

Proclaiming Life in Death: The Funeral Sermon

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A young pastor went home for lunch to find his wife raped and strangled, his two toddlers left unharmed. "Mommie's sleeping upstairs, Daddy," they told him. "A man came to the house." Later the grieving father appeared on television, saying that he had forgiven his wife's murderer and asking others to find it in their hearts to do so too.

The funeral service was characterized by a sense of the victory of Easter. The bulletin stated the following:

The black border around this paper is not only for the memory of Sharon or for the grief of her loved ones, but for a sick humanity. All of us have felt in these days something of the terrible misery of what it means to be human. For a short time the mask was stripped away, and we caught a glimpse of the hell in human hearts—the hell of lovelessness, of hatred, of callousness to other people, of our ready willingness to consume each other. . . .

But it is precisely at this point—at graveside—that Christianity, if it is to have any meaning at all, must begin to make sense. For it was to the very depths of this tragic human existence that God came personally in Jesus Christ. And it was here that He redeemed us and our existence. . .

The mercy is this, that we who have faced our humanity in all its horror are now enabled through Christ to realize our humanity in all its glory, the glory of love.

There was a quite different funeral service which took place some fifty years ago. As a Lutheran left the funeral service of her father, she overheard a Methodist friend say: "What a sermon! All about sin and death! That man must have been a great sinner!" The man being buried had, in fact, been a devout and loving Christian. The exact religious background of his daughter's friends—and what they actually heard at that funeral—cannot be ascertained at this point in time.

In any case, however, this episode and the episode recounted before it indicate the crucial nature of what people *hear*, especially

non-Lutherans, when they come to a funeral service. What is involved here? Many of the readers of this article will have preached hundreds more funeral sermons than its author. The goal here, however, is to focus on what constitutes a biblical funeral sermon while simultaneously directing readers to various resources.¹ The author is particularly indebted to the insights provided by Robert G. Hughes in *A Trumpet in Darkness: Preaching to Mourners*.²

I. The Sermon in General

First of all, a funeral sermon is the announcement of the Good News that Jesus Christ has conquered death and the grave *for us*. It is biblical preaching that focuses on Calvary and the empty tomb, so that the mourners may deal with the reality of death and have the certain hope which God gives us for life now and the life to come in heaven. A funeral *sermon* therefore is basic and integral to the whole liturgy for the burial of the dead. Also, as Hughes suggests, "mourners may be emotionally ready, open to God's word in a way that secure individuals are not."³ Defenses are down, life is disrupted, and there is a need to restore balance to life. "It has been the experience of clergy that greater vulnerability leads to heightened receptivity more often than to stubborn defensiveness."⁴

Yet there must be a balance in what is preached in the sermon—a balance between reference to the individual which is realistic (especially if the family knows the person far better than the pastor) and, on the other hand, delivering a sermon with a "to whom it may concern" flavor. The preacher is certainly to personalize the sermon, but without lauding the dead.⁵

"A Christian funeral sermon is for the living, not the dead." Pastors have heard that principle stated many times. Accordingly, how can the sensitive pastor take into account exactly where the mourners are in their process of grief? "If a death has been sudden and tragic, with the anesthetic of shock working its protective magic, one aim of the sermon may be to assist listeners to face death and begin to grieve."⁶ On the other hand, when a person has lingered a long time before death, there may be a feeling of relief. In either case, people may feel guilt. How does one preach to the particular feelings and questions of the sorrowing?

The funeral sermon is a key factor in a continuing pastoral relationship which the pastor has with the family—hopefully. Accordingly, even as the pastor interprets the biblical text selected very carefully, so he must study the listeners as well. He is an "active listener."⁷ He must ask, "What is the mourners' story?"—that is, "What are their feelings and questions?"

II. The Hearers of the Sermon

A. *Phases of Mourning*

In his *Worship and Pastoral Care* William H. Willimon entitled one of his chapters "Liturgy and Life's Crises: The Funeral." There he speaks of three "rites of passage" through which people go at the death of a loved one. These three phases (quoting Van Gennep) are separation, transition, and reincorporation.⁸

1. *Separation*

Willimon says he remembers a widow who asked him to go with her for a final look at her husband's body before the funeral. He was hesitant, knowing it could be a disturbing experience for her. But after she had touched her husband's cheek tenderly, she said: "He's cold. You can shut it now." She had proceeded through the separation from her husband. Willimon rightly states: "To avoid such separation is to postpone a necessary first step in the grief process and to run the risk of prolonging the pain of grief or dealing with grief in less productive ways."⁹

2. *Transition*

A second phase is transition. One day a woman is married; the next day she is a widow. One day children have a father; the next day he is gone. Normal activities are suspended. The mourners are moving into a new status in life.

At this point the funeral service has a very important educative function. "Here the church says in effect, 'When death comes, these are things that we believe.'¹⁰ "Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from henceforth—yea, saith the Spirit—that they may rest from their labours; and their works do follow them" (Revelation 14:13). "Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid" (John 14:27).

"So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom" (Psalm 90:12).

Particularly helpful at this time is the sheer "ministry of presence" to those who mourn. The author remembers A. R. Kretzmann saying that, when a parishioner of his was about to die, he would cancel other appointments and just "be there" with the family. Extensive conversation may not be necessary at times and certainly not such inappropriate comments as "I know just how you feel."

A pastor-friend of mine in Philadelphia says that, after his father died, one person after another stuck his head in his church-office door with comments of that nature until finally he was on the verge of vomiting. But then one friend came in and simply said, "I care." That assurance meant more to him than all the other comments.

But presence is not enough during this transitional stage. Words must be spoken. And the funeral sermon can do that speaking.

3. Reincorporation

The third phase is reincorporation. The mourners are now separated from their loved one, and the Christian community seeks to help them in the time of transition. But now their friends help reincorporate them into the mainstream of life again. And the funeral sermon can point in that direction—of the continued love and support of the caring Christian community.¹¹

B. Types of Death

All these aspects of the mourners' stories—their feelings and questions—are contextual as a pastor prepares the funeral sermon. What are they asking? What are they trying to understand? Robert G. Hughes is particularly helpful here as he considers the various types of death which occur and the specific problems which may arise in the mourners.

1. Prolonged Death

For many people, Hughes says, in connection with death from cancer or another lingering illness, the "dynamics of chronic grief" are anger and depression. Families feel helpless. Maybe the doctor is blamed. Anger at God is also common. The long waiting period

can also lead to depression. The pastor will want to take these elements into account and draw on the powerhouse of God's infallible word here, bringing in those passages which speak of Christian suffering and sorrow now in conjunction with the joy and hope and glory which is ours now and which is to come much more abundantly.¹²

2. *Sudden Death*

In connection with sudden death by accident one sees the "dynamics of acute grief." Shock and disbelief can overwhelm the grievers. Or there can be intense anger at those who caused the accident. Guilt can also appear when a person asks himself such questions as these: "What could I have done to prevent the accident?" "If I had been there, would things be different?"¹³

Henry Sloan Coffin's experience at the death of his son is pertinent here. As the author recalls the account, his son had been driving along-side a river in New York late at night. He had not been drinking, nor was he on drugs. His car somehow veered off the road and went into the river, where he drowned. Later at his home, before the funeral, Coffin was sitting down when a woman passed by with a hot-dish in her hands, headed for the kitchen. "I'll never understand the will of God," she said worriedly, walking past Coffin. Coffin immediately arose and followed her into the kitchen. There he made the point that God is not the driver at the wheel of the car in an accident; He is not the madman pushing the button to detonate a bomb. When his son died, Coffin said, God's was the first tear to fall. God grieved, too.

Coffin also speaks of an earlier experience. In his senior year at school a good friend was killed in an automobile accident. Sitting in the chapel waiting for the funeral service to begin, he was filled with angry thoughts. Now, as the pastor started down the aisle toward the altar, he began to intone unctuously Job's famous words: "The Lord gave and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord." Coffin continues:

From the aisle seat where I was sitting, I could have stuck out my foot and tripped him up and might easily have done so, had my attention not been arrested by a still, small

voice, as it were, asking, "Coffin, what part of that sentence are you objecting to?" Naturally I thought it was the second part, "The Lord hath taken away," spoken all too facetiously by the priest. But suddenly I realized it was the first. Suddenly I caught the full impact of "The Lord gave": the world very simply is not ours; at best we're guests. It was not an understanding I relished nor one, certainly, to clear up all my objections to my friend's death. But as I sat quietly now at his funeral, I realized that it was probably the understanding against which all the spears of human pride had to be hurled and shattered. Then, thank God, the organist played Bach's great chorale prelude, *Christus Stand in Todes Band*. It was genuinely comforting. And it made me think that religious truths, like those of music, were probably apprehended on a deeper level than they were ever comprehended. . . . So the leap of faith was really a leap of action. Faith was not believing without proof; it was trusting without reservation.¹⁴

An interchange of the author's own experience may be appropriately retold here:

I have a personal friend on the West Coast who lost her twelve-year-old son to leukemia in just two weeks. He was a swimming companion of Mark Spitz. And she said to me many times: "Don't tell me that you can give me a good answer as to why John died." I didn't. But I did share the gospel with her, and added: "Ann, wouldn't you have rather had John those precious twelve years rather than not at all?"¹⁵

Of particular importance is that we avoid at such times some of the phrases which are challenged in "Myths About Death." One example is the assertion without qualification that death is "the will of God":

In Job 1:21 Job states: "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return; the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord."

But in the next verse Scripture says, "In all this Job did

not sin or charge God with wrong." He did not "charge God foolishly" (KJV).

God *permits* death at a certain time, and He knows when we will die (Job 14:5). But He never *desires* man's death: "I do not enjoy seeing a sinner die" (Ezekiel 33:11, TEV).

Death comes upon us because we are all sinful mortals. "Death spread to all men because all men sinned" (Romans 5:12). "By a man came death" (1 Corinthians 15:21, RSV).¹⁶

Doctrinally, of course, a distinction is necessary between the permissive will and the causative will of God. His permissive will obviously embraces all events, including death. His causative will too may, certainly, be involved in the time of death, but we are not in a position to say in any given case.

There is also a distinction to be made between the stingless death of the Christian and the sting-filled death which comes to the unbeliever. But the words which we use to describe the Christian's death can be misunderstood by a grieving mourner, including such phrases as "God took him," or "God called him home," or "it pleased God to take him to Himself in heaven." Such language may not be comforting to a woman who put her two-and-one-half-week-old child down on her waterbed for a nap and returned to find the child face down, suffocated, dead. What we have moved to here is the circumstance of untimely death.

3. *Untimely Death*

The occurrence of a stillbirth or sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS) is hardly the time to say "it was the will of God." At an untimely death the mourners' responses may be feelings of personal guilt, anger at facing an unseen enemy, blaming of others (as when parents blame each other in the case of an accident), or the theological wrestling that goes on during the terminal illness of a child: "Why did he suffer so?" "Why did God allow this to happen?" "Why didn't God hear our prayers for a cure?"¹⁷

Particularly tragic at such a time is the comment of the naive friend who suggests that "God took the child because God needed

him up in heaven more than the parents did." Instead the preacher points to "a God who is self-giving, whose Son offered His life for the life of all people, who shares human suffering, and who seeks the best [for us] in a less than perfect world."¹⁸ References to baptism, in which God made the little one His own, will also be a key element in the sermon in such circumstances. More will be said on baptism later. Hughes suggests the following:

Pastors can help by encouraging parents to grieve. Later, after feelings are vented, parents may be ready to see that they do not have power over life and death, that they are human and fallible, and that chains of events cannot be controlled. Finally, they may be able to hear the good news that they too are children of a loving God who can reform their self-images (by the power of the Holy Spirit) and know their identity as God's forgiven people.¹⁹

4. *Old Age*

Several dynamics may be apparent in those who mourn the aged Christian. There may be acceptance, even welcoming of death as a release. There may be anxiety because of a feeling of abandonment. There may be guilt, especially when a person has died in an institutional setting. Or there may be anger when one person cared for the deceased more than the other siblings, or when there are quarrels over the possessions left behind.²⁰

All these factors will be concerns of the pastor preparing to preach the funeral sermon. The themes will be thankfulness to God for the blessings of a full life, death as a release, and so on. But "if the message of God's presence and comfort can be linked to the promised support of pastor and congregation, the sermon will be good news indeed."²¹

5. *Suicide*

Guilt, anger, and shame can all surface in cases of self-inflicted death. Families often have repeated warnings well in advance of a potential suicide. Hughes cites authorities who say that "fully eighty per cent of all completed suicides do in fact speak of their intentions beforehand."²² But John Hewett's observation is worth noting:

Suicide is an act completed in solitude, and one person is responsible for it—the deceased. . . . No person can single-handedly prevent a suicide unless that person can live without sleep and spend twenty-four hours a day restraining the potential suicide.²³

What can the preacher say? Luther's words of 1532 are apropos here:

I don't share the opinion that suicides are certainly to be damned. My reason is that they do not wish to kill themselves but are overcome by *the power of the devil*. They are like a man who is murdered in the woods by a robber. However, this ought not be taught to the common people, lest Satan be given an opportunity to cause slaughter, and I recommend that the popular custom be strictly adhered to according to which it [the suicide's corpse] is not carried over the threshold, etc. Such persons do not die by free choice or by law, but our Lord God will dispatch them as He executes a person through a robber. Magistrates should treat them quite strictly, although it is not plain that their souls are damned. However, they are examples by which our Lord God wishes to show that the devil is powerful and also that we should be diligent in prayer. But for these examples we would not fear God. Hence He must teach us in this way.²⁴

Whatever the circumstances of death, however (in any of those situations described before), the message we have to declare is always the same in its essence.

III. The Basic Message of the Sermon

A. *The Cross of Christ*

The burden of all good preaching in the church of Christ remains, as it always has been, the *cross* of Jesus Christ and the *resurrection* from the dead. Christ crucified and risen is to be the heart of the funeral sermon. For it is in Christ alone that the mourners have any true and lasting hope.

John Pless speaks well in his classic essay "Martin Luther: Preacher of the Cross":

For Luther the preaching that is shaped by the theology of the cross is proclamation that holds up Christ alone as Savior of the world. Any other theology is a theology of glory.²⁵

The theology of the cross is also the answer to all the people of this world—Albert Camus and Ingmar Bergman and any others—who ask, "How can a loving God let the innocent suffer?" *The Compassionate Mind* takes this approach:

Our response is to point them to a properly understood *theology of the cross*.

God suffers in the suffering of Christ and cries out with the godforsaken God, "My God, why have You forsaken Me?" As [Tobina] Dalton says, "Then God's being is in suffering and the suffering is in God's being itself, because God is love."

So God in Christ's death entered into our godforsakenness so all the godless and godforsaken can have reconciliation with Him. *No one*—the boy hung in *Night*, or the boy dying in *The Plague*, or the blonde girl raped and murdered in *Virgin Spring*—*no one* has loneliness, rejection, pain, or torture which God Himself has not absorbed in the cross of His Son.

When non-Christians lay aside their diminutive conception of God and cope with the godforsakenness in God (with Christ), they will have confronted the *true* God.

And then they must see this God alive in *us*.²⁶

The theology of the cross—and resurrection—will implicitly respond to the questions which emerge from the grief process: "Why, God?" "What did I do to deserve this?" "God, where are You?" (Hughes provides a detailed homiletical treatment of these questions—and the sermonic response.) Hughes states:

The theology of the cross affirms the need for believers to

wait, trusting in the action of God. In Christ the believer receives the forgiveness of sins and becomes a new person. At the same time the Scriptures affirm that believers remain lifelong sinners. For the believer who is simultaneously saint and sinner, waiting between the "already" of baptism into Christ and the "not yet" of the new being, waiting in obedience is part of what it means to be faithful.²⁷

B. Sacramental Connections

And therein lies a key point which should also be central to every funeral sermon—recalling the baptism of the one who has died. As Wayne Menking has written:

Liturgically the funeral is understood as the conclusion of the baptismal liturgy. The water and the word bring the new creature into being, but its completion comes at the resurrection which is celebrated in the funeral. Thus the baptism and the funeral form the beginning and the end of the Christian life, which is itself the entire baptismal liturgy of moving between death and life, old and new, darkness and light.²⁸

Proceeding, in this connection, from the sacrament of baptism to the sacrament of the altar, the question is frequently asked whether it is appropriate to celebrate the eucharist at a funeral. A colleague, however, has observed that this question should be phrased: "Is it appropriate to have a funeral at a celebration of the eucharist?" He believes it is, as does the author. An appropriate eucharistic funeral, however, would be quite unlike one conducted by an avant-garde preacher on the West Coast in the author's presence. The pastor's sockless, sandalled feet were enough of a distraction. But, worse, in the sermon he said: "Frank, as you all know, loved a party. [It was well known that the man was an alcoholic.] Well, Frank is with the Lord now and enjoying the greatest party he ever attended—in heaven." Later, when the pastor began the eucharistic portion of the service, he welcomed the people to the chancel with abandon: "Let the bash begin!" Clearly the mourners need a far more sublime and profound "word from the Lord."

C. The Resurrection of the Dead

In addition to all the questions alluded to earlier, there is the ultimate question: "What happens at death—and beyond?" Here the preacher is called to proclaim with *parrhesia* and conviction: "Our death is certain. But our resurrection is also certain. For God has made us His own in baptism. He has promised: 'I will never leave thee nor forsake thee' (Hebrews 13:5). 'Because I live, ye shall live also' (John 14:19)."

As Luther puts it, "We are to sleep until He comes and knocks on the grave and says, 'Dr. Martin, get up.' Then I will arise in a moment and will be eternally happy with Him."²⁹ We shall be "happy with Him." What more can we say to the mourners and our own grieving spirits? Three little words, "with the Lord," are all we need to know about heaven and be content!³⁰

IV. The Structure of the Sermon

To proceed now more specifically to the composition of the sermon, about ninety years ago John Henry Jowett wrote these words which are still as true today:

No sermon is ready for preaching, nor ready for writing out, until we can express its theme in a short pregnant sentence as clear as a crystal. I find the getting of that sentence the hardest, the most exacting, and the most fruitful labor in my study.³¹

The preacher would likewise do well to prepare a fifteen-word summary of his sermon in terms of law and gospel, problem and resolution. Already implicit, of course, in such a summary are the purposes of the funeral sermon in general—to help the hearers to face the reality of death and to assist them in finding comfort in the certainty of the resurrection unto eternal life for those who believe in Jesus Christ.

Hughes suggests a progression or sequence which, of course, may vary with the particular circumstances. There is an interweaving of three stories: the dead person's, the mourners', and God's. We begin with the story of the death, with a balanced reference to the

deceased. Certainly the dead person's name can be used in a proper way. Then there is a shift to the mourners' stories. The primary focus of the sermon is the survivors. What questions are they asking? Then there is a smooth transition into the text, such as the depiction of the grieving disciples after Good Friday or of the two disciples of Emmaus, grieving the death of their Lord. (A clear identification can be made between the first-century mourners in both these texts and the twentieth-century mourners hearing the sermon.)

Whatever the text, however, the law (the "malady" as Caemmerer would call it) is clearly before the mourners, if the casket is in the church. Here the preacher will be particularly concerned about the proper distinction between law and gospel—and the proper quantity of each. The "line of direction," however (as Gerhard Aho would say), is towards the proclamation of the good news of the gospel. Hughes argues rightly:

The most effective text for funeral sermons is a hinge. At the grave of Lazarus we not only see Jesus weep, but we hear the good news, "I am the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25). In the upper room we not only sense the disciples' fear, but we hear the reassuring, "Peace be with you" (John 20:19). In the midst of these narratives the action shifts from human anguish to God's promise of help.³²

And so we focus on the death and resurrection of Christ—for us! That is the heart of funeral preaching for Lutheran pastors.

V. An Example of the Sermon

The following example of a funeral sermon once preached by the author may not follow Hughes' schema in every detail. It is, however, one *approach* in a particular situation, and readers may see in it some of the elements which have been discussed here. The deceased was a relative's husband. About fifty-three years old, he was a Christian, although not very active in a church. The author was asked to preach the sermon, with only a few family members present.

There is reference in the Bible to one man who never died. His name was Enoch. Scripture says God translated him directly from life on earth to being in the presence of God in heaven.

A little girl was once asked to tell the story of Enoch. She said: "Well, Enoch and God were good friends. And they used to take long walks in Enoch's garden. And one day God said, 'Enoch, you look tired. Why don't you come up to My place and stay and rest awhile?' And so he did."

In a sense, we can say that God said the same thing to Max. God said: "Max, you look very tired. Why don't you come up to My place and stay and rest?"

And that poetic way of looking at Max's passing away from our presence may comfort us. But we do not say that God *caused* Max's death. Well-meaning people may say "God called him home," or "God took him." But God does not cause death. We do—for we are all mortal—all sinners.

Death comes upon us all because of our sinful condition—our sins of commission and omission which place ourselves first and God last in our lives. Sin is just that—self-absorption and self-centeredness. Sin is ignoring God and planning our lives as if He did not exist. It is having a meager prayer life or no prayer life at all. It is having little to do with Christ's church on earth—fallible as we all admit the church is as an institution. Sin is forgetting one's baptism by which we were forgiven our sins by the gracious redemptive power of God's Holy Spirit. It is not going to holy communion where we receive Christ's body and blood for the forgiveness of our sins. In sum, sin is living one's life independent from God.

A memorial service concerns not just the dead, but the living. God calls us all—people in the church and outside it—to repentance. We have a gracious God who does not desire our punishment and death, but who sent His only beloved Son into the world to suffer and die on the cross for our sins.

God is not a God of "cheap grace"—easy forgiveness. The payment for our sin cost Him the life of His Son, our Savior. But by Christ's death and resurrection we are forgiven people. God declares us righteous through Christ's atoning work for us. We cannot save ourselves. Christ did. And He wants the assurance and peace and comfort and hope of that forgiveness to be a living reality in our daily lives. God says: "I have graven thee on the palms of My hands. I have redeemed thee. Thou art Mine."

Max believed that promise. He was baptized and knew he was a forgiven child of God. He read much, including E. W. A. Koehler's *Summary of Christian Doctrine*. Max and I talked about that book and another book in which he was intensely interested concerning the nature of Christ. In February in our conversation I said I would get a copy of another book for him, and he was looking forward to receiving it. Because of his illness, I was not able to put it into his hands. It was entitled *life with God*. And that is what Max has right now—Life with God. We need to know only three words about Max's state right now. The words are "with the Lord." That is what life eternal is—being in the loving personal presence of God Himself. Nothing can be more wonderful.

We here today are human, and we have sorrow at losing Max. But Max would not have us grieve. For he is "with the Lord"!

Just imagine—just *imagine* if Eloise were going through all of Max's papers, and she found a letter from him which was like the following one. Can you imagine him writing these words?

A Final Letter to Eloise and My Sons: "Whenever I die, please do not grieve for me. I am beyond pain—by God's grace in the presence of our Lord. *You* are the ones in pain. That grieves me *now*. But in heaven I will not know pain.

"So if you hurt, I am truly sorry. But dwell on

the joys—the *many* joyful times God permitted us to have together. God has been most merciful and gracious to us!

"Remember our common faith in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. He lives in our hearts. And think of me as living in your hearts and lives now, too.

"So 'do not sorrow as those who have no hope.' I will see you again! I love each of you so much—each in a very special and different way.

"So now rejoice! Christ died for us—and rose again! And because of that I will see you again!"

Max is at peace. Let us be at peace then. And let us find our comfort in Him alone who gives solace to our grief—Jesus Christ, who forgives us all our sins and seals to us the sure and certain hope of life eternal. Amen.

Every different occasion, of course, will dictate a different approach. (One much admired brother in Chicago preached at fifty-four funerals in one year.)

VI. The Context of the Sermon

Obviously, the most appropriate place for the funeral service of a Christian is the church. Furthermore, as Willimon says:

A funeral may be primarily for the grieving family, but it is not exclusively for them. It is for all of us. A funeral, like every other act of Christian worship, is for the church! . . . Positive pastoral values are lost when any worship service—wedding, funeral, baptism, or eucharist—becomes a private, noncommunal affair.³³

Loren Shiley also affirms the conducting of the funeral in the church and speaks of the artificiality of the funeral home with the "shielded" family in a side room. He states in addition:

What about singing? That's another reason why a funeral home atmosphere is artificial . . . rarely is there anything

more than a few Scripture readings, poetry, and a mini-talk. The world's most universal language is music and to say we cannot stand music at a funeral is to say we have nothing to sing about.

The purpose of a Christian funeral is not to hear sentimental, syrupy funeral music but the purpose is worship . . . focusing our attention on the greatness and goodness of God. It is a marvelous time to sing the great and grand hymns of Christian hope. Families should not choose hymns which make them emotional but should choose hymns which have a devotional uplift. No Christian would wish to be so overcome with grief that he cannot join in thanks to Christ for overcoming death itself!³⁴

Accordingly, the funeral sermon can also well include appropriate hymn verses, especially a favorite hymn of the person who has died.³⁵

Conclusion

The conducting of the funeral service in the house of God and, yet more specifically, the preaching of a funeral sermon in the midst of this service is simply one application of the ministry to the people of God in general.³⁶ In all his service to his flock the faithful pastor lives as Paul tells the Philippians (1:23-26): "For I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart and to be with Christ, which is far better; nevertheless to abide in the flesh is more needful for you. And having this confidence, I know that I shall abide and continue with you all for your furtherance and joy of faith, that your rejoicing may be more abundant in Jesus Christ for me by my coming to you again."

Endnotes

1. This article is adapted from an essay presented to the Pastoral Conference of the Minnesota South District of the LCMS, meeting in Mankato, Minnesota, on October 22, 1990.

2. Robert G. Hughes, *A Trumpet in Darkness: Preaching to Mourners* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985). Hughes is Director of the Academy of Preachers and new president (beginning in 1990) of Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. His book is the best resource on the funeral sermon. It is used as a required text in the senior class called "Preaching Workshop" in Concordia Theological Seminary.
3. Hughes, p. 9.
4. Ibid.
5. Hughes, p. 10.
6. Ibid.
7. Hughes, p. 13.
8. William H. Willimon, "Liturgy and Life's Crises: The Funeral," *Worship and Pastoral Care* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1979), p. 102.
9. Willimon, p. 103.
10. Willimon, p. 104.
11. Willimon, pp. 105-106. In the months that follow loneliness can also assail the grievers. One of the finest pastoral aids in this connection is Elizabeth Elliot, "Those Who Are Left" (*Christianity Today*, February 27, 1976). It could well be given to every widow and widower.
12. Hughes, pp. 24-27.
13. Hughes, pp. 27-30.
14. Quoted in Willimon, p. 112.
15. See note 1 above.
16. Donald L. Deffner, *Myth or Faith: An Issue-Oriented Adult Instruction Course* (unpublished manuscript); see also Deffner, *Myths about the Lutheran Church* (Fort Wayne: Concordia Theological Seminary Press, n.d.), p. 35.

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17. Hughes, p. 31.
 18. Hughes, p. 32.
 19. Hughes, pp. 32-33.
 20. Hughes, pp. 33-34.
 21. Hughes, p. 35.
 22. John H. Hewett, *After Suicide* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980), p. 23.
 23. Hewett, pp. 75-76.
 24. Martin Luther, "Suicides Are Not Necessarily Damned" (April 7, 1532, No. 222), *Luther's Works: American Edition*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann, 55 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1955-1986), 54, ed. and trans. by Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), p. 29.
 25. John Pless, "Martin Luther: Preacher of the Cross," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 51:2-3 (April-July 1987), p. 96. He particularly cites Luther's precise summary of the theology of the cross in Theses 18-26 of the Heidelberg Theses of 1518. Also helpful is the depiction of Luther's move from preaching "Christ as example" to preaching Christ as *donum*, p. 96.
 26. Donald L. Deffner, *The Compassionate Mind: Theological Dialog with the Educated* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1990), pp. 81-82.
 27. Hughes, p. 63.
 28. Wayne Menking, "The Cross as a Way of Life: Towards Understanding and Using Luther's Small Catechism as a Resource for Spiritual Growth and Development in Lutheran Congregations" (unpublished Doctor of Ministry dissertation, San Francisco Theological Seminary, San Anselmo, California, 1990), p. 152.
 29. *D. Martin Luther's Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*

(Weimar, Hermann Böhlau and Nachfolger, 1883- , popularly called the "Weimar Ausgabe") 37, p. 151, quoted in Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, trans. Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), p. 415.

30. Also recommended are two pieces of literature (to which John Pless has drawn the author's attention) which stress the resurrection in the funeral sermon: (1.) "The Resurrection and the Life," in Ian Siggin, *Martin Luther's Doctrine of Christ* (Yale, 1970); and (2.) Gerald Krispin "The Consolation of the Resurrection in Luther," *Lutheran Theological Review* II:1 (Autumn-Winter 1989-1990), pp. 37-51.
31. John Henry Jowett, *The Preacher, His Life and Work* (New York: Doran, 1912), p. 133.
32. Hughes, p. 88.
33. Willimon, p. 115.
34. Loren Shiley, "The Christian Funeral," ed. Daniel Reuning (Fort Wayne: Concordia Theological Seminary Press, 1969).
35. In this connection see Robin A. Leaver, *The Funeral Sermon for Heinrich Schutz*, in "Music in the Service of the Church," ed. Carl Schalk (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1985). In its original form the sermon would take about two hours to deliver; this encapsulated version fills twenty-four pages. It is especially noteworthy for its correlation of Christian doctrine with the treasures of Christian hymnody.
36. An interesting study entitled "Examining Clergy Funeral Practices," reporting the results of surveys, was presented by Clifford Bira of Flushing, Michigan, to the Circuit Counselors' Conference of the Michigan District of the LCMS in autumn of 1988.