

## Walking on holy ground A pastor's theology of funerals

Klaudia Smucker

**O**ne day when my daughter was trying to do something for me on my office computer, she blurted out in exasperation, "All the funerals you have to do and *this* is the computer they give you?" While it's true that I do a lot of funerals at College Mennonite Church, what my sixteen year old and many others don't understand is that accompanying someone who faces death and providing them with a good funeral is a journey on holy ground.

When I sit down with a family to plan a funeral, they let me into their lives at a time when they are vulnerable. It is a gift they give to me. I do not take this privilege lightly. My role is to be

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present with them, listening, caring, and helping them create a service that honors the deceased, respects the family, worships God, and provides hope.

When I was a chaplain at Greencroft Healthcare several years ago, I received a call from a nurse.<sup>1</sup> Stella had taken a turn for the worse. "Her family is with her," the nurse told me, "but I'm warning you, they are on the

edge of hysteria." As I walked into Stella's room, I saw that the ninety-five-year-old woman in her bed against the wall was alone, while members of her family paced back and forth, crying. I went to her daughter and asked her, "Have you had a chance to talk to your mother and tell her some things you'd like her to know before she passes away?"

The motion in the room stopped for a few seconds. The daughter asked me, "Do you think she can hear me?"

"I think she can hear you. It might be nice to be able to say things you'd like her to know, before she dies. Or even to tell her that it's all right to go." I walked over to Stella's bed and sat down, gently laying my hand on her arm. I told her, "Stella, this is

Klaudia. Your daughter and granddaughters are here with you. God loves you, and they love you. It's okay to go."

Stella's daughter walked over to the bedside. "Mom, it's me," she said. "You've been good to me. I'm really going to miss you." Slowly, one by one, each granddaughter came and told their grandma that they loved her. They kissed her cheek.

Then I suggested that we pray. We gathered around her, laid hands on her, and I prayed. "Dear God, thank you so much for Stella. Thank you for her life. We know that you love her. Be near to her in these last hours and fill her with your amazing presence and love. Be with her family. Comfort them and wrap them in your love, and give them the strength to get through these days. We commit her spirit into your loving arms. In Jesus's name we pray. Amen." Then I recited the twenty-third psalm, and we sat down to wait.

The dying process often involves a waiting time. People rarely die quickly in their sleep. Staff brought in coffee, fruit, and rolls, and I asked Stella's family to tell me what she had been like as a younger person. We soon found ourselves laughing as they talked about how stubborn and independent she was, how she always seemed to have a witty response when she needed one. I heard stories of a woman with a courageous and adventuresome spirit.

When Stella took her last breath a few hours later, the room was peaceful. Although there were tears, it was a good moment. We thanked God for her, and we thanked God for taking her to her heavenly home.

Because Stella had moved into the community to be with her daughter, and because the family was not part of a church, I officiated at Stella's funeral. Around the table as we planned the funeral, I asked the family whether they had favorite scriptures or hymns. "I liked the twenty-third psalm that you said at Mom's bedside," her daughter said, and everyone agreed that was a good passage. As I led them through the funeral planning, I talked about how I knew Stella, and about her wonderful sense of humor, her quick wit, even in the midst of her dementia. I encouraged the family to tell me more about her. I told them that I would focus on God's availability to us through all of life, in the dark valleys as well as during the peaceful times. By the time the funeral came, I had a good sense of who Stella was. I was able to

include some of the family stories that I heard from her daughters. And I included the promise of a new resurrected life, because of what Jesus has done for us.

As a pastor at College Mennonite Church, I rarely work with people who do not have a church connection. Many members of our congregation are well-educated and have deep faith. But as I have walked with people through illness, death, and funerals, I have discovered that no matter how much people know about scripture and faith, no matter what their educational background is, illness, aging, and death are great levelers.

However a death occurs, losing someone we love turns our world upside down. Even when we expect it, death can devastate those left behind. It disorients us and invades our lives. It is not convenient. Each time a family member or friend dies, we are faced with the reality that our own life will end. And we realize that the life we knew with our loved one has ended with their death.

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How people will behave in their grief is difficult to predict, and each of us grieves differently. When I sit down to plan a funeral I try to be prepared for anything. Some people who are normally calm become

anxious and difficult. Some cope by taking control of the planning, perhaps in order to avoid facing their feelings of loss. Others want to leave everything to the pastor because grief has hit them so hard that thinking and planning are out of the question.

People cannot help how they grieve, but as pastors we can guide them with sensitivity. It is our responsibility to be professional yet caring—to hold things together, leading gently all the way through the planning of the funeral service. Those who are grieving need pastors to create a safe place for them. It is our task to make a haven of comfort and care as we represent Christ's light and hope for them. If we succeed in making space where they can talk and cry while we listen, they are more likely to call on us later when the reality of death sinks in and friends are no longer offering care.

Creating a safe place for people who are grieving takes time, time that can seem in short supply when we're under pressure to

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plan a funeral quickly. It's easy for us as pastors to focus on that approaching deadline, but we do well to stop long enough to listen to the family and observe how they are doing. How are they responding to the death? Are there telltale signs of unresolved family relationships with the deceased? How are they relating to each other? As we plan together I tuck my observations away for future reference.

Sometimes siblings and a parent will have different ideas of what the funeral should look like. I start with the presumption—usually sound—that they all want a wonderful service. Then I listen for a common thread in their conceptions, and try to draw it out and help them build a service around it.

Pastors face special challenges when they find themselves grieving the death of a loved one while trying to carry responsibility for funeral planning. When I work with pastors who are grieving, I gently remind them that they need opportunity to mourn their loss with the rest of the family. Like the rest of the family, they need pastoral care. Sometimes their families need to be reminded to release them from a sense of obligation to participate in the service.

When my grandmother died, my family looked to my brother-in-law and me, both pastors, and asked how much we wanted to do in the funeral. I was glad for the opportunity to provide a remembrance about some of the things my grandmother taught me, as a last gift to her, but I was grateful that her pastor could care for me. I welcomed being able to sit back during most of the service, hearing the ancient words of comfort and strength and letting them sink deep into my soul.

As pastors, we may have ideas about what direction we want to take in planning a funeral, but we must be prepared to let go of our own agenda as we discern with the family what their needs are. We desire salvation for all God's people, and funerals provide us with a wonderful opportunity to demonstrate God's love and to proclaim good news. Funerals are not a time for shoving the threat of fire and brimstone down the throats of a captive audience. If we run roughshod over people who are grieving, espe-

cially those who have already been hurt or excluded by the church, we are adding insult to injury.

I attended a funeral once where the pastor hit the casket so hard and so often as he talked about how sinful we were and how much we needed Jesus, that I thought he might wake the dead. We didn't hear good news that day. I once read a newspaper article about a priest who was being sued because he declared that a person who had died was going to hell. He apparently couldn't think of anything positive to say about the deceased.

It is certainly easier to preach a funeral meditation for some people than for others. The reality is that those who die in our congregations are good, bad, ugly, and beautiful, inside and out. As Paul writes in Romans, we are all sinners, and we all fall short of the glory of God. One of my professors once suggested that when we get to heaven we will be surprised to see who is there and who is not. Others might even be surprised to see us.

The community of believers meets every Sunday, declaring that we are a redeemed people of God—not perfect, yet seen as perfect. I hold this concept in mind as I conduct a funeral. The incarnation of Jesus is a clear statement that God values, cares about, and understands humanity. The conviction that God wanted to be in the middle of the messiness of life, wanted to experience the joys and sorrows that accompany life, is central to our faith.

We go to funerals because we believe that God loves and values each person, even those who have not lived exemplary lives. We go because we want to walk with the people who loved the one who has died. We go because we are sad, and we find comfort as we grieve together. We have hope that even in the inconsistencies, failures, and hypocrisies of our own lives, we will experience God's grace and mercy once again.

At these times when we are most vulnerable, we are reminded that Jesus cares not only about our present life, but about what happens beyond it. It warms my heart to hear the story of Lazarus's death and to ponder the significance of Jesus's weeping with Mary and the other mourners. To know that Jesus understands what it is like to lose someone, that he experienced a loss so painful that he "was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved" (John 11:33), should comfort all of us as we contemplate Jesus's love for the ones we also loved.

When we remember people of faith, we can draw inspiration from the ways they followed Jesus. At the same time, I try to notice their peculiarities. How did they, as unique individuals, with particular quirks and foibles, make a difference in the world? One Saturday when I went to visit a woman in the hospital, I noticed that she had brought in a radio. Because our church services are on the radio, I said, "Oh, you brought in a radio to listen to the church service." Without skipping a beat she replied, "No, for Cubs games." Then she hastily added, "and for church services too!" When I gave the meditation at her funeral several months later, I recounted that story. People laughed because anyone who knew Wilma knew that she loved the church, but the Chicago Cubs could give it competition!

Recounting how a person lived as a disciple of Christ is important. We consider what this life meant and what purpose it served. But unless we also point to the hope of the resurrection, death can mean despair and emptiness. Jesus's incarnation gives our earthly life meaning, and Jesus's resurrection gives us hope that the

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sadness, evil, and brokenness in the world will someday come to an end. Death does not have the final word. In the midst of deep grief, we can believe that God has something better in store for us. The radical belief in resurrection not only gives us hope, but it shapes our lives as we live out our faith.

As I walk with people through the joys and the tragedies of their lives, I know that at the end it doesn't matter how much money they made, or how well-known they are, or

what Mennonite or worldly pedigree they have. Many people nearing death have asked me, "Do you think I've done enough? Will God be pleased with the life I've lived?" They are concerned with their primary relationships. Have they lived their lives with integrity?

Helen was a woman I admired. At ninety-one she always had a quick smile and positive things to say, although she was often in pain and her mobility was limited because of arthritis. She knew her Bible and could quote scripture like no one else I knew. I always thought that if I could choose how I would age, it would

be like Helen. One day she called me to come visit. It was clear that she was troubled. She told me that she had been diagnosed with a respiratory disorder and that she would probably be gone within the year. But that wasn't what bothered her. She wasn't afraid to die, but she wanted to get some things clear in her thinking before she died. She said, "I've tried to live a life worthy of God. But I haven't always done everything right." She was quiet for a while and then tears streamed down her face. "I was divorced in 1932."

We talked about God's love and forgiveness, but I could see that she wasn't convinced that God's forgiveness was for her. Finally I asked her what she would say to me if I were in her place. "I would never wish a marriage like that on anybody. He was very mean," she told me.

I asked her, "What would God say to me?"

"I forgive you and I love you."

"Can you believe that God would say that very same thing to you?" I asked.

"I want to believe it. I want to," she said.

Most of us want to live a good, decent life, ending in a good death while we sleep. We want to hear Jesus say, "Well done, good and faithful servant." Yet we tend to be hard on ourselves, and we worry. We know how often we falter and fail. All the sins present in the world are present in the church. We are not immune to them. Sometimes we do better at being good and faithful servants than other times. We need forgiveness, and without a doubt, we need the magnificent grace of God.

In the movie *Back to the Future*, the main character, Marty McFly (played by Michael J. Fox) was able to go back in time and see how the choices people made affected their futures. Walking with people at the end of their lives and planning their funerals has helped me think about the bigger picture of life. If only people could remember to look ahead and say, "Will this be worth it to me down the road?"—before they have an affair, before they break relationships, before they focus on work at the expense of family and friends—they would have fewer regrets at the end.

We pay a lot of attention to Christian education for our children, but often as adults we seem to stop attending to growth in our spiritual lives. Many people who would be considered

important and successful by the world's standards are bereft and in despair toward the end of their lives because they never developed a sense of who they were in Christ, apart from what they did.

People who have worked hard at incorporating God into all aspects of their lives seem to have deep reserves when times get tough. When I listen to the stories of such people, I discover that they have seen their share of the good and the bad, but throughout the years they have continually sought God's transformation. I believe more than ever that caring for our relationship with God at every stage of life will provide us with a strong foundation, a deep well of spiritual treasure to tap into when we need it.

Funerals remind us that we can't control everything in life. Some people die too young, some suffer too long, and some have too much pain. I have seen some people long for heaven and have rejoiced with them when they take their last breath. With their families, I have asked God why, and I have prayed, "This is too hard. Help us cope."

Funerals remind us that we need each other and that we need God in this imperfect world. Funerals remind us to call on God for comfort and strength. When we remember to rely on God in those moments, we can come together at someone's death, in spite of all our differences and disagreements, and have hope for each other, for the church, and for the world. Jesus has been here, Jesus cares, and Jesus has conquered death.

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The Mennonite *Minister's Manual* order for a funeral opens with the words "The peace of God which passes all understanding in Christ Jesus. Amen." It continues with a confident

and comforting statement of what we want to accomplish in a funeral: "We have gathered here to thank God for the life of our brother/sister, \_\_\_\_\_, to find comfort in time of need, and to place ourselves in the presence of God whose love knows no end, in time or eternity."<sup>2</sup> In a funeral we value the life, mourn the loss, and give hope to the living. That hope is embodied in us through the Holy Spirit and continues in us as we follow Jesus in this kingdom of heaven partially realized on earth. Things will happen to us that we can't control, yet as Christians we have the radical



notion that whatever happens, we can be assured of God's consistent availability and love, through life and through death into eternal life. As we worship together at a funeral, we gather as a community around those who are bereaved, and we live as those prepared to die.

## **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Names and some circumstances have been changed to protect confidentiality.

<sup>2</sup> John Rempel, ed., *Minister's Manual* (Newton, Kans., and Winnipeg, Man.: Faith & Life Press; Scottsdale, Pa., and Waterloo, Ont.: Herald Press, 1998), 192.

## **About the author**

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