

February 9, 2014

TEXT: I Corinthians 15:50-58

TITLE: Ritually Adrift: Good Grief, Good Funerals – Part 1

Our lives are full of rituals, big and small. You may have a ritual around that first cup of coffee in the morning or what you like to do as soon as you come home from work. In the church we have rituals around baptism and communion – formal acts that emphasize God’s love for us as individuals and as a community. But what happens when rituals go adrift? When, for a variety of reasons, rituals lose their moorings – and people find themselves lost, adrift, unsure what they are supposed to do at important moments of their lives? Some have suggested that Christian funerals are ritually adrift, affecting not only how we remember loved ones who have died but also how we grieve loved ones who have died. I want us to consider this topic this morning and again next week. Please bear in mind that my remarks are not to be heard as a criticism of any funeral you yourselves have had to organize. This sermon simply reflects some new insights that have come to me as a pastor who regularly has to plan and lead funerals. And by exploring this topic together, perhaps we can stop the drift and disarray too often associated with funeral services today.

A favorite book of mine is called The Undertaking, written by Thomas Lynch, who is a funeral director and a poet living and working in Milford, Michigan. Lynch has recently written a book with my preaching professor, Tom Long, called The Good Funeral. Early in the book, the authors observe this startling fact: “We are rapidly become the first society in the history of the world for whom the dead are no longer required – or desired – at their own funerals.”¹ When I read that line, I stopped to do some mental math and estimated that only about 1/3 of the recent funerals I’ve led here at our church have involved a casket or urn of ashes. This absence of the dead from their own funerals is a growing trend and a striking American Protestant phenomenon.

There are often legitimate reasons for this absence. For some people, there is a real discomfort around dead bodies and funeral services; so they request a memorial service full of stories about the loved one and upbeat music, but please, with no casket present. Sometimes having the body at church is impractical if you want to have a service followed by a reception, since it means some guests will have to wait around while family head off to the cemetery for the graveside committal.

My parents are now deceased, dying in 2010 and 2012. The large Presbyterian Church in Kansas City, to which they belonged, had their funeral ritual structured so that we would first go to the cemetery for the committal, and then return to the church for the service, followed by a reception where people offered condolences to the family. It was all quite lovely. But a hard, awkward moment came when we finished the committal service and got back into the hearse to be efficiently transported back to the church – leaving my father’s casket on a May afternoon,

and 18 months later my mother's casket on a cold January morning, alone on a cemetery hillside. You'd have to have known my mother, but she hated being cold. It felt wrong leaving their bodies behind while we went to the church for their funerals. Our choices that day made practical sense, but they felt ritually adrift and wrong emotionally and spiritually.

The first step in correcting all this begins with confronting our own fears around death. The developmental psychologist Erik Erikson has written that "healthy children will not fear life if their elders have integrity enough not to fear death."² This is not an easy task; there are thousands of things with which we distract ourselves to avoid ever thinking about death – until that moment when the doctor's diagnosis is told to us or about a loved one, or the phone call we've been dreading actually happens. Many recent books have been written by people who were dealing with terminal illnesses, such as novelist John Updike, the irascible atheist Christopher Hitchens, and movie critic Roger Ebert. One retired doctor wrote a newspaper essay about how he found making his own coffin to be a way to be realistic about death while celebrating the creative spirit of life. He wisely noted that it is "pretty much impossible to feel anger at someone for driving too slowly in front of you in traffic when you've just come from sanding your own coffin."³ The doctor didn't have any easy answers about death or about life after death; but he had seen enough of life not to be fearful about death. So embossed on the inside of his own coffin lid are words from an old poem by Sarah Williams: "Though my soul may set in darkness, it will rise in perfect light. I have loved the stars too fondly to be fearful of the night."⁴

The second corrective in this process comes from Thomas Lynch, the poet undertaker. In his Irish-American direct way, he insists that there are four essential parts to a funeral. First, because ours is a species that deals with death by dealing with the dead, the dead (the corpse, the remains) must be present at the funeral. Second, because a death affects both the one who dies and those who survive the death, those whom the death has affected must also be present. Third, there must be some narrative, some effort toward an answer, however provisional, about the primal human questions about what death means for both the ones who have died and those to whom the deceased mattered. And then fourth, the funeral should accomplish the disposition of the dead – moving the person's remains from where they are now to where they will ultimately reside. Whether they are buried, burned, entombed, enshrined, scattered, or cast into the sea, it is our active involvement in these arrangements that transforms the funeral ritual into something authentic, complete, even holy.⁵

That last point is the part of the modern funeral process from which we are most removed, so let me share a bit more on this point. Lynch insists that by getting the dead where they need to go, we the living get nearer to where we need to be. That's because grieving a loved one is not just a matter for the brain; it is also a matter for the body. Grief is work – and it is a work better done by large muscles

than gray matter; it is less a mental burden and more a bodily burden manifest in sagging shoulders, shared embraces, and heavy hearts.⁶

That is why Lynch recommends that bodies be present at funerals – whether embalmed in caskets or in urns after cremation. He suggests we find ways for people to do things, rather than having them simply worry about what they should be feeling. The act of picking out clothes for the loved one to wear means something. Helping place a pall over the casket or being a pallbearer so one knows the actual size and the weight of a casket means something. Going to the cemetery and accompanying the coffin to the grave or urn to the columbarium means something. And yes, it may be inconvenient to ask to see the coffin being lowered in the ground, or to ask to put a shovel full of dirt into the grave (as is common in Jewish funerals), but since when did inconvenience ever stop us from doing things for those we love? Being present with those who are dying or who have died sometimes is all we can do. By carrying flowers or making casseroles, praying or singing or breaking the silence with our words of faith and comfort, lifting a casket or paying our respects when it is lowered into the ground – these physical acts in times of death are a crucial part of how we faithfully grieve those who die.

For me, a powerful image of the truth of Lynch's advice is Michelangelo's *Pieta* – that heart-wrenching statue of Mary holding her son's body after Jesus has been crucified and removed from the cross. It is the image of a mother who had cradled her child in life, comforted and caressed her son as an infant and youth, and who now holds him again, one last time. It is so important to honor our bodies in life and in death – to caress and embrace one another, to remember the mystery of how our bodies work even as they grow frail and fragile and one day stop working altogether – for it is through that awareness of the physical that the spiritual words of our faith make sense.

If we gather at a funeral and yet our ritual is literally “disembodied,” how can Paul's words make sense when he says, “Brothers and sisters, flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable”? Paul starts with the messy, fallible human body – bodies that upon dying, in his day and age, were washed by family, clothed by loved ones, and carried to their place of disposition. And then, as our muscles ache and our hearts break with grief, he says, “Listen! I tell you a mystery! We will be changed. This perishable flesh will put on imperishability; this mortal body will put on immortality.” It is not so much a road map as it is a promissory note, spelling out the victory over death that has been won for us and all humanity through our Lord Jesus Christ. *“Though my soul may set in darkness it will rise in perfect light. I have loved the stars too fondly to be fearful of the night.”* Know the truth of that poem and of Paul's words. Know it in your heart and your muscles and bones. And trust that something even stronger than the physical awaits us – a mystery, a light, a hope that surpasses all understanding, won for us through our Lord Jesus Christ. AMEN.

¹ Thomas Long, Thomas Lynch, The Good Funeral: Death, Grief, and the Community of Care, 2013, p. 93.

² Quoted by Paige Williams in review of The Death Class: A True Story About Life by Erika Hayasaki; New York Times Book Review, January 26, 2014, p. 21.

³ Jeffrey M. Piehler, "Ashes to Ashes, but First a Nice Pine Box," New York Times, February 2, 2014, p. SR 9.

⁴ Ibid, quoting Sarah Williams (1837-1868) "The Old Astronomer to his Pupil."

⁵ Long & Lynch, The Good Funeral, pp. 79-81.

⁶ Ibid., p. 65.