lent, and we also begin a worship series on the rituals of loss and remembrance; a series on death and dying. You might be asking: Why a death and dying series for Lent?

There are a number of reasons we are doing this. One reason for this series is that the topic of death and dying has come up in several commission meetings: Caregiving, Missions, Christian Education and Coordinating Council. The conversations included individuals asking for resources for funeral planning, the stewardship of our property, having a memorial garden, the desire to have conversation/education about death and dying, and the recognition that every joyful event for some people, like pregnancy and the birth of a baby, brings up painful experiences of infertility, miscarriage and stillbirth for others. In the complexity of human life, joy and sorrow are mixed together. As Dan and I talked about this, we began to see much synergy between the season of Lent, with its built-in focus on mortality, deepening spirituality and hope, and this topic of loss and grief.

Lent as a season, lends itself well to reflection on death and dying, in light of Jesus' journey to the cross. Lent begins on Ash Wednesday with the direct confrontation of our own mortality--"Remember that you are dust and to dust you will return." Lent is also seen as a wilderness time, often beginning with Jesus' own time of testing in the wilderness. None of us likes the wilderness, those times of desert and dryness, of loneliness and death.

Christine Valters Paintner writes, "Death of any kind is rarely a welcome experience...We resist death...We spend so much energy and money on staying young. But when we turn to face death wide-eyed and fully present, when we feel the fullness of the grief it brings, we also slowly begin to discover the new life awaiting us. In the desert tradition, death is a friend and companion along the journey. St Francis of Assisi referred to death as "sister" in his famous poem, Cantic of Creation. Rather than a presence only at the end of our lives, death can become a companion along each step,

heightening our awareness of life's beauty and calling us toward living more fully. Living with Sister Death calls us to greater freedom and responsibility." ([www.abbeyofthearts.com](http://www.abbeyofthearts.com))

We recognize that death comes in many forms for each of us. Most of us have experienced the death of someone close to us. We know the pain of separation that death brings at the loss of someone we love, and that while every death is a loss, the untimely deaths, the deaths that are out of order, like the death of a child, or death by suicide, bring with them a different layer of grief that can sometimes complicate it. We also know that every loss is in many ways a death--the loss of a job, infertility, divorce, family estrangement--each of these is the loss of a hoped for future, the loss of a dream, the death of a relationship.

And so this is the journey on which we are embarking for the next 6 weeks, a journey that will take us through the desert of loss and grief. This is a journey we take with Christ, who walked this way first, and it is a journey we take in the company of this community, our brothers and sisters in faith. We do not journey alone. As the planning committee was thinking about this series, the image of holding each other, holding the stories, holding the pain, became an image that guided us. So often we want to fix things, to know just the right word or action that will make things better. But as is often the case with death and loss, there are no words or actions that will change the loss, that will lessen the pain or will undo the death. But we can hold each other and our situations and stories of loss--we can hold them in prayer, in silence, and before God, trusting that God is also holding us and them.

Today we begin our journey by looking at the primary ritual of remembering, the funeral or memorial service. For the first 9 years of my ministry, death and funerals were a regular occurrence when I served as chaplain in a long term care facility. Then, when I moved into congregational ministry, they remained a fairly common occurrence, as we usually had 8-12 funerals a year, often in clusters.

Also during that time in congregational ministry, Allan officiated at funerals at one of the local funeral homes, for people with no church connections. Those funerals also seemed to come in clusters, and sometimes our clusters

of funerals were at the same time. Dinner time conversation could be interesting, as we talked about schedules, death, funeral home visits, funerals, etc. At one point, I looked at the children and said, "You realize this is not normal. Most families do not have this many funerals to go to and don't spend this much time talking about funerals and death!"

Death has a way of disrupting our normal routines; it intrudes into our lives and takes all of our attention and energy. Tom Long, in his book, *Accompany them with Singing: The Christian Funeral*, says that one of the human tasks we have is to deal with the fact of death--there is a dead body, and something needs to be done. In years past, the family washed and prepared the body for burial. In our context today, we call the funeral home to do that. But there are practical necessities that come with death, and that involves taking care of the body.

Convention, or custom, also plays a role in funeral practices. There are things we do "because that's just what we do". Region, religion and cultural context play a role in this, so that 'the way we do it here' is different in different places and among different people; and these customs also change over time. "Local customs dictate, to a certain degree, what is imaginable and even proper to do." (p. 9-10)

Our convictions also play a part in how we do funerals. While there is no one single pattern for the Christian funeral--they are as varied as the Christians in all parts of the world--there is one central conviction that guides us in our funeral practice: that "the life and death of the one who died has been shaped after the pattern of the life and death of Jesus." (p.16)

I have found Tom Long's book to be one of the single-most helpful books on ministry I have read. Reading his book significantly changed the way I approach funerals. There has always been a tension between how much to speak about the person in a funeral sermon, and how much to focus on God. Long's book helps navigate that tension, placing the story of the one who has died squarely into the gospel story of death and resurrection. Long is very clear that he is talking about the Christian funeral, and for our purposes here, that is also what we are talking about. One of the things that makes a funeral Christian is the focus on the life and death of Jesus as the pattern for

our living and dying. The Christian funeral proclaims the gospel story that God through Jesus, conquered death by dying on the cross and rising again to new life.

Long distinguishes between what he calls 'small-d death' and 'capital-D Death'. Small-d death is our physical, natural death. Capital-D death is "Death as mythic force, as the enemy of all that God wills for life." (p. 38)

For a lot of our lives, we view our physical death as an enemy--we don't want death to come too soon for us or our loved ones. We see small-d death as a threat to life as we know it. We all want to live to a ripe old age. Our fear of death can lead us to make unwise decisions, to live as if it doesn't matter, or as if we will live forever.

On the positive side, though, small-d death recognizes that we all will die. It helps us to make the most of each day, to treasure the relationships we have. It is reflected in Psalm 16:6: "The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; I have a goodly heritage." It is making peace with our lives, the choices we have made, and trusting that they have been good. Sometimes, small-d death comes to us as friend, after all the options of medical science have been exhausted, when the pain and suffering are almost too great to bear. At a certain point, both the one dying and those who surround the dying one, welcome small-d death as a friend, in spite of the pain of separation that comes with it. And so we spend most of our lives living between these 2 views of small-d death--the limit of our days as both gift and threat.

Capital-D Death is quite different from this. It is always enemy, never friend. It is the enemy of humans and of God. It is 'the pestilence that stalks in darkness' and "the destruction that wastes at noonday", to quote Ps. 91:6. It is enemy of all that is good and just and right, making a mockery of God, faith and the gift of life. (p. 39)

The Christian funeral needs to keep both these forms of death in mind and distinguish between them. We don't want to only rage at capital-D Death as the enemy, for that ignores the fact that our biological deaths can come as friend. But if we focus too much on death as friend, then we forget that Jesus

himself was deeply grieved in the garden at the prospect of his own death. He sweat blood, he cried and prayed, he asked for this cup to be removed from him. His "let it be", his "not my will but yours" came after much arguing and resisting of Death. Even when physical death ends pain and suffering, it still marks the end of physical life for a loved one, and that is difficult. A Christian funeral will always acknowledge and remember the sharp-edged sword that Death is.

But the other thing a Christian funeral will remember is the risen and embodied Christ. The gospel, Long says, adds a third form of death, and that is death in Christ. Early Christians, as they lived with the story of Jesus' death and resurrection and reflected on it, realized that as Jesus hung on the cross, God also hung on the cross. "The God they had always known before was immortal, untouched by death, always...distant from human mortality. But in Jesus, God had done the unimaginable, had become one with humanity even in death." (p. 43-44) God died a human death, and through that death and resurrection, God defeated the power of death for humanity. The gospel then, proclaims this third form of death: that in Christ, capital-D Death was defeated and no longer has the victory.

The funeral is a worship service, first and foremost, and worship is ritual in which we, the church, "both act out our faith and absorb what our faith is all about." (p. 77) In worship, we affirm our faith, speak our faith, sing our faith--that is how we act it out. But in doing so, we are also then absorbing, or trying to also figure out and understand anew or differently what our faith is all about. We proclaim in order to affirm what we believe and in order to continue to understand what we believe. Funerals heighten this even more. When the person who has died is someone who was close to us, we may not be able to act out our faith, particularly if the death was unexpected or out of order--we may need the community to do the singing, the speaking and the praying for us; we may need the community to act out the faith we believe but in the moment cannot act out. But in being present while that is happening, we hear, absorb, maybe come to understand in a new way, what it is we've believed and affirmed for a long time.

In a Christian funeral, the community gathers to hear and speak the promises of the gospel, as seen and reflected in the life of the one who has

died. The funeral tells the gospel story, and "the life story of the one who has died is a motif running through this larger story of the gospel....a funeral is about the intertwining of these two stories." (p. 78) In this light, a funeral is about more than offering care and support to those who are grieving, although that does happen. It is also more than a celebration of life, although the funeral also does that. Long says that, "Good funerals, in fact, do all of these things--console the grief-stricken, remember and honor the deceased, display community care, and give thanks for all the joys and graces experienced in the life of the one who has died. But these are some of the consequences of a good funeral, not its central meaning or purpose." (p. 78)

The story that the funeral tells is a story that began with the person's baptism, generally long before the death. In our baptism, we are plunged beneath the waters, either symbolically or actually, as a sign of our dying with Christ, being washed clean, and being raised to new life. It is a powerful symbol that in baptism, we die to our old self and rise to new life in Christ. This new life is seen as a journey--early Christians were known as people of the Way--baptism wasn't the end, but the beginning. We journey through life following our baptism, figuring out what it means to have died to our old self and be raised to new life in Christ. We live that out, and continually absorb and interpret and try to understand what it means. We live it out in community, surrounded by those who sang the songs of faith at our baptism, and with whom we continue to sing the songs of faith. Throughout our Christian journey, we travel in the company of the saints, and at our death, the company of the saints continues to surround us with songs for the last mile of our journey, to our final resting place.

Paul uses these images of dying in Christ and rising to new life, throughout his writings. The Romans passage that was read affirms this. We live to the Lord and we die to the Lord. Earlier in Romans, in chapter 6:3-5, he says: "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his." Our baptisms begin a journey with Christ that continues until our death.

While it is rare for the community to process from the church to the cemetery anymore, it is such a lovely image for what the Christian funeral is. Long argues that the Christian funeral is more than the service in the church; it begins with the death and the care of the body, and continues until the body is laid to rest, whether that is burial or cremation, and either burying or scattering the ashes. Memorial services change this image somewhat in that they reverse the order of the burial and the service, but the idea is that in a Christian funeral, we, the community who surrounded the person at their baptism (or if it's a child, at their birth) and in life, also gather to surround them for this final stretch of their journey. While our presence brings comfort to the grieving, our primary role as a community of faith is to continue to proclaim the gospel through song and word. This is one of the things I like about Long's approach--it counters the individualism of our culture by giving the community of faith a role to play in the funeral. It isn't only about how well we knew the person, or about being present for the family; it is what we do as a community of faith.

The Christian funeral also proclaims that the dead in Christ are going somewhere. (p. 84) At the funeral, we give the one who has died over to God, knowing that God through Christ conquered death, and their future is secure with God. They aren't going off into a state of nothingness; they are continuing the journey begun at their baptism, and now ending in the presence of God.

The Christian funeral proclaims the gospel story; the life of the person is told alongside that gospel story; their story became firmly entwined with the gospel story at baptism and continues beyond physical death because God through Jesus conquered death so that we can be raised with Christ. As a community of faith, our role is to surround the believer from birth, through baptism to death, proclaiming our faith through song and prayer.

As we journey through Lent this year, exploring this theme of loss and death, we place all the losses of our lives into the pattern of the life and death of Jesus. We can rage against the losses for they remind us that Death would rob us of the gifts and joy of life. But in the life and death of Jesus, we also know that Death does not have the final word. In the midst of loss, we are

held by the community that surrounded us at our baptism, and continues to surround us through the experience of loss and grief, holding us and our pain, just as we are held by God.

What then have we to fear? Death has been swallowed up in victory. "If we live, we live to the Lord; if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's." Thanks be to God!