



Preaching at the “Tough” Funerals

MICHAEL ROGNESS

The occasion for my first funeral, four days after my ordination, was the heart-wrenching tragedy of an eleven-year-old boy who had reached in to unjam the corn picker and got pulled in. I was relieved when the family asked if they could invite the former pastor back to preach.

Most of the funerals I have conducted were for elderly people, longtime members of the congregation. I suspect the same is true for most preachers. In many cases death came as a relief after a period of debilitating illness. But inevitably the phone call comes with news of terrible tragedy or with the request to conduct a funeral for someone you don’t know, unconnected with the church. Those are the “tough” funerals.

Funeral sermons are among a pastor’s most important and crucial tasks, and that is especially true with the “tough” cases. A family is suffering deeply. They long for healing and for hope, and they come wondering what the pastor will say, either because it’s a tragic situation or because there is little or no evidence of faith in the deceased. In addition, funerals are attended by friends and relatives who have no church connection at all. This may be the one sermon they will hear for a long, long time.

After teaching about funeral sermons for twenty-plus years, I summarized three purposes of funeral sermons:

Funerals for the “tough” cases—tragic deaths or deaths where there has been little or no evidence of faith in the deceased—provide difficult moments for pastors but also moments of great opportunity. The good news of the gospel is always applicable, but its articulation and application in these hard situations will call forth all of a pastor’s skill and tact.

1. Proclaim the gospel to the survivors. The heart of our faith is that because Jesus was raised, death is not the last word.
2. Do pastoral care, dealing with the theological issues raised by the situation—in addition, of course, to the pastoral care given by the congregation before and after the funeral (yes, including hot dishes to the home and the coffee hour after the funeral).
3. Highlight memories of the deceased that witness to faith and church life, giving thanks for all the person has meant to the family and the church. The grandchildren who live far away need to know Grandpa's favorite hymns and Bible verses.

For most of our funerals we know how to do this. For the tough cases it may not be at all clear what we should say in the sermon, and yet those may be our most important sermons!

BE AWARE OF WHAT FAMILIES ARE HEARING

In tragic situations, people want so very much to give some kind of comfort to the bereaved. They try to think of something positive, but say things that aren't very helpful at all. Even family members say such things. We've all heard these comments:

"It must have been God's will."

"God must have wanted another angel."

"Isn't it fortunate you have other children?"

"Don't grieve. She's in a much better place."

"Don't worry; you'll get over it in time."

"They really made Grandpa look good in the casket."

One of the worst attempts at comfort was what a family friend said to my parents after my twenty-four-year-old brother was killed: "The last time I saw Paul he didn't look very well. Maybe he was about to suffer a terrible disease, so God willed the accident to prevent it."

These statements are well meaning and some even contain a grain of truth. But they seldom help those who are grieving and may make the situation worse. As a pastor, be prepared to deal with the aftermath of hearing such comments. It's equally important to know what *not* to say as to know what one can say.

FIND A FITTING TEXT

One of my early funerals was for a high school student. He had been cut from the football team, his girlfriend was breaking up with him, and he was in a bit of trouble at school. In a momentary fit of despondency, he came home from school and shot himself. In the next couple of days, I was astonished to discover how many people in the community were surprised that the funeral would be in the church. The customary assumption in the community was that persons who com-

mitted suicide could not go to heaven and should not be buried from the church or in the church cemetery.

I called a wise pastor in the next town and asked his advice for text. He said, “You want Psalm 130.”

I said, “Yes, I know the psalm: ‘Out of the depths have I cried unto thee, O LORD. Lord, hear my voice: let thine ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications’” (Ps 130:1–2 KJV).

“That’s right,” he said, “but it’s the next verses you want: ‘If thou, LORD, shouldest mark iniquities, O Lord, who shall stand? But there is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared’” (vv. 3–4).

It was the perfect text. Of course suicide is wrong, but we all do wrong, and if God were to count our wrongdoings, we would all be lost.

One of our seminarians interning in Alaska conducted the funeral for a young man who had been swept off the deck of a fishing boat in the storm-tossed Bering Sea and had drowned. The intern looked up verses that mentioned the sea and oceans. He found the perfect texts in Pss 46 and 93:

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear though the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;
though its waters roar and foam. . . . (Ps 46:1–3 RSV)

The floods have lifted up, O LORD,
the floods have lifted up their voice, the floods lift up their roaring.
Mightier than the thunders of many waters,
Mightier than the waves of the sea,
the LORD on high is mighty! (Ps 93:3–4 RSV)

He ended the sermon by returning to the texts:¹

The sea took him from us, but that is not the end of his story. There is one mightier than even the waves of the sea. There is one who created the wind and the waves and the breakers of the sea. God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear though the waters rage and foam. The waters have lifted up, O Lord, the waters have lifted up their voice; the waters have lifted up their pounding waves. Mightier than the thunders of many waters, mightier than the waves of the sea, the Lord on high is mighty.

Some years ago I attended the funeral of a twelve-year-old boy killed in a freak accident when a rock pitched from a neighbor’s lawn mower hit him in the head. When the pastor announced his text as 2 Sam 12:15–23, I wondered what this passage could possibly hold for this situation. It was the aftermath of David’s adultery with Bathsheba. When their son was stricken, David mourned. When the boy died, the court attendants were worried about David’s possible rage or despair.

¹This and the following sermons were shared by students in classes at Luther Seminary or in personal communication and thus made public with the permission of the authors. All names in the sermons are fictitious.

They were astonished that the king returned to his duties. David explained, “While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept. . . . But now he is dead; why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he will not return to me” (vv. 22–23). We don’t know exactly what David meant, but the message of the text is that there will be a reunion on the other side of death. For the funeral of this boy, it was a powerful and meaningful text.

A pastor I know well was called upon to bury a young nineteen-year-old who had finally kicked his alcohol addiction after many prayers from his parents, only to be killed by a reckless driver. The pastor picked Mark 9:14–29 as the text, the story of a son possessed of an evil spirit brought to Jesus by his father. Jesus “took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he was able to stand” (v. 27). The parallel was striking—a father bringing his evil-ensnared son to Jesus, who reached out to lift him up. The pastor ended the sermon:

That describes Steve’s victory so perfectly. For the first time in such a long time, by the power of Christ, Steve is able to stand, next to Jesus, straight and tall, handsome and happy, peaceful and free. Jesus has taken him by the hand and lifted him up, and Steve is standing now, standing tall, standing firm, with the Lord.

ARTICULATE WHAT PEOPLE ARE FEELING

I once attended a funeral of a young man who had been killed by a tragic accident. The preacher apparently wanted to find something reassuring to say. The summary of his sermon was, “He had a wonderful life and is now in heaven.” It was true, of course, but he was implying that we shouldn’t be sad anymore, when we were still grieving deeply that this promising life was cut short and feeling how we were missing him so much. If people listening to a funeral sermon sense “the preacher has no idea what I’m thinking and feeling,” the sermon has misfired.

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Shortly before Christmas a young pastor in northeast Minnesota had to conduct a funeral for a newborn baby who lived only a few days. She chose Rom 8 for the sermon: “We are more than conquerors. . . .” She began the sermon:

“In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. . . .” That is what the apostle Paul writes. But how? How are we more than conquerors? If we are conquerors then why does it seem that today we are the conquered ones? Why did death take Susanna away? Why was not Susanna healthy at birth? Why were your hopes dashed? Why was the one so long awaited taken away so quickly and painfully? Today it seems that death has conquered us.

You so eagerly awaited Susanna’s arrival, waited and waited with dreams of all that your new child would bring and mean. Susanna was born. Almost imme-

diately there was difficult waiting. Waiting... from the moment the doctor told you that not everything was right. In these last weeks and days you have known the terror of dreadful waiting. Waiting... dabbing water on her tongue a drop at a time with your fingertip... hoping this would keep her from being so thirsty. Then she died. A part of you has died. After many months of eager waiting and these last weeks of dreadful waiting—for what is there now to wait? Where is the hope in this very minute? What is the hope for the time later this afternoon when you leave this building? What is the hope for the days ahead?

That’s exactly the bleak grief everyone was feeling. After speaking so plainly of the desolation of death, what can the preacher say now? She continued,

Susanna was not a healthy baby—I don’t know why. I don’t know why your tiny Susanna had to have tubes running in and out of her fragile body. These are questions I cannot answer. But I will tell you that of which I am sure. God is love and nothing can separate us from that love. For the ultimate revelation of that love we wait. In that love is our hope. It is that love of God which cradles each one of you here today. God is love—how can I even dare to say that? Susanna is dead. What kind of love is God’s love? Is it a love that would let Susanna die? What kind of love is God’s love? How can we comprehend it? Know it? Grasp it?

Out of the grief and questions the gospel begins to emerge. The good news never cancels the grief, but God comes near to us in that grief. The sermon continued,

Christ came to us at Christmas. The only Son of God came as a baby—a vulnerable, tiny baby like Susanna. In other words, love came to us at Christmas. All of God’s love for us came as a baby that you could hold and cradle in your arms, exactly as you cradled Susanna. The apostle Paul tells us that God did not spare his only Son—but gave up his child. You know how much that hurts... God knows how much it hurts. I’m not talking about a sentimental, sweet love. The love of God is not that. God’s love is an extreme love, a close-to-the-bone love, a love that knows hurts and fears of even a tiny baby like Susanna. God’s love knows the pain of losing a child, because his Son died on the cross.

The preacher went on to say that out of the death of God’s son came resurrection and eternal life. The sermon did not flinch from articulating the pain of loss and death, but ended with the message of life and love.

One of our seminary interns preached at the funeral of a young woman, a dear friend with three young children, who succumbed to cancer. She began the sermon with Ps 121 as the text:

Psalm 121 is filled with the promises that Lucille proclaimed daily. This psalm carries the message of the Lord watching over and protecting his people. “The Lord is your keeper; the Lord is your shade on your right hand. The sun shall not smite you by day, nor the moon by night” (vv. 5–6). These are powerful promises!

But she knew exactly what the family would be thinking upon hearing Ps 121. She went on,

But as we think of Lucille's last days and experience our own grief, it's hard not to ask the questions, "Lord, did you fall asleep? Lord, have you closed your eyes? Where was your shade as Lucille endured the radiation therapy? Where is your shade as we are left exposed to the reality of Lucille's absence? Lord, are you sleeping?"

The psalm promises that "the Lord will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life." But where was the Lord as Lucille struggled with that evil cancer and we watched it overtake her? Where was the Lord when Lucille spoke for the last time and closed her eyes? Lucille's life was taken from her and from us and now you are left without a wife, without a mother, without a daughter, without a grandmother, without a friend. Has the Lord gone to sleep?

This is exactly what the family has been thinking. Their faith has been badly shaken by these questions. After delving so deeply into the family's pain, how should the preacher continue? She went on,

"I lift up my eyes to the hills. From whence does my help come?" Take your eyes off of the hills. Take your eyes away from the sky. Because right now you won't see God on the hills. You won't see God in the clouds. You won't see God sitting on a throne, robed in splendor.

But your help does come from the Lord—from the Lord Jesus who hung on the cross with nails through his wrists and thorns penetrating his scalp. Your help comes from the Lord who cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" and hung his head to die.

Bring your eyes down from the hills. Allow your eyes to focus on the ground—to focus on the depths of your grief, on the depths of your sorrow, because it is there that you will see the Lord from whence your help comes. The Lord was with Lucille in her suffering. The Lord was continuously at Lucille's bedside, never once falling asleep as they suffered together throughout the days and the nights. The Lord kept Lucille from evil and sustained her life as they entered death together. Our Lord Jesus who suffered on the cross and was buried in the tomb conquered death and rose again to life—a life to which he will escort Lucille.

Just as the psalm promises, the Lord was with Lucille throughout her life. He did not abandon her in her pain and he continues to keep her life even in death.

The expression of grief was deep and real, and the promise of the gospel was even more powerful. I thought the funeral was finished, but she continued with a profound expression of pastoral care, encircling the whole congregation in the healing ministry for a grieving family:

Bring your eyes down and look at all of those around you. From whence does your help come? Look and you will see the Lord in your family and your friends. You will see the Lord as they cry with you. You will experience the Lord as someone sits silently with you. You will feel the Lord's healing touch as you hug and embrace one another. You hear the words of the Lord as you

hear each other speak words of consolation, words of happy memories, words of hope and new life. You will know the Lord’s concern as you read the cards and letters from people who care. Our help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth and who now lives within each one of us.

DON’T MAKE GOD’S JUDGMENTS

What do we say at a funeral of a person with no evidence of faith or church membership? This is a hugely complicated issue. In our seminary preaching classes, our most vigorous and wide-ranging discussions are those that follow such funeral situations. Here I can only relate what I have done.

One day in my last year in the parish, a woman came to my office and handed me a newspaper article about her son who had hanged himself in the Hennepin County jail. It was a sad, sad story. He was a petty criminal and had been regularly jailed for short terms after various inept burglaries. The only light in his life was his infant daughter, but his wife had told him that if he were to be jailed again, she would leave and he would never see his daughter again. At his next attempt at theft, he was caught. His wife left town and, in his despair at the possibility of never seeing his little girl again, he took his own life.

At funerals of baptized and believing Christians, I do not hesitate to proclaim the clear promise of the gospel that the person has gone home to God. But with the “tough” cases I cannot say who is going to heaven and who isn’t, and I must not speculate.

During our conversation, his mother asked me several times, “Tell me, pastor, will Bruce go to heaven?” She didn’t think he had been baptized, but he had attended our Sunday School during his childhood. “Will he go to heaven, pastor?”

At funerals of baptized and believing Christians, I do not hesitate to proclaim the clear promise of the gospel that the person has gone home to God. But with the “tough” cases I cannot say who is going to heaven and who isn’t, and I must not speculate. I think of Rom 8:31–39 as the “funeral text of last resort,” so to speak, ending as it does with, “For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (vv. 38–39). We cannot say for sure whom Paul has in mind in writing these verses, but the plain meaning of the text is that God’s love sweeps all human beings into its embrace. That’s what I told the mother that day. I have no record of what I did at the funeral, but I’m quite sure I read Rom 8.

A funeral sermon is for the survivors, and when I officiate at the funeral of a person apparently unconnected with the Christian faith or the church, I speak about meaningful memories the family has about the dead person. In Bruce’s funeral, I assume I mentioned that he attended Sunday School at our church. I also

say that God loves all people. But then in these instances I go on to proclaim to the survivors our hope of eternal life thanks to the life, death, and resurrection of our Lord, Jesus Christ. I do not speculate about the person's eternal destiny or grasp at straws or hints of faith or good works. I would never say, for example, something like, "We have hope for Bruce's eternal life because at least he did attend Sunday School."

I also do not speculate why the death happened. Did God decide to "take Grandma home"? Did God decide that seventeen-year-old Bobby would die when his friend Tom fell asleep at the wheel? Why didn't God prevent it? Could God prevent it? These are questions that stricken families inevitably ask. Personally, I find it difficult to believe that God "called home" a child with leukemia. It's fashionable today to say to a grieving family, "God didn't want this to happen." It may be comforting to say that, and it puts God in a compassionate light. But who are we to say whether this happened as God's will or not?

I got my comeuppance as a young pastor when a physician in our congregation asked me to call on a young boy dying of leukemia. The family did not belong to a church. As a young pastor, eagerly wanting to make God appear as loving and compassionate, I said, "God did not want this to happen." The parents were crestfallen. Their one source of comfort was in believing that God "wanted Jimmy home with him," as they said. Now I took away their only shred of consolation. Never again did I tell people what God is doing in such situations—despite what I personally believe. For this reason I seldom used the second version of the committal formula in the *Lutheran Book of Worship*: "Since almighty God has called our brother/sister from this life to himself. . . ."² I was not sorry to see it omitted from *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*.³

I count funeral sermons as one of my most important ministries and, incidentally, one of the prime opportunities for evangelism. People are hungry for the gospel, and a funeral sermon will always be the glorious, uplifting good news that in Jesus life overcomes death. That message will ring most vibrantly in these "tough" situations. ☩

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²"Burial of the Dead," *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1978) 213.

³*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006).