

*Planning the Funeral:  
Practical Matters*

STRONG, LOVING, AND WISE

Planning a funeral involves blending that which is very old, deeply traditioned, and oft repeated with that which is entirely new, profoundly personal, and utterly unique. What is old . . . very old . . . of course, is the act of human memorializing of the dead and the Christian rites that have developed over the centuries around burial. What is new is *this* death at this moment in time and place, *this* family's grief, *this* community's desire for meaning in the face of death's latest assault, *this* congregation's need to state the gospel afresh. Good funerals, as the old wedding saying goes, incorporate "something old and something new," and performing these rituals well, Tom F. Driver has observed, is much like art. We should heed the wisdom of established forms while, at the same time, being prepared to improvise.<sup>1</sup> To put it another way, whenever we perform a funeral on the occasion of a person's death, we should be ready to do what we have done a thousand times before, but in a way we have never done it before.

It is not easy to walk the balance bar between tradition and improvisation in funerals, and we constantly run the risk of falling off to one side or the other. On the side of tradition, every major Christian group and denomination has its time-tested funeral liturgy, and there is much wisdom in following these ancient road maps as we travel from life to death to life. For the most part, the prayers are beautiful, the structure sturdy, and the theology sound. Even so, merely plugging the

name of the next person to die into a liturgical template finally ignores the distinctiveness of each person's life and creates a coldly impersonal effect.

On the other hand, many people today have a pretty keen and active sense of being a "self," a unique personality, but they are ritually homeless. Because of shifts in society, changes in the life of the church, confusions generally about worship, many who come to the church to plan a funeral have either lost, or never had, a deep and appreciative memory of the patterns and words of worship. So, when a death happens and they encounter one of life's most challenging moments of transition, they become lost and disoriented. Like mountain climbers who are unaware of a well-traveled, well-marked trail to the crest, they feel compelled to forge their own path, to follow their intuitions, to "make up something really personal," and they inevitably reach out to the only resources they know: vague sentiments and impressions drawn from cultural stereotypes, movies, television, fleeting experiences with other ceremonies, and nostalgia. When funerals are woven out of such straw, the result—as is so often the case when, say, a couple crafts a do-it-yourself wedding with homemade marriage vows—is shallow, unsatisfying, and ultimately a loss to the participants themselves and to the community.

A major fault line lies between funerals that are "personal," which is good, and those that are merely "personalized," which is a diminishment. In a funeral, the church gives thanks to God for the gift of a life, indeed, this very particular person's life, and for all the ways the grace and mercy of God have been seen and experienced in this life, conflicted as it may have been. If we are paying attention to the claims of the gospel in the face of death, we can do nothing else but fashion funerals that are deeply personal.

A "personalized" funeral, however, is one that is caught up in all of the current cultural anxieties about selfhood and identity, such that what constitutes a "self" is a set of lifestyle circumstances and consumer choices. I may be (let us engage in a flight of the imagination) a Prius-driving, Red Sox-loving, Harvard-educated, independent-voting, environmental attorney of Italian heritage with a membership in a Methodist church, an extroverted personality, a physician wife, three fine children in college, and a penchant for sipping single malt scotch, listening to the music of John Coltrane, and spending weekends hiking in the Berkshires. But the Christian faith never for a minute would let me get away with thinking that this collection of traits, preferences, and social place-

ments somehow defines my deepest self. Who am I really? In the Christian faith, definitions of self do not begin with outer markings, such as job or education, and even with inner characteristics, like personality or family origin. In Christianity, the definition of self begins with baptism. As one of the biblical texts often cited at baptism puts it,

You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of the One who called you out of darkness into God's marvelous light.

(1 Pet. 2:9)

This is not mere piety. It is not as if, when I am church, I put on a choir robe, speak mysteries of liturgical language, and play the part of being a member of "a royal priesthood," but in the rest of my life I put on a Red Sox cap and head up the hiking trail with some Coltrane blowing through my earphones. The stuff about family and job and education and ethnicity is the way a person is embodied in the world, the palpable ways that a person moves forth in life, and these things matter. In fact, they matter spiritually. To be baptized is a sign that everything we are—work and play, personality and character, commitments and passions, family and ethnicity—is gathered up and given shape and definition by our identity as one of God's own children. Every person is complex, a prism with many facets, and the deepest question of personal identity is, how are the many colors of the bright light of God's image refracted through this life?

So at my funeral it will all be remembered. In the prayers and the sermon, the music and the testimony, the church will almost surely bring to memory that I was a husband and a father, a lover of baseball, one who cared for and enjoyed the environment, and a fan of jazz and that all of it gathered together was my attempt, sometimes successful and sometimes not, to be a good Methodist and a faithful follower of Christ. There may even be a little Coltrane music played. But if I leave behind a letter specifying that at my funeral my coffin should be emblazoned with the Red Sox logo, that the choir should sing the Harvard alma mater, that the bulletin cover should be a photo of Mount Greylock, and that the prelude should be a selection from Coltrane's "A Love Supreme," because this is *my* funeral, damn it, and this is what expresses the true *me*, then the Christian community would be right to arch an eyebrow in suspicion that I had perhaps misunderstood both the definition of "true me" and the meaning of a funeral, slipping over the fault line from "personal" to "personalized."

In our time, the impulse to overly personalize funerals, to "monogram" them so to speak, is in many ways a cultural given. People who are saturated daily by commercials urging them to choose personalized versions of everything from cars to credit cards, from clothing to fragrances—in short, to piece together "my very own way of life" out of disparate fragments—approach a funeral imagining that the same range of options is necessarily placed before them and that they need to make decisions. Funeral homes, as service businesses, quite naturally often reinforce the notion that a funeral too is a set of consumer choices: cremation or burial? this metal casket or that wooden one? a flag on the casket or a spray of flowers?

How should a pastor guide families in planning funerals? "Strong, loving, and wise," a phrase drawn from 2 Timothy 1:7, is the title that Catholic liturgical scholar Robert Hovda gave to his book on presiding in worship,<sup>2</sup> and these words point to the virtues needed by pastors who consult with grieving families. When someone dies, the mourning family wants to make sure that this beloved person will be known, remembered, and honored, and that the personal wishes, actual or imagined, of the deceased will be carried out. Thus, they will often suggest readings, poetry, music, speeches, and actions for the funeral, some of them healthy and creative and some of them injudicious, self-referential, and perhaps even harmful.

A pastor needs the strength and love to guide people well. In many ways, the postmodern hunger to invent ourselves through our autonomous choices, which seems like freedom, is actually a kind of imprisonment. We are condemned to make ourselves up, as if there were no shared, hard-won wisdom available to us; when we are faced with a crisis of meaning, we turn inward, hoping to find in the gardens of our souls flowers of truth that, sadly, no one has planted or cultivated.

In Acts 16 there is a dramatic story of the religious conversion of the head jailer in the prison at Philippi. He happens to have on his roster of inmates Paul and Silas, whose missionary work in town has gotten them arrested for disturbing the peace, roughed up, and shoved rudely into a cell block. But instead of spitting, cursing, and hurling threats, as any self-respecting prisoners should do, Paul and Silas have been sitting in their cell praying and singing hymns. As unsettling as this may have been to the jailer, it is nothing compared to what happens next. In rapid succession, there is a violent earthquake, the prison walls tremble, handcuffs fall away, doors fall off their hinges, and the jailer, certain that the prisoners have escaped in the chaos and justifiably terrified

over what will be done to him when his superiors find him presiding over an empty jailhouse, draws a sword to take his own life. But suddenly from the darkness and confusion of the ruined prison comes the loud voice of Paul: "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here" (Acts 16:28). The jailer is overwhelmed. Whatever God has hold of Paul and Silas, the jailer now wants that God too. Within seconds he is on his knees, trembling. "What must I do to be saved?" (Acts 16:30). Before the night is out, the jailer tenderly washes the wounds of Paul and Silas, and then Paul and Silas, in their way, wash his wounds too: he and his whole family are baptized. The story ends with the jailer and his family at table with his former captives, sharing a meal of joy over the fact that he has "become a believer in God" (Acts 16:34).

Now can we possibly imagine that Paul would have said to this jailer when the man was trembling on his knees and being swept up in a moment of profound personal revolution, "Look, before you shove on to the rest of your life, there is this matter of baptism. It's a little ceremony we do whenever somebody becomes a Christian, but I'm sure you'd like to personalize it. You don't want to do just the same old, same old. Here's a pad and a pen. Why don't you go back and consult with your family, scratch down a few ideas, maybe some jailer motifs, and we'll talk?"

Well, we should not imagine it for a funeral either. Baptism, marriage, funeral—these are not polite dinner parties needing good decorator ideas. These are sacred ceremonies of dramatic transformation, torches marking the perilous way between life and death. No pastor, out of a well-intentioned but ill-advised desire just to serve people where they are, should assume the posture, "Whatever you'd like at the funeral, whatever would be meaningful to you, will be fine." Pastors have a responsibility to help people in a season of loss receive not merely those things that they, in the terrible crush of mourning, most think they need, but the very best gifts and the most grace-filled vision the gospel has to offer.

Also, as compelling as the needs of the grief-stricken family may be, a funeral is an event larger than these immediate needs, more encompassing than this family. Part of the power of a Christian funeral is that we do not do this alone; the funeral is not just a ceremony for a single family, to which guests are invited. It is a service of worship involving the whole church—indeed, involving the entire communion of saints—and it is a joyful duty of the church to reenact the promises of the resurrection on the occasion of someone's death. One role of a

pastor is to be sure that the witness of the gospel is not lost, this hopeful vision does not get whittled down to the small story of our private grief and mere personalism.

We can learn wisdom about the power that lies in the practice of Christian funerals by comparing it to a Jewish funeral practice: the custom of saying the "mourner's Kaddish." When a Jew dies, the children of the deceased are to go to synagogue every day for eleven months, to join with the others in worship and to pray the Kaddish, a prayer that gets its name from *Qodesh*, the Hebrew word for "holy." The words of the contemporary Kaddish in English are,

May the great name of God be exalted and sanctified, throughout the world, which he has created according to his will. May his kingdom be established in your lifetime and in your days, and in the lifetime of the entire household of Israel, swiftly and in the near future; and say, Amen. May his great name be blessed, forever and ever.

Blessed, praised, glorified, exalted, extolled, honored, elevated, and lauded be the Name of the holy one, Blessed is he above and beyond any blessings and hymns, Praises, and consolations which are uttered in the world; and say Amen. May there be abundant peace from Heaven, and life, upon us and upon all Israel; and say, Amen.

He who makes peace in his high holy places, may he bring peace upon us, and upon all Israel; and say Amen.<sup>3</sup>

As a mourning ritual, saying the Kaddish seems somehow counter-intuitive. No one, in the hour of grief, would design such an exercise. This mourner's prayer, strangely, contains no words that appear to touch tenderly on the depth of mourning. Other Jewish death rituals are explicit about grief, but not the Kaddish. There's nothing here about grief at all. In its cadences there is no turn inward, no mention of loss, no cry of pain, no appeal to be comforted. There is only the turn toward the Holy One, toward the praise and blessing of the God who gives and sustains life.

But, of course, that is its power. The Kaddish is not an expression of how a grieving Jew *feels* to have lost a parent; it is an affirmation of where he or she is *going* as a faithful Jew, toward the unfettered praise of the holiness of God, a holiness that even the powers of death cannot destroy. The Kaddish is an opportunity for a mourning Jew, struggling with all the centripetal force that grief can bring, to move from the isolation of self to the giving of the self utterly to gaze upon the majesty

of God, finally to be able to say, as does a character in one of Robinson Jeffers's poems, "I have fallen in love outward."<sup>4</sup>

When Leon Wieseltier, the literary editor of the *New Republic*, lost his father in 1996, he decided to comply with the custom of saying Kaddish, even though he had not been a ritually observant Jew for more than twenty years. Three times a day, during the morning, afternoon, and evening services, he would say the mourner's prayer, either in his home synagogue in Washington, DC, or, if he was traveling, in any synagogue he could find. A friend asked him why he, as one who had not followed Jewish law for two decades, had now chosen to participate in this strange and unfashionable practice. Wieseltier reflected on his reasons. There was duty, duty to his father, which left "thoughts about my father unimpeded by regret and undistorted by guilt,"<sup>5</sup> and also, in an odd way, duty to his religion. But there was yet one more reason: "It looks after the externalities," Wieseltier wrote, "and so it saves me from the task of improvising the rituals of my bereavement, which is a lot to ask."<sup>6</sup>

As is always the case when people engage in the exercise of any traditional ritual, there were good moments and bad. Sometimes the act of saying the Kaddish was full of meaning for Wieseltier, but at other times it felt like going through the motions, following by rote an empty ceremony. Gradually, however, the daily praying of the Kaddish began to gain in power. One day, just after dawn, Wieseltier was preparing to pray at an early service, and he had wrapped the cords of his phylacteries around his arm. Phylacteries, leather boxes containing passages from the Torah, are sometimes tied on the head and around the arms during morning prayer, symbolizing God's charge not to forget the commandments but to "bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead" (Deut. 6:8). As Wieseltier stood there in the dim daylight, he realized that these ancient prayer symbols, wrapped so tightly on his body, suddenly felt different. "They do not bind me," he said. "They gird me. . . . The arm on which they are wrapped feels strong."

A year after his father's death, Wieseltier, along with his family and friends and their rabbi, gathered in a bitter March wind at the cemetery for the unveiling of his father's gravestone. After the reading of some psalms, a few words from the rabbi about his father, and a memorial prayer, Wieseltier was asked by the rabbi to read one more psalm. Instead of reading, Wieseltier decided to sing. "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want . . ." he began, singing the familiar psalm in "the

sweet sepulchral manner in which it is sung on Sabbath afternoons." He sang all the way to the closing words of the psalm, "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever." Then Wieseltier, whose many grieving days of saying the mourner's Kaddish had prepared him for this moment, said Kaddish one more time:

I stood in the ashes of fury and spoke the sentences of praise. Was that voice my voice? It was no longer the effusion of woe. Magnified, I said. Sanctified, I said. I looked above me, I looked below me, I looked around me, With my own eyes, I saw magnificence.<sup>7</sup>

Like the practice of saying of the mourner's Kaddish, the Christian funeral embodies more wisdom than we at first can see or know. The words, patterns, and meanings of the funeral service transcend grief's desire to curve in on itself. They allow us to journey outward and beyond with our dead to the place of farewell, bearing witness to the gospel and singing words of praise as we go. They do not bind us; they gird us. Pastors should be strong enough, loving enough, to do all they can, not to let their people miss these deep waters of healing by spending their energies languishing only in the shallows.

But if a pastor needs strength and love, a pastor also needs discerning wisdom to know where to improvise in funerals. Worship services, including funerals, involve real people and are therefore messy affairs. While worship includes words of truth, moments of awe, and experiences of the holy, it also includes people with mixed motives, confused purposes, wandering minds, halfheartedness, who lack even a thimbleful of understanding about what is taking place—and this sometimes includes the clergy. Anyone who has ever invited the congregation to shout out whatever comes to mind as "joys and concerns" or presided over a service on Mother's Day or preached on Stewardship Sunday or tried to figure out what to do about a national flag displayed in the house of God knows full well that the waters of worship do not always run pure and clear.

At a funeral, we do not bury the dead in general; we bury this very particular dead person, who was herself or himself a mixture of the well-being and woe, the commonplaces and eccentricities that make up any human life. And we do so with prayers and songs not preserved on unsullied pages in a divine liturgy but, rather, said and sung in the mouths and hearts of people who are themselves composed of the same admixture. As pastors, to complain in principle about fleshly

contaminants intruding into Christian funerals is like griping about the weather. More significant, to yearn deeply for it to be otherwise is finally a misunderstanding of Christ's incarnation and a failure to love the real world—the one full of people whom God loves, not the uncompromised world we adore in our imaginations. Jane Doe's funeral will inevitably be Jane Doe's funeral, and who she actually was will make a difference in the rhythms and sounds of the ritual. We will sing the hymns, pray the great prayers, and read holy wisdom from the Scriptures, but it will all necessarily make luminous the life of this flawed but blessed saint who has died, producing unexpected hues and tones.

So there will be hard decisions involved in the planning of most funerals. As the joke goes, many people want both "Amazing Grace" and "I Did It My Way" sung at their funeral. Should the basketball coach be given the microphone to speak a eulogy? What if the soloist croons a syrupy, sentimental ditty? What about showing during the funeral service a continuous video of the frolicking dog of the deceased? What about permitting a military guard to fire guns in salute at graveside? Helping to decide whether such elements are simply a little spice thrown into the standard recipe of good worship or are impermissible flat contradictions of the gospel being proclaimed, will require nimbleness, sound judgment, empathy, and wisdom. Many congregations have rules and policies about funerals to step around common problems and to help keep funerals liturgically sound and theologically responsible. But as helpful as these can be, no policy manual can anticipate every circumstance, and no set of rules can substitute for good pastoral judgment and the need to improvise in every worthy act of living worship.

One truth about worship should be reassuring to pastors: worship that is essentially sound in structure and content can absorb and overcome elements that are less worthy. A good funeral is like a fine and large chorus singing Vivaldi's *Gloria*. While we could hope that every voice would be on pitch, a single tenor who is a bit flat cannot overcome the power and grandeur of the music. While we hope, for example, that the uncle of the deceased will not, "speaking a word of remembrance," perform a corny and inappropriate stand-up comedy routine, a funeral with a steady beat and a sense of gospel pitch can keep the resurrection song going and can absorb this false note into the richer music of hospitality and understanding.

Church contexts vary widely, of course, but most pastors find it useful to go to the family immediately upon receiving the news of a death, not to do planning but to establish a pastoral presence. Then there will be

another meeting with the family to plan the service. These are often powerful times of pastoral care and fertile moments for the pastor to learn more about the deceased and how the person should be commemorated.

### OF CHOREOGRAPHY, LITURGIES, AND CULTURES

We now turn to the details of planning a Christian funeral, to the specifics of arranging the choreography of the drama of death and life played out in the funeral. We will use, as primary reference points, two state-of-the-art funeral liturgies: first, *The Order of Christian Funerals* (1989; hereafter called *OCF*),<sup>8</sup> which is the currently approved Roman Catholic rite used in the United States and which is derived from the Latin edition of *Ordo Exsequiarum*, the funeral rituals developed as a part of the liturgical reforms of Vatican II; second, one of the most recent and best crafted of the Protestant rites, the funeral service in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (2006; hereafter called *ELW*).<sup>9</sup> In order to provide a wider sense of the ecumenical options, these two basic funeral orders will be supplemented with material from other Protestant sources, such as the Episcopal *Book of Common Prayer* (1979)<sup>10</sup> and the Presbyterian *Book of Common Worship* (1993),<sup>11</sup> and with material from an Eastern Orthodox rite for laypeople (1998), part of a recent translation of *The Great Book of Needs*.<sup>12</sup>

Even as we use these established funeral liturgies as benchmarks, we should heed two cautions. First, not every pastor or congregation looks to published liturgies for guidance on funerals. There are many pastors who use no prayer books in funerals, who do not pray printed prayers, who follow no prescribed patterns, who wear dark suits and not clerical vestments, who fashion funerals more in response to the immediate circumstances of a particular death than according to ancient custom, and who, when planning a funeral, in no sense imagine themselves to be choreographing a liturgical ritual.

However, the difference between the free-church traditions and the prayer-book traditions regarding funerals may not be as great as it seems. Pastors leading funerals in the more liturgical traditions rarely go completely by the book and so-called free-church funerals are in their own way still ritualistic events with repeated and predictable patterns (indeed, wearing dark suits and praying from the heart, rather than

from a book, are vital ritual acts). Even though the emphasis appears in the free church to fall more heavily on the side of improvisation, most such funerals nevertheless are assembled on the same metaphorical chassis as their prayer-book cousins, namely, that the funeral is the enactment of the conviction that the deceased is a saint traveling on to be with God, surrounded by the songs and prayers of the church. In the same sense that an Episcopal priest, in order to conduct a good funeral, will need to develop the gift of ad lib and a dash of skill at improvisation, just so, by doing a little translation, the free-church pastor can gain much from tracing the maps of the prayer-book traditions. What one tradition does with holy water and the rhythmic chanting of psalms another tradition accomplishes through extemporaneous prayer and freewheeling gospel songs.

A second caution about using standard prayer-book services as reference points rises when we recognize that there are many local and ethnic customs not incorporated into these broadly ecumenical liturgies. But to say that a certain liturgy does not specify a practice does not mean that it doesn't allow it, that its branches cannot provide a welcome roosting space for many local customs. *Romeo and Juliet* can be reimagined as *West Side Story*, the same basic narrative retold in a different cultural setting and patois; and the basic pattern outlined in the *Book of Common Prayer* can take root in Appalachian or Caribbean soil. A nimble pastor can take the basic funeral structure described here and refashion it into a hospitable space for all sorts of customs that make good sense in some locations but would be unimaginable in others—from opening a previously closed coffin at graveside for a “last look,” to taking time to speak words of farewell to the corpse, to delaying the “funeralizing” days or weeks waiting for ice to thaw or for the funeral home bill to be paid.

This is not to say there will not be some tough decisions and judgment calls to be made about local and cultural customs. While it may be attractive to assume the posture of an easy multiculturalism, welcoming every idea and practice in the name of generosity and inclusion, the specifically Christian character of a funeral matters. As our society, and to some extent our churches, become increasingly multicultural, and as worship continues to draw deeply from many sources, Christian pastors and their congregations will more and more have to pull out surveying instruments to assess where the real boundaries of the Christian tradition lie.

A good example is the funeral held in the First Covenant Church of St. Paul, Minnesota, for Nhia Her Lo, who died at age 93, a revered leader of St. Paul's Hmong community. The roots of the Hmong are in the mountains of southern China, but the St. Paul area is now the home to the world's largest concentration of Hmong people, more than 60,000 residents. Funerals, very important in Hmong culture, are traditionally elaborate shamanistic ceremonies designed to transport the souls of the deceased to their ancestors. They typically last for several days and include such elements as animal sacrifice and offerings made to the spirit of the departed.

Nhia Her, a Hmong Christian, had requested that his funeral be religiously Christian and culturally Hmong. So the pastors and family began a careful and challenging sifting and comparing of practices to create a service that faithfully reflected both traditions. Tough calls had to be made. Would animal sacrifice, the ancient custom, be allowed? Yes. The decision was made to include in the ceremony meat from several cows, prepared at a local slaughterhouse. But would it be permissible to include the ritual of feeding this meat to the spirits? No. It was decided to make clear in the ceremony that this meat was provided to feed the people present and not the departed spirits.

Another crucial question was whether to include a traditional "blessing table." Near the close of many Hmong funeral rituals, a table is set up in the middle of the room, and all who wish can come forward to "settle accounts" with the person who has died. Speaking to the dead person, people express complaints, voice old grudges, and make financial claims; then the shaman makes a long speech on behalf of, in fact in the voice of, the deceased. When the air has been cleared, the shaman turns the table upside down and hands out glasses of an alcoholic beverage to the participants. People drink the beverage, a sign of blessing and confidence that, with all accounts now settled, the dead person will never trouble them again.

As he was dying, however, Nhia Her had been eager to speak not of retribution but of forgiveness. "I have no grudges against anyone," he repeated to all who would listen. There would be no need to "settle accounts." But Nhia Her's family knew that many of those coming to the funeral from a distance were coming to do just that, and they would expect and desire the ritual of the "blessing table." So the clergy and family decided to keep it in the funeral but to modify its practice and thus redefine some of its meaning. At the

funeral, after everyone had come to the blessing table and spoken his or her mind, the table was not turned over but left standing upright. The congregation was then told about how Jesus gathered with those he loved at tables and that this table was a symbol of Christ among them. "The blessing may not have been what most had expected or wanted," one of the participants said, "but this was not your typical Hmong funeral. This was a Christian funeral for a beloved Hmong man, and we were doing our best to honor his wishes and to honor the God he served."<sup>13</sup>

Such interfaith, intercultural decisions are tricky and controversial, and other pastors may well have drawn different boundaries from those marked out by the leadership at First Covenant. But two false alternatives here must be challenged. On the one hand, pretending that religious customs do not ever conflict and that choices need not be made is neither helpful nor true. On the other hand, attempts to seal off a tradition and keep it sterile are not possible either (from baptism to Christmas, Christian practice is full of ceremonies and symbols borrowed from other religions and reinterpreted). But if an actor knows his part by heart and loves it, then he can improvise if something unexpected should happen on stage—if, for example, another actor should forget her lines or a phone that is supposed to ring, doesn't. Just so, pastors who know the gospel and love the ancient texts by which Christians have buried their dead can with boldness perform improvisations of those texts and traditions in the shifting and unpredictable mix of contemporary cultures.

Before I examine the details of the structure of funerals, a word about terminology. For the sake of simplicity (and as has been the case throughout this book), we will speak mainly about "funerals" and "burials." Obviously, these terms do not cover the full range of possibilities, but much of what follows can apply equally to "memorial services," the term commonly used for rituals where the body of the deceased is absent and for situations where other dispositions of the body, such as cremation or bodily donation, are performed. There are exceptions and special cases, of course, and these will be noted and discussed. Also, the focus in this book is on what we have been calling "the Christian funeral," meaning the death ritual for a baptized Christian. However, many Christian groups make ample and hospitable room in their life for funerals for those who are outside of the faith or alienated from the church. This issue will be discussed in a separate section.

## DRAMATIC STRUCTURE OF THE CENTRAL FUNERAL RITE

We have been making the case that the Christian funeral embraces the whole ensemble of acts and rituals around death, but in this section we will narrow the scope somewhat, focusing on the central funeral rite. What I mean by the "central rite" is what people generally mean when they say they are going to a funeral. It is the portion of the overall funeral process that is patterned as a formal order of worship, and because the vast majority of these services take place in a church or a chapel, this setting will be assumed.

The central funeral rite is composed of the following sequential movements: gathering, procession, service of prayer and word, Holy Communion, and sending.

### 1. The Gathering

All Christian public worship begins when the people gather. Most congregations gather for worship every Sunday at the same hour, but this is not merely keeping an appointment on the calendar, as with the hairdresser or the dentist. It is instead an act of memory, faith, and hope. We remember that God has called us to worship in the past, we have faith that God is calling us even now, and we have hope that God will meet us in the Spirit when we gather. The God who appeared to Moses in the burning bush, to Isaiah in the temple, to Paul on the Damascus road, to John on the Lord's Day, evoking worship, is calling us to worship once again, and so we go. Summoned by God, people come from east, west, north, and south to assemble as a congregation for the praise of God. Funerals are no exception; at a funeral, just as it is for a service on the Lord's Day, the congregation gathers for worship.

What sets a funeral apart, though, is that among the faithful who gather is the one who has just died. This saint, though deceased, is still joined to the congregation and is coming in the body to this place one last time for worship. It is difficult to underestimate either the importance of this truth or how deeply it is misunderstood and neglected today. Sometimes people say, "Funerals are for the living," usually meaning that the content of a funeral should be shaped entirely around the needs of the mourners and not at all focused on the person who

has died, but this is a simplistic view. As we have said, in the Christian faith, death changes, but does not destroy, the relationship between the community of faith and the deceased. Certainly at a funeral the living do not worship God on *behalf* of the dead in the sense that we would be so arrogant as to try to strike a bargain with God, but the living also do not worship in spite of the dead or in the absence of the dead. They worship *with* the dead.

It is not far-fetched to say that the deceased saint has a role in a funeral similar to that of the bride and groom in a wedding or the one being baptized in a baptismal service. In each case, the church has gathered in prayer to mark a transition in the life of a Christian. A wedding, as worship, is about the adoration of God by the community of faith, but it is worship being entered into on the occasion of a marriage, and we couldn't perform this act of worship without the bride and groom. A funeral is also about the adoration of God, but the occasion is the death of a saint, and we could not engage in this act of worship without the presence of the one who has died.

This is represented in the funeral by giving dramatic emphasis to the arrival of the body of the deceased. When the congregation has gathered and the time for the funeral is at hand, the coffin bearing the body is brought to the entrance of the church. Usually the coffin is carried by pallbearers (or, if borne on a cart, escorted by them) and accompanied by the family. There are two good options for the presiding clergy at this point: they can go to the family home, or wherever it is that they are, and accompany them and the deceased to the church; or they can wait for them at the church and meet them with a greeting at the entrance when they arrive.

One good option (*ELW*) is for the minister(s) to meet the coffin and the mourners at the church entrance, while the congregation stands and faces them as they arrive. Then, from the door of the church, the minister does three things. First, the minister turns toward the congregation and welcomes them. Second, the minister tells them what the funeral is about:

Welcome in the name of Jesus, the Savior of the world.  
We are gathered to worship, to proclaim Christ crucified and risen,  
to remember before God our sister/brother \_\_\_\_\_,  
to give thanks for her/his life,  
to commend her/him to our merciful redeemer,  
and to comfort one another in our grief.<sup>14</sup>



Third, the minister looks at the coffin, perhaps gesturing toward it, and names the deceased as one who belongs to Christ in baptism:

All who are baptized into Christ have put on Christ.

In her/his baptism \_\_\_\_\_ was clothed with Christ.

In the day of Christ's coming, she/he shall be clothed with glory.<sup>15</sup>

The *OCF* calls on the priest to go to the church entrance, to greet the family and others who have accompanied the deceased, and then to perform certain actions pointing to the baptismal nature of the funeral. These can include sprinkling holy water on the coffin (symbolizing the water of baptism) and placing a funeral pall over the coffin (usually white, symbolizing the garments of baptism).

In the Orthodox tradition, the priest leads a candlelit procession to the church, accompanying the deceased in an open coffin. The coffin is brought down the aisle and to the front of the church as they together sing from Psalm 91 ("You who live in the shelter of the Most High, who abide in the shadow of the Almighty, will say to the LORD, 'My refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust'") and Psalm 119 ("Happy are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the LORD. Happy are those who keep his decrees, who seek him with their whole heart, who also do no wrong, but walk in his ways").

Another option is for the minister to meet the deceased at the entrance to the place of worship with words like these: "We greet our brother/sister \_\_\_\_\_, a sheep of God's own fold, a lamb of God's own flock, a sinner of God's own redeeming." These words have the advantage of anticipating similar language in a prayer of commendation often used at the end of the funeral:

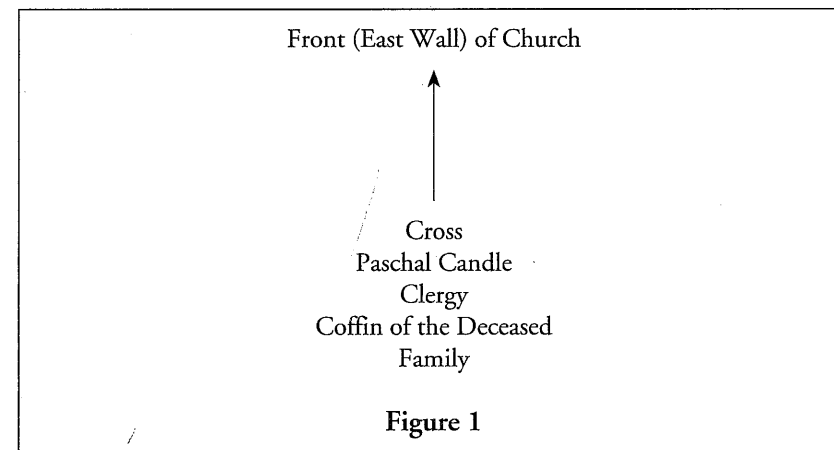
Into your hands, O merciful Savior, we commend your servant *N*. Acknowledge, we humbly beseech you, a sheep of your own fold, a lamb of your own flock, a sinner of your own redeeming. Receive *him* into the arms of your mercy, into the blessed rest of everlasting peace, and into the glorious company of the saints in light. *Amen*.<sup>16</sup>

In less formal traditions, the minister may wish simply to enter with the coffin and the family and pause for a moment at the door, a prelude to walking with them down the aisle as the whole congregation sings a hymn. However it is done, the main symbolic import of the gathering movement is to signify that the community of faith (including the deceased) is present, assembled in response to the call of God, and that worship has begun.

## 2. The Procession to the Front of the Church

In a funeral, the deceased is, in a sense, one of the worshipers, a member of the praying congregation in the way that he or she has always been. In another sense, though, the deceased person is obviously not just another worshiper. The death of this Christian is a main reason and context for this service. This is the last time this saint will be present in the body in this place of worship, and this is in part a service of farewell. God will be worshiped here and the gospel proclaimed as always, but today this worship and proclamation will be done in the light of this particular person's life and death. Taken together, this means that the deceased should assume a both/and position—both as one among the congregation, and also as one this day prominent and visible. So, in the next movement of the funeral, the coffin is taken down the aisle to its proper place of worship: at the front of the church but still in the midst of the gathered congregation.

The movement is essentially simple: the coffin is carried or rolled from the door to the front of the church. What happens while this is taking place? Sometimes the visible action of the deceased moving into place is accompanied by other things to see. In some traditions, the coffin is preceded by people carrying symbols of the Christian life, such as a cross and a paschal candle. If this is done, the usual order for this procession is shown in figure 1.



Sometimes there are things to hear. For example, as the coffin is moved, the ministers may speak words about the resurrection and Christian hope, such as,

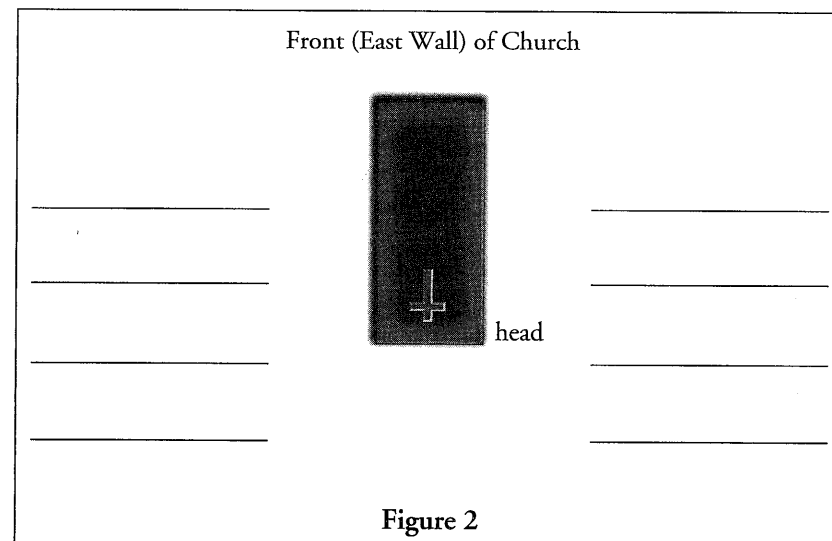
I am Resurrection and I am Life, says the Lord.  
Whoever has faith in me shall have life,  
even though he die.  
And everyone who has life,  
and has committed himself to me in faith,  
shall not die for ever.<sup>17</sup>

Or perhaps the congregation sounds out the faith here, singing or chanting a psalm, spiritual, or hymn such as "Abide with Me," "For All the Saints," or "Precious Lord, Take My Hand." Congregational singing during this movement hearkens back to the early Jewish and Christian precedent of chanting psalms as the body was carried to the grave. One eleventh-century hymn sung in funeral processions, "*Media Vita*," continues in use in various translations and hymns and prayer settings today. Here is a contemporary translation from *BCP*:

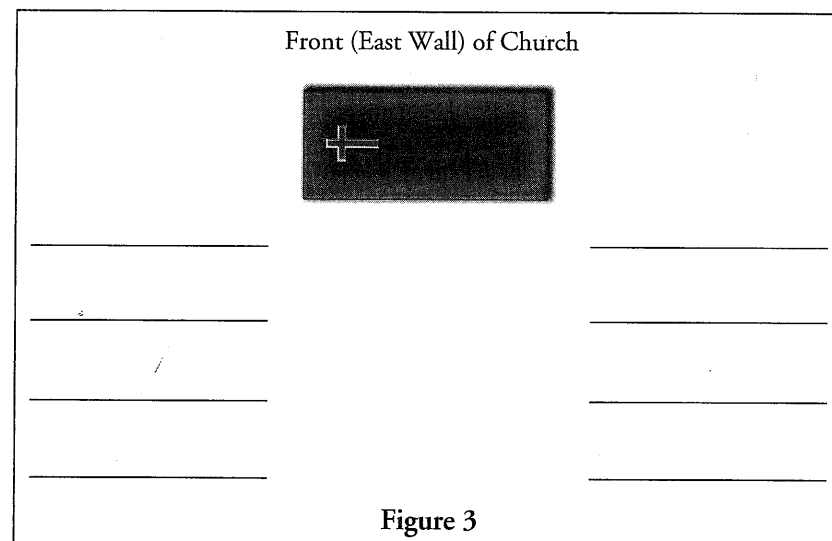
In the midst of life we are in death;  
from whom can we seek help?  
From you alone, O Lord,  
who by our sins are justly angered.  
*Holy God, Holy and Mighty,  
Holy and merciful Savior,  
deliver us not into the bitterness of eternal death.*  
Lord, you know the secrets of our hearts;  
shut not your ears to our prayers,  
but spare us, O Lord.  
*Holy God, Holy and Mighty,  
Holy and merciful Savior,  
deliver us not into the bitterness of eternal death.*  
O worthy and eternal Judge,  
do not let the pains of death  
turn us away from you at our last hour.  
*Holy God, Holy and Mighty,  
Holy and merciful Savior,  
deliver us not into the bitterness of eternal death.*<sup>18</sup>

Because this procession of the coffin from the door to the front of the church symbolizes the deceased taking his or her place in the assembly for worship, there is an old tradition that laypeople are carried feet-first toward the altar/table (i.e., facing the front, as they did in Sunday worship) and clergy are carried in headfirst (i.e., facing the people, as they did when they presided). Whether carried in headfirst or feetfirst, the coffin is best placed as pictured in figure 2, because this position

most clearly symbolizes that the deceased has arrived at the place of worship. Here the deceased is both in a prominent place and yet is still a part of the congregation:



Placing the coffin in this way is not always possible or desirable. Sometimes the body is placed in the church earlier for a viewing; sometimes the room doesn't have a wide, central aisle or the necessary space to place the coffin perpendicular to the altar/table. A common alternative placement of the coffin is shown in figure 3:



While this placement may be serviceable, it has the disadvantage of muting the imagery of the processional and making the coffin more an object to be viewed (and perhaps revered) than a symbol of the presence of the deceased in the worshiping community. If architecture or circumstance call for this arrangement, an emphasis upon the deceased as a participant in the assembly and as one who is on a baptismal journey should be made a part of the service elsewhere.

The family members, following behind the coffin, take their places in seats near the front, but still among the congregation. The custom, practiced in some funeral home chapels, of seating the family in an area separated, sometimes even screened off, from the rest of the congregation, is unjustified and significantly undermines the communal character of worship.

### 3. Service of Prayer and Word

Now that all are in place for worship, the funeral proceeds with prayers and Scripture:

**1. Collect.** The first element is usually a "prayer for the day" or a collect. The purpose of this prayer is to catch up in a stitch or two the fact of death and the prayer expressions of the congregation in this moment. In some ways, this opening prayer is like passing an offering plate, collecting thoughts, feelings, and hopes from those present, and placing all of them before God. Therefore, in the prayer-book traditions, this prayer usually assumes the form of an expanded "collect" form, adding to the usual five elements of a collect (name of God, attribute of God, petition, reason, and closing), other petitions or thanksgivings. Representative of these prayers is one found in *ELW*:<sup>19</sup>

(*N*)*ame of God*: O God

(*A*)*tttribute of God*: of grace and glory,

(*T*)*hanksgiving*: we remember before you today our sister/brother, \_\_\_\_\_. We thank you for giving her/him to know us and to love as a companion in our pilgrimage on earth.

(*P*)*etition*: In your compassion, console us who mourn. Give us the faith to see that death has been swallowed up in the victory of our Lord Jesus Christ,

(*R*)*eason*: so that we may live in confidence and hope until, by your

call, we are gathered to our heavenly home in the company of all your saints;  
(*C*)*losing*: through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. **Amen.**

Here is an example from the Roman Catholic tradition:

(*N*): O God

(*A*): in whom sinners find mercy and the saints find joy,

(*P*): we pray to you for our brother/sister \_\_\_\_\_, whose body we honor with Christian burial,

(*R*): that he/she may be delivered from the bonds of death.

(*P2*): Admit him/her to the joyful company of your saints and raise him on the last day

(*R2*): to rejoice in your presence for ever.

(*C*): We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. **Amen.**<sup>20</sup>

Another example comes from the Presbyterian tradition:

(*N*): O God

(*A*): who gave us birth, you are ever more ready to hear than we are to pray. You know our needs before we ask, and our ignorance in asking.

(*P*): Show us now your grace,

(*R*): that as we face the mystery of death, we may see the light of eternity.

(*P2*): Speak to us once more your solemn message of life and death. And when our days here are ended, enable us to die as those who go forth to live,

(*R2*): so that living or dying, our life may be in Jesus Christ

(*C*): our risen Lord. **Amen.**<sup>21</sup>

**2. Prayer of Confession.** Some traditions (e.g., United Methodist, Presbyterian, United Church of Canada) add a prayer of confession after the prayer of the day. While it may seem unusual to ask the congregation to confess their sins at a funeral, the inclusion of this prayer is actually a mark of the pastoral care and therapeutic concerns inherent in a funeral. A death often stirs up feelings of anger and guilt, regret and remorse, and a prayer of confession provides the means for these

feelings and experiences to be offered to God. One woman, for example, reported that she entered the church for her father's funeral with deeply conflicted feelings. She had loved her father, but their relationship had been damaged, mostly, as she saw it, by his desire to continue controlling and scolding her well into her adult years. They had clashed many times over this and never arrived at a place of reconciliation, and now he was dead. But when, in the prayer of confession, the minister prayed this phrase, "and redeem, O God, even our memories," she reported feeling a deep wave of peacefulness pass over her, a gratitude that memories that neither she nor her father had been able to repair could now be given in trust to the mercy of God.

The prayer of confession from the United Church of Canada is particularly apt for a funeral:

God of the living and the dead,  
we are burdened by the things we have done  
and by the things we have not done.  
We remember our broken promises  
and missed opportunities;  
the gifts we have taken for granted,  
the love we have not shown or returned.  
Forgive us, comfort and heal us.  
Lift our guilt from us,  
that we may walk in freedom and grace. **Amen.**<sup>22</sup>

Here is another fine funeral prayer of confession from the United Methodist tradition:

Holy God, before you our hearts are open  
And from you no secrets are hidden.  
We bring to you now our shame and sorrow for our sins.  
We have forgotten that our life is from you and unto you.  
We have neither sought nor done your will.  
We have not been truthful in our hearts,  
in our speech, in our lives.  
We have not loved as we ought to love.  
Help us and heal us, we pray.  
Raise us from our sin into a better life,  
that we may end our days in peace  
trusting in your kindness unto the end;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord,  
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
one God, now and forever. **Amen.**<sup>23</sup>

If a prayer of confession is used, it should, of course, be followed by an announcement of pardon.

**3. Scripture.** Generally two or three passages of Scripture are read, and in most traditions at least one of these should be from the Gospels. Though it is fitting to read "favorite passages" of the deceased or the family members, the main purpose of these readings is for the whole congregation to be reminded, through Scripture, of the promises of God in the face of death and loss.

**4. Sermon or Homily.** Not every funeral includes a sermon or homily, though some traditions stipulate that one be given. A detailed discussion of the place of preaching at a funeral is given in chapter 9.

**5. Naming and Witness.**<sup>24</sup> Here is a controversial element in a funeral, the time when the community explicitly evokes the biography and memory of the deceased. This can be done in a variety of ways. A memorial statement describing the life of the one who has died can be read by the pastor or someone else. Something created by the deceased (music, poetry, art, etc.) can be offered. People who were close to the deceased—neighbors, friends, relatives—can make short speeches, giving remembrance. Inspirational readings from sources other than Scripture can be included here.

What makes this element controversial is that there are so many ways it can go off the rails. It can drift into an inauthentic form of eulogizing, in which the deceased is romanticized and, thus, misremembered. It can lapse into sentimentality, pomposity, frivolity, pedantry, or just sheer tedium. So many and so great are the risks that some pastors and congregations forbid this sort of activity in funerals altogether, which is probably an overreaction. It is better to think of this, like the collect, as a kind of offering of the people. At this point in the service, what they have brought to give to God—their memories, their sense of sorrow, their words of thanksgiving for the life of the person they have lost—is now received and blessed. Of course, it can help if the coaches, cousins, and coworkers who plan to speak at the funeral are told in advance that they are actually crafting offerings, not roasts and after-dinner speeches.

**6. Creed.** If a creed is recited by the congregation, this is the location for it. Placed here, the creed serves three purposes. First, it is one of

those moments when the voice of the community at worship is heard, an audible sign that those who mourn are not alone but surrounded in prayer. Second, coming close after the sermon, it ritually reenacts the creation of the church: the Word evokes faith. Third, it serves as yet another reminder of the connection between the funeral and baptism, especially if the creed used is the one most associated with baptism, the Apostles' Creed. The *BCP* makes this baptismal linkage specific by introducing the creed with these words: "In the assurance of eternal life given at Baptism, let us proclaim our faith and say . . ." <sup>25</sup>

**7. Prayers of Intercession.** Although several different kinds of prayers are rightly included here—thanksgiving, adoration, petition, intercession—the main theme of this prayer section is pleading with God, praying for the mourners that they will be consoled, for the church that it will continue along the path of discipleship, and for the deceased that she or he will be received into the mercy of God.

These prayers of intercession, placed as they are at the end of this section, are "traveling prayers." In fact, assuming that the funeral is taking place inside a church, these prayers are joined with the symbolic sound of the people of God getting to their feet and heading out, resuming the journey with the deceased toward the place of farewell. As the congregation travels, it begins to call toward heaven, as it were, telling God to get ready for the new saint's arrival. Let the angels of light walk before him. Let the gate of righteousness be opened to him. "Let him join the heavenly choir," say the words of the old Coptic prayer noted in an earlier chapter. "Bring him into the paradise of delight."

This kind of intercessory prayer at a funeral, in effect praying *for* the deceased, makes many Christians, maybe especially Protestants, nervous. By the time of the Reformation, these intercessory funeral prayers for the dead had become firmly connected to the concept of purgatory, particularly the idea that the living could somehow help pray people out of their time of purgation and into paradise. Such prayers, the Reformers claimed, were anathema, vain attempts to save people by works instead of through faith. As such, the prayers of intercession were banished from funerals, and once people had died, the church's voice of prayer on their behalf, at least among most Protestants, grew silent.

The fact that certain types of intercessions for the dead have reappeared in contemporary funeral services, even among Protestants, is by no means a sign of amnesia, a theological misstep, or a reversion to

medieval views. It is a sign, rather, that these intercessions have taken on a different character and are understood by the church, Catholic and Protestant, to have different meanings from their sixteenth-century counterparts.

Put briefly, today's prayers of intercession grow out of an understanding of the Christian funeral as a rite of passage,<sup>26</sup> as a ritual act marking an event of human transformation that has been enacted by the grace of God. A person who was alive and with us in this earthly life has now died and, through God's mercy, has been raised to new life and joined to the communion of the saints. Precise language is not possible for us, but the deceased has moved from this world to the next; someone who was "this" is now "that," who was "here" is now "there," and the funeral, as a rite of passage, ritually marks this change and bridges this distance.

In rites of passage, even nonreligious ones, "real" time and ritual time are two different realities. Take, for example, the graduation ceremonies that are held every year on the campus where I teach. The soon-to-be graduates put on funny-looking academic regalia, march to the ceremony, and when the officials pronounce the magic words, everybody flips a tassel from one side of the cap to the other, and . . . Voila! People who were students one minute have become degree-holding graduates the next.

Now all of us on the faculty know that this is not really the magic moment. These students actually became graduates, in a legal sense anyway, several days before when the faculty voted to grant them their degrees. The ritual simply acts out in ceremonial fashion what is already true about them, that they have made the transition from being not-graduates to being graduates. But even though the ceremony itself does not actually *cause* them to change status and to be graduates, this does not mean that it amounts to nothing. Something actually happens when they flip those tassels and clutch the sheepskins. Even though nobody absolutely requires our students to show up for the ceremony, few miss it. It would hardly do to send out a mass e-mail saying, "We voted. You're a grad!" Walking ritually through the process of moving from one status to another is important to humans; it is the way that we participate in a reality that has changed around us.

In Christian worship, the issue of ritual time is even more complex, because all worship is an enactment of eschatological time, that is, God's time. Our worship, measured by the ticking of the clock, is gathered into eternity. If, for example, on Sunday we pray the prayer

of confession pleading for forgiveness at 11:06 a.m., and we announce the assurance of pardon at 11:08, does that mean we were unforgiven at 11:06 and forgiven two minutes later? Of course not. In the economy of God we were, are, and will be forgiven. But this doesn't mean that the prayer asking for forgiveness is irrelevant. What it says is that the confession and forgiveness sequence that we marched through in clock time is our way of participating in and experiencing that which is eternally true in God's time.

To get us a bit closer to funeral intercessions, consider this prayer of the psalmist, "Remember how short my life is; remember that you created all of us mortal!" (Ps. 89:47 TEV). Does this prayer imply that it has somehow slipped God's mind that the life of the human creature is brief and fleeting, but that after the prayer, because of the prayer, God remembers it all over again? Taken literally, that is silly, of course. We are the time-bound creatures, not God. We are the ones who are locked into "before" and "after," and our prayer "Remember me!" is our cry to be gathered up once more into the eternal remembrance of God. It is a little time-bound boat launched into an everlasting sea.

So when we pray for ourselves and for our departed loved ones at a funeral, we are neither bargaining with God nor performing some meritorious good work to polish the apple with God. We are doing what we always do in prayer: crying out in the midst of time to be gathered body and soul into God's eternal love. We are, as we pray on earth, gathered into the life of the Trinity, even, as the *OCF* suggests, praying "in the voice of Christ," "who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us" (Rom. 8:34). When a Christian sister dies, we believe that she has been raised, imperishable, and that it happened, as Paul says "in the twinkling of an eye." One moment she was an alto in the choir of First Baptist on Main Street, and then, faster than light can travel, she was singing in the great chorus of the saints singing "day and night without ceasing . . . , 'Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God the Almighty, who was and is and is to come'" (Rev. 4:8).

But that is in God's time, which is not yet our time. And so at the funeral we walk step by step over the pathway from here to there. We lovingly carry the body of the sister who is already with God, walking toward eternity, but walking—as we must, one step in front of the other through time and space—singing, and praying as we go, that both our sister and we ourselves will be welcomed into the open arms of God. All of this is getting around to the point that, properly understood theologically, the old fights about purgatory are long past, and it

makes perfect sense for the church to pray, "You raised the dead to life; give to our sister eternal life. . . . You promised paradise to the repentant thief; bring her to the joys of heaven." A prayer of intercession used in the Orthodox liturgy acknowledges that the prayer is bridging two temporal realms:

With the saints, give rest, O Christ, to the soul of Thy servant, where sickness is no more, neither sorrowing nor sighing, but life everlasting. Thou only art immortal, who hast created and fashioned [human beings]. For out of the earth were we [mortals] made, and unto earth we shall return . . . we [mortals] all shall go, making as our funeral dirge the song: Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia.<sup>27</sup>

Here, from *The Book of Common Worship*, is another fine example of a contemporary funeral intercession:

For our *brother/sister* N.,  
let us pray to our Lord Jesus Christ  
who said, "I am the resurrection and the life."  
Lord, you consoled Martha and Mary in their distress;  
draw near to us who mourn for N.,  
and dry the tears of those who weep.

**Hear us, Lord.**

You wept at the grave of Lazarus, your friend;  
comfort us in our sorrow.

**Hear us, Lord.**

You raised the dead to life;  
give to our *brother/sister* eternal life.

**Hear us, Lord.**

You promised paradise to the repentant thief;  
bring N. to the joys of heaven.

**Hear us, Lord.**

Our *brother/sister* was washed in baptism  
and anointed with the Holy Spirit;  
give *him/her* fellowship with all your saints.

**Hear us, Lord.**

*Hershe* was nourished at your table on earth;  
welcome *him/her* at your table in the heavenly kingdom.

**Hear us, Lord.**

Comfort us in our sorrows at the death of N.;  
let our faith be our consolation,  
and eternal life our hope.

**Amen.**<sup>28</sup>

#### 4. Holy Communion

As early as the fourth century, there is explicit mention of celebrating the Lord's Supper, the Eucharist, at graveside. Most contemporary prayer book funeral services place Holy Communion right at this point in the funeral. Some traditions expect the meal to be observed; others make it optional.

When the Lord's Supper is observed at a funeral, it is the kind of farewell meal with the deceased observed in many human burial practices. Even more, though, it is the paschal, Easter meal which remembers the death of Jesus, presents the resurrection of Christ, and anticipates the heavenly banquet when all the saints will gather at table.

Most funerals in our society now involve people who are not members of a church, and presiders should weigh, as a practical and pastoral matter, whether observing the Supper at a given funeral would serve as a sign of hope or mainly as a reminder of division and separation. If the meal is observed, the usual manner is followed, but the suggestion that family members and friends of the deceased be invited to bring the bread and wine forward is good.<sup>29</sup>

Several of the prayer book services specify that, if the Eucharist is not observed, the service include the Lord's Prayer at this point. This prayer, which would normally be a part of Holy Communion, is particularly fitting, both because of its connection to Holy Communion and because, as familiar as it is to most people, it provides one more place for the voice of the congregation to be heard.

#### 5. Sending<sup>30</sup>

The drama of the funeral has now arrived at its climax: the community of faith carries the deceased to the grave and bids farewell, entrusting her or him to God. It then goes forth with God's blessing to live and serve in the world, its grief tempered by hope. As Dennis Bushkofsky and Craig Satterlee comment:

If we understand that different parts of the pattern of worship are more prominent in some services than others, we might think of the Sending as especially prominent in the funeral liturgy. Everything the assembly has done in the service to this point—giving thanks for the baptism, proclaiming and hearing the gospel, and receiving

Christ's body and blood—prepares the assembly to be sent to live in the hope and peace of Christ, even as they symbolically take leave of the deceased and "send" her or him into God's all-embracing hands.<sup>31</sup>

The sending movement of the funeral consists of two parts: the Commendation and the Committal:

**1. Commendation.** In the Commendation, the presider prays on behalf of the deceased and in the spirit of Jesus' own prayer on the cross, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" (Luke 23:46). This is done most powerfully when the spoken words are accompanied by visible action. The minister comes to the side of the coffin, and family members and others may join the minister around the coffin. The pastor then speaks a preface to the prayer.

*ELW*'s preface is simple, calling for the pastor to say, "Let us commend name to the mercy of God, our maker and redeemer."<sup>32</sup>

The *OCF* is more elaborate, providing for a statement like the following to be said, after which holy water, as a sign of baptism, may be sprinkled on the coffin:

Before we go our separate ways, let us take leave of our brother/sister. May our farewell express our affection for him/her; may it ease our sadness and strengthen our hope. One day we shall joyfully greet him/her again when the love of Christ, which conquers all things, destroys even death itself.

*The Book of Common Prayer* includes a preface in the form of a prayer that employs the biblical imagery, so familiar from Ash Wednesday, of dust:

Give rest, O Christ, to your servant(s) with your saints,  
*where sorrow and pain are no more,  
neither sighing, but life everlasting.*

You only are immortal, the creator and maker of mankind; and we are mortal, formed of the earth, and to earth shall we return. For so did you ordain when you created me, saying, "You are dust, and to dust you shall return." All of us go down to the dust; yet even at the grave we make our song: Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia.

*Give rest, O Christ, to your servant(s) with your saints,  
where sorrow and pain are no more,  
neither sighing, but life everlasting.*

Then the pastor, and perhaps the others near the coffin, places a hand on the coffin and prays a prayer similar to this:

Into your hands, O merciful Savior, we commend your servant *N*. Acknowledge, we humbly beseech you, a sheep of your own fold, a lamb of your own flock, a sinner of your own redeeming. Receive *him* into the arms of your mercy, into the blessed rest of everlasting peace, and into the glorious company of the saints in light. *Amen.*<sup>33</sup>

**2. Committal.** The whole community of faith now processes again, this time to the grave to commit the body of the deceased to the place of burial. The order of procession is essentially the same as was used to process to the front of the church: crossbearer (if there is one), clergy, coffin of the deceased, and family. The paschal candle, if used, remains in the place of worship. The main difference in this processional is that the rest of the congregation is invited to follow.

The procession proceeds to the grave. If this is some distance from the church, the minister (and crossbearer) stands by the hearse as the coffin is loaded. At the cemetery, the minister (and crossbearer) again stands by the hearse until the coffin is unloaded, then leads the procession to the grave site. When all are in place, the presider begins with a greeting from Scripture, such as one of these:

Grace and peace from our Savior Jesus Christ be with you all.

Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, and the living one.  
I was dead, and behold, I am alive for forever and ever. Because I live, you also will live.

One or two Scripture lessons may be read, and then the words of committal are said toward the coffin, preferably as it is actually being lowered into the grave:

In sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ, we commend to Almighty God our *brother N.*, and we commit *his* body to the ground (or to the deep, or the elements, or its resting place); earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust. The Lord bless *him* and keep *him*, the Lord make his face to shine upon *him* and be gracious to *him*, the Lord lift up his countenance upon *him* and give *him* peace. *Amen.*<sup>34</sup>

If the coffin is lowered into the grave as the people are still present, some dirt may be placed by hand or shovel on the coffin. Then the following may be said or sung:

Rest eternal grant to *him*, O Lord;  
*And let light perpetual shine upon him.*  
May *his* soul, and the souls of all the departed,  
through the mercy of God, rest in peace. *Amen.*<sup>35</sup>

The committal and the funeral close with a prayer and a blessing.

O Lord, support us all the day long until the shadows lengthen and the evening comes and the busy world is hushed, and the fever of life is over, and our work is done. Then, in your mercy, grant us a safe lodging, and a holy rest, and peace at the last; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*<sup>36</sup>

Go in peace,  
and may the God of peace,  
who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus,  
make you complete in everything good  
so that you may do God's will,  
working among us that which is pleasing in God's sight,  
through Jesus Christ,  
to whom be the glory forever and ever!  
*Amen.*

## OTHER ISSUES OF PRACTICE

In addition to the main structure and elements of central funeral rites, there are also other recurring practical issues that need to be considered:

### 1. Music

The movement-by-movement analysis of the funeral above made no mention of music. This is not because music is unimportant in the funeral, but because it is so important that it is not possible to put one's finger on the order of worship and say, "There! *That's* where the music goes." There are obvious places for hymns, spirituals, or psalms—during the procession to the front of the church and after the sermon, for



example—but hypothetically almost every element of the service could be sung.

The service should have lots of music, and most of it, if not all of it, should be congregational song. Accompany them with singing! It is good for the voices of the community singing praise to be heard above the noisy clamor of death. If there is a soloist or a choir, don't allow them to serenade the congregation. The experience of death cancels all concerts. We have holy work to do, to carry a brother or sister to the grave; so let the choir and the soloists walk along with us. Let them sing *with* the people and on their behalf.

People will often request quiet, meditative hymns like "Abide with Me" and "Near to the Heart of God." The static inwardness of such hymns is fine, but the funeral is a confident procession of the faithful to the place of departure to hand our loved one into the arms of God. The best funeral hymns are traveling music, pilgrim songs. It is better to sing "I Want Jesus to Walk with Me" than "In the Garden."

I am not particularly a fan of the militaristic "Onward, Christian Soldiers"; I wouldn't want it sung on a regular Sunday, much less on the Sunday nearest Memorial Day. But it was used powerfully in the funeral of a young man who died of AIDS. When the commendation was said and the funeral was to proceed to the cemetery for the committal, a crossbearer lifted up the cross and led the coffin and the community in procession to the grave as they sang, "Onward, Christian soldiers, marching as to war, with the cross of Jesus going on before: Christ the royal Master leads against the foe." When it is clear who the foe is—namely, that scurrilous destroyer of all that gives life, that author of AIDS and cancer, the one who takes delight in inflicting pain and abandoning children to starvation, old Death itself—and that we cannot on our own strength defeat it, we need Christ to lead against the foe.

The "funeral" sections of many denominational hymnals simply have not caught up theologically, preferring a quasi-gnostic, we-will-always-remember-Harriet theology to the Easter kerygma. A popular funeral hymn from the 1960s, "Lord of the Living," gets a bit coy when it affirms, "You gave us Jesus to defeat our sadness with Easter gladness" and "Lord, You can lift us from the grave of sorrow." It's hard to quibble with that. The resurrection does generate joy, and God can surely lift our hearts from grief; but there is some unmistakable downsizing here. With all due respect to the pain of grief, the notion that God gave Jesus to defeat *our* sadness, while perhaps technically true, is like saying that God gave Jesus to defeat the flu, which is also true, I

suppose, but seems way too small for a hymn. I know we are mournful at a funeral, but why not stand up in the midst of our tears and shake a fist at the old Enemy and say, "In Jesus, God defeated the powers of death." Why not shout out, "Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee":

Mortals, join the happy chorus  
Which the morning stars began;  
Love divine is reigning o'er us,  
Joining all in heaven's plan.  
Ever singing, march we onward,  
Victors in the midst of strife,  
Joyful music leads us sunward  
In the triumph song of life.  
(Henry van Dyke, alt.)

## 2. Cremation and Bodies

Some readers will wonder if this book has been written oblivious to the fact that the practice of cremation is now, for a rapidly growing number of people, the method of preference for the disposition of the body. True, I have only rarely spoken of cremated remains and urns, sticking mainly to the language of bodies and coffins. This does not imply that I am opposed to cremation; I am not. With only a few exceptions, most Christian groups now accept cremation as a perfectly acceptable alternative to earth burial, and I am with them. The old superstitions that the fires of cremation are symbolic of the fires of hell or that cremation makes it somehow impossible for God to raise a person bodily are just that, superstitions, and are based on serious misunderstandings of both cremation and of bodily resurrection. Burning a body subjects it to no more hellish form of indignity than burial, given what water and worms will eventually do to a corpse, and no embalming or rubber sealed vaults will keep them at bay forever. And while the bodily resurrection, as an exasperated Paul explained to the Corinthians, is a bodily resurrection, it is not a mere revivification of *that* body. Our bodies are transformed, glorified. "It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body," said Paul (1 Cor. 15:44).

In the second century, the Romans burned at the stake the venerable Bishop Polycarp, student of the apostle John, because he would not deny his Lord, whom he said he had served for eighty-six years. The Christians who witnessed the execution said they did not smell the

odor of burning flesh but something more like gold and silver being refined in a furnace or the fragrant aroma of frankincense. Cremated by the Romans though his earthly body was, I am confident that a fully embodied Polycarp is now singing the alleluias in the presence of God.

If there is a problem with cremation in regard to a funeral, it is that the cremated remains are required to stand in for the whole body of the deceased, which at its worst could be like asking Ralph Fiennes's hat to play *Hamlet*. We have experienced and known the deceased as an embodied person who speaks with a mouth, touches with hands, caresses with arms, and walks with feet this way or that. Commitments are made with the body, not the spirit, and the embodiment of the person *is* the person we have known and loved. The thought of substituting a container of bone and ashes for a human body puts me in mind of what Frederick Buechner once said of using grape juice instead of wine at holy communion:

Unfermented grape juice is a bland and pleasant drink, especially on a warm afternoon mixed half and half with ginger ale. But it is a ghastly symbol of the life blood of Jesus Christ, especially when served in individual antiseptic, thimble-sized glasses.

Wine is booze, which means it is dangerous and drunk-making. It makes the timid brave and the reserved amorous. It loosens the tongue and breaks the ice especially when served in a loving cup. It kills germs. As symbols go, it is a rather splendid one.<sup>37</sup>

If the deceased is to be cremated, then the best option is for the funeral to be held before the cremation and for the body to be present at the funeral. Most funeral homes are adjusting to this option and can provide a temporary (rental) coffin or a sturdy cardboard coffin that can be used instead of a more expensive permanent coffin. If the funeral is held reasonably soon after death, in most cases embalming is not required.

Second best, but definitely second best, is for the deceased to be cremated immediately and for the cremated remains, in an urn or other container, to be treated in a funeral just like the body in other funerals. Some congregations have commissioned the crafting of a small, coffin-like box of wood, metal, or stone, that holds the urn and can be carried or wheeled into a funeral, with or without a pall, just like a regular coffin.

There are some funerals where, for good reasons, the body cannot be present. The body was lost and could not be recovered, or the body was donated to medical science, or the funeral is being held miles away from

the place of interment, or the family simply insisted uncompromisingly that the body be buried or burned in advance. In proper hands, these funerals are not lesser services in any respect, but they should not be services where the body is ignored.

During the time of slavery in the southern United States, slave owners were known to take Bibles away from slave preachers, fearful that the biblical message was stirring up insurrection. There are moving accounts of these preachers standing beside open graves and leading funerals, reciting Scripture from memory while holding open folded hands as if they were cradling a Bible.

Just so, funerals without the body present should open hands and arms as if the body were in fact there. The leaders of these funerals should do everything in their power, in prayers and in sermons, to evoke the bodily presence of the one who has died and who is now being offered back to God, embodied and with gratitude and in hope that God will raise this body from the dead.

One additional issue about cremation needs to be addressed: what to do with the remains. In addition to the usual repertoire of possibilities—burying them, putting them in a “niche” in a columbarium, or scattering them on the earth—people today are exploring a whole new host of choices, from dividing them among the surviving relatives to having the ashes swirled into lamps, furniture, and jewelry.

The Catholic *Order of Christian Funerals* takes a firm stand here. The only acceptable practices are burial or entombment in a mausoleum or columbarium. “The practice of scattering cremated remains on the sea, from the air, or on the ground, or keeping cremated remains in the home of a relative or friend of the deceased is not the reverent disposition that the church requires.”<sup>38</sup>

This position grows out of a commitment to keeping the symbolism straight, that the cremated remains represent the body. Although the rubrics do not say so, there may also be concern about the inherent meanings of the alternative practices. Keeping a vase of the deceased ashes on the mantle may be a psychological refusal, perhaps temporary, to let the dead go. As for scattering ashes, if we pushed hard enough, we might discover that where people choose to scatter ashes reveals something of their eschatology, their view of the afterlife. Scattering Pop's ashes “in the woods where he loved to hunt” may be an overdomestication of the concept of eternal life.

Personally, though, I don't try to push these images quite so far, and I think we can help people think through these choices in wise and

practical ways. I like the advice of one cemetery director, who suggested that a good test of what is done with cremated remains is to ask if there is any parallel with what we would sense as proper to do with a body.<sup>39</sup> Would we commit Pop's body to the earth in the woods he cherished? Probably. Would we divide Pop's body and send pieces to the children so that they could encase them in jewelry and lamps? Probably not. But some Catholics have defended the practice of dividing the cremated remains, arguing that this is precisely what the church has done with the bodily relics of the saints. So stay tuned.

### 3. Coffins Open or Closed

A good many contemporary funeral liturgies put a foot down when it comes to open coffins. They allow them at the viewing or the wake, but they want that coffin snapped shut at the funeral. I can think of no good theological reason why this should be done, and I suspect that the preference for a closed coffin has more to do with class consciousness and squeamishness than with gospel sensibilities. A fine counterwitness was offered in the last days and the funeral of Pope John Paul II. As he was dying, he did not try to hide the ravages on his body of Parkinson's disease, and when he died, his body, not in a coffin but exposed on a cot, was carried in full view to his grave.

Perhaps the best way to think of the open-or-closed coffin issue is to consider it as *adiaphora*, a wonderful liturgical term meaning "either way is fine" or, more precisely, those things that are neither morally prohibited nor morally commanded. Some ethnic groups make much of having the coffin open; some others are bothered and distracted by an exposed body. So, *adiaphora*. Open it if you will; close it if you prefer. There is simply no way that a coffin, open or closed, does not convey the presence of the dead body, and *that* is the main point.

### 4. Going All the Way to the End

If a funeral is a piece of community theater, one noble goal is to keep people from yawning and exiting the stage in the second act, never carrying the performance all the way through to the end. It has become commonplace to consider the church funeral service as a self-contained service. When that's done, the funeral is over, and the family can take

care of the disposal of the body in private. But in a funeral we are carrying the body of a saint to the place of farewell.

As a practical matter, people will peel away at various points along the way, but we should strive to make it clear that we are not done here until we have handed our loved one over to the earth and to God. In short, we are carrying a loved one to the edge of mystery, and people should be encouraged to stick around to the end, to book passage all the way. If the body is to be buried, go to the grave and stay there until the body is in the ground. If the body is to be burned, go to the crematorium and witness the burning.

Resistance to going the full distance with the dead will occasionally be encountered from some crematoriums, which are not accustomed to people who want to stay for the firing up of the retort, and some cemeteries, which view trudging to the grave as an inefficient use of employee time or don't like the idea of families being present for the dirt being placed on the coffin in the grave. These cemeteries much prefer for funeral processions to end not at graveside but in some plastic pseudochapel where the ceremonies can be peremptorily put to an end and the worshipers dispatched without delay, thus freeing up the burial crew to get on with their business unimpeded. These so-called chapels are—why mince words?—Chapels of Convenience and Cathedrals of *Funeralia Interruptus*. Tell the cemetery owner or the crematorium manager, kindly of course, to step out of the way, that they are impeding the flow of traffic. You have been walking with this saint since the day of baptism; the least you can do is go all the way to the grave, to the end, with this child of God. They may refuse, but if enough clergy demand to be able to go the last few yards with the dead, change will happen.

### 5. The Graveside Service

Many funerals are held entirely at the grave. They are usually smaller gatherings, and the service is abbreviated. Pastors should think creatively about how to preserve, even in graveside ceremonies, the symbol of the church processing with the body of the deceased to the place of farewell. Two ways to do this are, first, to be sure that, even when shortened, the service still retains the basic movements outlined above, and second, to invite the worshipers, rather than going directly to the grave, to gather by the hearse. The opening statements of the service

can be made there; then the group can follow in procession behind the coffin to the grave, perhaps singing a familiar hymn as they go.

## 6. The Funeral Director

A great irony hangs over the relationship between clergy and funeral directors. In the literature, they are often portrayed as adversaries and competitors, with colliding values and goals. I do not want to minimize the frictions that can result when trying to work together to serve families at a difficult time, but relationships in practice tend to be better than they are pictured in theory. Clergy will often say, "You know, you have to watch funeral directors like hawks; they're just out for the dollar. But, now, Ralph down at Kilpatrick's, he's different; he's great."

The real stress points emerge when unstated and incompatible images of a funeral clash in the planning process. At the time of death, Christian families who use the services of a funeral home do some planning with the staff of that home, and they do some planning with their pastor, but hardly anyone is completely clear where the division of labor lies. When families arrive at the funeral home with the idea that for the funeral to be meaningful they have to monogram the service in some way to "make it more personal," then the funeral director can be placed in a difficult situation. He or she may not agree with the family's request to, say, stencil "Go Cowboys!" on the side of the coffin or to hire a sad-faced clown to hand out programs, and may gently try to guide the family in another direction. But funeral homes don't stay in business long if they sternly resist the desires of their customers. After all, from the funeral director's perspective, it's *the family's* funeral. If Pastor Kate should say to the funeral director, "A clown handing out bulletins? Not in *my* church, we don't!" then an impression is created that Pastor Kate has *her* way of doing funerals, and the family has *its* way of doing this funeral, and the funeral director is caught in the middle, just hoping to do something dignified and professional, and not get sued.

Actually, most thoughtful funeral directors are as worried as are pastors about the loss of public and cultural value in funerals. They are concerned as business people, of course, but they are also concerned as citizens and sometimes even as people of faith. Every week they see people choosing the trivial over the profound, and they sense that our society is the poorer for it.

If the church and its clergy can recover for themselves the character of the Christian funeral, the kind of public community theater that it is, the power of its script, the sacred nature of its cast, then this vision needs to be shared with the local funeral director. Most good funeral directors would welcome a conference with a pastor with whom they will be working. Such meetings allow for relationships to build, for frank conversation about mutual concerns, and for the pastor to say, "When I am working with my families, I am trying to help them to participate in a Christian ritual of long-standing and great power. Here is how I understand it." The point is, this is not Pastor Kate's funeral, shaped by her personal peeves and preferences; this is the church's worship. It is to everyone's benefit to help faith communities retrieve and then to perform their sacred funeral rituals.

For the time being, anyway, funeral directors have settled on calling themselves just that: funeral *directors*. But it is, or should be, a misnomer. We would be puzzled and wary if someone should build a lovely, white-columned establishment down the block from the church and put out a tasteful sign reading "Sullivan and Sons, Baptism Directors." When it comes to the Christian funeral, this is a liturgy that is a part of the church's heritage, a ritual the church has been enacting for two millennia. We need plenty of help to do it, but we should not be so indifferent to our own gospel, our own traditions, and our own worship that we hand these treasures over to others.

Although I am not optimistic that it will happen, I would like to see the recovery of an older designation for funeral directors, namely, *undertaker*. Most funeral directors will probably not take kindly to this suggestion, since it seems like a demotion from the so-called ranks of the professions. But I mean to honor their work, not diminish it. There are scores of tasks that need to be done, and done quickly, to carry out the drama of a funeral. The staff of a funeral home are those who *undertake* some of the tasks that we are no longer able or willing to do. This kind of "undertaking" is a solemn responsibility, and a faithful stewardship of it is a sacred work.

There is a small trend to bypass the funeral home altogether, to go back to the practices of an earlier time, and for families to bury (or cremate) our own dead. For the most part I find this movement interesting and praiseworthy, as I do the accompanying trend toward "green" funerals in which non-embalmed bodies are placed in the earth either directly or in a biodegradable coffin. I hope both trends gain strength. But in a complex, fast-paced urban society where we don't make our

own candles, shoe our own horses, or even fry our own chicken any more, realistically most people need the help of others to prepare the bodies of their dead and transport them to the cemetery or crematorium. They need people with the equipment and expertise to *undertake* these important responsibilities and to perform them in ways that enhance the worship of the faith community.

Who does what in all this has to be figured out locally. I know of one congregation that has a rule: the funeral home can bring the coffin to the front door of the church, but the church takes it from there. This rule gladdens my heart. Here is a congregation that wants to reclaim its sacred responsibility and to conduct its own ritual. However, a funeral director in that town makes a good point when he notes that most of the members of this congregation are on the elderly side and to watch them try to navigate a coffin down a narrow center aisle without banging into the pews is an anxiety-making experience. Maybe someone else could be allowed to perform that task—not to change the ritual, but to *undertake* the job of helping us enact it.

### 7. Leadership and Community Involvement

One advantage of the village funerals of two centuries ago is that everybody had a job to do. There was a grave to be dug, a coffin to be made, food to be prepared, the body to be washed and dressed. Once again we can see how the Christian funeral was built on the chassis of necessity. These tasks had to be done, and doing them was the human thing to do. Doing them in ways that disclose the gospel is what makes them the Christian thing to do.

Now many of these tasks are done by others; about the only job left for people is psychological consolation, a daunting task. Churches are beginning to recognize the value of weaving back into the funeral ritual the labor of our hands. For example, some congregations have rotating groups of members who volunteer to participate in the whole funeral process. They see that phone calls are made, programs prepared, and that food is available. The ideas for gathering in more of the community to help perform the drama of a Christian funeral are many and depend upon local circumstances, but the goal is worthy.

It is also helpful to see the funeral service itself as a drama with several parts, and not just a monologue by the pastor. To ask people to

read Scripture, pray, and, as fitting, perform other parts in the service, makes the dramatic character of the funeral richer and more evident.

### 8. Military and Other Civil Ceremonies

Sometimes the family of the deceased will desire to have the funeral include a military ceremony or a civil ritual, such as the Elks fraternal ceremony. In some ways, doing one of these rituals in the midst of a Christian service is like performing two plays on the same stage at the same time. The best solution is to keep the two rituals completely separate, but this is usually unrealistic. The best acceptable compromise, in my view, is to do the civic ritual first, then perform the full Christian ritual. However, some of these civic ceremonies are designed to be done at graveside, which creates a problem. Either the civic ceremony takes place as soon as the funeral group arrives at the grave, which interrupts the logical dramatic movement of the funeral, or it is done as the final event, which means that the last word of a funeral is not the blessing of the committal but a secular ceremony. Given the choice, I go with having the ceremony as soon as the group arrives at the grave so that the last word spoken will be the gospel. But pastors will simply have to work out their own salvation here, with fear and trembling.

### 9. Preplanning

The preplanning of funerals normally occurs in two ways. The first is the purchasing of a preneed contract with a local funeral home, which allows one to pay in advance for a funeral at a locked-in price. Frankly, many of these contracts are really just overpriced insurance policies, and people should investigate carefully before purchasing them.

The other kind of preplanning is deciding in advance what one's wishes are for the funeral: what hymns, what Scripture, whether to be buried or cremated, and so on. Sometimes this is done in a letter to one's children or even more formally in a will. Some congregations, as a part of a program of end-of-life planning, provide forms for people to describe their specific desires.

All preplanning, though, should be held like a thistle, very gently. We have already pointed to the questionable value of preneed

contracts, and we should also question the desire to pin down the details of one's own funeral. Why would we want to do that? Either we don't want our families making those decisions, so we decide to stay in control from beyond the grave (a person with no heirs is, of course, an exception). More commonly, we don't want to be a burden on our family. Truthfully, though, bearing one another's burdens makes us human and brings us closer to the spirit of Christ. We may feel the weight of trying to figure out the best hymns and so on for mother's funeral, but it is a good weight, much like the good weight of putting our muscles to work in carrying her to the arms of God. We have the duty and the delight to carry one who has, in times before, carried us. Some broad-brush preplanning may be helpful, but we don't want to deprive our loved ones of the soul-making labor of fulfilling the law of Christ by bearing our burdens in a time of need.

## 9

*Telling the Truth about  
Life and Death:  
Preaching at Funerals*

SERMON OR EULOGY?

When it comes to the idea of sermons at funerals, much confusion has raged. Is a sermon at a funeral necessary? Desirable? If so, what is it supposed to be and do? What should be its basic content and aim? These questions have proved vexing and difficult to answer, and what are deemed to be the "correct" responses depend in large part upon where one stands in the stream of church history. As an example of how the funeral sermon has been something of a wax nose—bent first this way and then that way by the tides of history and fashion—consider Jacques Bénigne Bossuet (1627–1704), possibly the most celebrated Christian funeral sermonizer in history.

Bossuet's ornate, polished funeral orations are still admired and studied as fine rhetoric in French schools. Well-born, classically educated, and possessed of a rich, sonorous voice and theatrical pulpit manner, Bossuet quite naturally made his way rapidly through the clerical ranks of French Catholicism, climbing finally to be chaplain to the court of the "Sun King," Louis XIV. Bossuet clearly had what it takes to be a royal chaplain—polish, grace, charm, a gift for flattery—but mainly the man could preach a good funeral. What that meant at Versailles was, among other things, that Bossuet could sprinkle the fancy perfume of his oratory over the fetid moral lives of various deceased royals and cause them to smell like roses at their own funerals.

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24. The terms "naming" and "witness" for the actions of this section of the funeral are taken from *A Service of Death and Resurrection* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1979), x, 58–61.
25. *The Book of Common Prayer*, 496.
26. The pioneering anthropological work on human rites of passage is Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960).
27. "The Funeral Service," Orthodox Church in America, <http://yya.oca.org/TheHub/StudyGuides/ContemporaryIssues/LifeandDeath/LifeDeath%20Sessions/Session2.htm>.
28. *The Book of Common Worship*, 922–23.
29. Dennis L. Bushkofsky and Craig A. Satterlee, *The Christian Life: Baptism and Life Passages, Using Evangelical Christian Worship*, vol. 2 (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008), 174.
30. The name "Sending" for this section comes from *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, Pew Edition, 283.
31. Bushkofsky and Satterlee, *The Christian Life*, 175.
32. *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, Pew Edition, 283.
33. *The Book of Common Prayer*, 499.
34. Ibid., 501.
35. Ibid., 502.
36. Ibid., 833, altered.
37. Frederick Buechner, *Beyond Words: Daily Readings in the ABCs of Faith* (New York: HarperOne, 2004), 409.
38. *Order of Christian Funerals, Appendix 2: Cremation* (New York: Catholic Book Publishing, 1997), 6.
39. Richard Peterson, "Cremation Memorialization for the Next 1,000 Years," an address given to the Cremation Association of North America, August 21, 1998, and reported in H. Richard Rutherford, *Honoring the Dead: Catholics and Cremation Today* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001), 22.

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