



KIP R. GILTS

# fficiating at a funeral

## AN AWESOME AND INTIMATE TASK

"CHAPLAIN, I'D LIKE FOR YOU TO DO MY MOTHER'S FUNERAL."

CHAPLAIN! WHO WAS SHE TALKING TO? I WAS FRESH OUT OF SEMINARY, INSECURE, AND HAD NOT EVEN ATTENDED MANY FUNERALS.

Thus began my encounter with mortality, finitude, and the task of officiating a funeral. Standing up in the midst of indescribable grief, hoping to say words that do not sound trite, superficial, and shallow was, and is, a frightening experience.

Why do we have funerals anyway? One's response to that question will become the guide for how one approaches this intimate task. My belief is that funerals help us bring closure, affirm life, and proclaim faith. Therefore, my first words when officiating a funeral are much like the greeting in the *Book of Worship*, "We have come to celebrate life, to mourn our loss at a time of death, and to proclaim our faith."

Since my first fearful encounter as a hospital chaplain intern, I have taken part in hundreds of funerals and memorial services. I have not always known the person whose life I was charged with remembering; I have sometimes known the person very well. Regardless of how well I knew the person who died, someone in the congregation knew that person deeply, and his or her heart often feels as if it is about to break. *It is, therefore, imperative that we, as pastors, spend time with the loved ones of the person to be remembered.* What do they remember most? What stories speak to them of the person's character and life? What words

would friends and associates use to describe the person being remembered? We must spend some time studying the human document, even as we move toward applying the sacred writings to persons in grief. That is an awesome task.

I read the ritual of a "Service of Death and Resurrection" as if I were studying for a final exam. I wanted to do it right, but I did not want the service to seem wooden. That would never do. Each element of the ritual needed to be laced with the unique elements of the individual.

My first step as a novice chaplain was to race to the Christian bookstore and pick up a minister's manual, something to give some structure to what I was to do. Allow me to be presumptuous enough to share with you what has evolved since then.

### CALL TO WORSHIP

If the entire service is to be held in one place, I often start with "The Word of Grace." Jesus' promise of life is far more profound than anything I can write. However, if an interment is to be held, I usually use this reading to open that brief and final service. The situation itself directs any other call to worship. Sometimes I will begin with Psalm 46:1-3, because for some in attendance the earth has shaken, the mountains have fallen, the seas are roaring. Often I use Psalm 62:1-2, because we do depend on God for strength and salvation. Never should a scripture be used without first thinking what those first few words say to the family.

### INVOCATION

The first prayer offered ought to be personal, relevant, and sincere. To begin a service with awkward and stoic reading seldom offers much comfort to the bereaved. This is not to say that the prayers in the *Book of Worship* are to be discarded. Phrases like "Lord, you know our needs before we ask and our ignorance in asking" and "Give to us now your grace that as we shrink before the mystery of death, we may see the light of eternity" say exactly what I want to say to God. However, to weave these powerful phrases into a personal petition for God's guidance and for God's presence is my task in this element of the service.

### GREETING

After the Call to Worship and Invocation, I address the congregation as to why we are gathered together. *First, we have come together to celebrate life.* People have gone to great lengths to be present because in some way that person's life has touched their lives. *We have come also to mourn our loss.* I remind the congregation that it is appropriate to grieve. Some people feel guilty about grieving saying, "It's selfish of me to have wanted him/her to continue like he/she was. I know he/she is in a better place. I should be happy." Others feel less faithful, saying, "This is God's will, why am I crying? If I truly believe in eternal life, my grief is really doubting." Grief is an expression of love, not selfishness or faithlessness. We come together to mourn our loss. Thirdly, *we come*

together to proclaim our faith—to affirm that this life is not all that there is, that even the longest life is but a vapor when compared to eternity.

I find that transitions are important when attempting to reap the benefits of the ritual while maintaining the personal aspect. Therefore, I remind the congregation that these three tasks, celebrating life, mourning our loss, and proclaiming our faith are accomplished through scripture, song, and stories.

## SCRIPTURE READING

There is such power in the scriptures' relevance to life situations. Certainly this is true when addressing death and hope. The Old Testament has beautiful words including promise of feast to exiles (Isaiah 25:6-8), reminders to children of parents' teachings (Proverbs 6:20-22), virtues of a loving mother and wife (Proverbs 31:10), and reflections on righteousness (Micah 6:4-6). The New Testament is rich with reflecting on life after death (I Corinthians 15:51-58; I Thessalonians 4:13-18), words addressed to anxious grievers (John 14:1-3, 27), affirmation of children (Matthew 18:1-6), and appreciation of generations' influences (II Timothy 1:5). Regardless of which scriptures you choose, make sure they are appropriate for the individual.

## SONG

Music can do what we preachers cannot. It can move beyond words that are never deep enough and massage the soul. I have seen music minister more to a family than anything else in the service. While I do not force music into the service, I certainly welcome it.

## NAMING AND WITNESS

When first I saw these words in the ritual, I was oblivious as to what they meant. I wanted to do this right, so I did not want to delete it out of ignorance. So I naively reflected on a "name." I thought about all the stories I'd heard about the person being remembered, all the experiences that I had shared with the individual, and other information that I had gathered. *What name, I thought, would I give to this person that sums up who I experienced in him/her?* It was only later that I discovered "Naming" meant "read obituary here." Now I print the obituary on the back of the bulletin, call the congregation's attention to that, then state that I choose to

reflect on the person's qualities and characteristics rather than facts and figures. Names that I have used in the past are "a man of integrity," "gardener," "angel: a messenger of God," "loyal," "gentle," "clown," "laughter," "caregiver," "feisty," "ornery," "adventurer."

Occasionally, family members or close friends will want to speak at a funeral. Again, because my primary task is to celebrate life, I affirm this. I do encourage those individuals to write out every word they will share so that if emotions overwhelm them, I can read their tribute on their behalf. This also helps the speakers to focus their reflections. If a witness is to be offered, I briefly introduce it by saying, "Scriptures and songs are not all that we long for today, we long for stories as well. Jane Doe comes now to share her stories." I then move into the Naming.

A word probably needs to be said regarding questionable songs, poems and personal remarks. Occasionally a family member will want something included in the service with which the pastor is not comfortable. The first thing to do in this case is self-reflection. That is, clarify in your own mind two questions: 1) *Is this a matter of theology or taste?* Sometimes we pastors object to certain things because they're not our taste. I'm sure people have walked into my office and wondered why I chose to spend money on that and then be foolish enough to hang it on my wall. We can do the same with personal articles that the family wants to include. Be careful that your objections are not a matter of personal taste. 2) *Am I drawing too strict of a line between the sacred and the secular?* It always amazes me that we pastors encourage our congregations to live out their Christianity in the real world and then we do so little integration in our own services of worship. I have played "Top 40" songs in worship to let the congregation know that what I am preaching about is a topic of concern to others as well.

Still, there are occasions when these two questions have been considered and the material is, in fact, inappropriate for a worship service. Most families will yield to the pastor's direction in these matters. The important issue is how do we pastor the family through this awkward experience. In the rare instances where this would happen, I think it best to be honest with the family by saying, "I have to admit, I'm uncomfortable with this song, poem or story. It is somewhat distracting to me and I fear it will be to some others as well. I would like to leave this out of this service for your loved one." What

this does is provide the family with an explanation without condemning them for suggesting it.

## SILENT MEDITATION

After I have offered a name and shared a story or two of why that name fits my experience, then I ask the congregation to pause and reflect on what name they would choose to describe the person whose life we celebrate. During the reflection, a song may be played or sung, once again, incorporating the power of music in the intimate task of the funeral/memorial service. I close this time of reflection with a brief prayer asking God to seal these memories in our hearts as lasting treasures.

## THE MESSAGE

The message, to me, is a microcosm of the entire service. It integrates the scripture with the stories of the person who is being remembered and the lives of those gathered together. Without the scripture, the service would be shallow and without hope. Without the stories, the scriptures seem disconnected and perhaps even irrelevant.

The apostle Paul instructed the Thessalonians about death and resurrection so they "would not grieve as those who have no hope." (I Thessalonians 4:13). He concluded that passage by writing: *"Therefore, encourage one another with these words."* (I Thessalonians 4:18). This, to me, is a big part of why we come together at funerals: to give comfort, to lean on each other, to encourage one another. I believe we, as pastors, do that when we blend the power of the scriptures, the order of the ritual, and the unique aspects of the individual.

May God bless and guide each one of us as we attempt to speak in moments where words seem so inadequate. □



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