



SHOULD WE *Preach* AT FUNERALS?

WILLIAM B. MCCLAIN

A few months ago I attended the funeral of my brother-in-law, Robert Harris. Robert was a devoted, staunch, and active United Methodist layman in Sweet Home United Methodist Church in Gadsden, Alabama, for more than 55 years. He served the church in virtually every capacity: Sunday School teacher and superintendent, steward (in the old days of the Steward Board, which the African American Methodist Churches have retained), lay leader, trustee, delegate to Annual Conference many times, chair of virtually every board of the church, life-long tither to the church, and so on. He cut the grass, mopped the floors, repaired whatever needed repairing, whatever the church needed.

As he had requested, there was a simple graveside service at the cemetery. None of the family objected. He had made it clear to all of us many years ago that this was what he wanted.

This would have been a very unlikely occurrence a few years ago for someone of his stature in the African American Church and community, especially in the South. In fact, it would have been perceived as a downright embarrassment. Such services were reserved for stillborn babies, very, very old people who had no family left, non-Christians, and people of very low repute. And, even in the case of people in

the last two categories, there was still the funeral chapel service, with the preacher called on to say “the last few words.”

Things are changing in the African American community and in the Black Church—of every denomination. The church funeral, which has been so much a part of the Black culture, is occurring less frequently. However, the church funeral is still an important occasion in the African American Church and community, often attended in large numbers. It is a celebration of the “homegoing” of the faithful, as well as an attempt to get the less-than-faithful “home.” It is also a time for preaching the gospel—time even for a clear evangelical and prophetic word, and not just some words of comfort to the bereaved. It is an occasion and opportunity for the preacher to respond to the question: “Is there any word from the Lord?”

In the African American Church tradition, the word “eulogy” is used broadly to refer to a sermon in which the pastor speaks of the life of the deceased, but also shares a message based on a scriptural text in which the gospel is brought to bear on human need. What more important time and place than a funeral for the sermon to deal with the issues of life and death, human existence, the meaning of life, and the Divine requirement? What better time to proclaim that the love of God reaches to the highest mountain and

the lowest valley, to the highest heaven and the lowest hell?

I teach a preaching practicum as the second preaching course for seminary students at Wesley Seminary where I have taught preaching and worship for the last 20 years. Students taking this class have already completed an introduction to preaching class the year before. In this course, I require students to prepare, and then deliver in class, sermons for funerals based on specifically assigned situations, i.e., suicide, a teen-age drive-by shooting victim, an old saint in the church, a non-Christian, someone who has left the church in anger, and so on.

Let me give examples of two cases:

CASE 1

An old saint of the church has died. She has been a stalwart and faithful member for many years, serving in many leadership roles in the church. But in the later years of her life, she has become cantankerous and caused several conflicts, including causing some younger members to become “church alumni.” You have been the pastor for a few years and have witnessed some of the conflict and confusion and have even “refereed” some of these conflicts. Her funeral is scheduled at the church for Friday morning and you are to preach at the service.

CASE 2

A 39-year-old father of two children has just committed suicide. He has been an active member of the church, both he and his wife singing in the chancel choir. His children have grown up in the Sunday School, and are now teenagers in the United Methodist Youth Fellowship. The older of the two children is President of the UMYF and attended Annual Conference last time as youth representative. There is a good deal of whispering going on about the tragedy. Some church members have been rumored to say that there is no forgiveness for suicide, and therefore he is "on his way to hell!" The funeral is scheduled to be held at the church on Saturday morning at 11:00 so that his children's high school classmates may attend. As a pastor about his age with children of similar age, you are to preach at the service.

In each case, the students discuss the following questions in small groups of 3 or 4 and then bring their answers to the class for further discussion, along with an outline of a possible sermon.

- What are the critical factors in the situation?
- Who are the persons needing special attention?
- How, or in what aspect of the sermon, are these needs attended?
- Where is there hurt or special needs that the Good News must speak to, beyond individuals directly involved?
- What must be avoided? Why?

After the group presentation to the class, there is general discussion of the case and comments on the answers as well as the sermon outline. Here opportunity is offered to modify the sermon and make changes in the approach to the sermon. The student of the group assigned that particular case will then go back and prepare the sermon for delivery in a subsequent class.

My experience has been that this course has proven very helpful to students. Time and again I hear from my former students, how important such a course has been to them and their ministries in the local church.

I would urge us to preach at funerals: to declare that love is more powerful than death. Our faith is a faith of death and resurrection. Our hope is in the One who died declaring, "It is finished!" At Calvary, God's ancient intention to lift the load and weight of sin from the world is completed, an accomplished deed, *fait accompli*! Everything needed has been done: the last drop of blood needed has already been spilled at Calvary's mountain. The last tear needed to make things right has been shed.

There is a way out. God has a way if we will take it. The crooked way and the perilous way have been straightened out!

And early Sunday morning, we get the affirmed good news from the women at the tomb: "He is risen!" Love's redeeming work is

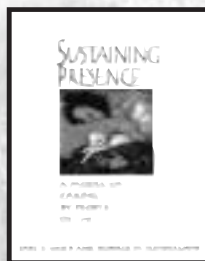
victoriously done. Death has lost its battle. The grave has lost its power. He is risen! And, made like him, like him, we shall rise. Alleluia!

Grace, truth, love, justice, and mercy are the key words of human existence and of the Divine Compassion. God has gotten to us by getting with us. Immanuel! The Word has been made flesh. Christ himself is the Word. Jesus Christ is Lord of life—and death, too. The families, as well as many who perhaps attend funerals and do not attend church, need to hear that Word! □



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Discover the Power of Community



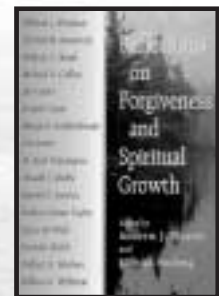
Sustaining Presence: A Model of Caring by People of Faith, by Earl E. Shelp and Ronald H. Sunderland. The authors argue that pastoral ministry is a function of the entire church, not just the ordained. They make the case for laity care teams as proven, effective ways to deliver pastoral care. Several chapters are devoted to applying care team models to specific audiences—the elderly, people who have Alzheimer's disease, people with AIDS, and children—and their particular needs.

CI2-025893. \$16.00

Reflections on Forgiveness and Spiritual Growth, edited by Andrew J. Weaver and Monica Furlong. This book comprises a series of reflections by experienced voices in the Christian community on forgiveness as part of our faith journey.

Contributors include Roberta C. Bondi, William H. Willimon, Barbara Brown Taylor, William J. Abraham, and many others. Includes a study guide.

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