

Eulogies at Christian Funerals—Some Second Opinions

Colleagues,

Last week's posting about eulogies from Bill Moorhead [ThTh 331] elicited responses from some of you. Here are six of the "second opinions" I received. Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

A. From Three Women on the Listserve.

1. Deaconess Hospital Chaplain in California I can't keep silent about the "Eulogies" issue. Of course, the Word must be among us as we travel through the rituals we have created in the wake of death and the promise of Eternal Life. I see death every day, families ask me to speak at funerals all the time. Often these are people I've met on their deathbeds 24 hours before they've died. Why do they ask me of all people? Because I'm there, and I'm supportive at the moment. As Woody Allen said, the key to fame is to "Show up."

I ALWAYS hasten to spend time with the family thinking about who they would really want to speak about their loved one at a service—someone who has known h/her a long time, and well...maybe one of them, the family members would be a good choice. When someone dies in a family, family members can't even think about that in the grief they are feeling.

People do strange things in the face of death. Kathy was apparently taken by surprise, and didn't think to work that through with the person who asked her. Yes, she was asked. "Why" is not the question.

When we have a death in the family—especially a sudden death of someone young—we aren't thinking straight. Let's not get on a roll about people asking people to do things inappropriately at a time like that. It sounds pompous and judgmental. We Lutherans can sound that way without a whole lot of prompting.

It matters not what the dictionary definition of the word "eulogy" is to most of us common folk. When we come to a funeral, we expect to hear the Word of God emanating from many places, in many ways. One of the places and ways that we hope we'll hear His Word is via the loving and sincere tribute(s) to the deceased and h/her life made by whoever has been picked or has offered. Period. In our town, no matter what the denomination, the "tradition" includes a short sermon followed by people in the congregation imparting a few words, as they are moved.

Some people stand up and recall a funny incident. Others tell of something moving. Whatever—when we come to the church we want to remember and talk about the person who died, for better or worse. Catharsis is the key here. That's what these services are about. Pain is fresh and we feel it and we want to talk about it, hear others talk about it, and experience it fully. Check around with any professional—that's a healthy way to deal with

bereavement.

Recently, I was asked to speak at the funeral of someone I barely knew. I work with her children at the hospital where I serve. I asked them why they were asking me, and finally realized that the family is very large, it is split up, lots of issues divide them, and they didn't want to have to argue over this one important thing...this sad death of a mom they all loved. They would not agree on a pastor, they would not agree on a friend to speak. So they picked someone "neutral." So I got all the phone numbers and visited the relatives I had time to visit and came up with a profile of this lady, some lives she touched, and added my own sense of who she was—very dynamic and incredibly alive. When I got to the church, I was astonished to find that I was the only one to speak, but I went ahead and it went well. Everyone recognized some of what they had told me in what I said about their mom-grandma-aunt-sister-wife-friend. That's all they wanted--just to hear about her once more without any aggravation of family dynamics intervening in their grief. They just stayed and stayed. It was sad and moving. They knew what they needed.

There are too many times when I have attended funerals (which I do all the time as a chaplain) and the pastor's spoken Word falls on deaf ears because nothing that anyone can immediately relate to the deceased has been uttered. I truly feel that Jesus's messages and promises to us can be imparted through the caring words echoed by His little ones as they express His love through their own, for another. Maybe I'm missing the point here, but I really don't

think that the issue is whether someone who shouldn't be asked to speak should speak or whether eulogies should be done before eating or after sermons or at the graveside or in a hospital room. Let's get off our high horses, put our noses back into joint, and leave our rush to theologies and correctness behind us. Let's repent our rush to judgment and ask our Lord to show us just who has the mote in whose eye.

2. ELCA pastor in Oregon Hi Ed – Thanks for all you give us in this forum. It was interesting to read Bill's struggles with the eulogy. Fortunately we do not have a set tradition here in Oregon for a eulogy at the end of the service. That, in my mind, is definitely out of order. What I have found very useful, though, is to have the eulogy (if the family wants one offered) and any personal sharing (more common) presented in the time of the lessons. I consider it the prime story which is my duty to follow with The Story as the preacher. I prepare remarks beforehand based on my visits with the person, the family members, and other people who know the person, Scripture study, and prayer, but listening in the context of the service to people's comments also informs what I say. People have commented to me that they find what I do extremely meaningful – to have the Word of God (law and gospel) proclaimed with reference to the context of the person and family before me. To me this is the most appropriate place for those remembrances of the person, similar to the comment by one famous preacher (I cannot remember by name!) about preparing to preach with the Word in one hand and

the newspaper in the other. Thanks again for all you offer.

3. "Armchair Theologian" in MississippiThis is one of the best guest articles! It should be required reading for every person in every church. LOL As old-timey Presbyterians, we have always thought that weddings, funerals, baptisms, and Eucharist should be solemn events that offer a time of reflection and introspection, and worship of Holy God. Not self expression of humanity. When I married 25 years ago, one of my relatives explained to some of the silly bridesmaids why grinning, giggling, and simpering were not appropriate during the ceremony. That the marriage ceremony was a high holy moment that joined two people for a calling of Christian service through family life. As your guest commented, there are plenty of opportunities at the related social events for fun and foolishment.

One of the best sermons I have heard was preached at the funeral of a young person who committed suicide. It was so full of thoughtful concern and compassion for the family, and enveloped them in love and hope. It also included the strong words of assurance that God's love and grace are available to all in a presentation of the Good News. The practical show of compassion coupled with the proclamation of the gospel had an effect that was far reaching. It was the first time that many of the attendees had been in a "church" setting, and a number later embraced that good news.

Thanks as always for the finest in Thought Provoking Theology! Your Armchair Theologian

B. From Three Men on the Listserve.

1. Presbyterian pastor (PCUSA) now in Bangkok, Thailand There are eulogies and there are homilies. Some funerals have both and some don't. But there is a middle ground. There are homilies that make reference to particular persons in the process of recalling relevant aspects of the Gospel at significant points of passage. There is no need to create a harsh dichotomy between eulogies and homilies. Doing so is not only unnecessary for a preacher, who should always be skilled in finding the points of relevance between current events and the Gospel. It is also detrimental to the pastor's relationship with persons in the parish and community.

When I was younger and greener I steadfastly held the line on the doctrinaire side, defending the liturgical integrity of one and all worship services. But it was nearly a disaster for my pastorate in that small county seat town. Somebody was going to have to make reference to the deceased. It was a clear and obvious fact. There were sometimes family members who were nominated or volunteered, but that often led to the type of trouble Pastor Moorhead lamented. The solution was not as troublesome as I had imagined. I sat with the families ahead of time and collected their reminiscences and then used them as points of reference or springboards to jump into the Gospel passages. With a little practice it worked well. It was less of a compromise than I had dreaded, and it restored my reputation as a caring pastor who knew the people.

2. LCMS pastor in Michigan For what it's worth: Though

some might expect a eulogy as a matter of course, I expect for a lot of folks the request for a eulogy is a reaction to the unfortunate tendency to completely ignore the deceased in the funeral homily. This is not an accusation against the writer, just an observation that when people gather for a funeral, it is well to preach the Gospel, but can we not also inject some humanity without compromising our witness? That is, I want to hear/preach not only who died and rose but also want to celebrate the life of a child of God who died and whom I expect to see rise at the last day. Just a thought.

3. Industrial Cyber Guru in St. Louis, also Crossings Veteran This reminds me of the funeral sermon I once preached to myself instead of the one the pastor gave (as Bob Bertram was said to do, when a preacher missed the point). A son of the deceased had said a few remarks, and then turned the podium over to the pastor with the words, "and now, , who does this for a living." The pastor then gave his prepared sermon. I thought the pastor missed a nice opportunity to capitalize on the introduction, something like this:

"Yes, I do this for a living." But more, I do this for THE living. We're not here to help . He's beyond anything we can do now. We do this for the living, for each other. ...

"But even more than that, I do this for The Living. For the Living God, Jesus Christ. Because he, who was once dead, is now Living, I can do this, we can do this. ..."