



## **SACRED CERMONIES:**

### **The Funeral**

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Today we are venturing into some<sup>1</sup> of the deepest water of human experience ... with profound feelings in them. We've been studying the sacred ceremonies of our lives. Today we look at the Christian funeral. May God speak to us today. We pray.

I come to this message as one who has been on both the giving and receiving end. I have done many funerals. I have done them for complete strangers, standing virtually alone at a graveside in a cemetery. I have done them for dear friends in a packed sanctuary. I have done them at the beach where the cremains were carried into the ocean waves. I did one once in a delicatessen. The staff there was the deceased waitress' only family really. So that's where we did it, prior to the lunch crowd arriving, with me standing next to the jar of pickles near the cash register.

Sometimes doing funerals can be tricky. There are competing interests and you have to finesse it just right. For example, there were two evil brothers. They were rich, but used their money for wrong. They attended the same church and looked to be perfect

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<sup>1</sup> I say "some" even though there are those who would say that is the most profound. I appreciate, in that respect, the orthodox priest who, during the Russian revolution, was separated for a great time from his father. When they met again, the father said he had been worried. The son asked, "Because I might have died?" The father replied, "No, I was worried something worse might have happened, like you losing your integrity." There are different valuations in life.

Christians. Their pastor retired, and a new one was hired. Now he was gifted, not only to see right through to how the brothers really were, but he was gifted in other ways, so that the church started to swell in numbers. That meant a fund raising campaign to build a new assembly hall. All of a sudden, one of the brothers died. The remaining brother sought out the new pastor the day before the funeral and handed him a check for the amount needed to finish paying for the new building.

"I have only one condition," he said. "At his funeral, you must say my brother was a saint." The pastor gave his word, and deposited the check.

The next day, at the funeral, the pastor did not hold back. "He was an evil man," the pastor said. "He cheated, did his family wrong, ...." After going on in this vein for a small time, he concluded with, "But compared to his brother, he was a saint."

Yep, it can be tricky being a pastor. I haven't quite faced that, but I have done funerals where the few family members present were muttering disgust, and only present out of obligation. I've done them where much laughter of love and faith shined through the tears of sorrow.

And I've been the one in the pew with so much pain in my heart that everything seemed in slow motion.

Now there are questions with funerals that we all seem curious about. We could cover practical matters like what I need from family members when I help them plan a funeral, and can anybody's ashes be put in our memorial garden? We could go through the funeral glossary and discuss what a pall is, or interment versus interment versus inurnment. We could cover more theological ones, like the difference between cremation and burial. Or, what do we do with a suicide victim?

Funerals are different in different places. In some places you have to wait for the ground to thaw to do a burial, and in other places, because of the heat, you have to bury the person right away. In some, the culture has people being very reserved, and in others there may be loud wailing or even a Dixie jazz band.

Funerals have changed a lot over the years. Once upon a time, our loved one died most times at home and his or her body was cared for there by the family. The procession to the graveyard was a walking affair. The casket was met by the minister at the front door and then situated perpendicular to the communion table so as to not obscure the view of the communion table and cross. The graveyard was next to the church. Now, you can get a casket at Costco, people die in the hospital, and the funeral director staff look like Secret Service agents monitoring the gravesite. So things have changed.

But what hasn't changed is people's interest in having a *good* funeral. Sometimes people will say to a pastor, "You do a good funeral." Well, okay...but what is a good funeral?

The funeral service is a type of worship service. Weddings are a type of worship service. Sundays have a type of worship service. So we might answer that a good funeral is one that is worshipful, not of the deceased, but of God.<sup>2</sup>

Yet that begs the question in a way. What's a good funeral? A worshipful one. Ok, what makes for a good, worshipful funeral?

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<sup>2</sup> From the Worship Book of the PCUSA, "We mourn," here I say it verbatim, "the death of someone we knew and loved. It is inevitable that we should feel this sadness, and it is natural and right that we should wish to express it; *but* we are gathered now *for one main purpose: to remember the love and promises of God.*"

A good, worshipful funeral has five elements. Churches, pastors, the Bible, the people of God over the centuries have centered on these and said a good funeral has them.

It has first, and foremost, the Gospel. Here's the reality #1, death. And it isn't nice. It wasn't nice even for Jesus. Life is gone. Bonds are severed. We are not immortal. All life is like grass and the grass withers, the flowers fall. It's hard. Death is not nice. We face that at a funeral and we face it honestly.

We often want a funeral not to be sad, to be a celebration. And we can all understand that. At the same time, Christian funerals do not just gloss over death as a non-issue.

But while facing its hardness honestly, Christians also shake their fist in its face...because, here's the reality #2, Jesus rose from the dead. Without facing the awfulness of death, we don't get the wonder of His rising. He is the Great Shepherd and "Thou art with me in the valley of the shadow of death." "Thou wilt watch over my coming and my going, now and forevermore." I am the resurrection and the life. He has gone before us. He prepares a place for us. He is the first fruits of the resurrection.

And this is not just a thought we made up to comfort us in an anesthetic sort of way, but an historical reality. Educated, bright people knew Jesus to be 100% dead, and then found him to be 100% alive. So, so, so ... death is not the final word, Christ is!

This is why it is called a Service of Witness to the Resurrection. This is why Paul says, "I don't want you to grieve as those without hope."

Sometimes people refer to a funeral as a Celebration of Life service and that's fine. But,

remember we are not saved by the life of the deceased person, no matter how wonderful they were. Celebration happens because of the life of Jesus. Because of his resurrection. A good funeral especially remembers Him, his resurrection.

Second, it has the element of offering. An airplane was about to crash and someone yelled to the pastor on board to do something religious. So he got up and started to take an offering.

When we say a funeral has the element of offering, that's not what we mean exactly. Worship is about truth – God is, resurrection is...let's get in touch with the truth. But worship is also about offering.

We lean into God; we give to God; we express to God. And we give him tears. We give him regrets. What we didn't say to the one gone. What we did say. What they felt was undone. We give him, perhaps, anger. "This hurts, God, and I don't like it!" We give him, of course, thanks ... for the love God showed to our loved one, the way God loved us through our loved one, for life itself, for the gospel hope. And we give him the deceased. You made him. You bought him. You shared him with us. We give him back to you. We entrust him to you.

Third, it has the element of dedication. The Psalmist said, "Teach us to number our days that we might get a heart of wisdom." In a funeral we are face to face with the fundamentals, and what we really believe in the face of death. And in these rarified moments, we take stock. We think about how we are and how we want to be, whether we belong to God and honor him. All this pondering should lead to more than a committal of the body to the ground, but a committal of our lives to a life respectful of God.

Fourth, it has the element of togetherness. "Together we need to come to God, the God we sense exists and that we know so well in Jesus Christ." Together. We need to be consoled, to console, to care for the deceased, to listen to the promises and love of God.

There is never an audience at church. We are all "in the play." We all have a part to play. We are all holding out the candle of thought and love and witness and presence. We are fellow travelers.

The Christian who dies, does not die alone. The Christian who mourns, does not mourn alone. Even if there was no actual person present at death or at the funeral, there is a great cloud of witnesses. There is a church triumphant who is present. Jesus is present. His people and angels are present.

In our togetherness we pray. Sometimes in pain we cannot, and our brothers and sisters pray for us...yes, for us, but also they pray our prayers for us when we cannot. They hold our candle of faith when our hands are unsteady.

I like this hymn that expresses our togetherness.

There's a village hidden deep in the valley  
Among the pine trees half forlorn  
And there on a sunny morning  
Little Jimmy Brown was born  
All the chapel bells were ringing  
In the little valley town  
And the songs that they were singing  
Were for baby Jimmy Brown

Then the little congregation

Prayed for guidance from above  
Lead us not into temptation,  
Bless this hour of meditation  
Guide him with eternal love

There's a village hidden deep in the valley  
Beneath the mountains high above  
And there, twenty years thereafter  
Jimmy was to meet his love

All the chapel bells were ringing,  
Was a great day in his life  
Cause the songs that they were singing  
Were for Jimmy and his wife

Then the little congregation  
Prayed for guidance from above  
Lead us not into temptation,  
Bless oh Lord this celebration  
May their lives be filled with love

From the village hidden deep in the valley  
One rainy morning dark and gray  
A soul winged its way to heaven  
Jimmy Brown had passed away

Just a lonely bell was ringing  
In the little valley town  
Twas farewell that it was singing  
To our good old Jimmy Brown

And the little congregation  
Prayed for guidance from above  
Lead us not into temptation,

May his soul find the salvation  
Of thy great eternal love"

In baptism we lay a child given by God into the arms of parents, and he or she is inducted into the church below. At the other end of life, we have a funeral where we take a baptized believer and lay them into the arms of God, and he or she is inducted into the church above.

This is the conclusion of the message, but a Christian funeral while a kind of conclusion is never just a conclusion. While we hope it gives closure, it is never really just closure. For the dead in Christ live. As C.S. Lewis wrote, "For them (the departed) ... all their life in this world ... was just the cover and title page: now they are beginning Chapter One of the Great Story, which goes on forever and in which every chapter is better than the one before."

*If you would like to talk with someone about this message or your spiritual life, or to have someone pray with you, the pastors and elders of the church would welcome your call.*

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