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PRINCIPLES for PREACHING at FUNERALS

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After 20 years in the ministry, I have learned that many pastors are uneasy about doing funerals; some even choose not to preach during funeral services. I would like to suggest five principles that can help us preach funeral sermons that give comfort and hope to family and friends in any circumstances.

PRINCIPLE No. 1

Keep central the idea that Paul expresses in 2 Corinthians 3:2-3:

"You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all; and you show that you are a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts."

For me, this means that everyone teaches us something about how to live, how to relate to others, and what a relationship with God looks like. This lesson may be "taught" in a positive way, or it may be taught in a negative way. And we, as pastors, ought not be afraid to point this out to those who have gathered.

This is easy, of course, when the deceased is a praiseworthy person. But it never rings true to heap praise on a man who dies in a car crash, drunk, with his mistress by his side. It also happens that abusive parents die, leaving a good deal of unfinished business unfinished forever. Men and women trapped in a cycle of pain and addiction die every day. Suicides happen.

In such cases, how can we be honest and still comfort the bereaved? *First*, we need not be crass, just honest. We can say, gently, that this person was living in ways that were hurtful to others. Without naming names, we might address the anger and disappointment that many have felt. *Second*, we need to remember that Jesus ate in the homes of profiteers, kept company with prostitutes, invited a zealot [read: gang member] to be a disciple. *Third*, we can honestly — and scripturally — preach that "God is Love" and that

"the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart." Just because a person was living a hell on earth doesn't automatically put her in hell after death.

PRINCIPLE No. 2

Take the time to interview family and friends before doing a funeral.

I remember doing a funeral early in my career, at the request of the local funeral director. I had barely met the family when they started handing around pictures of their deceased mother. I quickly learned that she wore too much makeup, tight dresses, and hung around in bars every weekend! I was "young" in my ministry, but I sensed I was in trouble. Happily, whether by instinct or inspiration, I sat down and said to the adult children around me, "Tell me about your mother." They laughed and said, "Well, she was quite the party gal. . ." and then, "She was the nicest person. . . . She lent money to everybody — anybody who asked, if she had anything to give, she did.

She never had a bad word to say about anybody. She was awful lonely after Dad died, but she said nobody could ever replace him. I don't think she ever went out with another man, though she was alone the last fifteen years of her life." Finally, her eldest son turned to me and said, "She's not the type you get in your church, that's for sure. Are you OK with doing this funeral for her?"

I said in my sermon for her funeral the same thing I told her son: "Jesus was accused of being a glutton and a drunkard because of the people he ate and drank with. And he said those folks were closer to heaven than the good people who were criticizing him. Helen followed the most basic principles Jesus held out — love your neighbor, lend without expectation of being repaid, don't worry about tomorrow, but trust God."

On the other hand, I did a funeral for a man I thought I had known well. He was a lonely old man, over 90, gruff in his demeanor. I knew a good deal of this was due to depression and pain, but I wondered what to say at his funeral. I began interviewing church members I thought would remember him as he had been 50 years ago. What a surprise! He was remembered fondly, as having a wonderful laugh, as being the host of many a cook-out for the youth (all in their 70's now) and an avid fisherman.

PRINCIPLE No. 3

Never lose this opportunity to preach the Good News to those gathered.

Funerals bring people to church who would not otherwise be there. I remember with great pain the funeral of a friend who had died of an extremely rare brain syndrome. He died slowly, losing the framework of his personality, then body functions, and died of seizures that wracked his body for months before he died. A crowd, including many unchurched folk, filled the sanctuary. But the opportunity to preach the gospel was lost as the pastor vacillated between the idea that

death in Ned's case was a welcome release from his suffering and the idea that death is our enemy.

It can be very effective to share our own fear of death, our own uncertainty, with the congregation in order to witness to the work of God in our lives. But the most important thing we have to offer is *our personal witness* to the power of the resurrection in our own lives and work.

PRINCIPLE NO. 4

Preach to the congregation as well as the family.

I was called on to do a funeral for a young man I had never known who was killed in an auto accident. An elderly widow was left without her only son. Because she had multiple health problems, Sam had turned his mom's basement into an apartment for himself so he could take care of her. Even when he was out for the evening, he would call home at her bedtime to make sure she was all right. The fact that his rather rough, biker club often made fun of his faith and the fact that he took his Mom to church whenever she was able was mentioned in passing. I went early to the funeral parlor, to see if I could talk to some of Sam's biker friends. I learned that they respected Sam and his faith.

At the funeral, I asked the congregation, "Remember those tests we used to take in school, where we couldn't turn a page until we were told to, and we had to be careful that our pencil marks stayed between the lines?" Many heads nodded around the room. "The part I hated most was when the teacher would say, 'Put down your pencils. Time's up.' That's what happened to Sam. He was in the middle of his life, and he got told, 'Time's up. You're done, ready or not.'" A young man came up to me after the funeral and said, "Your message really spoke to me. I haven't been living such a good life up until now, but I'm determined to change. I'll take over caring for Sam's mom." I saw his mother a year or so later, and she said she'd gained a new son.

Everyone teaches us something about how to live, how to relate to others, and what a relationship with God looks like.

PRINCIPLE NO. 5

Find the theme of this person's life as witnessed by others.

I attended the funeral of Fred, who hadn't had much use for the church. He had been a small-engine repair expert, running his own business out of his garage. In his sermon, the pastor said, "Fred could tell you everything you might ever need to know about the engine you'd brought to him. And he could fix almost anything that went wrong with them. But sometimes he would have to say, 'It's beyond fixing. Buy a new one.'"

But then the pastor missed the connection between this statement and what had happened to Fred. He had struggled against cancer for seven long years. The last two years of his life he had contended

constantly with pain.

This was the opportunity to preach the Good News, using Fred's life theme. Like the engines Fred fixed, Fred's body had been through many repairs. Surgery was followed by radiation, by chemotherapy, by pain pills. Fred had kept going as long as he could, but the time came when God said, "Fred, I'm sorry. This body just can't be repaired. Come to me, and I'll give you a new one."

Preached that way, the Gospel could have

given comfort and encouraged those who had hoped that Fred would be healed in this life, and now despaired. It could have told them that though Fred had had problems with the church, God is bigger than the church. It could have taught them to trust Fred to God as they had trusted their engines to Fred. □



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