





*Abstract*

FOR ALL THE SAINTS:  
THE FUNERAL HOMILY AS REVELATION OF GOD EMBODIED

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The following project aims to address a prevailing homiletical problem in funeral preaching today. The endeavor of funeral preaching is practiced most commonly in one of two ways. The funeral sermon is completely doctrinal, articulating an eschatology only accounting for that which happens after death, devaluing the life lived. Conversely, the funeral sermon is predominantly biographical, speaking only of the deceased's life, without any eschatological—and very little theological—reflection.

Therefore, this paper explores the cultural, historical, and theological influences which have led to these practices. While there are many factors which have had an impact on the funeral and funeral preaching over the last 100 years, it is the Church itself, most notably well-intended clergy, who have had the greatest influence. In the midst of a great deal of cultural change, clergy have allowed the funeral ritual and, subsequently, the funeral homily to morph into what is experienced today.

Building on Thomas Long's recent work, *Accompany Them With Singing: The Christian Funeral*, which encourages the Church to reclaim the funeral service as worship, this project seeks to move the church toward a corrective in funeral preaching, reclaiming the funeral homily as proclamation of God's Word.

Using the Anglo-Catholic tradition of feast days for saints as a model, I argue that for Protestants, who claim all people are made in the image of God, every funeral is an occasion to reflect on the life of a saint. By doing so, the saint's life becomes primary for the preaching occasion, while scripture plays a secondary role, interpreting that life.

The sermon, then, is not an obituary or eulogy; nor is it a means of converting others to Christian faith. Instead, the funeral sermon becomes a reflection on the ways in which God is revealed through the life and death of the individual being remembered. Such an approach is more balanced, integrating both the theological and biographical, which can reveal the many and varied ways in which God is embodied in humanity.

The conclusion of the project includes four sermons, with commentary, which serve as examples for the homiletical model this project proposes. Each sermon provides one possible approach, given the particular circumstances of the person's life and death. An effort is made at offering a variety of sermons given the diversity of life and the varied circumstances surrounding death.

My hope is that this project is a continuation of those efforts being made to place value back on the rituals and traditions of the Church, which are increasingly being devalued as the Church declines. Specifically, it attempts to be part of the ongoing conversation regarding the significance of the role of the Church at a time of death and its potential to facilitate healing in the midst of loss and brokenness.

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The Funeral Homily As Revelation Of God Embodied

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## Introduction

I would rather preach a funeral than a wedding. There, I said it. Perhaps that is surprising to hear from a pastor. After all, most consider weddings to be celebratory and funerals depressing. Many claim weddings symbolize a beginning, while funerals represent an ending. Others even suggest that weddings lift up life, while funerals focus only on death.

Recently, I was listening to an interview of two obituary writers at the New York Times. One said something that resonates. The interviewer asked, “Does writing obituaries cause you to think about your own mortality?” The writer responded, “Yes, to a degree. But the truth is 98% of what we write is not about death, but life—the way a person lived, who they impacted, the ways in which their life made a difference.”<sup>1</sup> The same is true of writing the funeral sermon.

The funeral homily does not just teach us something of death. If done well, it has the potential to communicate more about life. We can learn from the lives of those we remember. Specifically, we can learn something of God through the life one has lived while on earth. Clergy are given the unique role, in the context of the funeral, to offer this revelation through the funeral sermon.

Unfortunately, fewer and fewer people are looking to the Church to be present during Christian rituals. According to a New York Times article, “nearly a third of the couples interviewed by the wedding website TheKnot.com, in studies of its members in 2009 and 2010, said they were married by friends or family members outside the church.

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<sup>1</sup> Fox, Margalit and Bruce Weber. Interview with Terry Gross. *Fresh Air*. WHYY, Philadelphia. April 27, 2017.

Anja Winikka, the site's editor, said the topic 'wasn't even on the radar enough' to include in the survey from 2008."<sup>2</sup>

While more people are choosing to exchange their marital vows and honor their deceased by friends and family ordained online, the Church, when given the opportunity, still offers a unique presence through the funeral ritual, which no other institution does in the same way.

Funeral homes may provide space and services that help the bereaved, but the Church offers theological meaning and represents Divine presence at a time of death. As a result, the funeral might be the most important ritual of Christianity today. The words spoken, especially during the funeral homily, may matter more than any others the Church offers.

Sadly, in attending many a funeral, I have seen that care is not being taken with these words. Over and over, I witness clergy do one of two things with the funeral homily. They turn the homily into a eulogy, speaking only about the deceased and nothing of God. Conversely, they say nothing about the person, utilizing death as a means of manipulating others into faith. It's fairly common in such a sermon for the preacher to point to the casket and say, "Repent! For this will be you some day!"

The project that follows proposes an alternative homiletical method for the funeral homily, encouraging clergy to claim it as proclamation of God embodied, distinguishing it from mere eulogy or only a means of "conversion." Like every aspect of the funeral service, the homily must be an integral part of worship. Also, like any

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<sup>2</sup> Gootman, Elissa. "The Officiant Among Us." *The New York Times*. March 9, 2012. Accessed March 9, 2018. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/11/fashion/more-couples-ask-friends-or-family-members-to-marry-them.html>

preaching endeavor, the sermon must address the homiletical question, “What do the people of God need to hear on this occasion?”

In the context of a funeral service, this can best be accomplished by using the deceased’s life as the primary lens through which we can know something of God. If we are all made in the image of God, then *all* our lives communicate something of the Divine. The funeral homily is most effectively composed, then, by exegeting a person’s life, in light of Scripture.

Such a model has precedence in the Anglo-Catholic tradition of feast days for saints. The sermon on such an occasion might focus primarily on a saint’s life, in light of a Biblical text. James Wallace writes in *Preaching to the Hungers of the Heart*,

On the feasts of the saints I feel some responsibility to present the saint, or to make the saint present, to the community so that there is an opportunity to know the saint better. I try to do this by working with and through the saint to have the biblical texts interpret the lives of the listeners. In this way, both the community’s hunger for meaning and belonging can be satisfied by the homily.<sup>3</sup>

When discussing the liturgical year, the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy called for memorial days devoted to the martyrs and other saints to be included in the annual liturgical cycle; in these celebrations “the church proclaims the paschal mystery in the saints who have suffered and have been glorified with Christ.” Later, this document notes that “the feasts of the saints proclaim the wonderful works of Christ in his servants and offer to the faithful fitting examples for their imitation.” “The saints, then, are not to be

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<sup>3</sup> Wallace, James. *Preaching to the Hungers of the Heart*. (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1983), 120.

seen apart from the paschal mystery of Christ; they are embodiments of how this mystery has been lived out throughout history.”<sup>4</sup>

Approaching the funeral and funeral homily as a feast day for a saint, then, is consistent with the practices of the Church, provides the personal testimony families desire and need during a time of grief, and also honors and recognizes God’s presence in and through a person’s life.

Thomas Long recently wrote a comprehensive book on the Church’s call to reclaim the funeral as Christian worship entitled, *Accompany Them With Singing: The Christian Funeral*. This project aims to build on Long’s work as it relates to the funeral homily.

The first chapter sets the context for funeral preaching today, providing a history of the way in which the greater culture has understood death and dying. It shows how the rise of the funeral home and health care industries, along with the decline of the Church, have had a significant impact on our cultural understandings of death. Inevitably, this has had an impact on the funeral and, more specifically, funeral preaching.

Chapter 2 provides a history of the last 100 years of funeral preaching as it relates to its purpose in the funeral service. Through excerpts from funeral sermons and scripture readings most often used in funerals during this time, I will convey how a theology of death and dying, and thereby funeral preaching, have devolved in America.

Chapter 3 develops a theology of life and death to support a new homiletical approach for funeral preaching. Building on both Long and Moltmann, I construct a theology of embodiment that integrates the doctrinal and biographical, arguing that

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

eternal life is about both the “after-life” *and* “the here and now.” If we are embodied beings, made in the image of God, then we can learn something of God through not only a person’s death, but also her life.

The fourth chapter argues for this new funeral homiletic, which approaches every funeral sermon like that of a feast day for a saint. The funeral sermon should exegete a person’s life, in light of scripture, to reveal the Word needed for the people in that place and time. By carefully crafting a homily that reveals how God shone through the life of the deceased, those present are exposed to God’s presence in a powerfully personal way.

Additionally, if the funeral service is one of the last Christian rituals people outside the church attend, then the homily provides a unique opportunity to provide both pastoral care and Christian witness to those who might benefit from the healing, transforming love of the God we know in Jesus Christ.

The fourth chapter also gives particular attention to the practical aspects of developing a well-crafted funeral sermon using this homiletic. Such practice can begin even before the time of death, continue during the process by which the pastor gives care to loved ones of the deceased, and finally crystallize while crafting the funeral service itself.

The conclusion to this project will provide several examples of funeral homilies I have written that follow the proposed methodology. Each homily will include commentary, describing its particular context. Attention is given to a variety of homilies that reflect the nuance and complexity around the varied circumstances of death. Included are homilies preached for a life long-lived, an unexpected death, and the death of a young person.

## Chapter 1:

### Death, American Culture and the Christian Funeral Today

They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.”

—John 20:13 NRSV

In 2014, the New York Times printed an article entitled “Rite of the Sitting Dead: Funeral Poses Mimic Life.” In it, Campbell Robertson and Frances Robles tell the story of a funeral director in New Orleans, Louisiana, named Louis Charbonnet, who specializes in “personalized” funeral services. The article describes a recent service conducted by the funeral home for Miriam Burbank, a native New Orleanian who died at the age of 53.

Instead of her body lying flat in a closed casket or her ashes enveloped by an urn, Burbank “spent her service sitting at a table amid miniature New Orleans Saints helmets, with a can of Busch beer in one hand and a menthol cigarette between her fingers, just as she had spent a good number of her living days.”<sup>1</sup>

On the one hand, Charbonnet and others like him have been criticized for conducting improper and even sacrilegious services, a concern Charbonnet admits is shared by his wife. On the other hand, Charbonnet defends himself by saying, “I got the ‘O.K.’ from a local priest, and besides, I am honoring family wishes.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Roberston, Campbell and Frances Robles. “Rite of the Sitting Dead: Funeral Poses Mimic Life.” *The New York Times*. June 21, 2014. Accessed March 9, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/22/us/its-not-the-living-dead-just-a-funeral-with-flair.html>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

This is a parable of the way in which much of American culture memorializes death today. It is more about commemorating a personality than thanking God for a life. It is about honoring family wishes instead of making theological sense of loss. It's about celebrating a persona rather than learning something of God from the deceased.

Perhaps this is best captured by the story a funeral home director friend tells about meeting with a family to pre-plan a funeral. When it comes time to discuss the music for the service, the not-yet-deceased says, "I'll leave the music up to the family after I am gone..." Then with a smile on his face, he continues, "...with the exception of one song. I want to make sure that the funeral service is concluded with Frank Sinatra's *My Way*."

Over the last century, the funeral has moved from the "Church's way" to "My way." This is ironic, considering it was not long ago the Church was making a significant attempt at combatting these cultural trends by revitalizing the funeral liturgy. Over the last-half century, in fact, many Christian traditions have taken aim at the devaluation of the funeral by developing liturgies that "clear away centuries of clutter that had cropped up around funeral practices to allow the strong bond between the death of the baptized Christian and the hope given in the resurrection of Jesus Christ to shine more brightly."<sup>3</sup>

Much of this attempt at renewal was inspired by the Roman Catholics as part of the outpouring of reforms from the Second Vatican Council and, in particular, the appearance in 1969 of a new set of funeral rites for the Catholic World: *Ordo Exsequiarum*, the *Rite of Funerals*. Since then, many Protestant traditions have followed suit.

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<sup>3</sup>Richard Rutherford, *The Death of a Christian: The Order of Christian Funerals* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1990), 116.

The Presbyterians, United Methodists, the United Church of Canada, the United Church of Christ, the Lutherans, and my own tradition, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), have all joined the Catholics in trying to renew interest and emphasize the importance of commemorating death through the tradition of the Christian funeral.<sup>4</sup> As beautifully written and compelling as these new funeral liturgies may be, what is most impressive is how little impact they have had on actual practice.

Thus, today's Christian clergy are left scratching their heads, wondering, how did we get here? Why are so few funeral services done in the Church anymore? Why does the minister have less authority in decisions about the funeral service? How did the Christian funeral become so individualistic, even at times narcissistic? Why is God becoming increasingly removed from not just the funeral, but especially the funeral homily?

Christian clergy and laypeople alike can't help but feel at the modern-day funeral much like Mary did at the empty tomb: "They have taken away my Lord, and I don't know where they have laid him" (John 20:13). So, who took the body?

### A Stolen Body

The easiest target in this story, to which most history books point, is the one who, more or less, literally took the body: the modern-day funeral home. The funeral home business was developed around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when American culture began to shift in its thinking about death and the theological rituals and language used to commemorate it.

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

In her book *Preaching Death*, Lucy Bregman suggests that a significant change in Christian funeral language began with the professionalization of the funeral industry. Removing the body from the home, embalming, viewing, and the professionalization of body preparation all began to emerge as common practice during the same time that the funeral and funeral preaching changed.<sup>5</sup>

There is no question that the emerging funeral home industry had an impact on cultural views of death and dying. No longer were families dealing with the realities of a decaying body in their homes, like previous generations. No longer were mourners those primarily responsible for preparing the body for burial. No longer was there the same kind of intimacy with the deceased, as the body and those who would see it were taken to a more sterile, less personal environment—the funeral home.

As these changes slowly emerged, the Church became increasingly critical of the funeral home industry. *Catholic* liturgical scholar, Robert W. Hovda, wrote such a critique lamenting the “incongruity between the Christian way of life and the growing customs, practices, and expectations surrounding the death of an American” and how funerals became “a witness to materialism rather than to the faith values of prayer, reverence, honesty, simplicity, and community.”<sup>6</sup>

The result, said Hovda, was that the American Christian funeral was in peril of being trivialized, a trivialization not intended, but

surely evident: in cosmetic disguise, in limousines and other trappings of high society, in funeral homes refurbished to look like luxury hotels, in caskets so self-assertive that they draw attention away from the body rather than to it, in more

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<sup>5</sup> Bregman, Lucy. *Preaching Death*. Waco: Baylor University Press, 2011, 17.

<sup>6</sup> Robert W. Hovda, “The Amen Corner: Reclaiming for the Church the Death of a Christian, II” *Worship* 59/3 (May 1985): 251.

and more mechanical contraptions which deprive mourners even of the solace of carrying the casket or touching it or covering it with earth.<sup>7</sup>

Twenty years earlier, Jessica Mitford shaped such an opinion with her 1963 article, *The American Way of Death*. Mitford's piece became a phenomenal success and marked a turning point in American attitudes toward disposal of the dead.<sup>8</sup> According to Gary Laderman in his book, *Rest in Peace, The American Way of Death* changed funeral directing forever, "presenting a scathing indictment of the funeral industry, drawing attention to the commercialism and exploitation she saw driving the enterprise."<sup>9</sup>

There is evidence, like Hovda's critique, that Christianity was not pleased with the evolving practices around death and dying; however, because the Church and the funeral home business were so intricately woven together, Christianity and its clergy were lumped into Mitford's critique, marking a change in perception of the ministers who had long been trusted to craft the funeral service and preside over it.

Still, others point to the increasing growth of professional health care over the same period of time, specifically the rise in hospital and nursing home industries. Laderman writes, "The dramatic rise in the number of hospitals across the country and their increasing control over the health of the nation contributed to the separation of death from everyday life."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Jessica Mitford, *The American Way of Death*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963).

<sup>9</sup> Laderman, Gary. *Rest In Peace*. Oxford: University Press, 2003. Pgs. xxi – xxii.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 3.

In fact, during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, life expectancy rose exponentially due to advancements in medicine and the increasing emphasis on the importance of health care. According to one study, “The average length of life increased more during the twentieth century than during all previous periods of history combined.”<sup>11</sup> All of these factors moved the dying process from the home, where doctors made house calls, to the hospitals and nursing homes, which now employed them.<sup>12</sup>

In more recent history, the role of hospice care has increased, helping to bring the dying process back into the home for those for whom this is possible. Additionally, the health care industry is increasingly moving people out of health care facilities as soon as possible, due to the rising costs of and complexities around health insurance. Nevertheless, Laderman suggests that even today, “death continues to be separated from everyday life.”<sup>13</sup>

There is no question, then, that both the funeral home and health care industries have had a significant impact on the way that American culture views death and dying today. Undoubtedly, this influenced Christian theologies of death and dying and thereby the Christian funeral itself. However, can these two industries solely be blamed for the fundamental changes to Christian theologies and funeral practices around death and dying?

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<sup>11</sup> Peter Uhlenberg and James B. Kirby, “Longevity,” *The Encyclopedia of Human Biology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. Renato Dulbecco (San Diego: Academic Press, 1997): 231.

<sup>12</sup> Laderman, 3.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 3.

In his book, *Accompany Them With Singing: The Christian Funeral*, Thomas Long suggests that the answer to this question is “No.” Long says, “the Christian funeral [and the funeral homily have] been most damaged, not by [their] commercial rivals or even by [their] enemies, but by [their] theological friends.”<sup>14</sup> The hard truth is that we, as pastors and practical theologians, are the reason for the changes to the Christian funeral over time.

He writes,

Ironically, it happened mostly in the name of good theological intentions and tender pastoral care. Christian pastors have desired to make funerals more personal, more expressive of the desires and lifestyles of the deceased and mourning families, but have ended up allowing them to become more individualistic and even narcissistic. Pastors have tried to make funerals more pastorally sensitive, more comforting to the grief-stricken, but have allowed them to become controlled by psychological rather than theological categories and, therefore, shallower in meaning. Pastors have wanted to free funerals from the morbidity of funeral home cosmetics, but have allowed them to become spiritualized and disembodied. Pastors have desired to make funerals more faithful expressions of hope in the resurrection, but have allowed that strong hope to be edged out by sentimental views of spirituality and immortality.<sup>15</sup>

There is no more vulnerable time for humanity than during the dying and death of a loved one. Clergy understand this truth all too well. This is the reason Long’s remarks about “good intentions” resonate with those of us in pastoral ministry. We feel compelled to be more flexible with grieving families during the funeral planning process, often “giving into requests,” rather than “teaching theology.” We do this because we genuinely love people.

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<sup>14</sup> Long, Thomas. *Accompany Them With Singing: The Christian Funeral*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), xv.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

Additionally, clergy do this because the pastoral care provided around the process of death and dying moves clergy from being an “employee of the church” to the “pastor of the congregation.” The bonds formed between clergy and congregations, especially at times of death, build the foundation of relationship and trust upon which the ministry of the Church relies. There is no more crucial time for pastoral ministry than during the dying and death of a congregant.

There is, however, one additional aspect to the Church’s complicity in the many changes to the funeral rite, which others do not explicitly point out. For mainline Protestants, in particular, the decline of Christianity, as a whole, has undoubtedly impacted the funeral service and the words clergy use when presiding over it.

One need not pick up a book to recognize that the Church in North America, as a whole, has been dying for the last 60 years. “It was in 1968 that mainline institutions of all kinds, including mainline churches, began to experience decreasing attendance.”<sup>16</sup> This trend has continued today. There are several reasons for this decline.

Former General Minister of my own denomination, The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Dick Hamm, suggests that one of the most significant factors is the focus on institutional survival. He suggests the Church has been doing “maintenance” instead of “mission.” Hamm writes, “...the decline of our strength has been our natural tendency, in the face of declining numbers, to become focused on institutional survival

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<sup>16</sup> Dick Hamm. *Recreating the Church: Leadership for the Postmodern Age* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2007), 21.

rather than on the true mission of the church. Jesus said, ‘Those who want to save their life will lose it.’”<sup>17</sup> Hamm goes on,

Our concern in the face of declining membership and money, our fear of death as an institution, has often driven us, in congregations and in other manifestations of the church, to do exactly the wrong things. Thus, we have created self-fulfilling prophecies, paralyzed in the face of a culture we no longer understand and a future about which we have no clue.<sup>18</sup>

Every aspect of church-life, including our rituals, has suffered as a result of our focus on institutional survival. One of the “wrong things” Hamm points to is allowing many of our traditions and practices to erode, focusing on gaining and keeping members instead of carrying on theologically-coherent rituals. This has seeped into the planning and preparation for the funeral.

Clergy have not only catered to church members and their families to provide care during a time of grief, but also to avoid conflict and the risk of displeasing congregants. In many respects, in its efforts to survive, the Church has transformed into a service industry, accommodating its due-paying members by fulfilling their requests and desires at all costs.

The Roman Catholic Bishop of Portsmouth, Bishop Egan, recently suggested, in a pastoral letter, that the Church must change its attitude regarding the Church and its clergy as service-providers.

The bishop says the diocese needs “a huge shift in attitude” to view the Mass as a source of inspiration to announce the Gospel and perform good works. He says he suspected that since the 1960s there had been too much focus on the internal life of the Church including “changing the liturgy, building up the parish, the pastoral care of the community.” This had led, says Bishop Egan, to a neglect of the

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<sup>17</sup> Dick Hamm. *2020 Vision for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001), 3.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 4.

Church's outward mission to others, adding: "As a result, we have become overly inward-looking, self-absorbed and numerically in decline."<sup>19</sup>

The funeral is, first and foremost, a worship experience. This ultimately makes it, as Egan suggests, a source of inspiration to announce the Gospel and perform good works. This tension between creating a worship service and meeting the needs of a grieving family makes navigating the funeral rite one of the greatest challenges for clergy today.

It is a time of heightened emotion for everyone involved, including the minister, who likely has a relationship with the deceased and the grieving family. It is increasingly complex given current American cultural understandings of death and dying, the Church's lack of authority in those understandings, and a dying institution whose traditions are dying along with it.

Any reclamation of the funeral and the words spoken during it must begin with an acknowledgement, on the part of the Church, of our collusion in the development of current funeral practices. We are the ones who have, if not stolen the body (Jesus) ourselves, allowed it to be stolen. It's time for us to reclaim it. In order to do so, we must know, historically, how it was removed from the funeral over time.

### A Brief History of the Christian Funeral

A colleague recently met with a terminal member of his congregation to plan her funeral service. She was a long-time member of the church and a well-known personality in her community. This was not unusual. In fact, meeting with someone to pre-plan a

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<sup>19</sup> James Macintyre. "Clergy Must Not Be Seen as Service-Providers, Complains Bishop." *The Tablet: The International Catholic Weekly*. January 13, 2014.

funeral service is ideal. However, this colleague quickly discovered he wasn't meeting with the family to plan the service, but rather to receive the already-made plans.

Included with these funeral plans was an order of service, complete with liturgy, hymns, and those individuals already asked to speak. There was also to be an offering collected during "worship" to benefit the local non-profit for which the deceased had worked many years.

After looking everything over, my colleague said to his parishioner, "Well, it looks like you've already got everything worked out. What do you want me to do?" She responded, "Oh, I want you involved. You are going to read the homily I've written." Not surprisingly, the "homily" turned out to be a eulogy, speaking only of the deceased and saying nothing of God.

This story is true not just because it happened, but because it represents a larger shift in the way funerals are conducted today. Perhaps not as extreme as the "personalized" services funeral home director Charbonnet is offering in New Orleans, my colleague's congregant nevertheless created a "customized funeral."<sup>20</sup> While such funerals today do not all have the same movements or patterns, they do include many of the same elements.

In general, Long suggests those characteristics to be:

- a memorial service, instead of a funeral (i.e., a service focused on remembering the deceased, often held many days after the death, with the body or cremated remains of the deceased not present)
- a brief, simple, highly personalized and customized service, often involving several speakers (as opposed to the standard church funeral liturgies presided over primarily by clergy)

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<sup>20</sup> Robertson and Robles.

- a focus upon the life of the deceased (often aided by a physical display of photos and other mementos)
- an emphasis on joy rather than sadness, a celebration of the life rather than an observance of the somber reality of death
- a private disposition of the body, often done before the memorial service, with an increasing preference for cremation<sup>21</sup>

These changes are not yet experienced in all Christian traditions, in every community. This shift is happening to varying degrees among different populations and denominations. The movement toward the highly biographical and personal is most present among white, suburban, mainline Protestants. However, evidence suggests that even in more rural areas and among Catholics, aspects of this new pattern in the Christian funeral are creeping in.<sup>22</sup> What, then, are the historical circumstances that created the possibility for the “new funeral” to emerge?

While the scope of this project is not to provide an exhaustive history of the Christian funeral, it is important to point out that as early as the third century, Tertullian could already speak of an “appointed office” for Christian burial in North Africa, and certainly by the late fourth century, we can begin to see the contours of a basic and distinct Christian funeral rite.<sup>23</sup>

According to Paul Bradshaw in the *New SCM Dictionary for Worship and Liturgy*, this rite was not developed in a vacuum, but over centuries of evolving Jewish, Roman and early Christian practices.

The earliest written evidence comes from a prayer in the collection attributed to Sarapion of Thmuis in Egypt (c. 350). This prayer, No. 30, employs mostly OT

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<sup>21</sup> Long, 58.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Bradshaw, Paul F. *New SCM Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship*. (London: SCM Press, 2005), 214.

references. The Apostolic Constitutions (8.41) contains a prayer for the dead that likewise draws on OT themes. Funeral rites also included singing. Jerome refers to the singing of psalms done in the 'Christian manner' (*Ep* 108), and John Chrysostom (*Homily on Hebrews* 4.7) indicates that Psalms 23, 32 and 126 were chanted at funerals in Constantinople.<sup>24</sup>

The funeral rite which emerges as early as the Middle Ages, the essentials of which have been utilized as common Christian practice since, is composed of very specific movements. Bradshaw notes these movements when he writes, "Generally, the rituals included the last rites for the dying, preparation of the body, procession to and services in the church, procession to and rites at the cemetery, burial and post-burial rites."<sup>25</sup> In summation, preparation, processional, and burial become the three key practices of the Christian funeral ritual.

Despite the many challenges the rite faces throughout the centuries, this remains the basic pattern for Christian funerals until the late nineteenth century. So, what affected the church and its theology in the late nineteenth century that led to these changes? A few key American events undoubtedly had a significant impact.

As the Civil War came to its conclusion toward the end of the nineteenth century, people were dealing with the realities of death (violent carnage in the masses) in ways they had not previously. Dr. Gilpin Faust points out in a recent study that the sheer devastation of the Civil War caused American society to begin to question commonly held Christian beliefs regarding heaven, hell, the end of the world, the resurrection of the

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 217.

body, and the second coming of Jesus. These questions accelerated the nineteenth century's already growing crisis of faith.<sup>26</sup> She writes,

Civil War carnage transformed the mid-nineteenth century's growing sense of religious doubt into a crisis of belief that propelled many Americans to redefine or even reject their faith in a benevolent and responsive deity. But Civil War death and devastation also planted seeds of a more profound doubt about human ability to know and understand... The Civil War compelled Americans to ask with intensified urgency, "What is Death?" and in answering to find themselves wondering why death, what is life, and can we ever hope to know? We have continued to wonder ever since.<sup>27</sup>

Alongside the Civil War was already a growing crisis of faith, specifically surrounding eschatology, most directly connected to what is known as "The Great Disappointment." In the 1840's a large group of Christians, known as Millerites, from the Adventist movement, confidently calculated the exact date of Jesus' return, October 22, 1844, only for them to be greatly disappointed. In his book, *American Originals*, Paul Conklin writes about the devastating effects of this moment in history.

Many closed businesses, stopped their harvest, or otherwise prepared for the advent. Thousands gathered for worship. A few may have gathered on hillsides or even donned robes. Such was the expectancy that many were literally crushed when nothing happened. Embarrassment and widespread ridicule added to their disappointment, and many scarcely had any motivation to go on living. So critical was this date that, from then on, Adventists have referred to it as the Great Disappointment.<sup>28</sup>

Several similar predictions took place in the decades to follow, all with the same outcome.

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<sup>26</sup> Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008), 210.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Conklin, Paul K. *American Originals: Homemade Varieties of Christianity*. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997), Pg.122.

These disappointments were not helped by the rise of the sciences, including Darwinism, and the period of the Enlightenment, which championed logic and reason above belief, bringing a new level of critical thinking to the public square. As these realities began to solidify, heaven and hell were reimagined as places “on earth” rather than “in another realm.” Long writes of this time,

No wonder the metaphor of journeying to be with God began to break apart at the seams. If people had “already been living in heaven,” then there was, after all, nowhere for the dead to travel, and without letting go of the vocabulary of the otherworld, mainline Protestants in the late nineteenth century, long before the Beatles, could well “imagine there’s no heaven.”<sup>29</sup>

Another nineteenth century development, perhaps even more significant than the others, simply because of its impracticality, was the increasing development and use of rural cemeteries, separated from both churches and the greater community. This had a literal and symbolic impact on the funeral. In the days that churches had cemeteries on the church grounds or just down the road, at the center of the community, it made logistical sense to move from the funeral service to the burial, one fluid and continuous motion.

However, as bodies were moved to cemeteries further and further away from the towns and cities they once inhabited, the graveside became more of an optional afterward. Susan J. White points out this had a symbolic effect on the church’s overall understanding of the funeral. White writes, “The removal of the gravesite to a location far away from the precincts of the church depletes a fund of theological and communal images and severely reduces the sense...that the living and the dead are part of one ‘holy

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<sup>29</sup> Long, 74.

communion.”<sup>30</sup> Long concludes, “so with heaven gone and with the cemetery miles away, neither the dead nor the living had anywhere to go, and the metaphor of the journey to God collapsed.”<sup>31</sup>

It is in the midst of this collapsing metaphor that we see funerals begin to fundamentally change, specifically as it relates to the funeral homily. In fact, it could be argued that funeral preaching is the aspect of the funeral service that is most impacted by the emerging cultural realities at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is to these changes we now turn.

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<sup>30</sup> Susan J. White, *Christian Worship and Technological Change* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 72-80.

<sup>31</sup> Long, 75.

## Chapter 2:

### A Brief History: 100 Years of Funeral Preaching

Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you.

—John 14:1-2 KJV

Following a recent funeral service I conducted, a long-time member of the congregation said to me, “I really like that you don’t ‘preach’ at funerals.” I responded, “You don’t think I preach at funerals?” She said, “Well, you know what I mean.” I did.

At that time I lived in a small town in the South. On every corner rests a congregation where the preachers take a more “fire and brimstone” approach, even in funerals. In fact, a journalist writing about that community recently said, “...if it were an island, it would sink beneath the weight of its (Southern) Baptist Churches.”<sup>1</sup> Therefore, the funeral sermons people in our community hear most often are a warning rather than a word of hope.

Focused entirely on the after-life, these sermons serve as a “wake-up call” for the not-yet-deceased, reminding the congregation that death comes for us all and when it does, we will either be going to heaven or to hell. How we live today determines our fate tomorrow.

Sprinkled throughout our community, in much fewer numbers, are a few Mainline Protestant Churches. While the funeral preaching in these congregations is much different

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<sup>1</sup> Tabor, Nick. “A Town Under Trial.” *Oxford American: A Magazine of the South*. Issue 96, Spring 2017.

than that of their Southern Baptist counterparts, I'm not sure what is spoken from these pulpits can be categorized as sermons.

Almost in reaction to the strong emphasis on the after-life, many Mainline Protestant clergy avoid talking about heaven and hell in the funeral sermon altogether. Instead, the word spoken from the pulpit is entirely about the here and now, focusing mostly on the deceased, specifically their personal biography, and perhaps consoling the living along the way. The only mention of God typically comes at the end of the sermon in a phrase like, "We thank God for the gift of our friend we remember here today."

These two approaches to the funeral homily are like bookends on the history of modern Protestant funeral preaching. In only eight years of living and serving in one community, I experienced the last 100 years of funeral preaching, listening most often to the legacy of doctrinal preaching in more conservative Christian traditions, but also to the newly emerging biographical sermons in more progressive congregations. This chapter will briefly journey this history, documenting how funeral preaching has changed over the last century.

### The Legacy of Doctrinal Preaching

Doctrinal funeral preaching came to prominence at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but still exists in many Christian traditions today. Such preaching can, at times, sound more threatening than hopeful. It is rooted in the theological assumption that the ultimate goal of life is to reach eternity with God. Such sermons can be found throughout collections and anthologies of funeral sermons from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In 1918, Rev. L.H. Schuh wrote such a book, entitled *Funeral Sermons*. In one sermon, he writes, "So if the death angel should come soon, if he were to knock today at

your door, would he find your house in order? Would he find you trusting in the crucified son of God?”<sup>2</sup> Doctrinal funeral sermons are aimed at reminding the living of their mortality and that how we live in the here and now will determine whether or not we live with God in eternity. In another of Schuh’s sermon’s he makes this point clear:

Let not the call of God be heard in vain. Some of you are evidently halting between two opinions. The world and the flesh with their temptations have beset you, and you are saying, “Not now, not now. Some other day when I have a convenient season...” If the death of this young man should make you more thoughtful...or win you away from the world and its service and direct your feet heavenward, then both his life and his death would have been a blessing...May God grant it!<sup>3</sup>

The theology behind such preaching is captured well in Andrew Blackwood’s 1942, *The Funeral: A Source Book for Ministers*. Blackwood is worried that the rise of the funeral home industry and its emphases on embalming, viewing, and the professionalization of body preparation is focused too much on the physical and not enough on the spiritual.

Specifically, Blackwood complains that the “conventional funeral focuses all attention on the body, obscuring the proper Christian emphasis on the Soul.”<sup>4</sup> Instead, according to Blackwood and common Christian teaching in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the purpose of the funeral, and thereby the funeral sermon, is to emphasize the transition

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<sup>2</sup> Schuh, Rev. L.H.. *Funeral Sermons by Lutheran Divines*. Columbus, Ohio: Lutheran Book Concern, 1918. Pg. 45.

<sup>3</sup> Schuh, Rev. L.H., ed. *Funeral Sermons*. Columbus, Ohio: The Book Concern, 1925. Pg. 112.

<sup>4</sup> Blackwood, Andrew. *The Funeral: A Sourcebook for Ministers*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1942. Pg. 76.

from this life to the life beyond, not what is being left behind, but what lies ahead for the deceased.<sup>5</sup>

In a funeral sermon from William Ketcham's, *Funeral Sermons and Outline Addresses*, Rev. R. Rock writes,

(Death) is the soul's emancipation from all bondage and limitations that mar its larger pleasure and deter its expansion and unfolding. It is like the worm that bursts its chrysalis and comes forth a thing of larger life, liberty, and beauty... He is like one who moves from the poorhouse into king's palaces and from plain fare to everlasting banqueting.<sup>6</sup>

In funeral sermons from this period, we find this dualistic theology as the most prominent theme. What is primary is liberation from this earthly life, into the great beyond.

The congregation then is, above all else, the future dead, waiting to be freed from the bondage of earthly living.

According to Blackwood, then, everything in the funeral, including the sermon, should point toward this understanding. "Today we bury him. So you, too, may die. Are you living under the power of the world to come?"<sup>7</sup> Bregman suggests this stark question, preached in a funeral sermon from 1899, acts as "point A" in our journey from the past into the present. In other words, the purpose of the funeral sermon in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century is to explicitly and publicly communicate Christian doctrines of salvation, eternal

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ketcham, William. *Funeral Sermons and Outline Addresses*. New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1899. Pg. 73.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

life, and divine judgment. In other words, “Are you living under the power of the world to come?”<sup>8</sup>

This focus on the after-life is most evident in the Scripture readings regularly utilized as primary texts for the funeral sermon during this time. Zechariah 8:4-5 is a popular option among those readings suggested in Christian Ministry Manuals. It reads, “Once again, men and women will of ripe old age sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each with a cane in hand because of his age. The streets will be filled with boys and girls playing there.”<sup>9</sup>

This particular text is used as a prophecy about what God wants for all of humanity. It is a vision of multigenerational harmony, a people able to enjoy the goodness of life, even of urban life. But this vision is in the future and is “otherworldly.” It points, as Paul does in Galatians 4:26, to “the Jerusalem from above.” Achieving a place in this “New Jerusalem” is the ultimate goal of the Christian life.<sup>10</sup>

The New Testament text used most often in doctrinal preaching of this time is John 14:1-2. The King James Version reads, “*Let not your heart be troubled; ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house are many mansions: if it were not so I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you.*” If Zechariah offers a vision for *who* will gather in the eternal realm beyond this life, John paints a picture of *where* we will live in the great beyond. The KJV uses the word “mansions,” while more modern

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Zechariah 8:4-5

<sup>10</sup> Bregman, 33.

translations like the NRSV use “rooms.” Regardless, both emphasize that in heaven, you have a home.

Utilizing such texts emphasize that, as people of faith, our goal is to return to our ultimate home--God’s house. Just as Jesus comes from God and returns to his Father in heaven, so too do we come from God and return to our eternal Father upon our death. If we are “right” with God, death, then, becomes something to which we can look forward, if it means living in God’s house with Jesus.

What is assumed in such preaching is that home for Jesus will be home and homelike for us as well. In some of these funeral sermons, Jesus’ experiences are imagined to mirror ours, when we are far away from our homes. One sermon excerpt captures this well:

Jesus spoke of death as GOING TO THE FATHER...Jesus felt that He was away from home, a traveler in a foreign land, a voyager. He had lived amidst the glory of the eternal throne. When He came to earth how frequently his thoughts must have journeyed back to the land from whence He came, and forward to the land to which He was soon to return. Undoubtedly, He like all travelers, suffered at times from homesickness.<sup>11</sup>

At its essence, doctrinal preaching is about Christians returning “home.” As Rev. Hollack writes in his *Cyclopedia of Funeral Sermons and Sketches*, “Heaven is represented as the home of the good, and is called ‘our Father’s house,’ and surely the children will all be acquainted...where we will greeted by ‘remembered smiles, a heartease from the hand of one who loved us, and a child’s pure kiss.”<sup>12</sup> The image of

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<sup>11</sup> Shepfer, H. Reed. *When Death Speaks*. Burlington, Iowa: Lutheran Literary Board, 1937. Pg. 42.

<sup>12</sup> Hallock, Rev. G.B.F. *Cyclopedia of Funeral Sermons and Sketches*. New York: George H. Doran, 1926. Pg. 158.

“heaven as home” cannot be overstated. As Redd Shepfer writes in *When Death Speaks*, “Heaven is a HOME and death a homegoing.”<sup>13</sup>

Doctrinal preaching worked well for deaths that were “natural” or “expected.” The challenge for doctrinal preaching, however, came with circumstances around difficult deaths: a child’s death, a suicide, or an unexpected death. This was true, especially, given the eroding eschatology mentioned in the previous chapter, at the end of the nineteenth century. How does the community of faith celebrate such a “homecoming” under tragic circumstances? Even with faith that the deceased is at home in heaven, how are the loved ones left behind to make sense of a seemingly senseless death?

In these circumstances, the doctrine of funeral preaching did not necessarily change, but the emphasis of the sermon had to shift. One scripture passage, in particular, was used regularly to address such difficult deaths: 2 Samuel 12:15-23. The New Interpreter’s Version reads:

The Lord struck the child that Uriah’s wife had borne to David, and he became ill. David pleaded with God for the child. He fasted and spent the nights lying in sackcloth on the ground. The elders of his household stood beside him to get him up from the ground, but he refused, and he would not eat any food with them. On the seventh day the child died. David’s attendants were afraid to tell him that the child was dead, for they thought, “While the child was still living, he wouldn’t listen to us when we spoke to him. How can we now tell him the child is dead? He may do something desperate.” David noticed that his attendants were whispering among themselves, and he realized the child was dead. “Is the child dead?” he asked. “Yes,” they replied, “he is dead.” Then David got up from the ground. After he had washed, put on lotions and changed his clothes, he went into the house of the Lord and worshiped. Then he went to his own house, and at his request they served him food, and he ate. His attendants asked him, “Why are you acting this way? While the child was alive, you fasted and wept, but now that the child is dead, you get up and eat!” He answered, “While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept. I thought, ‘Who knows? The Lord may be gracious to me and let

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<sup>13</sup> Shepfer, 43.

the child live.’ But now that he is dead, why should I go on fasting? Can I bring him back again? I will go to him, but he will not return to me.”

This particular text is listed in Hollack’s work as a “Suggestive text for Sermons at Funerals of Infants or Little Children.” He suggests that such sermons typically have three movements:

1. Persistent grief is always wrong, because it is useless. “Can I bring him back?”
2. Think how happy and safe the child is in heaven.
3. “I shall go to him.” We shall go to the children.<sup>14</sup>

While the emphasis of “homecoming” is not as prominent, the fundamental theological presupposition still remains. Even in an unfortunate death, heaven is still achieved. Therefore, the faithful should be happy, not sad. In fact, tears are not even appropriate. The death was simply God’s will. Just as David refused to mourn after the death of his child, so should we. This kind of Christian resignation is to be commended as an example of faith.

In Charles Wallis’ *The Funeral Encyclopedia*, an excerpt from one sermon captures this theological position well.

Let us not then dwell upon the virtues which you and I have lost by his passing, but upon the glory which he has gained. For musing the loss which we feel so keenly only makes our hearts heavy, but the realization that he has gone into a far more glorious existence should lift a burden from our hearts, even as the burden of earthly life has been lifted from his heart.<sup>15</sup>

Over time, this understanding of death as “God’s will” becomes challenged by those who, themselves, cannot reconcile their own experiences with such doctrine. An

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<sup>14</sup> Hallock, 29.

<sup>15</sup> Wallis, Charles, ed. *The Funeral Encyclopedia: A Source Book*. New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1953. Pg. 65.

example is found in Christian philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff, whose son, Eric, died in a mountain climbing accident in 1983. In an earlier time, such a death would have been divinely intended. But Wolterstorff, the grieving father, refuses to believe “God has shaken the mountain. God had decided it was time for him to come home.”<sup>16</sup>

Instead, Wolterstorff cries out, “I find this pious attitude deaf to the message of the Christian gospel.” He continues, “The Bible speaks instead of God’s overcoming death...God is appalled by death. My pain over my son’s death is shared by his pain over my son’s death. And yes, I share in his pain over his son’s death.”<sup>17</sup>

We find in Wolterstorff’s words a different answer to theodicy, which also eventually becomes common in funeral sermons; not that God *wills* particular deaths, but that God *suffers with us* whenever death comes. In fact, the use of 2 Samuel as a primary text for funeral sermons slowly fades away during this time.

What happens, as a result, is a change in understanding of what life has to do with death. Bregman writes,

When both the timing and manner of death were clearly the ‘Lord’s Will,’ this meant that preparation for death was our constant duty...The preacher’s task was to remind us of this and to reawaken our consciousness that the Lord would, one day, will our own deaths...without this certainty of God’s direct intentions for me, it may not help if I ponder and prepare for my own death.<sup>18</sup>

In the era to come, such preparation isn’t just impractical, it is considered morbid and useless, which is part of the reason an era of silence and denial begins.

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<sup>16</sup> Wolterstorff, Nicholas. *Lament for a Son*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967. Pgs. 66-67.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Bregman, 103.

## The Era of Silence and Denial

In the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there emerged a new way of thinking about life and death. This era serves almost as the culmination of the doubts around heaven and hell that began to surface at the turn of the century. The doctrinal answers Christianity was offering for the meaning of life and death were no longer resonating with Western people. Historical and cultural circumstances like the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights movement were raising questions about every commonly held thought and belief, including the value of human life, the meaning of death and what happens beyond this life.

Suffice it to say, death and the funeral become something to avoid, rather than to embrace. Death is no longer thought of as a homecoming, but rather something not to be thought of at all. Paul Irion, whose complex analysis of funerals from this era, calls this “vitalism,” and finds it a pervasive belief in contemporary culture.

In his book, *The Funeral: Vestige or Value*, Irion describes vitalism as the notion that death can tell us nothing. Irion writes, “The supreme valuation is vitality.” He goes on to suggest that during this age, only that which is youthful and vital is considered worthy. Productivity, in particular, “is one of the most important criteria for considering worth.”<sup>19</sup>

Irion’s book, however, challenges this overarching philosophy of death and the Christian funeral. Even his title is significant: a vestige is a remnant of a faded and failing tradition, of no more value to anyone in a more modern time. During the age of silence

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<sup>19</sup> Irion, Paul. *The Funeral: Vestige or Value?* Nashville: Abingdon, 1966. Pg. 28-29.

and denial, lots of traditions were being challenged as “vestiges.” Many believed funerals were not just a sign of a dead person, but a dead past. Irion argues, on the other hand, that such ideas are simply the result of psychological denial and fear of death. He calls this a “neurotic flight from reality.”<sup>20</sup>

What is most interesting about Irion’s work, though, is his observation that in the face of silence and denial, a confluence of voices begin to emerge, claiming an authority to speak about death. While the Church had historically been THE voice to speak at and about the funeral, the emergence of the funeral home industry brings another voice to the table. The function of the funeral begins to change, based on who is doing the talking. Irion diagrams this well (124, fig. 2): “For clergy, the funeral continues to be primarily an occasion of worship... A funeral, from the family’s perspective, however, must fulfill certain psychological needs... The seller’s language of the funeral industry is aimed at the family, and uses the language of psychological consolation and familial duties to the dead.”<sup>21</sup>

While fear of death is certainly at work in the age of silence and denial, this confusion around the meaning of death and the purpose of the funeral might be perpetuating it. At the very least, clergy control over funerals and their meaning begins to slip away. During this era, the Church becomes only one perspective among several.

Ironically, during the age of silence and denial, funerals continue and funeral sermons remain virtually the same. Most people do exactly what so many thought was pointless, sitting through funerals filled with faded out remnants of earlier religious ideas

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 59.

<sup>21</sup> Bregman, 115.

and images. The difference is that this is a world where they are unhappy, now confused by what they were hearing from the several different voices making meaning of death and the after-life.<sup>22</sup> This created space for new understandings of death, the funeral, and the funeral homily to emerge.

### New Language

With every action, there is reaction. The reaction to the era of silence and denial was the search for new theologies of life, death, and the funeral. What developed can best be captured by the scripture reading utilized most often for funeral preaching in the time period following the era of silence and denial, Romans 8:35-39. The NIV reads:

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?...For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The confusion, pessimism, and overall uneasiness surrounding death during the era of silence and denial caused people to feel separated from their loved ones in a new way at the time of death. At least during the days that doctrinal preaching reigned, people had hope that their loved ones were in a “better place” and that they would “rejoin” them in their “heavenly home” someday. However, as death became something to avoid thinking and talking about, hope in the face of death was lost altogether. God became a distant, uninterested idea, rather than an eternal, loving Father waiting for his children to return home.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

The use of God's promise found in Romans 8 responded to the stark separations people were feeling from the dead, the living, and from God. This notion that nothing can separate us from the love of God came not only as words of comfort, but also as a fresh theological voice to the ongoing conversation about death. As Bregman writes, "It's not about the 'world to come' or 'natural immortality,' it is about human experience now, in this life. Its promise is that God will never abandon us."<sup>23</sup>

This change in funeral preaching can be summed up nicely in an excerpt from a funeral homily preached on Romans 8, from the early 1980's:

Separation—it's a mournful, frightening word... We mourn Homer's loss, for now we must face life separated from him... Nothing separated Homer from the love of his family and friends. Days in a hospital or bedridden at home are never easy, but Homer seemed to find great comfort in the steady procession of loved ones who came to visit and to add their strength to his... If there is a sense of separation in Homer's death, it is in the loss that we feel.<sup>24</sup>

The emphasis on "the loss we feel" focuses more on the "here and now" than the "great beyond." In fact, in this particular quote, death is addressed head-on, including some of the uncomfortable realities of death (hospitals, bedridden, etc.). The afterlife is not mentioned. What we find here is movement back toward wrestling with the realities of death, while simultaneously rethinking God's presence in the midst of it. Bregman suggests that what makes this possible is the pastoral counseling movement that comes to fruition during the latter part of the twentieth century.

Pastoral counseling is one of the great success stories of American twentieth century religion. It has especially had a tremendous impact on Mainline Protestantism.

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<sup>23</sup> Bregman, 151.

<sup>24</sup> *We Are the Lord's: An Anthology of Select Funeral Messages*. Lima, Ohio: CSS Publishing, 1989. Pgs. 25-26.

By focusing primarily on “this worldly” human situations, it began to undo the lingering view that the purpose of the Christian life here was to live solely under the power of the world to come.<sup>25</sup>

This movement encouraged the pastor to become more and more involved in the everyday struggles of his or her congregants, being present not only to their spiritual needs, but also to their physical and psychological needs. In fact, it was during this time that many denominations began requiring Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) for ordination. This mandate, in and of itself, shows how important the “worldly” struggles and conflicts became to the role of the pastor.

In this sense, not only was denying death and grief not possible, it was not “healthy.” In fact, the conversation was no longer just about death, but also dying. The shepherding image, as the primary pastoral role, became prominent during this time, which begged the question: How can the Pastor best shepherd the congregation through a time of dying and death?

Notice, this question takes the emphasis away from the deceased and places it on those left behind. As this relates to the funeral, then, pastors began catering the funeral and, specifically, the homily, to those still living and mourning, rather than to the deceased and the future dead. We see this throughout funeral preaching during this period. “The essential promise of the gospel is that we are never separated from the love of God...Much of the gospel hope is realistic and this-worldly. It has to do with the

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<sup>25</sup> Bregman, 153.

ability to live joyfully in this world despite irretrievable loss.”<sup>26</sup> Or in the closing section of a funeral that used the Romans 8 passage as its text, “But what was true for C\_\_ is also true for us, nothing can separate us from the love of God... We have experienced God’s love in this place today as it has enveloped us and flowed through us, and it will accompany us as we leave to begin our daily routines.”<sup>27</sup>

This approach to the funeral sermon embraced the notion that the funeral is for the living, not the dead. However, “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.”<sup>28</sup> What, then, is that role?

In *The Funeral: A Pastor’s Guide*, John Mansell answers this question when he writes, “the pastor should ask himself, ‘Am I doing right by the departed?’ He goes on, “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 authentically convey Christian caring and respect for the bereaved.”<sup>29</sup>

The purpose of the funeral, then, becomes not only a time to give care to the bereaved, but also to “pay respects” to the deceased. The idea is that mourners “owe it to the dead” to honor the deceased well, which is best expressed through the funeral sermon.

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<sup>26</sup> Mitchell, Kenneth R., and Herbert Anderson. *All Our Loses, All Our Grievs*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983. Pg. 159.

<sup>27</sup> *We Are the Lord’s*, 44.

<sup>28</sup> Bregman, 163.

<sup>29</sup> Mansell, John S. *The Funeral: A Pastor’s Guide*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1998. Pg. 37.

The preacher becomes the primary representative of the community in honoring the dead. Therefore, during this time, the funeral sermons that are most effective are those that give care to the grieving community, while also celebrating and honoring the life of the deceased.

*The United Methodist Book of Worship*, written in the early 1990's, reflects this in its funeral liturgy,

Friends, we have gathered in this time and place to worship God and to celebrate the life of (the deceased). As we gather, we trust in the peaceful presence of Christ who walks with us in our grief and helps us in our time of need. Although we come here in sorrow, we also come giving thanks for the life and memories of (the deceased).<sup>30</sup>

This greeting and purpose conveys that the funeral is to worship God, to celebrate a life, and to care for the bereaved. The implication is that what is to follow, including the funeral sermon, will do all of these things.

However, it seems reasonable to ask, can the pastor do all of these things well? Even the most effective ministers, who tend to their flocks and know their people on a personal level, cannot always “celebrate a life” to its fullest, not knowing the deceased as intimately as family and friends. Such “personal words” often not only honor the deceased, but simultaneously bring great comfort to those in mourning. These questions and challenges open the door for the funeral preaching experienced in most mainline congregations today—the eulogy or biography sermon.

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<sup>30</sup>Hickman, Hoyt L. *The United Methodist Book of Worship*. (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1992). Pg. 142.

## Eulogy and Biography

Whenever I meet with a family to plan a funeral service today, one of the first questions I ask is, “Will anyone else be speaking?” Almost without exception, the answer is “Yes.” I do not take offense at this. In fact, I welcome it, knowing that part of grieving the loss of a loved one is remembering their life through words that are more personal. More and more, I am asked not to “preach a sermon” because a fellow friend or family member will be “taking care of that.” These “sermons” almost always turn out to be all about the person and nothing about God.

Anecdotally, this represents the nature of funerals and funeral preaching today. Funeral services have become much more intimate, personal, and, in many cases, secular. Obviously, this has had an impact on the funeral homily. In fact, John Allyn Melloh’s 1993 article, “Homily or Eulogy? The Dilemma of Funeral Preaching” captures well the challenge for every funeral preacher today.<sup>31</sup> He asks, “Is the funeral sermon completely biographical (eulogy) or is it proclamation of God’s Word (homily)?”

When preaching to the “future dead” became preaching to “those who mourn,” an unexpected change took place. The focus of the sermon became less about God and more about the deceased. Preachers began asking questions of family and friends in funeral preparation sessions like, “Tell me about the deceased. What were they like? What did they do for a living? What was their character?” This made sense. During the rise of pastoral counseling, clergy learned that talking about the deceased was therapeutic for the

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<sup>31</sup> Melloh, John Allyn, “Homily or Eulogy? The Dilemma of Funeral Preaching,” *Worship*, 67/6 (Nov. 1993).

bereaved. However, in asking these questions, the expectation is that now some of the answers will be used in the funeral homily.

Bregman offers a couple of examples from biographical sermons preached over the last several decades,

You all knew\_\_\_\_. He contracted diabetes very early in his life. Because of that disease, he lost his eyesight at a young age. Perhaps he despaired, but not for long. He went to a school for sightless people and learned to get along without his eyes. You all knew\_\_\_\_. He was the man who, little by little, lost bits and pieces of his legs to diabetes until he completely lost both legs. He may have despaired, but not for long. He learned to get along without them. You knew\_\_\_\_. He was a man who did not always live in a way that everyone agreed with him. He was no saint; you know that.<sup>32</sup>

For Beth, he was a husband. You shared your love over 44 years. There are many memories, which you will hold. You will remember meeting at the Roller Skating Rink while he was stationed here in the army.<sup>33</sup>

I suspect that in both the case of the diabetic and Beth, the specifics shared in these sermons were direct answers to questions posed by the minister, while meeting with loved ones in charge of arrangements. It's obvious the family of the diabetic acknowledges his problematic public reputation, while also attempting to give reason for, and even redeem, his behavior, emphasizing his deteriorating physical condition. Likewise, Beth must have shared the story of where she met her husband on more than one occasion.

Such personal details would have been appalling to an earlier generation of preachers, especially the likes of Blackwood. Biographical details were to be used

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<sup>32</sup> Richmond, Kent D. *A Time to Die: A Handbook for Funeral Sermons*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1990. Pg. 68.

<sup>33</sup> *We Are the Lord's: An Anthology of Select Funeral Messages*. Lima, Ohio: CSS Publishing, 1989. Pg. 53.

sparingly, when the preferred form of sermon was “doctrinal.” Biographies draw attention to the deceased and the presiding minister, rather than to God and the after-life.

This is a fair critique, given where the “triumph of the biographical” is taking the funeral and funeral preaching today. For instance, I receive many requests to include in the service, or even in the homily, a popular secular song that means something to the deceased. While living in Kentucky, the most common requests were “My Old Kentucky Home” and “On, On, U of K.” Similarly, the family will often want to include secular symbols and readings in the worship space or liturgy.

The question becomes, “Where do we draw the line?” In a service of worshipping God, does “My Old Kentucky Home” belong? Most of my congregants at the time would say, “Yes! Kentucky is, after all, God’s country!” If the aim of the funeral is only to give care to the bereaved and to “do right by” the deceased, then I would agree with those congregants. However, those should not be the only two criteria for the funeral.

In fact, there is an emerging protest against the biographical sermon, but even more, against the criteria clergy are using for determining the “appropriateness” of content in a funeral sermon. While one such protest lies outside Mainline Protestantism, it is nevertheless relevant.

From 2002–2003 Catholic Archbishop John Myers of Newark made a strong attempt to curtail the practice of turning the Roman Catholic funeral into a “celebration of life” for the individual dead. In the most heavy-handed manner imaginable, Myers laid

down the rules, writing, “the sole focus of a Catholic funeral is to be ‘the saving mystery of Jesus’ death and resurrection.”<sup>34</sup>

Unlike most Protestants, the Archbishop had the power to enforce such a rule. Therefore, the “triumph of the biographical” will continue to present challenges for the funeral sermon today. Bregman concludes,

The triumph of the biographical makes it harder to see that preaching to mourners is not just “celebrating a life” in a vacuum. There is a community, there is a church as the body of Christ—whether or not one wishes to use the language of “communion of saints.” There is the doctrinal heritage of Christian faith and teaching, even when different eras have radically different understandings of this. And there is, somewhere in the midst of all this, the sound of the trumpet in darkness, the presence of God at and after the time of death.<sup>35</sup>

The next chapter constructs a theology for death, dying and the funeral that takes Bregman’s conclusion to heart, informing a new homiletical approach to the funeral homily.

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<sup>34</sup> Myers, John J., the Most Reverend. “Reports on Policies for Funeral Liturgies Need Clarification.” Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Newark. February 5, 2003.

<sup>35</sup> Bregman, 179.

### **Chapter 3:**

#### **Toward a Theology of Life**

I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

—John 10:10

Last year both my grandparents died. They lived long, full lives. In fact, they were so healthy even into their final days that we were able to discuss their end of life wishes before they died. My grandparents left many of the details to their children, my mother and uncle, but there was one detail upon which they both insisted: cremation. Specifically, I can remember my grandmother saying something like, “My body is just a shell. Don’t waste a bunch of money preserving it or honoring it. I won’t know the difference anyway. Besides, I pray my soul will be in heaven.”

I can remember encouraging my mother and uncle to honor my grandparents wishes after their deaths. Yet, if I am honest, it felt like there was something missing at both of their funerals. It was their bodies. The church’s theology around death, dying, and the funeral today is like my grandmother’s, with a dualistic understanding of “body” and “soul.”

Long expresses this commonly held religious perspective well. He writes,

... “the real me” is an immortal soul and souls and bodies are two separate things—that is to say, “the real me” and the body that hauls “the real me” around have only a temporary and stormy relationship. When death occurs, the pure soul is released at last from the always limited, occasionally troublesome and decay-prone body, leaving behind...well, “just a shell.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Long, 23.

We still hear this theology hanging around in the legacy of doctrinal funeral preaching, reminding the future dead that the goal for the Christian is for his or her soul to be liberated from the flesh to join the Father in God's eternal home. However, this is not Christian theology; it's Platonism. Speaking in the voice of Socrates in *Phaedo*, Plato writes:

In this present life, I reckon that we make the nearest approach to knowledge when we have the least possible intercourse or communion with the body, and are not surfeited with the bodily nature, but keep ourselves pure until the hour when God himself is pleased to release us. And thus having got rid of the foolishness of the body we shall be pure and hold converse with the pure, and know of ourselves the clear light everywhere, which is no other than the light of truth.<sup>2</sup>

In his book, *Death and Western Thought*, Jacques Choron outlines the arguments Plato makes for this dualism throughout *Phaedo*:

- (a) The soul existed before birth. This pre-existence of the soul is based on the contention that knowledge is recollection.
- (b) There are eternal and immutable "forms," or "ideas," and since the soul is capable of apprehending them, it must be itself eternal and divine ("nothing mortal knows what is immortal").
- (c) The soul rules the body, and therein resembles the immortal gods.
- (d) The soul is simple; it is uncompounded, and therefore incapable of dissolution (what is simple cannot change, begin or end—the essence of things is simple, indivisible, unseen and eternal).
- (e) The soul, whose essence is life and thus the very opposite of death, cannot be conceived of as dying, any more than fire can be conceived of as becoming cold.<sup>3</sup>

While Choron writes that "Plato himself was aware of the inadequacy of his arguments about the immortality of the soul,"<sup>4</sup> this dualism continues right through most

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<sup>2</sup> Jowett, Benjamin. Trans. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., *The Dialogues of Plato translated in English with Analyses and Introductions, in Five Volumes*. (London: Oxford University Press, 1892). Pg. 36

<sup>3</sup> Choron, Jacques. *Death and Western Thought*. (New York: Collier Books, 1963). Pg. 48.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 49.

of Western thought. We find it elsewhere, in Descartes, for instance. His well-known “I think, therefore I am” has been central to philosophical thinking in the West. Our essence, then, is not what we *do*, but rather what we *think*. This philosophy places less value on what we do with our bodies and more on how we think about them.

It is no wonder the Church has long struggled with what to do with our bodies—not just the deceased, but our living bodies as well. Such a dualistic understanding of mind and body can make for confusion around what we *experience* with our bodies versus what we *think* about our bodies. What feels good to our bodies may be thought of as “morally bad.” What we enjoy about our bodies may be thought of as that which is not to be enjoyed. We see the Church continue to struggle to make sense of how to interpret and understand our bodies even today.

In a recent *Christian Century* article, Brian Bantum suggests that the conflicts Christianity is facing even today with regard to race, gender, and sexual orientation point to our ongoing struggle to theologically understand our bodies. Bantum writes,

At the heart of our divide lies a reformation deeper than questions about how we interpret a particular book. It’s about who or what can interpret our bodies. Bridging the language gap in our conversations with one another is not about finding a common reading of the Bible, because the Bible isn’t the text that’s being read, not really. Why is the divorced man still a pastor while the ordained woman waits for a call? Why is the abuser not shunned and shamed but LGBTQ people are? These questions are about bodies—what they’re for, what they mean, and who gets to decide.<sup>5</sup>

This is a common thread throughout the history of the Church. The age of silence and denial emerged, in part, for a lack of clergy being able to articulate theological meaning for our bodies, especially when those bodies stopped functioning unexpectedly,

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<sup>5</sup> Brian Bantum. “Bodies in the Vernacular,” *The Christian Century*. (March 29, 2017).

in tragic circumstances. Doctrinal preaching's answer of, "It doesn't matter, the soul is at home with God," did not speak to those mourning the loss of an embodied loved one who was now suddenly dead.

However, that did not stop clergy from persisting with Platonic rationale. In fact, one of the most widely reported religious challenges to the growing funeral "empire" came from a committee of ministers in Middletown, New York. The Revered Hugh Stevenson Tigner described the events surrounding the publication of the committee's final report on what constitutes a "decent Christian burial" in an October 13, 1937 article in *The Christian Century*. What was of primary concern to the committee was the funeral business' focus on worshipping the body, rather than a soul, which was clearly a pagan ritual. Such practices conjured up fears of "heathenism, idolatry, and barbarism."<sup>6</sup>

It should be no surprise, then, that people do not find it important to have the body present. More and more are coming to this conclusion with the significant increase in cremations and memorial services today. In *Christian Century* recently, it was reported that in 2016, just over half of all Americans chose cremation over traditional burial (50.2 to 43.5 percent). The year 2015 was the first in which more people chose cremation (48.5) than burial (45.4).<sup>7</sup> If the body is just a shell that is going to decay in the earth, what importance does it really serve at the funeral rite?

Christians, though, are not Platonists in our understanding of what makes human beings. Rather, our understanding of what it is to be human comes from our stories of

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<sup>6</sup> Hugh Stevenson Tigner, "A Foray Into Funeral Customs," *The Christian Century*, 54, 41 (October 13, 1937):1263.

<sup>7</sup> "Century Marks." *The Christian Century*. (September 13, 2017). As reported on CNN, August 9, 2017. Pg. 9.

creation, in Genesis, where God creates humanity from the dust of the earth, breathing life into matter to make it human. In other words, both are important, the dust and the breath, the body and the spirit, in making possible human life. Long writes,

Christians, to sum up, do not believe that human beings are only bodies, nor do they believe that they are souls who, for the time being, have bodies; Christians affirm, rather, that human beings are embodied. What others call “the soul” and “the body,” Christians call the “breath of God” and “dust”; and when it comes to living human beings, they form an inseparable unity.<sup>8</sup>

In fact, there was a time that dualism did not reign among Christian practices surrounding death and burial, reflecting a more embodied theology. The early Christians learned from their Jewish heritage the importance of the body, especially the care for it at a time of death. Thus, unlike their neo-platonic, pagan neighbors who idealized and even romanticized the body, nevertheless understanding the body and soul to be separate, early Christians simply cared for the body, both the living and the dead.

Margaret Miles writes, “The historical fact that Christ as God entered the world of nature, bodies and objects, meant to the Christians of the first three centuries that a cosmic seismic shift had occurred in the condition of being human.”<sup>9</sup> In other words, if God chose to take on bodily form, then the body must matter. What we do with our bodies, both dead and alive, must matter to God.

This led to early Christians being perceived as quite strange by the rest of Roman culture. They gathered before dawn as a body for worship, they sang hymns together as a

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<sup>8</sup> Long, 24.

<sup>9</sup> Margaret R. Miles, *Bodies in Society: Essays on Christianity in Contemporary Culture* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2008), 13.

body, and they shared a common meal, which they described as “body and blood,” even giving them the label of “cannibals” by some.<sup>10</sup>

However, even more bizarre than eating body and blood, according to the Romans, was the Christian practice of burying the dead—not just their own dead, but the poor as well. Nobody wanted the responsibility of burying the dead—the dirty work of preparing and handling the body, especially bodies unfamiliar and “unclean.” Christians, though, not only volunteered to bury the dead, Miles says, they even “insisted on gathering the bones of those who had been executed for refusal to renounce the Christian sect. They put these bones in a place of honor and described them as capable of possessing the sanctity of the living holy person.”<sup>11</sup>

The early Christians understood what the Church today must reclaim: being human is an integration of body and spirit. Both are essential and important as part of God’s creation. Thus, what we do with our bodies while we live is just as important as what happens to them when we die. If the body matters, then, will there be a physical resurrection? If so, when? If not, why are our dead bodies important?

#### A Christian Theology of Embodiment and Eternal Life

In the chapel of Augustana College in Rock Island, Illinois, the stained-glass window high above the altar depicts a six-toed Jesus ascending into heaven. Why an early 20th-century artist elected to leave posterity with a polydactyl Jesus is anyone’s guess. Yet, in an article from *Christian Century*, Peter Marty suggests that perhaps “the

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Miles, 14.

artist wanted to show that physical abnormality is perfectly acceptable or even lovely in the eyes of God. In a world where so many judgments are cast upon the appearance of others, this purpose is not inconceivable.”<sup>12</sup>

Such portrayals of Christ’s resurrection undoubtedly raise questions about our own resurrection, at a time of death. Are we physically or spiritually resurrected? Does it matter? For this artist, depicting physical abnormality as something to be recognized and even celebrated in the resurrection was important.

Regardless of what one believes about physical resurrection, if God creates us embodied beings, then bodies may very well be important not only on earth, but also in heaven. However, this can be a challenging concept to grasp, let alone argue, which is the reason the Church has historically had a difficult time articulating a concise, cohesive theology about what happens to our bodies at a time of resurrection.

While Plato has had a significant impact on a theology of the resurrection of the dead, so has Paul. Most funeral liturgies talk about the deceased going to be with God immediately, while the body rests in the casket in front of us. This fundamentally rests on the Platonic notion that our souls and bodies are separate.

Paul, on the other hand, had two answers. In Thessalonians, he says the dead will be in a rest-like state until the last day when all of the dead in Christ will be raised together to the sound of the trumpet: “For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel’s call and with the sound of God’s trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive...will be caught up in the clouds”

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<sup>12</sup> Marty, Peter. “Rock Island’s Twelve Toed Jesus.” *The Christian Century*. (November 30, 2017).

(1 Thessalonians 4:16-17). However, Paul also tells the Philippians that he could not make up his mind which was better, to “depart and be with Christ, or to do more ministry with them” (Philippians 1:23).

The verse to which most point when arguing an immediate, spiritual resurrection, at the time of death, is Luke 23:43. Jesus looks to the thief hanging on the cross next to him and says, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.” N.T. Wright argues, though, that in a Jewish context, “paradise” did not mean “heaven.” Rather paradise means “the blissful garden, the parkland of rest and tranquility, where the dead are refreshed as they await the dawn of the new day.”<sup>13</sup>

Jehovah’s Witnesses argue that the comma in Jesus’ statement belongs after “today,” instead of before. Subsequently, Jesus’s words should read, “Truly I tell you today, you will be with me in paradise.” In other words, Jesus isn’t talking about when he will see the thief in paradise, rather when Jesus is making the statement.<sup>14</sup>

One can see why it is difficult to articulate a clear, rational theology of the resurrection. Perhaps the most significant reason, however, is its irrationality. The pinnacle of our faith rests on a mystery, which in some respects cannot be explained. One approach theologians have taken in addressing the challenge of articulating a theology of embodied resurrection has been to differentiate between historical time (the way we perceive time) and eternal time (the way God perceives time).

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<sup>13</sup> Wright, N.T. *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church*. New York: HarperOne, 2008. Pg. 130.

<sup>14</sup> Paroschi, Wilson. “The Significance of a Comma: An Analysis of Luke 23:43.” *Ministry Magazine*. June 2013.

When we talk about death and resurrection, we are talking about eternal life, after all. This is what every funeral liturgy speaks of, to some degree, including the most-used scripture passage for funeral services, John 14. If what we experience in death is “eternal,” then we must theologially define time.

Long suggests that if we are talking about eternal life, then we cannot think in terms of

the metrics of linear, historical clock time, with its fixed notions of before and after, now and then. But when we speak in a Christian sense about death and resurrection, we are working not in clock time alone, but in at least two time frames: ordinary historical time and eschatological time (or perhaps more accurately, the eternal that transcends time).<sup>15</sup>

The ancient Greeks distinguished between these two kinds of time with the words “Chronos” and “Kairos.” In his article, “Time, Times, and the ‘Right Time’: ‘Chronos’ and ‘Kairos,’” John Smith describes the difference. He writes,

*Chronos* expresses the fundamental conception of time as measure, the *quantity* of duration, the length of periodicity, the age of an object or artifact, and the rate of acceleration as applied to the movements of identifiable bodies, whether on the surface of the earth or in the firmament beyond. The questions relevant to this conception of time are: “How fast?”, “How frequent?”, “How old?”, and the answers to these questions can be given, in principle at least, in cardinal numbers or in terms of limits that approach these numbers.<sup>16</sup>

Smith continues,

The other term, *Kairos*, points to a qualitative character of time, to the special position an event or action occupies in a series, to a season when something appropriately happens that cannot happen at ‘any’ time, but only at ‘that time,’ to a time that marks an opportunity which may not recur. The question especially relevant to *Kairos* time is ‘when?’, ‘At what time?’... *Kairos*, or ‘the right time’ is, therefore, peculiarly relevant to historical action and to historical enquiry because it points to the significance and purpose of events and to the idea of

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<sup>15</sup> Long, 51.

<sup>16</sup> Smith, John. “Time, Times, and the ‘Right Time’: ‘Chronos’ and ‘Kairos.’” *The Monist*. January 1, 1969, Vol.53(1), pg. 1.

constellations of events yielding results which would not have been possible at other times and under other circumstances.<sup>17</sup>

In the New Testament, Kairos means “the time that God acts.” For example, Mark 1:15 reads, “the *kairos* is fulfilled and the Kingdom of God is at hand.” The word, kairos, appears in the New Testament 86 times while chronos only appears 54 times. However, Kairos is also used in the Old Testament. In fact, Kairos is the word used in the Ecclesiastes reading, which is read so frequently in the context of a funeral and often used in funeral preaching, “To everything there is a season and a *Kairos* to every purpose under heaven. A *kairos* to be born and a *kairos* to die.”<sup>18</sup>

One might suggest that “chronos” is *our* time while “kairos” is *God’s* time. Likewise, one might refer to “chronos” as scientific time and kairos as poetic time. In fact, it’s in his poem, *Auguries of Innocence*, that William Blake seems to capture best the difference between the two:

To see a World in a Grain of Sand  
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower  
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand  
And Eternity in an hour<sup>19</sup>

Jurgen Moltmann has most recently developed this poetic notion of time as it relates to an embodied theology of resurrection. He suggests that the raising of individuals at their hour of death, which in our world of clocks and calendars we experience one by one in linear, chronological fashion, and the general raising of all the

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ecclesiastes 3:1

<sup>19</sup> William Blake. “Auguries of Innocence.” *Poets of the English Language* (Viking Press, 1950).

dead in Christ on the Day of the Lord, should be thought of not in temporal sequence, one happening before and after the other, but as simultaneous events:

But how ought we imagine a “resurrection at death”? The starting point must again be eschatology: the “Last Day” is not just the chronologically last day on the calendar. It is eschatologically the Day of the Lord, and therefore the Day of Days. If this is the day when the dead are raised, then it appears to all the dead simultaneously, “in a moment”—that is diachronically—irrespective of when in time they died. If this is correct, then we must be able to say the converse too: that the hour of every individual death in this present time leads directly into that eternal “Day of the Lord.”<sup>20</sup>

While this may not solve all of our questions around a theology of the resurrection, it does open up the door for us to see life and death in broader, more transcendent ways; not just as events that happen in chronological time, when we take our first breath and when our heart stops beating, but rather as states of existence, along a continuum in God’s eternal time. It’s no wonder we turn to the gospel of John most often for words of comfort at a time of death. After all, it’s John’s gospel that reframes the notions of life and death.

In his book, *The Living God and the Fullness of Life*, Moltmann reminds us of the “life” that is central to Christian faith and best articulated in the gospel of John. From the outset, John’s Gospel redefines life, the life of Jesus, by not emphasizing chronology, like the synoptics with Jesus’ birth, but rather as something that comes into existence before chronological time, “in the beginning.”

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. (John 1:1-5).

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<sup>20</sup> Moltmann, Jurgen. *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996. Pg. 103.

All things come into being, including chronological time, all of creation, and humanity, through this life, which is the light of the world. That is the way John describes the divine mystery of Jesus Christ. “In him was life, and the life was the light of all people.” (1:4).<sup>21</sup>

Later, in John 14, this life is described as “eternal life,” which common Christian teaching has interpreted as heaven. This makes sense given the description of our heavenly home as a “mansion” or a “room” in God’s house (14:2). However, Moltmann suggests that there is more to John’s description of eternal life than the after-life. If the life *is* Jesus, which is present even before creation, and all things come into being through this life (Jesus), then the eternal life John describes “in the beginning,” continues in the here and now, and extends into the great beyond. Moltmann describes it like this:

Eternal life is not endless life but life that is filled with God, life in abundance (John 10:10). Eternity is a divine qualification of human life, not its endless prolongation. To experience a moment of the divine eternity is more than to have survived many years. That is what the gospel of John means by the presence of eternal life in faith: “Whoever believes has eternal life” (6:47); “Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live” (11:25).

The life John describes (eternal life), and that God gives humanity through the incarnation, is not just about what happens after we die. Rather, it is about the life Jesus lives—the compassionate, healing, forgiving, and reconciling love he displays while alive on earth. This is the “life” Jesus offers humanity “in abundance.” This is the life we bear, as those created in the image of God. This is the life we accept, as people of faith, and attempt to live in the here and now.

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<sup>21</sup> Moltmann, Jurgen. *The Living God and the Fullness of Life*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015. Pg. 74.

While doctrinal preaching interpreted the eternal life John describes as only being that which happens to us after death, a more accurate interpretation of eternal life also places importance on the here and now. In other words, we are living eternal life every day because God is eternal and is in us. The eternal life God offers shows through our lives in the way we live at school, at work, at home and at church. Moltmann writes,

It is generally said that life here on earth is nothing but finite and mortal life. To say this is to allow human life to be dominated by death. But that is a reduced life. In fellowship with the living God, this mortal life and finite life, here and now, is a life interpenetrated by God and hence it immediately also becomes a life that is divine and eternal... If we cease to contemplate the temporal end of human life, but look instead at its eternal beginning, then human life is surrounded and accepted by the divine, and the finite is part of infinity. Eternal life is here and now. This present life, this joyful and painful, loved and suffered, successful and unsuccessful life is eternal life... We do not live a merely earthly life, and not only a human life, but simultaneously also live the life that is divine, eternal, and infinite.<sup>22</sup>

If this is true, then the goal of the Christian is not simply to achieve heaven someday or for our souls to be liberated from our bodies, as doctrinal preaching would suggest. Instead, what we do with our bodies *today* becomes paramount. How we live can reveal the light and life of the world. Our bodies, on earth and in heaven, have the potential of revealing “eternal life.”

I’m not suggesting that cremation discontinues life eternal. There will be times when cremation is the best choice for a family, or a body cannot be present because it’s been lost, destroyed, or donated to science. How exactly “this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality” is ultimately a mystery.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 73-74.

<sup>23</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:53

The point is, the body is not just a shell, and always matters, no matter what we choose to do with it for a funeral service. In fact, we would do well to trust our deepest human impulses on this. When someone goes missing, we employ every resource to find them. When a plane goes down, we search high and low for the remains. When someone dies in war, we bring the body home for burial.

In fact, I recently did a funeral service for a man who died 73 years earlier. He was a soldier during World War II, deployed to the small island of Betio in the Tarawa Atoll of the Gilbert Islands, where he fought four days in the battle of the Tarawa and died of a gunshot wound.

In the immediate aftermath of the fighting on Tarawa, U.S. service members who died in the battle were buried in a number of battlefield cemeteries on the island. In 1946 and 1947, the 604th Quartermaster Graves Registration Company conducted remains recovery operations on Betio Island, but this man's remains were not recovered. On Feb. 28, 1949, a military review board declared his remains non-recoverable. A memorial service was conducted on his behalf at that time.

In June 2015, a nongovernmental organization, History Flight, Inc., discovered a burial site on Betio Island and recovered the remains of what they believed were 35 U.S. service members who fought during the battle in November 1943. The remains were turned over to the government in July 2015. I conducted his funeral that same month.

What was most interesting about doing his funeral was not how long he had been dead, but the impact his body, returning home, had on the community. As we drove down Main Street in the funeral procession, people lined the street to pay respect to this man

none of them actually knew. When we arrived at the cemetery, hundreds of people gathered to honor and remember this person.

During the funeral homily I said,

While our faith teaches us that upon our death, no matter the circumstances, we immediately continue our journey to be with God in the after-life, there is still something important about the physical, about bodies, about place and location. We take great comfort in knowing that our loved one is close once again—that he has a place near those who knew him best and in the midst of the community who loved him most. As people of faith, we always give thanks for the promise we find in scripture that nothing can separate us from the love of God. But today, we also give thanks that thousands of miles and thousands of questions no longer separate his body from his family and his home.

It wasn't just a dead body that impacted our community that day, bringing so many people together in the spirit of love and unity. It was the eternal life shown through even his remains that was, is, and forever will be.

## Chapter 4:

### The Funeral Homily as Embodiment

Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni!”

—John 20:16

Recently I was doing a workshop for a group of ordinands on the practical aspects of planning and executing a funeral service. It came time to discuss the preparation of the homily when one of the candidates stopped me and asked, “Before you go any further, I’ve always wondered...is anyone really listening?”

It’s a legitimate question. In a world in which the Word offered by the Church has become devalued and, as we have explored throughout this project, the funeral itself has devolved, there are times I have wondered the same. Yet it’s been in the context of funeral services, more so than any other Christian ritual today, I have found people are listening.

Several years ago, in a very small town, two young children were tragically killed in a house fire. The ripples of grief, no doubt, touched an entire community. The preacher acknowledged the community’s grief in his opening to the sermon:

In this place today, there are many eyes wet with tears, and many hearts, yes, many hearts heavy with sadness. Nor are we alone in the grief that brings us here today. Since Thursday, many other people have felt the hurt of what has happened. Many other eyes have been wet with tears. Many other hearts have been heavy with sadness. Firefighters and police officers and medical personnel and funeral home staff... I’m not here to tell you that today you must dry your eyes. I’m not here to tell you that today the weight will be lifted from your heart. I’m not here to tell you not to cry. For the tears in our eyes at a time like this are

sacred. They are holy. They bear witness to your love for Justin, for Ronald, for members of their family.<sup>1</sup>

I was not present for the funeral. However, I am certain everyone was listening.

Obviously, such tragedy does not always surround a funeral service. However, I agree with Charles Hoffacker who says, “The crowd who assembles for a funeral are more often ready to listen to the preacher than is the usual Sunday congregation, because what brings people together at the funeral is undeniably a matter of life and death.”<sup>2</sup> It is during times of life and death that people are listening. After all, the human condition seeks two specific things at such times: meaning and belonging.

### Meaning

In *Preaching to the Hungers of the Heart*, James Wallace says the homilist is always addressing “a people hungry, sometimes desperately so, for meaning in their lives.”<sup>3</sup> Specifically, in the context of a funeral service, there are all kinds of meaning-making questions swirling among those gathered: Why did my loved one die? What purpose did her life serve? How am I going to carry on? What if I die? What has God to do with all of this?

This makes for a ministry opportunity unlike most. Funeral preaching can simultaneously address all of these questions, becoming Christ’s presence in different ways, to the various needs present among those gathered. This is true of all preaching to

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<sup>1</sup> Hoffacker, Charles. *A Matter of Life and Death: Preaching at Funerals*. Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 2002. Pgs. 48-49.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>3</sup> Wallace, James. *Preaching to the Hungers of the Heart*. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1983. Pg. ix.

some degree. The spoken word becomes God's Word, in and through the Holy Spirit, utilizing scripture as its primary source for inspiration.

Fred Craddock calls this "revelation." He writes, "Preaching is making present and appropriate to the hearers, the revelation of God."<sup>4</sup> Craddock argues that one of the ways this proceeds is from silence. He writes,

We all speak freely and favorably of the Word of God, but we have also experienced, even if we do not speak of it, the silence of God. The silence of God is not solely a reference to our not hearing an answer to prayer or not receiving a word in response to an anguished, "Why?" God's silence is integral to God's revelation. God does not talk all the time.<sup>5</sup>

Craddock goes on to describe preaching as "God breaking the silence with the Word—what an appropriate description not only of revelation but a sermon, a word tossed against the clear glass of silence behind which people sit waiting and asking, 'Is there any Word from the Lord?'"<sup>6</sup>

Congregants crave, in a funeral service, for the silence of confusion and uncertainty to be broken by a Word that makes meaning of their loss and brings resurrection hope into their lives. Because of the intimacy of a funeral service, God's Word can be communicated in a deeply personal way, using the life of the deceased and scripture in tandem to speak this Word in the face of silence.

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<sup>4</sup> Craddock, *Preaching*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1985. Pg. 51.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 53.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 54.

## Belonging

Wallace contends that another hunger of the heart, especially in the face of death, is “our deep desire for connectedness, community, and companionship.”<sup>7</sup> Not only do we feel great separation from our loved one at a time of death, but we also can feel a great distance from God and even a divide from our family, friends, and faith community. It’s not uncommon for a grieving family to take many weeks to return to church after a death. Some never return at all.

This is especially true in a culture where our connections are already fragile at best. Robert Wuthnow uses the metaphor “loose connections” as a title for his book on the breakdown of community in our nation.<sup>8</sup> In his article, “Religion and the Shape of National Culture,” Robert Bellah provides evidence for these loose connections:

In a recent study, 75 percent of the public thought this a serious national problem. The term “loose connections” is primarily applied to those tenuous bonds that hold together groups and organizations, but it can also extend to marriage, the family, friendship, and other forms of social contact...today children live in fear of divorce...parents share in that...grandparents fear the future and if they will be abandoned...suicide is the second highest cause of death among teens...the fastest growing category of households is one-member households...loneliness has not lessened. The craving for community continues.<sup>9</sup>

The funeral homily has the potential to strengthen bonds of family, friends, and community. It can provide a sense of belonging to those who feel separated. It even has the power to help heal broken ties that were caused by death.

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<sup>7</sup> Wallace, 109.

<sup>8</sup> Wuthnow, Robert. *Loose Connections: Joining Together in America's Fragmented Communities*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998.

<sup>9</sup> Bellah, Robert N. “Religion and the Shape of National Culture,” *America*. (July 31, 1999). Pg. 13.

Specifically, by utilizing a person's life as the primary source for God's Word, we can make meaning of how God shone through a life on earth, while simultaneously being reminded of our connection to this life now through the communion of Saints. Meaning and belonging can both be accomplished by finding God embodied in the person remembered during the funeral service.

#### A New Homiletical Approach: For all the Saints

On All Saints' Day Sunday several years ago, I heard a Children's message in worship provide a beautiful definition of a saint. The minister took out a piece of stained glass and showed it to the children. She identified what it was and indicated that it had come from a church, of which she was a part, which was very important to her.

Next, she held the glass over a sheet of paper and asked the children, "When I hold this piece of glass can you see it having any impact on the paper?" The kids shook their heads. Then, she took a flash light out, turned it on, and directed the light through the stained glass onto the paper. She asked, "What about now?" The children nodded their heads in delight, as they saw the beautiful colors shine through onto the paper.

She concluded, "Today we honor the saints in worship. A saint is anyone through whom God's light shines and impacts the world. The saints have something to teach us. So, we must always listen."

For most Mainline Protestants, her children's message provides a good working definition for how we understand the saints: "anyone through whom God's light shines." According to the *Wycliffe Bible Encyclopedia*, "Christians in general are 'saints' in NT usage, and the term is common in reference to the inclusive membership of a local

church. Other references in the NT equate Christians in general with ‘saints.’ All these are identified as saints because they are in Christ Jesus.”<sup>10</sup>

Most mainline Protestants remember the saints on All Saints’ Sunday, which happens once a year on the Church Calendar. During worship that day, the minister reads the names of those members of the faith community who have died in the last year. While the Anglo-Catholic Tradition also observes All Saints’ Day, additionally they have feast days for saints.

Feast days for saints are celebrations throughout the liturgical calendar, which lift up and acknowledge one specific saint, on a particular day. While the title “saint” in the Anglo-Catholic Tradition is reserved for a canonized few, their understanding and definition of the saints is helpful in thinking about what happens in the funeral.

In her poem, “The Saints Come Marching In,” Annie Sexton writes, “The Saints come as human as a mouth, with a bag of God in their backs.”<sup>11</sup> Reflecting on this quote, Wallace writes,

When poet Anne Sexton spoke of the Saints as having “a bag of God in their backs,” I see them arriving on the human scene bearing the *weight* of God, which is another way of saying, “the glory of God.” These men and women of all ages and cultures continue to approach us as bearers of the divine glory. They are the enfleshed response over the centuries to the request some Greeks made long ago to the apostle Phillip: “We wish to see Jesus.”<sup>12</sup>

God’s light doesn’t just show through the saint in a spiritual or ethereal way.

Rather we can see Jesus enfleshed in and through the lives of the saints. Understanding

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<sup>10</sup> Pfeiffer, Charles; Vos, Howard Frederic; Rea, John (1975). “Saint”. Wycliffe Bible Encyclopedia. 2. Chicago: Moody Press.

<sup>11</sup> Sexton, Anne. *The Awful Rowing Toward God*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975. Pg. 79.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 110.

the saints in this way allows the preacher to use the deceased's embodied existence as a primary text for the preaching occasion.

The funeral homily, then, isn't just words on the page. Rather, when preaching, the words on the page come to life. The person we remember is resurrected before our very eyes, embodied, incarnate in the worship service, revealing something to us of the God we know in Jesus Christ and how that God is still at work in the world today. It's as if the words on the page get up and walk among us, much like the Word made flesh does in the Gospel of John.

If approached like a feast day for a saint, I imagine the funeral rite, especially the preaching moment, much like the moment Mary encounters Jesus in the garden after the resurrection. There is recognition. *Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turns and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!"* (John 20:16).

Not only does Mary recognize Jesus, the one who died, but she also becomes face to face with the divine, encountering something deeper, something more mysterious about a God who raises the dead. In fact, this post-resurrection recognition between Jesus and those he loves happens three more times in the gospel of John. Such encounters were significant, playing an important role in what his followers came to believe about life, death, and resurrection.

Let me be clear, however, that the Biblical text is not forgotten on such an occasion. Quite the opposite, in fact. Rather, the Biblical text can be understood, in light of the life of the Saint. Wallace reiterates this point:

We are called to preach the gospel and to enlist the saint of the day in this task...I try to remain faithful to the intent of preaching articulated in the FIYH [*Fulfilled In Your Hearing*], that is, to preach a homily that scripturally interprets the human existence of those present. That is our primary responsibility. Still, on the feasts of

the saints I feel some responsibility to present the saint, or to make the saint present, to the community so that there is an opportunity to know the saint better. I try to do this by working with and through the saint to have the biblical texts interpret the lives of the listeners.<sup>13</sup>

I had a colleague who died recently of a terrible kind of cancer. He was only 58 years old. Before his death, he asked me to preside at his funeral. The service was to take place in the church I currently serve, but that he had served for many years prior. He requested that his best friend who, ironically, serves his home congregation, give a eulogy at the service. He looked at me and said, “After he is done with the eulogy, I want you to preach the gospel!” I understood what he meant. He wanted balance.

Approaching funeral preaching like that of feast days for saints requires a kind of balance that is lacking in funeral homilies today. We either continue to hear doctrinal preaching, which tends to focus nothing on the person and only on God, or we hear the triumph of the biographical, which focuses only on the person and speaks nothing of God. Throughout the history of funeral preaching, we have seen a struggle for this balance, the pendulum swinging back and forth between the two, each over-reacting to the other.

Most recently, we have seen this in the Church’s reaction to current trends of over-personalization and customization of funerals and the funeral homily. In addition to the revitalization of funeral liturgies mentioned in the first chapter, both Catholics and Protestants are reminding clergy that the homily is not strictly a biography of the deceased.

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<sup>13</sup> Wallace, 120.

For example, the Catholics have recently reminded priests, “A brief homily based on the readings is always given after the gospel reading at the funeral liturgy; *but there is never to be a eulogy.*”<sup>14</sup> Likewise, in the Protestant world, the command of the Lutheran *Manual on Liturgy* captures well the overall sentiment of most Mainliners: “The sermon may include a recognition of the life of the deceased, *but its purpose is not eulogy but a proclamation of hope and comfort in Christ.*”<sup>15</sup>

Hoffacker recommends a more balanced approach, drawing upon the image often attributed to Karl Barth, that a preacher ought to preach with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. Hoffacker says, “A funeral preacher should be warned away from raising up the obituary without also raising the Bible, but it is equally unsatisfactory to lift up the Bible but not the obituary.”<sup>16</sup>

Therefore, the funeral homily is not “either or,” completely doctrinal or solely biographical. Instead, it is “both and,” speaking something of the deceased’s life while simultaneously revealing something about eternal life—the life God calls us to live through Jesus Christ.

If we are embodied beings, made in the image of God, as Genesis teaches, created with the same flesh incarnated by Jesus as the gospels instruct us, all our lives reflect something of the Divine. Some have asked, “While we have all been made in the image

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<sup>14</sup> *The Order of Christian Funerals* (New York: Catholic Book Publishing, 1989), 8, emphasis added.

<sup>15</sup> Pfatteicher, Phillip H. and Carlos R. Messerlu. *Manual on the Liturgy: Lutheran Book of Worship*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing Co., 1979. Pg. 360.

<sup>16</sup> Hoffacker, 14

of God, what do we make of those who did not live faithfully or were part of other religious traditions or never became Christians?”

In his book, *Sainthood*, Lindsey Jones argues that the term “Sainthood” should have broader definition for the very reason that all are created by God, regardless of religious affiliation. He writes,

Historians of religion have liberated the category of sainthood from its narrower Christian associations and have employed the term in a more general way to refer to the state of special holiness that many religions attribute to certain people. The Jewish hasid or tsaddiq, the Muslim waliy, the Zoroastrian fravashi, the Hindu rsi or guru, the Buddhist arahant or bodhisattva, the Daoist shengren, the Shinto kami and others have all been referred to as saints.<sup>17</sup>

Every life matters to God because every person is created by God. In other words, everybody can reflect something of the divine. Thus, what we do with our bodies in the here and now reveals something of the abundant life we learn about in scripture and are given by the God we know in Jesus Christ. Every life, no matter how it is lived or ends, then, can communicate something of God to the world.

### Crafting the Funeral Homily

In the forward to *Preaching the Funeral Homily*, Andrew Greely confesses perhaps the greatest challenge to crafting the funeral homily. He writes,

There is a dangerous asymmetry in the relationship between the minister and the mourners at a funeral liturgy. For the mourners the liturgy is usually a moment of grief and pain, a unique and critically important experience in their lives. For the minister the funeral liturgy can easily become just one more funeral that disrupts his morning and jumbles an already too busy daily schedule.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Jones, Lindsay, ed. (2005). “Sainthood”. Thomson Gale Encyclopedia of Religion (2nd ed.). Macmillan. p. 8033.

<sup>18</sup> Sonfeld, Rev. R.C. *Preaching the Funeral Homily: Proclaiming the Gospel of Heavenly Hope*. San Jose: Resource Publications, Inc, 2000. Pg. xiii.

Typically, the time between a death and a funeral is short-lived. Additional responsibilities and circumstances in a given week can make for a stressful time. Writing a funeral homily, in addition to the weekly sermon, is enough on its own, let alone the other possible circumstances surrounding a given week both in the church and the personal life of the minister.

It's tempting, under such circumstances, to simply preach a canned sermon from a file on John 14, not spending the time developing a thoughtful reflection on the ways in which God's light is revealed in the life of the deceased. However, the saint who has died will only get one funeral. There will only be one opportunity for the preacher to help the family make meaning of their loved one's life and regain a sense of belonging as ties are broken.

Being the pastor called upon to preside at such an occasion isn't just "part of the job." It is an incredible privilege and an overwhelming responsibility. As Sonefeld says, "Somebody must sweat, either the preacher in preparation, or the assembly during the delivery. Think of the assembly—that is the first rule."<sup>19</sup>

### Finding the Key

Effective funeral preaching, then, takes a kind of intentionality, on the part of clergy, more so than other times, to practice the spiritual discipline of listening. Being in tune with God, yourself, your congregation, and the bereaved are all important during the time period leading up to a death, at a time of death, and in the days following a death. After all, at any moment, the key to the funeral homily could be revealed to you.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 1.

Charles Hoffacker writes,

The preacher waits for what I will call the key to the funeral sermon. This key helps mourners recognize grace in the unique life of the deceased. It helps the preacher proclaim good news in the face of a particular death. The key may be an image, a phrase, a story, a personal characteristic, a vocation or avocation, or some other feature that is connected with, or at least can be connected with the life of the deceased.<sup>20</sup>

Some lives present several keys and the preacher is offered a variety of options through which to enter the funeral homily. Other lives may present one clear key, which opens the door to the preaching endeavor. Regardless, the preacher must discern what God needs the people to hear on this particular occasion and, utilizing the key, craft a sermon that reveals God's Word through the person's life being remembered.

Hoffacker uses one example of a woman who lived the course of her life in three different countries. The key to the sermon he preached at her funeral was this "succession of worlds" in which she lived and currently resides. He writes, "Faith reminds us that the same God is present with us in every world, and that in Christ, death is yet another transition, the final journey home."<sup>21</sup>

Over the course of the sermon, he describes the different places she lived, including Ireland, England, Canada and the United States. Then Hoffacker acknowledges she has now moved on to a new world. However, he wants to make clear that God is present everywhere she went—both on earth and, now, in the great beyond. The key is an aspect of her life, but it opens up the door for theological reflection. He writes,

"Yes, Nanna lived in a succession of worlds. Now she has been called forth to yet another one, one beyond our sight, but a world of unending beauty, the best world, the truest one she has ever seen. In each of these worlds where she once

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<sup>20</sup> Hoffacker, 18.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 108.

lived there waited for her the one God, the true God, the living God, who was the same in Ireland and England, in Ontario and Michigan.”<sup>22</sup>

### Challenging Cases

Not every saint dies a timely death. Not every saint is so “saintly.” Perhaps you are presiding at a funeral for someone who you know was involved in illegal activities. Maybe the person about which you are speaking is someone who lived a life of chronic-illness. It could be that you are called upon to preach at a funeral for someone who committed suicide or wrecked their life through addiction or was murdered. There are those cases in which finding God’s light present in a life can become problematic.

Then there are times it’s not the person so much as it is the circumstances. In fact, troubling circumstances are so common when it comes to death, most books of worship, including my denomination’s, *Chalice Worship*, suggest several different prayers upon such occasions: the death of a child, a suicide, a tragic death.<sup>23</sup> The same is true of most books on funeral preaching. Sonefeld’s book is outlined in this very matter, every homily titled by the specific circumstances of the death: death of a young wife and mother, death of a young husband and father, death of a motor vehicle accident victim.<sup>24</sup>

In a world in which the Church’s voice is increasingly becoming less important, the funeral sermon offers a unique opportunity. At no other point in time, will this same group of people gather for a time of worship. The group will be comprised of those faithful to the church, those who have left the church, those who are looking for the

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 110.

<sup>23</sup> Cartwright, Colbert S. and O. I. Crickett Harrison, eds. *Chalice Worship*. (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1997). Pgs. 69 – 76.

<sup>24</sup> Sonefeld, Table of Contents

church, and those who want nothing to do with the church. The preacher is given a moment to share the Gospel with a group of people assembled, brought together by the one remembered in their final rite. It is an overwhelming burden and humbling blessing that requires the very best of the preacher's efforts to offer God's words of hope to those in need.

L.M. Moore, a professional grave digger in Aiken, South Carolina, captures this best in his book, *Grave Digging: A Necessary Business*.<sup>25</sup> He concludes,

You have to remember that no matter how old the person is, no matter how rich a life he had, he left behind someone who is grieving and hurting. For that individual family, this is the only funeral you have today, even if you really have three or more before the day is over. You can't be in a hurry to get away. You have to be sensitive to the family.

God is present in the life they are grieving and the future that is before them. As

Craddock reminds us, the preacher's words make possible this "revelation."<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Craddock, 51.

## Conclusion

*For All the Saints: Funeral Preaching as Revelation of God Embodied* aims at offering a new funeral homiletic, not only as a corrective for current trends and practices in funeral preaching, but also a means of encouraging clergy and lay preachers alike to take seriously the privilege that is preaching, especially on the occasion of a funeral. There is no time of life more fragile for the human condition than when we find ourselves in the midst of grief and loss. Funeral preachers, then, are not just a means to an end. Rather, we are a means by which the gospel story can be re-told and, subsequently, re-inspire. It is a tremendous gift and responsibility to proclaim the good news that death is not the end and resurrection hope is always, ever-present.

Therefore, this work provides context for how we arrived at our current practices around funeral rituals, more specifically, funeral preaching. Chapters one and two reflect on the many ways in which the last 100 years have had an impact on our understandings of death, dying, and the funeral rite. However, what is most important in providing this history is revealing how clergy, even in our good intentions, allowed, or were complicit in, these changes. We must acknowledge the significance of our role if we are going to affect change in the future.

Additionally, most preaching remains doctrinal today because most Christian theology remains dualistic and primarily Platonic. By offering an alternative to common Christian understandings surrounding eschatology, in chapter 3, the project seeks to help lay people and clergy reconstruct a theological understanding of death and resurrection, which might inform not only funeral preaching, but also how we live as people of faith. If

eternal life begins in the here and now, what we do with our bodies, both in life and in death, significantly matter every day.

While the final chapter attempts to concretely lay out the homiletic I propose, along with practical steps for its application, it also reveals how we might continue to draw upon our tradition in rethinking our practices for the future. Observing feast days for saints is a long-standing tradition for Christians. Yet, it has informed and inspired a new method for preaching, articulated in this project, relevant for today. In other words, the Church can continue to draw upon its traditions, in order to communicate God's love in fresh ways.

One of the great ironies of this project is that while the preacher will use many of the same scripture readings and components of the liturgy in the funeral services she will conduct throughout her ministry, I am arguing that each funeral homily be unique in its own right. As Sonefeld writes, "Respect and consideration should be given to each deceased and to each group of mourners. Even though the same texts are used, the language and additional subject matter adapted to *this* individual and *this* family are unique and different."<sup>1</sup> As it is written in *Funeral Liturgies*, "Since each person is unique, each liturgy should, to some degree, be special. Hence, it is essential to know at least a fragment of the biography of the deceased. In fact, the more we know about the deceased the better."<sup>2</sup>

The final component to this project, the sermons and their commentary, not only take this "uniqueness" seriously, serving as examples of the proposed homiletic applied,

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>2</sup> McCarthy, Flor. *Funeral Liturgies*. Dublin, Ireland: Dominican Publications, 1994. Pg. 11.

but also as the possibility for this homiletic as a regular, ongoing practice, even with the many and varied complexities surrounding death. I recognize what is being proposed may not be possible in *every* circumstance. Sometimes there isn't time. Sometimes the family doesn't want anything personal said. Sometimes the bereaved are so grief-stricken, they cannot utter a word about the deceased. It also requires more work on the part of clergy in the midst of an already demanding schedule.

However, my experience is that often, just by utilizing the time typically put into a funeral homily, in different ways, this homiletical approach is no more work on the part of the preacher, and more importantly, is more pastoral to the loved ones of the deceased. The work is worth it to make "every funeral different because every life is different, uniquely precious."<sup>3</sup>

The following four sermons are my attempt at revealing God embodied, through the life of a Saint, given some of the most common circumstances surrounding death: a life long-lived, an unexpected death, and the death of a young person. These sermons represent, for me, the most challenging and rewarding part of being in ministry. There is nothing more difficult, and simultaneously sacred, than journeying with people through a season of loss, helping them to make meaning of their loved one's death, by offering words of comfort and hope. The names of the deceased and their family members have been changed to protect their identities.

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<sup>3</sup> Hoffacker, 4.

**Four Approaches to Preaching the Saints:**  
**Saint as embodied Sacrament, Christ, Liturgy and Word**

Saint as Embodied Sacrament: Wayne Smith

Scripture: Matthew 26:26-29

**Commentary**

On a crisp October morning, Wayne Smith was working on his farm, when he died suddenly and unexpectedly of a massive heart attack. He was 62 years old. Wayne was a long-time member of the church I was serving at the time. He was well known, not only in our town, but throughout the state, as a politician and businessman. His death was tragic for his family, his friends, and the greater community.

This was my first “big” funeral at the church. I had only been serving the congregation for six months. They were just beginning to trust me. When they called me to be their Senior Minister, I was 29 years old. I learned later that there was concern on the part of some of the congregation about hiring a minister that young.

Presiding at this funeral and offering the following funeral homily was the turning point in my ministry at the church. In part, this funeral sermon moved me from their hired minister to their trusted pastor. It was risky using an unorthodox scripture reading for a funeral, a passage about communion, as the primary text for the service. This was obviously not a reading they had heard before at a funeral. In fact, later, Wayne’s wife, Julie, said to me, “When I heard the passage you were reading before the sermon, I have to admit, I was a little worried.”

However, describing Wayne as embodying the spirit of communion turned out to be a meaningful way to capture his life. It did two things I was trying to accomplish.

First, it captured Wayne's generous, open, welcoming spirit. I wanted it to be clear that everyone was always welcome to the tables at which Wayne presided; even strangers felt like they belonged. Also, food and wine were typically the center piece that brought everyone together around the events Wayne hosted. Thus, communion was the first thing that came to mind when I thought about the life Wayne lived.

Secondly, I needed to address the reality that Wayne had died suddenly and unexpectedly. His death truly rocked the community. Therefore, I wanted the sermon to simultaneously remind those gathered that we are not alone in death, nor was Wayne. Using a familiar symbol like communion helped communicate this theological truth.

In my tradition, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), we receive communion weekly during worship. It's the most important part of the worship experience. It's a reminder that God is always with us. Thus, many from the congregation expressed to me later that it was a comforting image. However, I intentionally elaborated on the meaning of our tradition's practice of the Lord's Supper so that those unfamiliar with communion might find connection to the image as well.

If I were to write this sermon again, I would make at least one change. The Lord's Supper was the thread through Wayne's life from beginning to end. Thus, I would tie the Lord's Supper back into the very end of the sermon. I might even edit out the entire last paragraph, so that the sermon concludes with the paragraph on the Communion of Saints, rather than the greatest commandment, which I do not mention elsewhere in the sermon.

The sacraments are about embodiment. Therefore, utilizing one as a lens through which to see God in a saint can be one way to theologically make meaning of a life. As

you will see in the homily, drawing upon the sacraments can also simultaneously offer comforting imagery and symbols in a time of grief.

### **Funeral Homily**

I have never been a fan of comic books, but these last few days, hearing stories about the life of Wayne Smith, I cannot help but feel like we all have known a superhero. I've heard stories about fighting Buffalos, breaking limbs while riding four-wheelers, and building sophisticated structures with his bare hands. Perhaps I am embellishing to some degree, but when you think about Wayne Smith, it all really seems true. As we have already heard from his son, he was a larger-than life character. It feels like Wayne really had nine lives and lived all of them in only 62 years.

I have never used Jesus' institution of the Last Supper as a scripture reading for a funeral. However, when I think about Wayne Smith, I think about the spirit of the Lord's Supper—the openness, the hospitality, the inclusion.

If there is one theme we hear over and over about the life of Wayne Smith, it is that he brought people together, all kinds of people. He never met a stranger. He loved to entertain. He made you feel special. Wayne Smith's gift was the gift present in communion—a welcoming, hospitable spirit. He practiced it every day of his life.

I remember one of the last experiences I had with Wayne. Marion, Harrison and I ran into Julie and Wayne at Dots Restaurant one afternoon after church. We waved hello and goodbye to one another, but we never actually had the opportunity to talk. About the time I got ready to pay my bill, the waitress came to our table and said, "The folks who were sitting over by the window took care of it." Without a word ever spoken, Wayne extended hospitality across an entire room—he made us feel like we were some of the most important people in his life. That was Wayne Smith.

While we have made the Lord's Supper into a ritual we practice in our congregations, what Jesus really left for us to remember him by is a meal shared among friends and a table open to all people for us to gather round and remember—to be with one other in community.

I think the communion table is a symbol that guided the life of Wayne Smith—a symbol that calls us to love our neighbor, to be hospitable to one another, to share our lives, and to simply sit down at a table with friends and enjoy a time of fellowship.

Julie told me a story yesterday about the funeral home calling to double check a Bible verse she had passed along for the cards the funeral home hands out about the deceased. The funeral director said, “Now Julie, let me make sure I have this correct: you want me to put on the back of our program Psalm 22:1?” Julie said, “Oh no, it's Proverbs 22:1.” The director said, “Oh thank goodness. I wondered why you wanted Wayne to be remembered by the verse, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’”

While this is a humorous story, when an unexpected death happens like we experienced last Friday, we cannot help but feel, at moments, like the Psalm writer must have felt: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Such tragic circumstances will inevitably cause us sadness, anger, and perhaps even cause us to question our faith.

What Jesus offers us in the Last Supper, however, is the promise that we will never be forsaken. In the bread and cup, he will always be with us, especially in the most difficult circumstances of life. We will never be left alone.

And when we pass from this earth, we all join the communion of Saints and sit around that table with Jesus. Just as Christ will always be with us, Wayne will never truly be gone either. While he is separated from us by death, every time we gather at a tailgate,

every time we go to the farm for a concert, every time we gather as his friends and family around a table to share a meal, Wayne will be there in the laughter, the tears, the memories, and the stories.

Wayne Smith may not have been a superhero, but if he did have a super power, it was bringing people together. Perhaps there is no greater gift with which one can be blessed than the gift of hospitality. And isn't that the greatest commandment we are given: "to love God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind; and to love your neighbor as yourself."

Saint(s) as the Embodied of Christ: Charles Minor

Scripture: Romans 8:35, 37-39

### **Commentary**

One rainy morning, as a local florist drove down South Main Street of the community in which I lived and served, a rotted tree fell across the road, landing on his car at the exact moment he drove by it. Charles was killed upon impact. He was only 73 years old.

The accident shook our entire community. Charles was a well-known businessman. His family was well-respected in the community. However, it wasn't necessarily Charles's death, as much as it was the cause of his death, that was so troubling. The irony of a local florist being killed by a fallen tree, at the exact moment he drove by it, was not lost on the community. It's not surprising friends and family felt like his death was calculated. They wrestled with theodicy in ways I had not experienced before.

While I wanted the homily for his funeral to honor his life, more importantly, I needed to address the theological questions present. Therefore, in addition to using Charles's life as an example of the embodiment of Christ, this homily also attempts to communicate how those surrounding Charles and his family at his time of death were the presence of the larger body of Christ.

The community had experienced God almost as a henchman who took Charles' life, rather than a loving presence with Charles and those of us left behind. I wanted the sermon to help rewrite that narrative. In some very specific ways, I had experienced the body of Christ become the most visible expression of sainthood in the specific circumstances surrounding Charles's death.

Thus, in the sermon, I describe the ways in which the Church surrounded the family with love and support. Friends and family reached out to the Minor family during their time of grief. However, the most profound physical presence of Christ's greater body came through a woman who was in a vehicle behind Charles's when the tree fell on top of it. I tell her story, at the end of the homily, as a reminder to the congregation of Christ's presence to us, in our greatest time of need.

When such tragic, unexpected circumstances around death unfold, it's important for clergy to acknowledge that we will never have all the answers to our inevitable question, "Why?" I confess this in the homily as encouragement to others to be at peace in their questions without answers. However, I also don't think the preacher can leave the congregation only with their questions. It's important to offer some kind of theological reflection on how God is involved in what the congregation and greater community are experiencing.

Using selected verses from Romans 8, along with other scripture passages that speak of God's presence in our most difficult moments in life, this homily communicates that God does not cause tragedy, but promises to be with us in the midst of tragedy. In the case of Charles Minor, God's presence was visible in several poignant ways, including the life he lived, but especially in the woman who held him while he died. Sainthood was given physical expression through the greater body of Christ.

If I were to go back and write this sermon again, I would take out the introductory remarks, or the first two paragraphs. There is no need for the preacher to tell the congregation what the purpose of his or her sermon is going to be before it is preached. In the proposed homiletic, the funeral sermon should be the embodiment of God experienced, not explained.

### **Funeral Homily**

The purpose of this worship service today is twofold. On the one hand, we are here to give thanks for the life of Charles Minor; to reflect on the way that God touched each of our lives through his life. A funeral service done well always has this as a primary objective.

On the other hand, when tragedy strikes in such a bizarre and disturbing way, we cannot help but have questions too. We feel and experience a whirlwind of complicated emotions, and struggle to find meaning in the midst of our pain. So, today we are also called to spend some time with this tension, reflecting theologically on the particular circumstances of Charles's death.

First things first. Anne, Charles' wife, called me Saturday morning and offered a few suggested scripture readings that she found and thought fit Charles well. As I was reading through them, this passage from Proverbs seemed to get at the essence of who

Charles was to each of us: “A glad heart makes a cheerful countenance...a cheerful heart has a continual feast.”

If Charles Minor wasn't the most cheerful man we all knew, then he sure had us all fooled. I am not sure I have ever met a man who smiled more than Charles. His spirit was warm. People were naturally drawn to him. However, he never sought this attention. There was a humility in his cheerful countenance. Mac, his son, said it best: “My dad was the life of the party, who never wanted to attend the party.”

Charles was funny. He had a wonderful sense of humor. He was a savvy businessman and had an incredible work ethic. Charles was a die-hard Kentucky fan. In fact, Charles would probably be just as happy if we played the UK fight song as we recessed out of the sanctuary this afternoon.

He was a true Kentuckian. He loved his roots. He loved his home. He loved his family. And he cared for them faithfully, especially his wife Anne, as she has endured so many health concerns of her own in recent years.

If we are all honest with each other this morning, I think what makes Charles's death so difficult is what I have said thus far. Yes, the cause of his death is bewildering—it would be, had it been anyone. But, it's because Charles was such a good guy, such a cheerful, warm-spirited person, that we are even more befuddled by this loss today.

If God is in control of all things, then this death seems particularly calculated. If God knows all and is all, why would God allow such a thing to happen to someone who only seemed to spread God's joy to those with whom he interacted?

These, among others, are the questions which have inevitably crossed our minds the last couple of days. And, if I am continuing with my honesty this afternoon, the truth is I don't have the answers to these questions. I wish I did.

All I have is this:

“God is our refuge and our strength, a very present help in trouble.” (Psalm 46:1).

“The Lord is the strength of his people; he is the saving refuge of his anointed.” (Psalm 27:8).

“When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers they will not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the Lord your God.” (Isaiah 43:2-3).

“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.” (Romans 8:38).

No, I don't have answers to most of the “why” questions, because the Bible does not tell us much about the why. Terrible things happen to good people. Each of us will experience tragedy to varying degrees in this life. That's the thing about tragedy, it does not discriminate or show partiality. It simply is.

What I do know, what I do believe, and what I am certain God wants us to know, because it is printed over and over and over and over again in scripture, is this: God is with us in our suffering.

God does not forsake us in our time of need. God is our refuge and our strength, sustaining us with love and grace that we experience in the hugs, and meals, and smiles, and even the simple presence of our family, our friends, and our church.

God does not cause suffering or pain. God does not seek us out to punish us or to test us. God simply loves us and is with us no matter what our journey brings in this life. And the good news Charles knows now: God is waiting for us with open arms when our journey ends here on this earth.

There is an image I have found helpful when tragedy has come in my life. I think experiencing the grief that comes with calamity is like surviving a hurricane. Whenever you watch hurricane coverage, there is always that one weatherman or meteorologist who feels as if, in order to prove that there is really a hurricane happening, he must stand out in the middle of the storm. It's not enough that we can see trees bending to the ground and roofs flying off buildings. The weatherman actually has to be there in his yellow slicker to make it all real!

I recall watching coverage of hurricane Katrina and one of the pictures that most vividly sticks out in my mind is that of one of these weathermen, holding onto his microphone with one hand and with his other hand and arm, grasping around a tree, holding on for dear life in the midst of the storm.

I think that is what it's like sometimes to weather grief. We hang onto the presence of God while the winds howl. We hold onto our memories while the waves crash. We hold onto to our church while the floods rage. We even hold on to our loved ones we have lost, that live inside our hearts and surround our lives each day.

The questions will inevitably remain. The mix of emotions will come and go. The storm will be stronger during some occasions than others. But in the midst of it all, I encourage you to do everything in your power to hold onto your God, to hold onto one another, to hold onto your church.

I think you will find that in doing so, eventually you will find peace in the questions, the circumstances and causes of Charles's death will not seem so overwhelming. What you will have left to carry with you is really what is most important: the cheerful heart and warm spirit of a wonderful man named Charles Minor.

If in the days ahead, questions and doubts begin to encroach on your faith in God or God's presence in the midst of all this, I want you to remember what happened to the Minor Family last evening during the visitation.

As people were beginning to leave and the visitation was coming to an end, a few of the family members noticed a woman who suddenly appeared by the casket, obviously upset, staring down at Charles.

The family did not know who she was, and so they began to inquire about her relationship to Charles. The woman looked up and with tears in her eyes said, "I was two cars behind Charles when the tree fell."

She continued, "Immediately, I jumped out of my car, ran to Charles's car and tried to get in, but all the doors were locked and none of the windows were broken. So, I happened to check the backend which, to my surprise, was open. I crawled over the seats and I put my arms around him because I didn't want him to be alone. I wanted him to know that someone was with him in that moment. I told him how much he was loved and

I stayed until the authorities arrived. She said, “There was no sign of struggle. He looked at peace.”

My friends, if those arms, if those hands, if her presence was not the very presence of God in midst of tragic circumstances, then I am not sure what is.

### Saint as Embodied Liturgy: Ruth Jones

Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 5:12-28

#### **Commentary**

Ruth Jones lived a long life, dying at the age of 89. She was fortunate to not have many health concerns throughout that life. When she was diagnosed with cancer a year before she died, she told her doctors and her family that she did not want to go through the suffering of treatment. Ruth acknowledged she had the gift of many years on earth and was ready for death, whenever it might come. Ruth showed us all how to “die well.” She wasn’t worried about the life she would lose. Rather, Ruth was thankful for the life she had been given.

I was fortunate to know Ruth for about seven years before she died. One of the realities of being someone’s pastor is, after getting to know them well, you begin to think about what you might say at their funeral. Two years before Ruth died, I knew that I would emphasize the gratitude she always expressed. That was, as Hoffacker says, “the key” for Ruth’s funeral homily. She embodied gratitude in everything she did.

Ruth’s grateful heart reminded me of a sermon Fred Craddock wrote many years ago entitled “Doxology,” in which he anthropomorphizes the word “doxology,”

transforming a part of the liturgy into a person we all intimately know.<sup>1</sup> That sermon was the inspiration for this homily. When I thought of Ruth, I thought of that sermon Craddock preached. I took the next step, turning Doxology into a specific person, a saint we cared for and loved, namely Ruth Jones.

However, I wanted to express Ruth's thankful spirit not just as the way in which we experienced the divine through her, but also as a challenge for how we all live our lives on earth. Therefore, I chose the passage from 1 Thessalonians. Paul not only talks about gratitude as a characteristic of the Christian life, but he adds the words, "always" and "in all circumstances."

This, to me, was the difference between Ruth's life and the way most of us live. It is one thing to give thanks on appropriate occasions. It is another to live with doxology "always" and "in all circumstances." Quite frankly, the latter seems almost impossible for most of us.

Ruth's life, then, was an example of its possibility, or at least that we can all live with more gratitude than we do. In this way, Ruth's grateful spirit was not just a sign of God's presence in her life, but also a model for all of us to live with more doxology in our own lives.

One of the benefits of conveying a person's life as embodied liturgy is that you can utilize that portion of the liturgy in the funeral service in powerful ways. For example, toward the end of this homily, the pianist plays "Doxology" underneath the words I speak, as a means of concluding the sermon.

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<sup>1</sup> Craddock, Fred. *As One Without Authority*. St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001. Pgs. 131 – 136.

I found that this connected the congregation, through the liturgy, to both the deceased and God. Some present at the funeral indicated to me later that they did not know the song was called “Doxology.” However, when they heard the tune, it came together for them. For those of us who knew the song and tune already, the liturgy washed over us in a fresh way, allowing us to experience, once again, God’s presence in both Ruth’s life and our own.

### **Funeral Homily**

There is plenty that Paul writes about which I would love to question. However, it’s hard to find much of anything with which to argue in his words from 1 Thessalonians we’ve just heard. I think most people of faith would agree, these words capture well the characteristics of the Christian life: “encourage the faint-hearted, help the weak, be patient with everyone, rejoice, pray, give thanks, and always seek to do good to one another” (1 Thessalonians 5:14).

At least, based on what I know about Ruth, I think she would have agreed. After all, she lived these words every day of her life. That’s what Tim and Rob, her sons, reminded me of as we sat down with one another to plan this service. Tim said, “Everything I know about being a person of faith is not from what my mother told me, but how she lived.” If I were to guess, I would suspect that each of us here this morning feels somewhat the same way. In fact, I *know* this to be true because you’ve told me.

You could not have known Ruth Jones without having a “Ruth story,” which, without exception, was a story about how she helped you in your time of need. Whether it was nursing you when you were sick or calling you when you needed someone to listen, or visiting you when you felt alone.

Ruth was on the search committee that brought me to this church over six years ago now. As with any job interview, that first face-to-face can be somewhat nerve-wracking. I can remember walking into the room, sitting down, and immediately Ruth saying something to cut the tension. Her warm smile and gentle presence put us all at ease. I could tell she wanted to give me a hug after the interview, but knew she had to “keep things cool” until they made an official decision.

Ruth Jones did not just profess the Christian life—she lived it every day, in every way. I emphasize the word “every” here because, if I’m honest, there is one part of this passage from 1 Thessalonians I do question. It is the frequency with which we ought to live out these virtues.

Paul writes, “Rejoice *always*, pray *without ceasing*, and give thanks in *all circumstances*” (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18). I don’t know about you, but that seems like a lot to ask. It’s one thing to pray before a meal or when we wake up in the morning. It’s one thing to rejoice in worship or when we receive good news. It’s one thing to give thanks in a moment of relief or deep appreciation. But *always, without ceasing, in all circumstances*? Quite frankly, that just seems impossible.

But then I walked into a hospital room one afternoon. It had been a long day of tests and tubes and scans and blood work and heart monitors. In fact, for Ruth, it had been a long few months of multiple visits to hospitals and doctor’s offices, sleeping in uncomfortable beds in unfamiliar places, talking about things like cancer and time.

I watched as Ruth Jones thanked the nurse over and over again for helping her, and the doctor for coming to see her, and her sitter for always being around, and another church member for stopping by to visit. Then, as I began to leave the hospital room, she

said to me, with a smile on her face, “Now don’t you worry about me. You’ve got too many other people a lot worse off than me to worry about. I’ll be just fine.”

For the first time in my life, I realized it is possible. In fact, there is a word for it we use in the church. It’s called Doxology. Ruth showed me it’s not just something we sing about or that Paul writes about. No, Doxology is real. Because she was with us all along—always, without ceasing, in all circumstances.

I suppose it’s only now that she is gone I realize why I wanted to be (why we all wanted to be) around her all the time. The truth is we all need more doxology in our lives—more time to rejoice, to pray, and to give thanks.

Tim said just after their son, Ryan, was born, they were preparing to leave the hospital when Ruth said to Tim, “Would you all like me to come to the house and help?” Tim, being the good husband, said, “Well, you know Mom, I probably need to ask Stacey if that’s okay first.” This being the first child, Stacey responded like so many of us as first-time parents, “No thanks. We got this.”

Well, about 2:00 AM on the second night of being home and many hours of a colicky baby, Stacey looked at Tim and said, “I don’t know what to do.” Tim said, “I do.” He called Ruth and she immediately came over, took Ryan, and by the time Tim and Stacey woke up the next day, Ryan was sound asleep in the crib next to them.

When Lauren was born a few years later, they were once again preparing to leave the hospital when Ruth asked Tim, “You want me to come help at the house?” This time, Stacey was within earshot and before Tim could even respond, she said, “Ruth pack your bags, you’re moving in!”

You see that's the thing about Doxology--when you truly experience her, you never want her to go. You want her to move in, take root in your life, and stay forever. Which is what makes today so hard--saying goodbye to someone who embodied this for us in such a special way.

("Doxology" is played quietly in the background, preferably on organ or piano, while the following words are spoken.)

And yet, I think we sing about her and read about her and talk about her, as people of faith, not just as encouragement to somehow achieve Doxology, but also as a reminder she's always there, if we will only take a moment to look for her.

Saint as Embodied Word: Rachel Williams

Scripture: Genesis 50:15-21

### **Commentary**

Rachel died suddenly and tragically in a Cancun pool on a vacation with her brother earlier this year. I did not personally know Rachel, but I was inspired by her story. In fact, even though I did not preach her funeral, I used her story in a sermon I preached at the church I was serving at the time. This homily is what I would have said at her funeral, had I been her Pastor.

One of the methods I utilize most often in funeral preaching is reflecting on the saint as embodied Word. It's not uncommon for a scripture text to come to mind when thinking about a person's life. Often, while meeting with a family to plan a funeral, they will bring with them chapter and verse of books in the Bible they believe the deceased embodied. Sometimes, a person's life can so poignantly be captured by a Biblical text,

it's as if, while its being read during the funeral, the person is resurrected before our very eyes.

In the case of Rachel, it was the occasion of her death and the circumstances that followed that inspired the reading for this sermon. The story of Joseph, at least in part, is about a God who wants to bring good out of the tragic. More importantly, it does not reveal a God who is part of the tragedy. Joseph's brother's plans were not God's plans. God is using those plans, despite their bad intentions, for the good.

I read about Rachel's funeral, and it's no surprise it was a packed house, full of young people who knew her. Any time a young person dies, the "why" questions are always swirling. I suspect that question was very much present in the room that day. Thus, once again, I tried to acknowledge that we would not be able to ever answer "Why?" Instead, I wanted to use Rachel as a way of showing how God is always bringing new life out of death. In fact, I liken both Rachel's story and Joseph's to the larger Christian story of resurrection.

Specifically, I wanted resurrection to be seen not just as something that happens at death, but something that is happening also in life. Here is an opportunity to broaden theological understandings of resurrection to include not just the after-life, but also the here and now.

Therefore, this homily attempts to help the congregation rethink resurrection as something to look for and to participate in. Rachel's choice to be an organ donor made this possible in some significant ways. She embodied not just the story of Joseph, but the greater story of Christian faith, literally resurrecting a life by saving it.

However, I also wanted to make it clear that resurrection does not have to always be a grandiose gesture. We can see and experience smaller resurrections, every day, if we will look for them. Rachel's death serves as a wake up call to us all, that God is constantly using the tragic circumstances of life, for the good. Rachel's life and death embodies this good news. The sermon is a charge for us to take notice and do the same.

### **Funeral Homily**

At 20 years old, Rachel Williams left this earth too early. Having had the experience myself, I can tell you, no parent should ever have to bury a child. Yet, here we are, once again, doing what is not fair. And, if I'm honest, I don't know why. Which makes the question even more present here this morning.

After all, Rachel was a beautiful, smart, popular, kind-hearted girl. She certainly did not do anything to deserve this. Her father said that Rachel genuinely cared about others and treated everyone the same, no matter who they were or where they were from. Rachel was even kind to strangers and people whom she did not know.

In fact, if God was keeping score, I'm fairly certain Rachel would have been winning, when it comes to living her faith. Which is also the reason I am certain God *did not* cause this tragedy, nor any tragedy in this world. The hard truth is that sometimes awful things happen, for no reason at all.

Joseph must have asked, "Why?" throughout his life too. Being sold into slavery by your brothers and left for dead by those you thought loved you would cause anyone to question just about everything. While Joseph's story, like our stories, provides no divine reason for all that Joseph endures, he still believes God uses his tragic circumstances for the good. At least that is what he says to his brothers after they are reunited and ask for

his forgiveness. Joseph responds, “Even though you intended to harm me, God is using it for good” (Genesis 50:20).

We Christians have a word for this. In fact, it’s the foundation upon which our faith is built. We know it as “resurrection” - God bringing good out of bad, light out of dark, life out of death. And we use this word most often at times of death, to be reminded of the hope of eternal life God promises us all. But sometimes by focusing on eternal life as something we only realize upon leaving this earth, we miss the resurrection that takes place in the here and now, right before our very eyes. I wonder if Rachel revealed this reality to you, like she did me.

You see, four years ago, at the age of 16, Rachel made the decision to be an organ donor. As a result, five different people were given a second chance at life after Rachel’s death—including a 21-year old man, in Lafayette, Louisiana, who suffered a heart attack due to a rare genetic disease. He was given 10 days to live unless he had a heart transplant. Rachel’s heart saved that young man’s life.

In fact, to raise awareness for organ donation, Rachel’s father, Bruce, rode his bike from Wisconsin to Florida to meet the young man who received his daughter’s heart—to hear Rachel’s heart beat again. If you haven’t yet, I would encourage you to go online and see the moment they embrace. It’s one of the most moving moments you will witness. Truth be told, it looks like Easter morning.

God did not harm Rachel, but there is no doubt God is bringing good out of Rachel’s death. New life isn’t just what happens at the end of our lives. It happens every day, if we will only look for it. Sometimes it’s in more visible ways, like Rachel’s death

literally making life possible for others. But more often, it happens in smaller, more subtle ways.

Like when you get the courage to end that unhealthy relationship, and a new, more fruitful relationship comes along. Or when you lose that job from which you thought you would retire, and find a better opportunity as a result. Or when a cancer diagnosis of one, turns into a cancer foundation for millions.

Rachel's death is tragic. We will never fully get over it. We will only learn, eventually, to live with it. But if you don't believe in resurrection, I would invite you to take a moment and look around this room today, at all the people who were impacted by Rachel's life and her death. I know each and every one of you is suffering today. Yet I suspect each and every one of you either has already, or will in the future, embody the stories of Joseph and Rachel, using this experience for the good.

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