

• CHAPTER 2 •

The Funeral as Teachable Moment

Everything plus the Kitchen Sink

Jesus was a teacher. Among his other essential roles in the course of doing his Father's business, Christ focused on providing his followers with a blueprint for living . . . and with a vital challenge to apply Jesus' teachings as the only method for building a solid foundation for earthly and eternal life.¹

THE FORMER DEAN OF THE SEMINARY at Virginia Union University, the late Dr. Paul Nichols, often reminded us of the old adage that the scholar is not the person who knows all the answers. The true scholar, he said, is the person who knows where to find the answers. As a pastor, I have been adamant for many years that the most abundant setting for learning in the guild of ministry is the funeral. It is a venue for inquisitive preachers to find rich repositories of answers to many of the deep issues and questions of ministry. As a result, I have strongly suggested (and sometimes required) that apprentice ministers accompany me during the process of preparing for funerals. When a pastor conducts a funeral, every skill she or he has learned will be put to the test. Funerals are learning opportunities not only for the apprentice, but for the pastor as well. Any experience with such a textured and varied list of responsibilities must by definition create a teachable moment for all involved.

Families Are Complex Systems

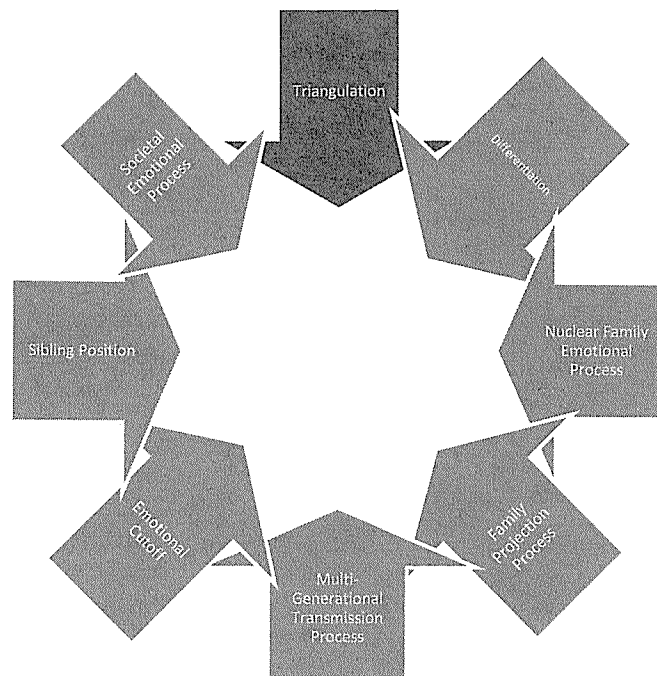
One of the first teachable moments relative to conducting funerals is that, during the process, the pastor must be a counselor. Depending upon the circumstances of the death, the pastor must be prepared to provide spiritual guidance to individuals and families within the circle of the deceased. To meet counseling responsibilities with excellence, pastors would do well to have a working understanding of Bowen Family systems theory. This does not require that every pastor be certified in social work or credentialed in psychology. It does mean that an effective pastor must understand the dynamics and mechanics of relationships in families.

Bowen Family systems theory presumes that families are necessarily and by nature interdependent. There are times, depending upon the intensity of the relationships between family members, that certain members of the family seem to each have one arm in the same emotional coat. That is, some members of the family not only share the same sorts of feelings, which is not surprising, but also things happen between two or more individuals that create a private constellation of complex responses to stress and grief.

Having even a basic understanding of how these relationships work is vital to bringing perspective to pain. One will never understand the pain of a family due to the death of a loved one until one understands the complexity of these relationships. The rub is, unless the family is known prior to the death in the family, the pastor has only a limited opportunity to observe and evaluate these dynamics, inasmuch as the interval from the moment of death to the funeral usually is a matter of days. Besides, even if the family is well-known to the pastor, funerals always bring together distant or extended members of the family a pastor may never have met. This means that a pastor must intentionally develop keen skills of observation and cultivate a useful lexicon of terms and concepts that inform the task at hand.

In figure 1, the eight tasks of systems theory are laid out in such a way as to suggest a relationship between them, but no linear process by which all the tasks must be accomplished. All of the tasks exert influence upon the family system, but no one of them is pre-eminent. The process is as individualized and unique as each family.

FIGURE 1: Components of Bowen Family Systems Theory



Components of Bowen Family Systems Theory²

Death can debilitate a family. Death is fraught with difficult and divisive issues. There is planning to be done, and there are persons who fail to carry their weight in that planning. There are bills to be paid, and there are persons who lack resources to meet those obligations. There are also persons who have the resources to meet funeral obligations but refuse. There are insurance policies around which complex beneficiary questions arise. There are overwhelming feelings of grief, anger, and denial, and there is enormous stress related to these feelings. Further, one has no way to know in advance which family members are experiencing which of these feelings. Being able to understand and identify patterns and possibilities of triangulation will accelerate the pace at which the pastor is able to engage healthily the overarching process of grief and the stages of grief which underlie it.

Triangles and the Pastoral Presence

One of the key systems terms in this context is “triangulation.” Triangulation takes on many forms, but in families it generally refers to the practice of drawing a third person into a conflict or relationship which is originally between two people (often siblings). The third person becomes the channel of communication between the two dysfunctional people.³

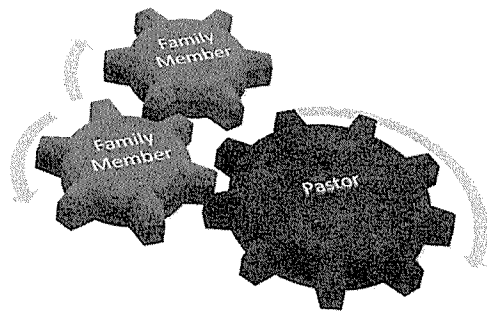
One of the prime moments for communication breakdowns in families is during a time of grief. Being on the lookout for such breakdowns and for instances of unhealthy triangulation is vital to the pastor seeking to discern the meanings of unspoken and esoteric communication among family members. The ability to recognize triangulation and to enter the triangle strategically may allow the pastor to become a symbolic part of the family, sometimes permanently.

Let me acknowledge that triangulation often has a negative connotation. In most instances, the concept infers some attempt to remedy a dysfunction or problem and usually involves accomplishing the goal by exploiting the resources of some other entity. In military science, to triangulate is for marksmen to lock in on a target with overwhelming force by posting three shooters in various locations, thus ensuring that each bullet will do damage from its own vantage point, and between the three marksmen, a lethal shot will be the result. In politics, triangulation refers to the somewhat Machiavellian idea of usurping the ideas of an opponent in order to curry favor with the opponent’s constituents, thereby rendering the opponent ineffective. In the social sciences, triangulation frequently refers to the fact that one partner in a two-person system draws another person into the system and uses the third person as a vehicle for communication when communication between the original two has deteriorated or ceased.

A somewhat comical example of this from movies or television is when a married couple has been arguing. The spouses are sitting in the same room with each other, but angry and refusing to speak. The wife looks at one of the children and says, “Tell your father it’s time for dinner.” The husband with a scowl looks at the child and says, “Tell your mother I’m not hungry!” Triangulation can

and sometimes does involve this unhealthy strategy of leveraging a third person to facilitate communication between unwilling or recalcitrant parties. In the context of a pastor's involvement with a family during a time of death, however, triangulation can be the positive result of a pastor being drawn into and infusing a family system with renewed and much-needed vitality when the family is functioning at diminished capacity.

FIGURE 2: Triangulation



This dynamic is illustrated in figure 2, in which a triangle exists in the form of three gears. Without the third gear labeled “pastor,” the other two gears will turn, but they will lack the synergy, efficiency, and dynamism that are possible. Once the energy from the third gear is included in the system, one family member can use the momentum of the pastor, and the pastor’s momentum will inevitably add energy to the other two to turn in their own directions.

Can Anything Good Come Out of Triangles?

Mrs. Glenda Scott, one of the elderly members of our church, approached me during the period of fellowship in worship. She handed me a crumpled note on a page torn from a small notepad. On the sheet, she explained, was the location and name of her older sister, who lay very ill in a nursing home. Mrs. Scott’s request was simple: “Please go to see her, lay your hands on her, and explain to her that she does have a reason to live.” I assured her that I would go. Soon after, I called Mrs. Scott and felt led to ask if she and her

husband would be there when I arrived. She informed me that they did plan to be there. Mrs. Scott had been the lone caregiver to her sister throughout her lengthy illness.

When I arrived at the nursing home, Mrs. Scott had lined up several chairs along one wall of the tiny room. Only she and her husband were there. She sat by the bedside of her sister, whom I could tell had begun to make the transition to the other side. There were no respirators or other life-support devices attached to her. She was peaceful but absolutely unresponsive. Her face was turned away from us toward the wall, and the placid and still affect about her made it seem almost as if she had already gone. I sat by the bedside with the Scotts and talked with them about this dying sister. As I laid my hand on the sister’s shoulder from time to time, we discussed the good times and the times of conflict between them. We even discussed their children. Several times, Mrs. Scott leaned over tenderly and spoke to her sister. I could tell from the increased volume of her voice that she feared her sister might not be able to hear her loving words. Mrs. Scott seemed to me to be concerned about the level and even the possibility of communication between them in this crucial time.

When the time was right, I joined hands with Mr. and Mrs. Scott and laid a hand on the shoulder of Mrs. Scott’s dying sister, and we prayed together. I asked God for peace and for strength both for the Scotts and for this sister. I asked God to allow the dying sister to rest in the assurance that God would handle all of the unfinished affairs of this life. (Mrs. Scott was convinced that her sister would not “let go” until she heard once again the voice of her only son, whom she loved with all her heart.) At the conclusion of the prayer, Mrs. Scott and her husband sang, *a capella*, an old meter hymn called “It Will Be All Right.” It was a moving and powerful moment. I left after about an hour. The time was around 5:30 p.m.

The next morning, Mrs. Scott called me to report that sometime in the wee hours of the morning, her sister had indeed “let go.” She was happy that we had held our bedside prayer meeting, and she mused that it was divine providence that had brought us all together that day. She felt that, although her sister had not spoken, had been blind, had been immobile in illness—somehow, her sister had participated as we had talked, prayed, and sang.

While eternity may be the venue at which we learn the answer as to whether that dying sister in fact participated in the gathering that day, of this I am certain. For Mr. and Mrs. Scott, communication between them and their dying sister was enhanced by the triangle formed when they, the sister, and I came together. The enhanced energy, optimism, and joy—reflecting Jesus' teaching that where two or three gather in his name, he is present (Matthew 18:20)—are the true value of triangulation of this sort. The evidence of a pastor's involvement may seem at times opaque and unnoticed, but if we enter the family system properly, especially during a time of death, the outcome can be powerful and life-affirming.

Grief in Pastoral Perspective

Grief is the primal, personal sorrow which grows out of a perception of loss.⁴ Grief is not analytical, and it is not logical; it is purely emotional. That is not to suggest that the person who experiences grief has lost the capacity to think; quite the contrary. Grief as a response to death is intense precisely because a person has a cognitive understanding of irrevocable changes in a cherished human relationship. Grief is emotional because feelings of helplessness are intensified inasmuch as even when a death is anticipated, those who remain alive rightly feel that they have no control over developing events. Grief is the nursemaid to depression, and if grief is suppressed or poorly managed, it often nurtures depression. A pastor must allow family members permission to experience the normative pain of grieving, and bringing perspective to that pain is to generate a healthy climate for empowered healing within the family. The desired outcome of empowered healing is creating a climate which allows people to reach a state of acceptance of the obvious facts while maintaining wholesome relationships within the family and a working faith in God.

Depression

Depression is often clinically described as anger turned inward. When situations in life are at odds with the wishes of a person, he or she may detach from others or refuse affection. A depressed

person may withdraw from activities that once had been pleasurable, or that person may feel tired. Situational depression is usually transitory, and if a person is allowed to go through it, depression can pass on its own. However, the pastor and the church family need to be aware of the signs of depression. In this context, the theological, spiritual, and social engagement of the community of faith is an invaluable resource for creating a healthy climate for grieving persons to pass through the valley of depression.

Anger

Anger has been described as the response to a blocked wish. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross has included anger as one of what she understood as the organic stages of grief,⁵ and especially among religious families, experiencing anger during a time of death often generates enormous guilt and confusion. Whatever the form anger assumes, it is often a source of guilt among family members because many people view anger as impertinence or disrespect toward God. Numerous theological and homiletic opportunities emerge from angry feelings. A pastor must be expert in addressing these feelings to articulate that God is not insulted, nor is God diminished by these feelings, and God can lovingly handle even the rawest of these emotions.⁶

Denise Dombkowski Hopkins describes the response of ancient Israel to seasons of stress, loss, pain, and oppression as *chutzpah*.⁷ Moreover, she outlines that particularly in the Psalms, there is a *chutzpah* tradition, which finds Israel "shaking the fist" at God as they grapple with understanding why such sorrow could befall God's chosen people. Every pastor must be on the lookout for family members who, in their own way, are shaking the fist at God. Many times, this anger surfaces as subtle hostility toward the pastor or toward the church. Sometimes, this anger surfaces in the form of a family member who refuses to join the family and pastor in prayer as a home visit concludes. In any event, people doing the difficult work of responding to a death in the family are grappling with a reality which, if they had their own way, they would reject, and they will never be able to find a healing perspective on their pain unless they are allowed to experience the depths of it. They need to know "it's okay; God can take it."

Bargaining

Bargaining is the process by which an individual tries to negotiate, usually with God, for more time. In the case of grieving family members, this usually happens near the end of a serious illness of a loved one. "I'll stop smoking. I'll start going to church. I'll give more to charity. I'll be a better parent, better child, better friend." The logic is that God may intercede if only the survivor will commit to some personal life change in exchange for more time with a loved one. Ironically, despite being an intellectual exercise, bargaining may be the most irrational of all of the stages of grief because it is based upon the premise that the illness of a loved one and the behavior of the one doing the bargaining are somehow related. "God, if you will just give Grandma a little more time, I promise I'll stop drinking."

Denial

Denial is a defense mechanism designed to minimize intellectually the impact of any circumstance on the human psyche. Denial is also a coping tactic which strategically postpones stress until a time when the individual feels more emotionally able to process what are usually dire or sometimes threatening situations. Kübler-Ross defines denial as an irrational resistance to and rejection of the obvious facts. Denial does not, however, always involve irrational rejection of obvious facts—that, for example, our deceased loved one is not, after all, dead. Sometimes denial is used to compartmentalize tasks so that overwhelming demands can be met. In such instances, denial is a detour.

Consider this example from my own life. It was a typical third Sunday in May. We arrived home from church a little sleepy because we had gone out to dinner, enjoying a relaxed and productive day. We were happy with the way things had gone at church that Sunday: the music, the message, the attendance, the new members. Then the phone rang. It was my oldest sister, Gwen. The words she spoke are etched in my memory. "Peter, it's about Chee-Chee," her nickname for our mother. "I don't know. I've never seen her this sick before."

Mom had been hospitalized, and just a couple of days earlier, I had spoken to her. I had also spoken to her on the previous Sunday,

which was Mother's Day. Our mother had been battling breast cancer for seven years, but we had all been informed that her initial surgery seven years earlier had gotten all the cancer. Mom was simply suffering, so she told us, from residual effects of the treatment.

My conversation with my sister was brief. Gwen said, "I think you'd better come." But I couldn't believe what I was hearing. My sister was telling me that she thought our mother was dying. I hung up and immediately called Mom's doctor. After I peppered him with questions, his words unbelievably echoed Gwen's: "I think this would be a good time to come."

My wife, Wanda, and I frantically conferred and began throwing things in suitcases for ourselves and for the children. Thirty minutes later, I called my youngest sister, Tanya, to inform her that we were about to get on the highway, and she responded serenely, "Good, because she's gone." I fell back in the chair, quietly stunned, and thought, "She's gone? Gone where?" I thought, "You can't mean . . . dead!" But that is exactly what she meant. I barked at her, "Tell the mortician not to touch her until I get there!"

We jumped into the car and took off driving the thousand miles to Memphis, Tennessee, from Norfolk, Virginia. An hour later, I looked at the road signs above the highway and realized that, despite the times I had driven the familiar route, this time I had driven more than sixty miles in the wrong direction! The stress and shock of the moment had temporarily blocked my memory of familiar roads; it had even temporarily blocked out my vision as I unconsciously navigated a vehicle with my family inside. I had been looking at the road signs but not seeing them. For me, denial had taken the form of a literal detour.

Denial can present itself as symptoms of shock. It can influence human behavior and human decision making to the extent that sometimes at funerals we see family members who appear to be unsteady due to mood-altering medicines, or even some who appear to be under the influence of alcohol or other drugs. It is denial in response to stress which will occasionally cause persons to experience moments of disorganization and forgetfulness. The pastor's role in these times is to be alert to the signs and behaviors of denial and provide stability by modeling to the family a compassionate connection to the awful fact that someone they love is dead. The mere sight of the pastor realistically and compassionately

confronting the unthinkable issues of death is a powerful and reassuring reality. Modeling for a family that there are ways to function and move on is at times the only evidence that there is life on the other side of the destabilizing encounter with death.

Family Matters

These destabilizing encounters are the pivotal moments when family members can become dysfunctional and channels of communication can be obscured or mutated. All of the situations above are relationship stressors and can cause communication between people to deteriorate. When this happens, sometimes a third person is drawn into the family system. Sometimes this is to reduce stress between the two who are failing to communicate with one another. Sometimes this is to develop the third person as a channel of communication because the first two people have given up on speaking with or relating to one another. Sometimes, as in the case of Mr. and Mrs. Scott, the family simply needs a guide into the unknown realm of communication between the living and the dying. The pastor must be prepared to minister grace to those who feel wronged, promote peace among those who are alienated from one another, or even help to bridge the gap between family members when they feel less than competent to communicate with one another in the uncertain times often posed by death.

For this reason, it is vital to discern upon the first phone contact with the bereaved which family member seems to be in charge of the planning. Exercise caution here, because many times the person making phone contact with the pastor is not the authorized decision maker. Authorized decision-makers may be a surviving spouse, oldest child, cherished friend, or even a more distant relative such as a cousin, niece, or nephew. He or she may only be assisting with some details; occasionally, an individual will portray falsely that he or she is in control. Especially if a pastor is not familiar with the voice on the other end of the phone, once the niceties and small talk have been completed, it is appropriate to ask, "Are you in charge of the arrangements, or should I speak with someone else?"

The pastor attaching securely to the authorized decision-maker usually brings stability to the family, because it generates the feeling that progress is being made and creates the sense of a modicum

of normalcy. A surprising level of anxiety exists within a family until the pastor has engaged with the decision-maker. That contact creates, in a nominal way, the perception of security during a time when life really feels out of control. Most often, the person is in that position because the deceased put confidence in him or her based on age, stability, skill, or affection. In any case, that person is usually in the capacity of leadership because he or she has been endorsed in some way for the task.

Once some relationship between the pastor and the authorized individual has been established, this person can usually give the pastor insight about the character of relationships between immediate members of the family. This will require keen observation because the person in charge may not be aware of revealing the nature of these relationships. It will, instead, require that the pastor watch closely and listen carefully when introduced during the home visit. It will be impossible to learn on the spot all of the key family members and what their issues or personalities may be, but this person can provide somewhat of a crash course on the relationships close to the planning table. Watch for small reactions and eye contact with and between these family members (or the lack thereof), and listen carefully to what appear to be off-handed comments. These are usually packed with vital information.

The Kitchen Sink Unclogged

The pastor serves in a variety of capacities during the process of planning funerals: administrator, event planner, editor, worship leader, public relations person, scholar, theologian, teacher—and oh! I almost forgot: preacher. All of these roles for a pastor in the context of death are different from church to church and from denomination to denomination, but some core aspects of each role are similar no matter what the church or creed.

Administrator

The pastor as administrator must demonstrate early in the process that she or he is overseeing the process. This is not a hierarchical position from which to wield power. The pastor as administrator can delegate responsibility but must demonstrate authority. Remember

that in the event of a death in the family, people sometimes feel lost, abandoned, and disoriented. In these times, they must be made to feel that their pastor is not disconnected from the details but is very much presiding over the process. Even church leaders who participate in the process of making visits to the family must be sure to relay to bereaved families that their actions also represent the pastor. The key to bringing perspective to the pain of those traveling through the passage of death and dying is to incarnate the reality that their heavenly Parent is in touch with their pain. The pastor's leadership is the incarnation of God's empathy.

Event Planner

The pastor as event planner in these times must possess or develop skills in inherently knowing how to organize people in the uniquely church activity of fellowship as a catalyst for healing. (Depending on the church tradition, fellowship may be described as a repast, a reception, or a funeral luncheon.) Such moments are not only instructive but also are the true power of the church. In fact, in the earliest Christian churches, fellowship was the glue that held the church together. The pastor must understand what represents the healthiest aspects of fellowship in the course of a death in the family and then consciously lead, insisting on excellence and carefully monitoring the quality of the hospitality offered to bereaved families.

Attending to the details of hospitality does not require that the pastor be personally involved in the delivery of service. In many churches, however, people who serve in the kitchens can become territorial about their use, and authentic fellowship and quality service may suffer. The pastor has the opportunity as event planner to articulate clearly and compassionately a vision and principles for fellowship, and then set up a mechanism for ensuring those principles are practiced.

Editor

People may soon forget what is done during moments of happiness, but they will long remember what is done during moments of grief or bereavement. The documents written during these times are intrinsically historical documents, and they will be referred to for

years to come. The service program, the obituary, and the resolutions and letters produced for the funeral will become the primary source information with which families heal, and they will become the markers of family history in perpetuity. Memorial cards will be pressed into family Bibles and sealed into scrapbooks and photo albums. The impressions and messages that pastors allow to go out under the name of the church will continue to identify them long after the funeral is over. Thus, not surprisingly, in relation to the task of preaching funerals, every pastor needs editorial skills. These are to be differentiated from general reading skills such as those which every literate professional must possess. An editor must develop precise and accurate abilities in evaluating the syntax, organization, grammar, and even layout of printed or electronic documents.

Worship Leader

The responsibility of the pastor as worship leader is often underestimated in its importance because it is assumed that irrespective of what the pastor does or does not do during a funeral, as long as the program is well-organized and printed, as long as church leaders are fulfilling their responsibilities, the service will succeed. In reality, it is the pastor whose presence in and conduct of the service most often creates the tone and emotional tenor of the moment which will define success. Success has been achieved when the family and friends have been afforded the opportunity for healthy grief and worship in a context of order and compassion. In too many funerals, preaching and worship are sabotaged by emotion, and the service morphs into something which centers around grief only. Pastors must make clear and observe fastidiously rules of order, according to their own faith traditions, for funeral worship services, and their bearing during the service should reflect these principles. Consider this painful lesson from my experience ("Open Mouth, Insert Foot").

OPEN MOUTH, INSERT FOOT

Verneeta Black was a coworker of my wife, Wanda, and me. I was bivocational at the time, and we worked together at a psychiatric hospital for children. As it turns out, Verneeta's mother died. Her mom was a member of a church which did not at that time have a pastor, and Verneeta secured

permission for me to conduct the service. As always, I did my best to prepare. On the day of the funeral, a Roman Catholic priest came to the study requesting to make remarks at the appropriate time, confiding that he had been the deceased's employer. I was delighted to have him participate in the service.

Things went well, and it appeared that the family received what they needed from the process. When I got home later that day, however, I received a phone call from my coworker, with whom my wife and I had been quite close. Verneeta angrily denounced me for allowing the priest to speak and revealed to me that for all the years her mom had worked for this man, he had been cruel and otherwise unjust to her. Having him speak at the funeral had ruined the family's opportunity to heal.

We lost our friendship with Verneeta because of this careless and crucial mistake. I learned from that experience that no funeral service should include impromptu expressions from any person not approved in advance by the family. Every aspect of the service, from the music to the list of persons giving remarks, must be carefully planned and monitored by the worship leader.

Public Relations

Public relations is still a little-known imperative for churches in the age of the information superhighway. To reframe a statement about lies versus the truth frequently used by the late E. K. Bailey, a bad name will travel around the world before a good name puts her shoes on. It is not the sole responsibility of the pastor to manage public relations for the church. However, funerals are unique and singular occasions on which the pastor must bear the brunt of how the church projects its image.

During funerals, pastors are essentially the public relations face of the church. They must interact with the extended family of the deceased, who frequently come from far-flung corners of the country and will carry their impressions back to those places. The pastor must interact with members of a wider local community who may be coming into the church to support and comfort the family. The pastor must also interact with businesses via the funeral home entrusted with serving the family. All of these are high-visibility points of exposure for the church. The pastor's power to bring perspective to the family's pain is either diminished or enhanced according to how well the pastor responds to the responsibility of managing the

church's image in these various situations. All of these interactions will reflect positively or negatively upon the family as well as the church. If the pastor has managed any of these points of exposure poorly, it will add injury to a family which is already struggling to recover from injuries they feel are inflicted upon them by death.

Teacher and Scholar

It is a given that in most congregations, the pastor is resident scholar, theologian, and teaching elder of the church. Fortunately for the church, the pastor is no longer the only person who is likely to have training or even credentials in theology. The pastor, however, in times of death in the church, must demonstrate an applied, practical facility for making plain the difficult and complex issues of death and dying, the justice and mercy of God, and the eschatological implications of family circles being broken. There is nothing so useless as the fruit of education hanging so high that it cannot be picked from the tree by hungry, hurting people on the ground.

The pastor's charge, then, is to make truth about even the loftiest struggles of life accessible to the hungry and hurting without pretending to have answers for every question and without pretending to fill every uncomfortable questioning silence with her or his own wisdom. The fact is that there are many, many things which none of us understand. The pastor, as true scholar, must have sense enough not to pretend to know everything, but instead he or she must point mourners to where the answers are: the One who does have the power to tell us everything important enough to know. The pastor who brings perspective to pain must sometimes exhibit the wisdom to be quiet and sit with hurting people for a while.

Ironically, no pastor can bring perspective to pain or preach funerals with power until she or he has successfully understood and entered into relationship with the people, in all the nuanced and professionally demanding senses of this. Although the tasks as described here rightly seem complex, onerous, and perhaps even outside of the ability of the typical preacher, the reality is, preaching is done to people.⁸ The preacher who does not love her or his hearers enough to try and understand them is probably a hireling (John 10:12-13) and not worthy of the paradoxical privilege of being an ambassador in chains (Ephesians 6:20).

NOTES

1. Lora-Ellen McKinney, *Christian Education in the African American Church: A Guide for Teaching Truth* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2003), xi.

2. Bowen systems theory consists of eight principles: triangles, differentiation of self, nuclear family emotional process, family projection process, multigenerational transmission process, emotional cutoff, sibling position, and societal emotional process. For purposes of this writing, triangulation is focused upon, although other principles (e.g., differentiation, sibling position) may have some relevance to the subject matter at hand. However, to maintain thematic focus, this one principle is highlighted because of its more direct relevance.

3. Ernst Abelin, *Die Theorie der frühkindlichen Triangulation, Von der Psychologie zur Psychoanalyse (The Theory of Early Childhood Triangulation: From Psychology to Psychoanalysis)*, in *Das Vaterbild in Kontinuität und Wandel (The Father Figure in Continuity and Change)*, ed. J. Stork (Stuttgart: Fromann-Holzboog, Ruhr-UNI-Bochum/Thomas Bonnhoefer Gotteslehre, 1986), 45–72.

4. David Casarett, Jean S. Kutner, and Janet Abraham, "Life after Death: A Practical Approach to Grief and Bereavement," *Annals of Internal Medicine* 134.3 (February 2001): 208–15, available at <http://www.annals.org/cgi/reprint/134/3/208.pdf>, 2001 (accessed February 17, 2011).

5. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (New York: Macmillan, 1969), 50–81. Kübler-Ross outlines five stages of grief (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance). It should be noted that since her groundbreaking book, other scholars have either contested the theory or rejected it outright. My observation and experience have been fairly consistent with the stages as outlined by Kübler-Ross and her observation that there is no set order of progression through them. It is likely that a pastor will encounter all of the stages during the course of engagement with a grieving family, and the stages may not necessarily present in the order in which Kübler-Ross or this author outlines them. Some people experience only two or three stages. Grief is a very individualized process.

6. A helpful resource is R. F. Smith, *Sit Down, God . . . I'm Angry: A Grieving Father's Conversation with God* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1997).

7. Denise Dombkowski Hopkins is a friend and was a mentor to me throughout my doctoral studies at Wesley Seminary in Washington, DC. Her *Journey Through the Psalms*, rev. and expanded ed. (St. Louis: Chalice, 2002) is a marvelous resource which examines the Psalter as a guide for prayer and assists the reader in exploring the deep emotions of life. Denise is a preeminent Old Testament scholar.

8. Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Richard Lischer, *Theories of Preaching: Selected Readings in the Homiletical Tradition* (Durham, NC: Labyrinth Press, 1987), 29.

• CHAPTER 3 •

Pastoral Perspectives on Death and Dying

Leaping Lessing's Ditch

*One does not get discouraged for long, or try to place a time limit on God's help. Nor does one threaten to leave the will of God if hardships last "just one day longer."*¹

A GERMAN POET, PHILOSOPHER, and theater critic, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729–1781) made an indelible impact upon Christian theology despite the fact that in his own time, his work was vilified and many of his life's ventures failed. Lessing nonetheless became an undeniable influence on German literature and Christian theology. He was a child of the Enlightenment and argued, standing in the shadow of his clergy father, that reason is the only means by which anything can truly be known. For Lessing, the Bible was an unreliable sourcebook for religion, as was faith, because both were subject to human input and, therefore, human error. According to Lessing, the New Testament was unreliable as historical fact and especially unreliable as any revelation from God. Surprisingly to some, Lessing's work was not intended to destroy Christianity, but his expressed enterprise was the correction and rescue of Christianity from human corruption. Lessing argued that there is a "great ugly ditch" between what Christians believe and what is certain. It is this ditch which he said he could not cross, no matter how many times he tried.

Lessing's ditch has been the theological nemesis of pastors and families wrestling with death and dying ever since Lessing himself

failed to jump it. How does one jump the ditch between what one believes and what appears to be certain? During times of death, leaping the great ugly ditch between faith and human reason is especially crucial. One cannot easily leap the ditch between broken, grieving hearts clinging perilously to faith and the stark reality of death, but it can be done. The answer to how it can be done lies within the homiletic traditions of the church, and the pastor preaching at a time of death must appropriate a solid theological and biblical framework for approaching the task. These homiletic traditions and the theological and biblical framework which undergirds them must be grounded in an unshakeable and explainable belief that death for the Christian is not the end of our story. The issue is not to suggest that pastors lack faith. Rather, in too many cases, the content of that faith is unintelligible, or worse, it is not usable to the uninitiated or even to the rank-and-file member in the pew. This chapter is an attempt to propose a biblical and philosophical way forward in the task of helping pastors to construct a practical theology of death and dying.

Ready . . .

The funeral sermon and the eulogy are vehicles for retraditioning² the anthropology and eschatology of the church, a rare opportunity outside of the funeral process. In this retraditioning, the pastor and the church have the privilege of reshaping the fearful and often unhealthy attitudes of families surrounding death and dying. Retrading also allows the pastor and church as community to convey profoundly the power and healing resident in encountering death when one is surrounded by others previously delivered from the dark ditchbank of limited human understanding. If the funeral is a teachable moment for associate ministers and pastors (see chapter 2), it is a teachable moment for the church as community and the community at large when pastors are able to articulate an intelligible and practical theology of death and dying. The funeral sermon and eulogy, then, become exercises in healing homiletics, as well as didactic and transformative encounters between the church and the wider community.

The genius of the church is community and commonality. Community is the relational aspect of the church which rescues those

who are lonely from the danger of isolation.³ Commonality is a powerful and even mystical validation of faith, namely, that so many from diverse backgrounds and experiences have encountered faith and the God of faith in so many of the same ways that neither mere coincidence nor group delusion can explain it away. With these two principles, the community of the faithful and the inexplicable commonality of the community's encounters with God, faith becomes the facts. This book is the product of having sat at hundreds of bedsides, listening with bated breath and watching with rapt attention as the dying crossed over. Many times, their utterances about what they saw and the powerful, profound peacefulness with which they crossed over were identical. Hundreds of people from various backgrounds and different families, dying under radically different circumstances, remarkably often saw and felt the same kinds of things: angels, cool verdant gardens, long-dead family members, future events. As a pastor, one of the greatest privileges of ministry has been the blessing of being allowed to share this unusual journey of commonality with them. This is the "mystic sweet communion with those whose rest is won."⁴

The bridge which has carried to healing countless millions in the community called church is belief in the bodily resurrection of Jesus from the dead, and belief in the bodily resurrection from the dead of those in the community who have faith in him. Resurrection, however, is one of the main issues which left Lessing stranded on the ditchbank of reason and leaves many who grieve stranded there as well. The pastor who preaches funerals well must be able to leap the ditch with wing-footed confidence, or those in bereaved families and even others in the congregation will remain, to the detriment of the church, mired in the mud of human reason.

Remarkably, it is often preachers who wrestle with themselves and who wrestle with their own issues on the muddy and slippery bank of Lessing's ditch. I have witnessed preaching at funerals which betrays the sad reality that among clergy, there are fissures in faith and misunderstandings in message when it comes to what they believe about the implications of death. I have heard too much preaching at funerals which seems to hedge bets and apologize for what should be the church's unabashed faith in the fact that death is not the end of our journey. Too much preaching I have heard at funerals seems to fear offending those in the audience who may

not believe as the church does. The faith community has nothing to prove! The fact is, the burden to disprove what the community commonly believes about this rests squarely on the shoulders of those who do not believe.⁵

Set . . .

Timothy Keller, in his groundbreaking book *The Reason for God*, also places the burden of proof for the truth of the Bible and the reality of the miraculous (especially the resurrection) squarely on the shoulders of those who deny the veracity of them.⁶ Unlike Christian apologists, Keller does not try to argue that the Bible is a historical fact book. He does argue, however, that the facts, inspiration, and truth of the Bible are unimpeachable when they are properly understood. Keller articulates with great effect, for example, that those who deny the reality of resurrection have missed some pivotal issues clearly supporting it. There are extrabiblical data and sociocultural facts which, when objectively considered, leave little doubt about the reality of the resurrection of Jesus.⁷ To those skeptics, for example, who try to dismiss resurrection by assuming that the followers of Jesus, being grief-stricken after his death, wanted to believe he was risen, Keller explains that Jews, who constituted most of the early following of Jesus, did not believe in and had no notion of a singular resurrection or a resurrection of individual people. For Jews, resurrection was to be a national phenomenon.⁸ It would, therefore, have been unheard of for a Jew to be accepting of such an event unless it happened.

For those who attempt to explain away the bodily resurrection of Jesus by suggesting that people in the ancient world were much more accepting of superstition and were, as a result, more accepting of unexplainable events like resurrection, a more thorough reading of history is in order. Jews, as well as the Jews and Gentiles who became the first Christians, were influenced greatly by Hellenistic (Greek) culture. The ancient Greeks believed that the physical body was inferior to the spirit, always decaying, and constantly degrading toward extinction. Consequently, they would have rejected out of hand any notion of coming back to the human body once the spirit broke free from it. To return via resurrection, or by any other means, would have been unthinkable in the ancient world.

The empty tomb is the other thorny subject for those who reject the bodily resurrection of Jesus. It cannot be overemphasized how vital the empty tomb is to the resurrection. That the tomb of Jesus was empty and that at least four witnesses saw it empty is a major difficulty for those who try to undermine or who struggle with believing the resurrection. In the ancient world, and especially among Jews, the testimony of two or three witnesses validated officially the veracity of anything.⁹ Moreover, the tomb being empty and the numerous sightings of a living, walking Jesus outside of the tomb confirm the resurrection. Without the sightings, the empty tomb may have been the result of a theft of his dead body, or a hoax, but the sightings make concealing a hoax, even an elaborate one, an impossibility. Richard Nixon, a president of the most powerful and technologically advanced society the world has ever known, could not keep a mere burglary at Democratic National Headquarters a secret. How is it feasible, then, that poor, undereducated members of a society could cover up an event which contradicted their own two-thousand-year-old religion, challenged politically the most powerful nation in the world (Rome), and overturned the laws of human physiology? It would carry the phrase "conspiracy theory" to truly grotesque proportions.

The eyewitness accounts in addition to the empty tomb make it impossible for the resurrection to be a hoax because no group in the history of the world has been able to conceal anything of such magnitude. Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene, to the Twelve, to the two on the road to Emmaus, and even to more than five hundred people at one time. If this had not been so, there were too many witnesses wandering around who were still alive at the time that Paul wrote his letter to the Corinthians.¹⁰ These witnesses could have challenged Paul's claims as fraudulent.¹¹ The eyewitnesses to the resurrected Jesus, coupled with the empty tomb, leave on the shoulders of those who do not believe a heavy burden of disproving the resurrection.

Ironically, Lessing's struggle to leap the ditch between what one may know with the human intellect and the mysteries of faith is the struggle of every person who has experienced the death of a loved one. Leaping the ditch of doubt is especially the struggle of every pastor charged at a time of death with bringing perspective to believers whose faith is shaken or whose family buckles beneath

the pain. In the end, all things biblical, especially resurrection, are issues of faith. Such things are bound to remain foolishness to those who do not believe, and no amount of analysis is likely to change that. The work of bringing perspective to the pain of death is at its root, then, a theological job. Every pastor and every preacher at a funeral must herself or himself become an eyewitness to the resurrection of Jesus.

Leap!

We turned onto Scott Street in Memphis. It was the same route I had traveled a hundred other times over the years as my family went to my grandmother's church, or the many times we gathered at the funeral home owned by our cousin, Reggie, for the wake of a family member. Owens and Son Funeral Home was two blocks from "Muh-Dear's," my grandmother's, church. I knew this route by heart. We turned into the funeral home parking lot, and my heart pounded, my stomach sank, and I remember coaching myself silently that I had to keep it all together in front of my wife and the kids. We had not stopped driving for eighteen-and-a-half hours. We did not stop to sleep, and we barely stopped to eat. I had given our cousin, who was the mortician, strict instructions that he was not to touch my deceased mother until I got there. He complied with my request.

After my cousin and I greeted each other politely, I asked to see Mom. Because of our family connection, he allowed us access to the cooling room where Mom was kept until I would give my consent to embalm her.¹² Wanda was so supportive, watching me like a hawk to make sure I was all right and holding onto me so I would feel her love. I had dreaded this moment for the entire thousand miles from Virginia, and as we approached the door of the cooling room, I didn't know how I would react. As the door opened, my stomach felt like it had the first time I crested the highest slope of a rickety, wooden roller coaster. We peered into the dimly lit room, and there Mom lay just as she was when she was brought from the hospital the previous day. For the first time in my life, I saw my mother, bald from the cancer, wrapped in a sheet, cold and lifeless. It was a catharsis, but remarkably, it was a catharsis in a good way. I didn't break down; I didn't pass out; I didn't get sick. Instead, a peace washed over me like I had never experienced with

any other death. This time, when confronted with the severing of the precious, earthly bonds between a parent and a child and after walking with scores of others to this same dark place, I now stood at my own ditch between what I knew (death) and what I believed (resurrection), and I was all right. I understood in that instant that my faith had become the facts, and what I believed was infinitely stronger than even the powerful things I was feeling. When I realized this, all in a moment . . . I leapt!

There's a land that is fairer than day,
And by faith we can see it afar,
For the Father waits over the way
To prepare us a dwelling place there.
In the sweet by and by,
We shall meet on that beautiful shore.
In the sweet by and by,
We shall meet on *that* beautiful shore.¹³

NOTES

1. Nicholas C. Cooper-Lewter and Henry H. Mitchell, *Soul Theology: The Heart of American Black Culture* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991), 147.
2. David Lowes Watson, a prominent United Methodist scholar, introduced this term in his popular writings on covenant discipleship in the United Methodist Church. Watson modeled the program on the early class meetings of Methodists in eighteenth-century England and America. Covenant discipleship is a method of building fidelity in the day-to-day following of the teachings of Jesus by voluntarily engaging what Watson's wife, Gayle Turner-Watson, calls "friends in the faith" in accountability relationships. According to Watson, traditioning is a vital concept among churches with more congregational forms of church polity and worship, because it represents an intentional way for the church to assert its teachings and convey through generations its ecclesiology.
3. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, trans. and with introduction by John W. Doberstein (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1954), 21.
4. This is a line from "The Church's One Foundation" (1866), with lyrics by Samuel J. Stone (1839–1900) and music by Samuel Sebastian Wesley (1810–1876). This hymn is in the public domain.
5. See Boykin Sanders's treatment of 1 Corinthians 15 as apocalyptic drama, "1 Corinthians," in *True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary*, ed. Brian K. Blount, Cain Hope Felder, Clarice J. Martin, and Emerson B. Powery (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 298–302.

6. Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Dutton, 2008), 209–21.

7. Numerous ancient sources outside of Christianity, most of them hostile to the faith, mention Jesus and his followers. Moreover, many of these sources mention the miracles and resurrection of Jesus, and they are not able to deny the miracles; rather, they decry them as sorcery. A partial list of such ancient writers includes Pliny the Younger (112 CE), the Babylonian Talmud (sixth century CE), and Toledoth Yeshu (sixth century CE). This last source mentions the empty tomb and that Jewish leaders found it empty. It also mentions that Jesus healed, performed miracles which are called “sorcery,” and taught rabbis and many others who were believers and wrote documents which do not appear in the Christian canon.

8. See John 11:24. The Old Testament is replete with the Jewish understanding of national/communal resurrection as well (see Daniel 12:2). Those factions in ancient Israel that did believe in resurrection or life after death only understood the event to be impending in a communal sense.

9. See Deuteronomy 17:6; 19:15; see also Matthew 18:15.

10. See 1 Corinthians 15:3–6. Paul details most of the appearances of Jesus after the resurrection and adds a pivotal postscript: that most of the more than five hundred who saw Jesus alive were still living at the time Paul wrote his letter. Paul was the earliest of the New Testament writers, and if there had been any witness to refute Paul’s testimony, surely none of the rest of the New Testament would likely have been written. Jesus and Paul would have been exposed as frauds, and the story would have been over.

11. Sanders, “1 Corinthians,” 299.

12. An interview with a licensed mortician reveals that laws and practices have changed drastically over the past several years relative to allowing access for nonprofessionals to the previously esoteric domain of cooling rooms and morgues (embalming rooms) of funeral homes. During the time when my wife and I owned and operated a funeral home in Virginia, it was strictly forbidden for unlicensed persons to even look inside a morgue, much less walk into a cooling room or morgue. The interview with this licensed mortician (who also cited articles from professional journals in 2010) reveals, however, that there are now funeral homes in the United States which allow families to witness through plate glass the embalming of their family members. These types of access still vary from state to state. This radically open access is evidence of the striking changes that have developed in professional funeral services since my mother died in 1997.

13. Sanford F. Bennett (1836–1898) wrote the lyrics of “In the Sweet By and By” (1868), sometimes titled “There Is a Land That Is Fairer Than Day.” The music is by Joseph P. Webster (1819–1875). The song is in the public domain. Emphasis is added.

• CHAPTER 4 •

Finding and Selecting the Text

Texts under Negotiation

*The word arises out of the Bible, takes shape as the sermon, and enters into the congregation in order to bear it up. This self-movement of the word to the congregation should not be hindered by the preacher, but rather he should acknowledge it. He should not allow his own efforts to get in its way. . . . Upon Christ, however, who is the proclaimed Word, should fall all of the need, the sin and death of the congregation.*¹

PREACHING IS UNIQUE FROM EVERY other form of written or spoken discourse in that it is first and finally spiritual and not semantic. The Holy Spirit is the catalyst, and in fact, the “closer” for every type of sermon—the One who speaks the Word. The Holy Spirit is, as well, the imprimatur of God on both the life and the praxis of the preacher. It is anointing from the Holy Spirit which affords the ability and power of the preacher to minister with compassion, discover the text for preaching, exegete with clarity, and deliver the message of the sermon or eulogy.

It is the work of the Holy Spirit which animates every aspect of the preaching enterprise; from text to context, it is the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit which makes preaching possible. Preachers at their own peril neglect or denigrate the involvement and importance of the Holy Spirit, but according to James Forbes, this is precisely the ailment of much modern preaching. For various reasons, communities of faith and the preachers who arise from them are plagued with the malady of what I call spiritual anemia. Spiritual anemia results in preaching that is perfect but powerless.