**Funeral Fails and Grace: How I Learned to Stop**

**Celebrating Life and Preach the Gospel**

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“You will learn to hate weddings and love funerals.” My worship professor imparted this advice based on his own experience. It made sense. Clergy are usually just furniture for a couple to stand in front of at a wedding. At funerals people pay attention and might even want to hear a few words of comfort from a preacher. It’s hard to get shown up by a casket.

I could not have imagined back then how many funerals in my career would look and feel more like weddings. Instead of wishing for a time to mourn and reflect, so many people have asked me to lead “celebrations of life.” Some have even forbidden me from using the phrases “funeral” or “memorial service,” as if the words themselves would break the spell. My job, as explained to me by family meetings is “keeping it upbeat,” “letting everyone share what a great person she was,” or “helping us laugh during a hard time.”

Usually, some unspoken law is at work in these cases. Most people want to batter back the grief or they worry about being sad and vulnerable in front of family and friends. Others operate according to the western cultural belief that one’s sadness is a burden to others. Making someone else sad -- even by their witnessing your own tears -- is a terrible faux pas. And a few will even tell me that they can’t cry because “Mom would not want us to be sad.”

Rarely does the American cult of positivity get so strange as it does when it confronts the ultimate negativity of death.

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“Celebrating life” has become the new cultural funeral-hack. The phrase promises that we can just manufacture enough joy by our own efforts to cover over our worst feelings and even our eventual fate. Calling the modern funeral a “celebration of life” makes it less a practice and more a product.

I have sold this product. I have sold truckloads.

You really can’t avoid selling it with either my job or my location. I’ve worked as a hospice chaplain in Las Vegas for about ten years and have seen and done it all. Golf courses, event centers, common rooms in mobile home parks and master planned communities, restaurants, bars, casinos, parks, the middle of the desert, backyards, loading docks, garages, and a major performing arts venue where I sat backstage with ballerinas waiting for my turn to speak “words of inspiration.” There have been dove releases where the handlers had to nearly smack the birds because they didn’t feel like flying in the heat. I have given final benedictions where I have urged those present to crack a beer. I’ve blessed everything from urns to ratty but beloved ball caps. I’ve impersonated a Rabbi (accidentally). And, most entertaining for me, I was asked to do a funeral for a fan where I replaced scripture readings with quotes from “Star Trek: Generations.”

Over time, I’ve become very proud of my ability to do funerals on the fly. Sometimes I’ve done as many as three in a week, or two in a day. For a significant amount of them I’ve never even met the person (so many patients come on hospice service late and die before I meet them). After a few months on the job I learned a method. I would talk to the family as near the service as I could. Like an investigative reporter, I’d ask questions and learn about the people I was about to honor. Then I would write everything up quickly, trying to tie together as many strains as I could around a central theme. Rather than relating the themes to scripture most of the time I would treat that person’s life as the text and preach on that. I’d tell all the stories I could get my hands on, trying to capture their personality through a few anecdotes. Sometimes there would be humorous speculations about the deceased continuing to do their favorite activities in the afterlife. “We know that the feast of the Lamb now has one more excellent cook in the kitchen.” I’d usually close by retelling some favorite story and making it into a theme to remember the person by. One celebration of life coming up.

For a long time, I chalked this process up to just compromises I had to make in doing ministry within a secular environment. I still am glad to be able to help people who otherwise wouldn’t have the benefit of clergy at such a difficult time. And it was good not to have the “funeral sermon in the drawer” with Mad Libs style blanks that most preachers won’t tell you about. But for all the good work that I was doing it was less preaching and more a performance. I didn’t know the difference yet.

I finally learned that difference. And I learned it by failing.

A patient had come into the inpatient unit I was covering. For those who don’t know hospice, in-patient units are fully staffed beds where patients come to either await placement or have their most severe symptoms managed. This patient had come like so many others, referred to us by a local hospital because there was nothing else they could medically do.

He told me that he was confused and trying to figure out what his next steps were. I sat with him and listened to his concerns and explained as much as I could about the care we provide. When I asked, he allowed me to pray in what felt like a courtesy on his part. After sitting with him for about ten minutes, I left to go see other patients.

The patient died that evening. It seemed very soon but I followed my protocol and reached out to his sister. Hearing that her brother had somebody pray with him on his last day, the sister was overjoyed and later called me to ask if I could speak at the funeral. A local church that the patient frequented would be the location. I stated that I would be happy to.

Perhaps I’m an outlier, but my preaching game usually gets upped a bit when I know I will be around other clergy. Like playing piano in front of fellow musicians, it’s difficult to avoid the feeling that those clergy are evaluating my performance. So I pulled out all the usual stops. I talked on the phone with the sister. The information got strung together in a short eulogy that glossed over the darker and more difficult parts of the patient’s life (which the sister had no problems sharing with me). A beautiful story emerged about love and redemption: the deceased loved music and sang impromptu duets with his nieces and nephews. Now he sings those same duets with angels. I celebrated his life.

I treated that funeral sermon like I was headed to a golf course. But I was headed to a church instead. I played the part I thought I should, and smile-filled faces beamed back at me in appreciation. I sat down in satisfaction; I hit all the right notes.

But right after my act the *real* preacher that morning stood up and addressed the congregation.

“You know he was an addict right?” Suddenly the room froze. The celebration of life was over.

“He stole from us. We tried to help him. You know our pain. You’ve been through it too.” She said this looking right at the family. They nodded their heads solemnly.

“But you know what. Today, that’s okay. It’s okay because we know that he died into grace.” The nods started turning into verbal agreements.

“And that’s who grace is for. Grace is for the ones who drank it, the ones who hit it, the ones who smoked it, the ones who stole it, the ones who slept with it, the ones who lied about it!” The family began to shout and clap.

“That’s why we’re here today. That’s why we have faith today. Grace is for him. Grace is for us. Grace is from God. All that stuff is over. Grace is for today.”

And I don’t remember the rest. I hope what I remember is correct. Because whatever I heard was what I needed to hear. Especially at that low point in my life. The words cut through all my professional stresses and personal anxieties. While the sermon continued and the family cheered, I was busy trying to hide the tears that were now streaming down my face. I had spoken about grace. But through that preacher grace actually entered the room. Truths were told. Sins were named and forgiven in real time.

Life was not just being celebrated -- it was given by divine decree. Christ was there speaking life through promises made real right before our ears. She glossed over nothing. In the ugliness of sin, Christ had shown up right there in that room to claim a sinner. I had no doubt in my mind that he was coming for me, too. You can’t get that show on the strip.

A lot changed about my preaching at funerals on that day. I don’t toss poetry at the abyss anymore. Family meetings with me have become trips to the confessional. I’m less afraid to talk about God. When there is pain, I name it. Full stop. I still talk about people, but as people, not as bundles of good memories or sacred objects of adoration. When I can’t use scripture, I find other ways to give direct promises. When I can’t talk about God, I speak about his unique gifts of forgiveness and peace.

Most of all, I’ve stopped thinking about funeral sermons as products to help people feel better.

Funeral sermons are opportunities to tell the truth about life through the lives the deceased actually lived. They are words that don’t trip up around the weird taboos of a death-denying culture. The Holy Spirit may even let me get a genuine laugh or two without speculating and reaching for it. I stay in my lane now.

You can’t out-celebrate Christ when it comes to life.  He wants to do more than celebrate it.  The gospel is life reclaimed, renewed, redeemed and recreated.  Christ took all of life in his nail-scarred hands. The good parts, the bad parts, the ugly parts, the annoying parts, the awful parts -- all of them are carried on his body, etched in his flesh, and cling to him as he takes a morning stroll outside that tomb. The best a good funeral sermon can do is to try to keep up.

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