Eulogy
Lenten Devotional
Friday March 28, 2025
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The common thread of monuments, museums and memorials is death. Very few living people are recognized in statuary, and it seems a bit premature to memorialize the living. As a presbyterian pastor for more than 30 years I am very familiar with death and dying, burial and commemorative acts at the grave. Like most Protestant pastors of mainline denominations, I do somewhere between 20-40. There have also been many widows in the four congregations I have served. Hence, death is part of the life. I, though, have a unique feature. From 1999-2004 I did my Doctor of Ministry research in the area of death and dying, most specifically in the use of eulogy in funerals.

During my first funeral I encountered a question that stayed with me and ultimately became the focus study. Before I get to the question, let me paint a picture. The funeral of Ed Lynd brought the entire town. The church was packed to overflowing, the balcony was filled. When I met with Ed's widow, Ruth, and her son Steve, there was little information they were prepared to give other than a time and a date for the service. The one thing they did convey was to "watch out for Polly."

Ed's daughter Polly was described as a wild card, wild child, hellion. Who knew what she might do at the funeral was the warning.

When it came time for the service, just as the organist was finishing the preludes, the back doors of the church opened wide and down the center aisle walked a woman dressed all in black, black sunglasses, black spiked hair. In her hand she carried a Native American Talking Stick which she placed on the communion table after walking up the chancel steps. As she made her way to the family pew the enormous crowd was hushed.

At the end of the funeral, after the hymns and the homilies, after the readings and prayers, just as I was about to give directions to the fellowship hall for the repast, Polly stood up. As no one

was else was standing I stopped what I was saying and made eye contact. Then came the question: Can I say something about my dad?

As this was my first funeral and only the second funeral I had ever attended, there was nothing to guide me except impulse. "Of course," I said.

Polly then proceeded to recount how her father believed in God, but he also believed in the stars and Indians and ghosts. How he built the tent forts in the summer to gaze at the stars and told them tales. After her brief eulogy she said, "I love him so much. And will miss him terribly." Then Polly took her seat.

"Can I say something about my dad?" Polly's question formed the basis of my research. Was I right to say, "of course?" What was she asking to do? What was the purpose and potential effect of her speech? Five years of research, countless articles, books, and poetry of later I was ready to interview pastors and parishioners. For the pastors I had a set of questions I asked utilizing the methodology of participant observer and qualitative survey. This worked remarkably well. Pastors recounted a mostly positive description of eulogy in a funeral service. This did not work for the parishioners.

When asked critical questions regarding funerals, people froze. The most I could get out of them was: I like to hear stories about the deceased. This was maddening but then something occurred to me. They like stories. Write a story. Taking a cue from Kierkegaard and his theories of indirect communication, I wrote a novella about a son losing a father and then navigating the necessary steps of a funeral and burial. I serialized the chapters to a large Sunday School class and each week we would discuss an aspect of death and dying as lived by the characters of the story. This unlocked the floodgates.

What I heard from the class was this: offering memory, conjuring memory, inviting memory helped them endure the weight of grief. Memory didn't cancel grief or heal them. They still needed to mourn the loss of a loved one. But memory and the sharing of memories served as a balm, a relief. Again and again memory created joy in sorrow.

In the follow up to the novella and to the interviews with pastors two other factors emerged. While telling memories was important, it needed to be honest. The closer the story was to the authentic life the more the authentic presence was felt in the moment of absence. The truth was vitally important. Also, there was a sense of a "need to speak." This need was expressed with a request ("I must say something") or with a lament ("I wish I could but I don't believe I speak without falling apart"). Like Polly people felt the need to "say something."

Through the years I have heard some fantastic eulogies and I have also heard some stinkers. At one funeral I attended I listened to a neighbor give a long, rambling diatribe about the deceased, which he finished by saying, "he also got the last word. But not today. Hah!" When the eulogies were good they were exactly what the class and pastors claimed, authenticity was

the key. When they were bad they were much like the irate neighbor, something they wanted to say, but not necessarily a memory illuminating the life of the deceased.

The more I have spent time with memorials, monuments, and museums the more I have seen the same criteria: authenticity, honesty, and the need for healing. It is as if the depth of relief or cure in the hands of curators is based upon the honesty achieved in the statue, the plaque, the collection. This is a life, an event, a tragedy, a wrong that occurred and here we are to uncover the truth. The closer we come to the truth, the greater the debt we satisfy.