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Funerals: Typical Planning and a Typological Sermon

Rev. Joshua H. Jones

Like many other aspects of our culture, the landscape of planning and officiating funerals seems to have changed quite rapidly over the last decade. That is not to say that many of the things happening today were not present previously. However, the intensity and frequency of what we might call “challenging funerals” appears to have escalated. In what follows, I hope to provide a brief sketch of the anatomy of what may be encountered in funeral planning, as well as some proposals for how Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) pastors might faithfully handle some of the challenging aspects of ministering to the families and friends of the deceased. In the second half of this article, I will also provide a rationale for, and explanation of, what might best be described as a typological funeral sermon which I believe may be useful for current and future pastors.

I expect with the aging demographic in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, these matters will become all the more important. Even now, in my ministry as a sole pastor, funeral sermons have encompassed between eight and fifteen percent of my preaching in any given year. I do not expect the percentage to decrease for several years. There are probably many others more qualified to write such an article. I write this with a pastoral heart and submit it to readers as one who has been wrestling with these matters for over ten years. I do not claim to have all the answers, but I hope my thoughts might spur some serious conversation among seminarians and even professors as they consider one of the most wonderful and difficult aspects of our callings: funerals.

Typical Planning

Pastor Williams sat down with the funeral director and two adult children of his deceased parishioner. It did not take long for the fledgling pastor to become uncomfortable. Before his arrival, the family had already discussed dividing up the ashes of their mother and putting them in lockets for the grandchildren with matching ash-filled clocks for the themselves; there would be no burial. The service would be a “celebration of life” with no sad, mournful sentiments because mom was in a better place and that is what she

would have wanted. The family also desired the service be held at the funeral home and to revolve around the eulogizing of their mother. Finally, the music selections were to include "Amazing Grace," "Danny Boy," and "Wind Beneath My Wings," none of which would include the voices of participants.

It would be nice if such a situation was far-fetched or even uncommon. It is not. While one may not encounter all of the ideas expressed in the opening paragraph it has been rare in my ministry not to experience at least two of the above expressions in any given funeral planning session. And there are also times when you really do get a situation exactly like the one above. Families tend to treat clergy and churches much like they do funeral homes: as providers of goods and services who exist to cater to one's every wish and desire. Consumerism runs the show whether clergy and churches like it or not. Thomas Long argues convincingly that the "cultural and generational shift toward experimentation, customization, and personalization has impacted the social network of death customs and the Christian funeral along with it."¹ What do we do? How do we respond? How might we minister to families who may be nominally Christian at best?

Two easy answers come to mind. The first is to capitulate to the consumeristic mindset of the culture and give families whatever they want. I would suggest this option should be rejected. However, one should not dismiss the temptation to "go along to get along" out of hand. It is a real temptation pastors may face. This is because most pastors know that arguing with the family members of the deceased while planning a funeral is not helpful nor is it ideal for family members to be angry with the man who is seeking to comfort them. These realities also inform my proposal that wholesale rejection of a family's desires would not be helpful either. While there may be some things that a pastor believes he should not waffle on, there are also likely some ways that he can provide outlets for what the family desires that are not going to interfere with a Christian funeral service. A "my way or the highway" approach may likewise be tempting. There may even be some difficult situations in which a pastor must finally recommend the family use a different clergy member (I have only had to do this one time). In my own experience there is usually some middle ground to be considered and explored which would allow the pastor to have a clear conscience as he plans and officiates a Christian funeral as well as an opportunity to guide the family toward something that hopefully can be in keeping with Christianity.

Certainly, there is much that could be said regarding how one handles sometimes bizarre funeral service requests. I would offer one overarching piece of advice: plan ahead with your members regarding their funerals while they are still

alive. Family members generally still respect the wishes of the deceased, sometimes above all else. Guiding the planning before the funeral occurs can help to decrease the frequency of difficult funeral planning sessions. Jot notes down while you are making calls, or spend some time afterward to makes notes. And as sad as it may be, having something in writing from your parishioner may be necessary. You could encourage your parishioner to talk with his or her family about funeral plans such as hymn selections, etc. You may even offer your help to guide the discussion. Of course, this advice assumes the pastor is making regular visits to his members.

I believe most families simply desire to honor their deceased loved one and want the pastor to genuinely care. This is partially why saying “no” to eulogies or certain songs can be so upsetting to someone who may already be highly emotional. In our age of entitlement, saying “no” may carry the connotation of being uncaring. Sometimes offering alternatives to a family’s preferences can soften the blow of a firm “no.” For example, in the opening story, I may ask the family to consider playing “Danny Boy” and “Wind Beneath My Wings” during a visitation at the funeral home the day before the funeral. We could then sing “Amazing Grace” at the funeral and perhaps, if I have done my homework, I could suggest two more hymns their loved one enjoyed singing to be sung as congregational hymns during the funeral service.

While a consumer mentality toward pastors and churches in the funeral planning process may be lamentable, it is also likely unsurprising. Strange funeral requests are merely the outgrowth of such a consumer approach. Even recently there was a story in the national news about a Roman Catholic priest getting into trouble because of the way he handled the funeral sermon of a young man who committed suicide. I do not specifically know what the sermon entailed and I am not defending the priest. But I think it is telling that at least from the point of view of the press, the real scandal was not the priest’s theological convictions but that he failed to give the family what they desired.

It should be noted that the funeral practices of most LCMS pastors are in the minority even when compared to other church bodies. For example, eulogies tend to be included in most funerals people attend, whether they are entirely secular or officiated by a clergy member from another church body. And eulogies are the primary sticking point at nearly every funeral planning session in which I have participated. I recognize that there may be some disagreement regarding this practice even among LCMS clergy. I prefer that families not speak publicly to eulogize their loved ones during the funeral service. I tell them so up front. But I have found two ways to soften my clear and explicit “no.” First, I suggest that the family and friends

of the deceased could share their memories and sentiments during a visitation or wake instead of during the funeral service. Second, I invite the family to aid me in writing a portion of the funeral sermon.

A Typological Funeral Sermon

There are different ideas about what makes a good funeral sermon. While such a discussion is worthwhile, I will not delve very deeply into the matter here.² My goal in sharing the contours of a typological funeral sermon stems from the reality that I was not really taught how to craft a funeral sermon. To be clear, I am not blaming anyone for this. I do hope, however, that this structure or template might prove useful, especially to new pastors. My aim is not to offer something perfect. Instead, I hope readers will evaluate what follows and modify it to suit their unique callings as they see fit. What immediately follows, then, includes some aspects of a funeral sermon that I believe are necessary and important so that my assumptions are clear.

Since the Christian community is gathered because of the death of one of their own and because of the death *and* resurrection of Jesus, my goal in preaching a funeral sermon is to speak truthfully about the deceased and about Jesus. Like most ordinary sermons, I believe Law and Gospel ought to be proclaimed. Some believe that funerals are for the living; others believe they are for the deceased. I see this as a false dichotomy; instead, a funeral is *both* for the living *and* for the deceased. Like other sermons, funeral sermons utilize a text from Scripture. Finally, I assume the primary problem people are facing at a funeral is death and the state of grief³ (acknowledged or not) that death leaves in its wake. Thus, the hope of the resurrection must be proclaimed at every funeral.

To accomplish these things, I am proposing what one might call a typological funeral sermon (see Figure 1). It utilizes the words, emotions, and sentiments of family members and the pastor as well as the truth revealed in sacred Scripture. What I offer below attempts to take into account many of the challenges mentioned above and aims for a middle ground of sorts that I believe is both faithful to the Scriptures and satisfactory to grieving families. It also aims to account for what I believe is the primary problem for funeral practices in American Christianity: the conscious or subconscious desire to avoid grief.

Figure 1. *Typological Funeral Sermon Structure*

- I. **A** Law: Speaking of the Deceased with Typological Phrase
- II. **B** Naming Reason for Grief: Death because of Sin

- III. C Transition to Anti-type
- IV. A' Gospel: Speaking of Christ with Typological Phrase and Scriptural Text
- V. B' Naming Reason for Hope: Resurrection because of Christ

It may be a foregone conclusion on the seminary grounds that death is bad. But not everyone thinks that way. In approximately 90% of the funerals I officiate, the family specifically requests that the service be an occasion to celebrate the life of the deceased. Neo-platonic ideas reveal themselves most clearly at funerals and are very present in LCMS congregations. LCMS pastors, however, should know that death is bad. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:26 that death is an enemy. According to our Lord in Matthew 5:4, it is specifically those who mourn who will be comforted. Families and friends of the dead need to mourn. They need to grieve in hope and not as others do who have none (1 Thessalonians 4:13). Avoiding grief by celebrating life misses the mark. Nevertheless, a funeral is not the venue to argue about correct theology. A funeral is the venue for pastors to proclaim correct theology.

I suspect many people who have had a loved one die struggle to identify why they are sad. That may sound like a strange statement but after a long illness or significant suffering families may in some sense be relieved their loved one is no longer suffering. Additionally, when their loved one is “in a better place” as it is often said—why should they be sad? Some of my parishioners have shared that they feel guilty when feeling sad because they suspect they are being selfish. So, they feel like they should avoid grief. Instead, they attempt to celebrate life because their loved one is no longer suffering, etc. But they cry. They hurt. And they often do not know why. We do know why: death is an enemy. Death simply cannot be an occasion for a celebration of life. People will cry. People will end up grieving whether they want to or not. We need to tell them why. We need to name it, to call it what it is.

Naming the reason for grief is not altogether difficult to do. Although it can be challenging to do well. If you have been a participant in a funeral service for someone you love in recent memory, you may have experienced how difficult it can be to listen. I believe there are at least some ways pastors can help people to listen when preaching a funeral sermon.

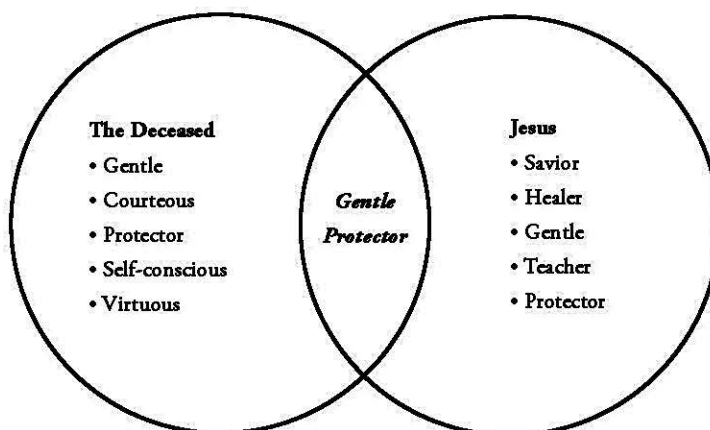
The primary way that I try to gain a hearing initially is by talking about the deceased. Some may consider what I do a “eulogy.” But I have a different purpose in mind than most laypeople do when they speak eulogies. When I speak about the deceased it is Law. I speak about the deceased first because, like it or not, that is why most people show up at a funeral.⁴ This is the part of the funeral sermon the family helps me write. During the funeral planning process, I ask them to tell me about the person who died. They tell me why they loved him. They describe his quirks. They

share her little-known hobbies. Sometimes they share stories: love stories, humorous stories, or family vacation stories. I may share something myself or occasionally ask a question. But mostly I feverishly write down everything they say. At the end I ask everyone present to summarize their loved one in one or two words if they are able. I put all of this together as best I can in words that could easily be preached under five minutes. And when I am done speaking generally kind words about the deceased, I make clear why we are gathered: death.

There are several ways to name the reality of death. Generally, I attempt to point out the reason for grieving. I may comment, “all of those wonderful things we just heard about this dear saint are about to be buried in the ground.” I may say that “memories like the ones I just shared are moving but they are nothing like holding onto the real thing. We do not get to hug him anymore and that is why this hurts so very much.” I may mention “all of those things I just spoke of will now have to be spoken of in the past tense because he is now lying in a casket.” I am seeking to capture a similar sentiment as that of C. S. Lewis after the death of his beloved wife when he writes, “Will nothing persuade us that they are gone? What’s left? A corpse, a memory, and (in some versions) a ghost. All mockeries or horrors. Three more ways of spelling *dead*.”⁵ In other words, I simply aim to speak clearly and truthfully about how terrible death actually is. It can sound harsh and brutal but only because death is harsh and brutal. I am only calling it what it is. It may well crush people—that is the idea. It is also at this juncture that I take the opportunity to make clear why a death has occurred: sin.

As I have been speaking about the deceased during the first part of the sermon, I have also been weaving a phrase into each paragraph of the sermon. Picking the right phrase is probably the most challenging aspect of this endeavor. It needs to fit the person who died, and it also needs to fit God. This is the typological aspect of the sermon.⁶ Figure 2 gives the example of “Gentle Protector.”⁷ Like considering typology in Scripture, not everything about the deceased may be used of the anti-type. Here, the good and faithful aspects of the person’s life should be emphasized. For example, we recognize that Moses is a type of Christ, but not everything about Moses points to Christ. Moses delivered God’s people from slavery, but he also disobeyed God by striking the rock. When speaking of Moses as a type of Christ, we rightly emphasize the former, not the latter. The same applies when preaching a typological funeral sermon. When a typological phrase has been decided on, I begin to search for a text that fits it well. In the case of “Gentle Protector” several texts could be used: Psalm 23, Matthew 11:27–30, or selected verses from John 10.

Figure 2. *Typological Funeral Phrases*



The text I choose is my entry point to speaking the Gospel. Since the “gentle protector” has been taken away from people because of death, I attempt to fill that void with “The Gentle Protector.” One way to transition might be to say, “Even though this gentle protector will soon be lying in a grave, there is another who walked out from the grave: *The Gentle Protector*, Jesus Christ.” At this juncture, the pastor may speak whatever Gospel language he feels would be most appropriate perhaps based upon the chosen text. There will likely have to be a now and not yet character to the Gospel as mourners need comfort in the present, but the resurrection remains yet future. I generally proclaim the hope of the resurrection in the closing paragraph of the sermon. Finally, I conclude with the same words in every sermon. My congregation knows them well after several years and dozens of funerals: “Christ is risen. [Name of deceased] will rise. Christ will come again.”⁸

Concluding Thoughts

I have sought to present a rationale for and explanation of a typological funeral sermon. In addition, I have attempted to briefly sketch some of the current challenges in Christian funeral planning and provide some guidance to navigate the challenges pastorally and faithfully. I have endeavored to show how a typological funeral sermon may be a faithful and appropriate way to navigate the unique challenges pastors face in funeral ministry. Typological funeral sermons may not always be the most appropriate for all circumstances. For example, tragic deaths may call for something entirely different. I invite the seminary community to engage in discussion about the challenges we currently face in planning funerals and preaching

funeral sermons. I hope such discussions will aid to sharpen one another toward being faithful pastors and also lead to helping people grieve so they might be comforted with the hope of the resurrection. In closing, I have provided an example of a typological funeral sermon I preached recently which should help to clarify the above explanation.

A Typological Funeral Sermon Example

"A Remarkable Man" - John 11:17-44

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

This is a funeral I have not been looking forward to. And certainly, I am not the only one who feels that way. Rog touched a lot of people.

A Law: Speaking of the Deceased with Typological Phrase

Roger was remarkably witty and had a remarkable sense of humor. From "my dad had to pay my sisters to be good but not me—I was good for nothing" to "I feel a lot more like I do now than I did when I got here." It was a rare conversation if he did not make me laugh at least once. Truly, I have not met anyone with a wit to match his.

Roger was remarkably frugal. How many couples regift old birthday and anniversary cards for 20 years? How many times can you use and reuse a napkin, plastic cup, or paper plate? Well, more than once anyway! Of course, to go along with being frugal, Roger was also remarkably generous.

Roger was a remarkable dad. In fact, he just told me two weeks ago that he and Judy raised three really great kids. (They had four kids!) He really said that! We thought best to leave that one a mystery. In all honesty, Roger was a remarkable father because he loved you, he spent time with you, he expected a lot from you, he forgave you, he encouraged you, he disciplined you. He taught you what a family is supposed to look like. It occurred to me the other day as we were visiting that while there were some things that were consistent about your dad's character and treatment of each of you, you also each remembered and valued slightly different things. And that is because your dad loved each of you as you needed to be loved. But most importantly, he taught you about Jesus Christ. And he wanted nothing more of you than what the Lord does as he says in Micah: do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with your God.

Roger had a remarkable career. How many times did you move? 16! How many lives did Roger touch and perhaps even save through his work? Judy showed me a letter written by a colleague who credited Roger with saving his life. At Roger's retirement party much could have been said about his accomplishments within the

company, but one person summarized Roger's work by simply commenting that it was obvious that Roger loved the Lord. What was that verse we just heard from Jesus about letting your light shine before others?

Roger was a remarkable husband. He talked about Judy with such affection and romance. Well, maybe affection and romance weren't exactly his thing. But honor, commitment, provision, faithfulness? Now we're talking. Best friends from the ages of 13 and 15. 58 years of marriage. And only one big argument...over the white dishes.

Roger was a remarkable friend. Ask his friends, ask any of us. Remarkable indeed.

B Naming Reason for Grief: Death because of Sin

Roger was a remarkable man. And we could say so much more. But for all the ways Roger was remarkable, he was at least in one way woefully unremarkable: he died. Just like everybody else, Roger was a sinful human being. Just like everybody else who died before him, sin finally got the better of him. As St. Paul says, "the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23) and "the sting of death is sin" (1 Corinthians 15:56) and "death spread to all men because all sinned" (Romans 5:12).

C Transition to Anti-type

You see we're not here today because *Roger* was remarkable. But there was another man who died *and* rose from the dead. Now, that's remarkable. That Remarkable Man is the reason we're here today.

A' Gospel: Speaking of Christ with Typological Phrase and Scriptural Text

It was this Remarkable Man, Jesus Christ, that claimed Roger as his own dear child in Holy Baptism. It was this Remarkable Man, Jesus, who blessed Roger with a vibrant faith, a wonderful family, and abundant life. It was this Remarkable Man, Jesus, who forgave Roger of all his sins. And it is this Remarkable Man, Jesus, who holds Roger and all of us even now in his firm grip of grace.

How many times did Roger get to hear of the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the grave? He had been dead for four days. Jesus intentionally shows up late in order that he might do a most remarkable thing. Mary and Martha are beside themselves. Jesus begins to weep and keeps on weeping. He grieves at the death of his friend who has died. The most Remarkable Man in history grieves when death shows up. That is not all that remarkable, I guess. All of us grieve, I suppose. But Jesus does something that none of us can. He calls out to the dead man, "Lazarus, come out!" And remarkably, Lazarus walks out of the tomb.

How many other remarkable things did Jesus do? He healed a man who was born blind, walked on water, calmed storms, fed thousands, and cast out demons. He

silenced the religious elites, flipped over tables in the temple, called fishermen as his disciples, forgave sins, rose from the dead, and ascended into heaven. And there are many more things we could add. But it is because of these things we confess that Jesus *is* a Remarkable Man, present tense. As such he is able to keep his promises to be with us and to comfort us in our grief.

B' Naming Reason for Hope: Resurrection because of Christ

Some of you also may not know that Roger could not stand the book of Revelation. We did it in Bible study a few years back and it was painfully difficult for him and for me. I joked with him quite some time ago that I might use Revelation for his funeral, so here it is. In Revelation 7, John sees a vision of a great multitude of people standing before the throne of God. They are wearing white robes and have palm branches in their hands and they are praising God. And then someone asks John, “who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?” There is an answer to that question and it’s an important one, “These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.” Roger is among them now. He is praising his Lord and waiting along with us for Christ to do the most remarkable thing of all—to come again in glory and to call out to Roger and all the departed saints to come out from their graves.

Christ is risen. Roger will rise. Christ will come again.

May God’s peace which surpasses all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus Amen.

Endnotes

- 1 Long, Thomas G., 2013, *Accompany Them with Singing—The Christian Funeral* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press): 6.
- 2 Donald L. Deffner has written an article which includes some discussion on this matter entitled, “Proclaiming Life in Death: The Christian Funeral,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 58, no. 1 (January 1994): 5–24.
- 3 Examples of the state of grief might include any of the following or any combination thereof: fear, loneliness, anger, inadequacy, disappointment, guilt, and regret.
- 4 See Dreier, Gary, “The Funeral Sermon: Remembering the Deceased,” *Word & World* 34, no. 1 (Winter 2014): 82.
- 5 Lewis, C.S., 1961, *A Grief Observed* (New York: HarperCollins): 20. Emphasis is original.
- 6 On typology in general see Michael P. Middendorf’s brief excursus, “Beyond Typology” in Middendorf, Michael P., 2016, *Romans 9–16* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House): 1240–1245.
- 7 Some other typological phrases I have used include the following: Tender-hearted Craftsman, Devoted Servant, Joyful Friend, Contented Cross-bearer, Lovingly Mysterious, Sacrificial Giver.
- 8 My brother, Rev. Andrew Jones, initially came up with this idea.