

How to Give a Eulogy

Colleagues,

It's late Wednesday evening. We've just watched the third debate between the U.S.A. presidential contenders. Though funereal thoughts come to mind, the word "eulogy" does not. Threnody and elegy seem more appropriate. Perhaps Alan Paton's "Cry, The Beloved Country." But rescuing me (and you) from a jeremiad for this week's ThTh posting is a guest essay on eulogy. It comes from Pastor Bill Moorhead of Pacific Hills Lutheran Church in Omaha, Nebraska. Bill's responding to an article in a magazine that inexplicably showed up on his desk, he says. Here's what he sent me.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

How to Give a Eulogy ***by Kathy Bartholow***

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I don't know where this issue came from. It was just on my desk one afternoon. Well, I will at least quickly page through something before I add it to my reading pile or toss it. It was then that I spotted the word: eulogy (from the Greek, eu=good, and logos=word, therefore "good word"). The etymology is

promising, but my personal pastoral experience with eulogies has not been. And it was that history that caused me to stop and pay a little attention to the article.

A little context. I've noticed over the years that more and more people think a funeral service is more or less a personal family statement in the same way that many weddings have become. One aspect of this is the eulogy, usually delivered when everything else in the sanctuary has been concluded, but before we all leave for the cemetery or the parish hall. Since you never know what's going to be said in one of these eulogies, and having been dismayed too many times by what has been said in one eulogy or another, my parish actually now has a policy against eulogies in the sanctuary at the conclusion of the liturgy. We suggest that such eulogies be done at the visitation the evening before, or at the luncheon in the parish hall, or wherever. But not at the conclusion to the liturgy. Or, horrible dictu, instead of the sermon.

If Kathy Bartholow's "lessons learned" are any indication of the kind of eulogy she gave, read on to find out why I think about eulogies, etymology notwithstanding, the way I do. Along the way I hope I do justice to the Reformation Law/Gospel lenses I started wearing during my seminary days.

I will quote the entire article by sections/combined paragraphs and offer response. I'll precede each section of Kathy's material with "Kathy says" and each section of my response with "Bill says".

Kathy Says

My friend and co-worker, Terry, died of leukemia at the age of 46. When his wife asked me to give a eulogy at his funeral, I was honored but worried. I did not know if I could do it. I told her this, but because Terry's work was important to him,

she wanted that part of his life recognized and remembered. So, I said yes, hung up the phone, and quickly panicked. What have I gotten myself into. What do I do now?

Bill Says

So, are we to believe that this eulogy's purpose is to highlight what has really been important for Terry throughout his life; namely, his work? And will it be the last thing worshippers hear before they leave the sanctuary, or worse, a substitute for the real Eu-Logy, the word of the Gospel in the sermon? Where's the pastor as this arrangement is being hatched? Does he know? What does he think?

Kathy Says

I called a friend for advice. She told me, "If you write from your heart, what you say will be true." I had only a vague idea what this meant, but with nothing else to guide me, I clung to her words as I tried to sort out my thoughts. Not until the funeral was over did I realize, this was the best advice anyone could give me.

Bill Says

If that's the best advice anyone could give her, she should have asked someone else. "If you write from your heart, what you say will be true." What was it that Jesus said? "For out of the heart come evil intentions...." (Matthew 15:19). No recognition here that the human heart is judged by God and found so wanting. Kathy should have been steered toward Christ whose heart is towards us in mercy. Trust in the Promiser should have given her something to say and some courage to say it. I'm not saying she has to give a second sermon. But as a Lutheran (read on) she has something important to give.

Kathy Says

Here are five lessons I learned: Focus on the nature of your

friendship, however limited it may feel. My first thoughts were to talk about Terry as a person: his intelligence, his willingness to work hard, his sense of humor. But did I know Terry well enough to talk about him in a meaningful way? We never socialized, and I met his wife and children only a few times. I feared that nothing I could say would be important. Some people may have a totally different face they put on for work, but most of us bring a large part of ourselves to our jobs. Even though the setting in which I knew Terry was separate from his family and social life, the personality traits were constant. I learned that by focusing on what I knew, I could illustrate for his family and friends that he was as hard-driving and fun-loving at work as at home.

Bill Says

"I feared that nothing I could say would be important." A well-founded fear, unfortunately. Somebody tell me again why she was asked to give this eulogy. "Focus on the nature of your friendship." That "nature", whatever it was, has been cut off by death. There's a big, resounding "No" spoken by death itself to everything Kathy and Terry had as co-workers. But she's going to charge ahead as if that hasn't happened. As Elert said, God's Law is an operational reality in our world. Kathy's really bumping into it here. She suspects she has little to say before the aspect of death, and she just may be right.

Kathy Says

Tell stories no matter how insignificant they may seem. As I tried to write about Terry, everything sounded repetitive and trite. Of course he was a wonderful person, I thought. But how many times can I say that without sounding stupid? Isn't there a way I can show how wonderful he was? I tried to think of workdays in the office, of events or moments from which our friendship had grown. I realized I could tell these stories and, hopefully, paint a picture of Terry at work. The stories

involved no monumental events. In fact, they barely qualified as events at all: a conversation in a hallway, a meeting in a conference room, a break for ice cream in the middle of the afternoon. But they were stories, and stories have a setting people can imagine and action that holds their interest. I learned one simple story can illustrate what you want to say better than a thousand words of description.

Bill Says

Bingo. And not just “illustrate.” One “simple” Story can be the reason why everybody’s gathering around Terry’s dead body. But I’m guessing that Story didn’t get mentioned, at least not from anything I can detect in Kathy’s words. Stories? Once upon a time, God sent His Son, who loved Terry enough to die for him. Kathy’s paragraph is screaming for help here. She’s afraid of sounding stupid, repetitive, and trite. What she has to say seems insignificant. Most does before the aspect of death. The better lesson here? Tell the most significant Story of all. Proclaim it. Offer it. Promise it to those who can trust Whose Story it is. But not without recognizing that death has stripped away everything to which we cling except the living Christ.

Kathy Says

Don’t be afraid of humor, but don’t force it. As I reflected on the stories I might tell, some were funny. I felt unsure whether that was appropriate for a funeral. I did not know his family well enough to know whether humor would be welcome. I decided for myself that we were there to remember all that Terry had been, and that because of his quick and hearty laugh, humor had a place. To my surprise, what I considered the unfunny stories were the ones that generated the most laughter. Because I did not know Terry outside of work, I could not know my stories would parallel family times at home and social get-togethers with his neighbors. The stories rang true not because

of their details, but because people related them to their own memories. I learned it was not important whether my story was funny as long as it spoke to the person Terry was.

Bill Says

So tell me again why Kathy was asked to deliver this eulogy. And why did she attempt humor with stories that she herself thought were not funny? She says they were there for remembrance. Rather than remembering what Terry had been, how about remembering what Christ has done and continues to do for his people? Ask God to remember (and to act) while we are being slaughtered all the day long (Romans 8). Offer it to the living. The lesson here is to remember that we gather at a funeral to remember all that God has done in Christ. Death strips away all that life in this world has given us. The life and death of Christ, stripped bare on a cross, means life itself from the midst of death. Tell how we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. As we stand around the casket, because of Christ we get to think "outside that box", so to speak. "Spoke to the person who Terry was" would better be "[speak] the Person Who was for Terry."

Kathy Says

Don't be overly concerned with the religious setting. I knew little of Terry's religious beliefs. I knew he was raised Lutheran and his wife was Roman Catholic. I knew they attended mass as a family, and that the funeral would be held at that church even though Terry never converted to Roman Catholicism. I did not know the history behind these facts, or whether, I, a Lutheran, should act a certain way. I decided I could not worry about any of this. My responsibility was to remember my friend and celebrate his life. I learned it was not important whether I was less or more religious, or religious in a different way. We were all united in our love and respect for Terry, and that was all that mattered.

Bill Says

What really matters is that they (we) are all united at such a time in memento mori [Latin: remember that you must die]. The question is not about the "religious setting," but about appropriate God talk. Does Kathy mean to say that she couldn't be concerned about God talk? I'm not sure. Her piece is very much "I"—I learned this, I learned that, I decided this, I decided that. She decides that all that matters is being united in love and respect for Terry, but their love and respect can't help him now. Her responsibility is to connect her friend and His Friend to everyone in this Eu-Logistic setting. All that matters is the One who gave His life as a ransom for many. Is that Matter represented here? Self-evidently not. No wonder Kathy struggles. She has nothing to offer but what she has experienced—God's Law and her/our awe-full speechlessness before the aspect of death.

Kathy Says

Don't be afraid of your emotions. They may not be as selfish as they seem. Terry was an energetic and dynamic person who never spoke of dying. When his treatment began to fail, it did so quickly, and his death was sudden. I realized at the visitation there were many of us who were bolstered by his positive attitude. Now we are left shocked and angry. How could this happen? What are we doing at this funeral home? Although it felt selfish, I decided to speak of this anger in my eulogy. Of all the things I said, this was the thing people thanked me for the most. Somehow I managed to give a voice to the wild mix of emotions many were feeling. Talking about my anger somehow gave people permission to admit they felt angry too. And I learned that in some indefinable way, when you say painful words out loud, the power they have over your thoughts is lessened. You feel less overwhelmed by grief, and can begin to remember the joy. I thought my eulogy would be the last gift I could give

Terry, but instead, I was the one to receive the gift.

Bill Says

She's on to something here. But she falls short. First, emotions are as selfish as everything else about us. They may even be more selfish than they seem. But second, the question, "What are we doing at this funeral home?" cries for an answer. And her answer is anger! Hmmm. I'm aware of the prophets expressing anger at God (Jeremiah comes to mind), but somehow—especially if the eulogy is at the end of the service—leaving people angry is not the way I'd want these folk to exit the church. What is the anger about? To whom is it directed? How about the anger in those who (when they figure it out) aren't being offered anything remotely genuine in this eulogy? What about fear, or worse yet, denial? "...when you say painful words out loud, the power they have over your thoughts is lessened." Really? Then imagine how much more powerful the true Eu Logos is. "...the last gift I could give Terry...", I suggest, would be to tell his friends and family about Christ's victory over the last enemy. That can be the last gift to any dying sinner, but proclaiming it to the assembly of fellow dying sinners and encouraging their trusting it seems not to be here.

Summa This is not how to give a eulogy. Rather, to present Christ, God's promise made flesh, God's Good Word to be trusted and clung to above all else—that's a Eu-Logy. Tell how and why this Promise/Promiser can be trusted. Offer it to the people. They're dying to hear of it.

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