

A discussion of Accompanying Them with Singing by Thomas G. Long

William L. Hathaway, Pastor, First Presbyterian Church, Annapolis MD

I have served as a Presbyterian parish pastor for 33 years in three congregations from a working class neighborhood in Buffalo to a small town on the Erie Canal in Western New York and, for the past ten years, in the upper middle income congregation within the wealth and poverty of Annapolis, Maryland. I have led the worship at 481 funeral or memorial services from grave side services to well attended church services to the small gathering of a handful of folks at Carlton Ulrich's Funeral Home in Buffalo with the ride to the cemetery with the cigar chomping senior Ulrich who at the Christmas season would ask, "What do you drink, pastor?" then pass a bottle of gin along with the funeral card when the service was over. I have had times when the community of the church gloriously praised God and ushered a saint to the arms of our merciful creator. I have also been party to ghastly events such as the time when cousin Sally shrieked out a solo so terrible that persons drifted to the back of the room and the funeral director, standing outside the door, had to duck into a side room because he was laughing so hard at the fact that I was stuck on the inside of the room with the shrieking soprano while he was safely on the other side of the wall. I also started my ministry in Buffalo, New York with funeral homes with names the like of Lord, Bury and, my favorite, the successful chain under the family name of Amigone. But this time is for theology and not just story telling even though any one who loves the scriptures knows that story telling and theology are not so far apart.

After 481 attempts of being faithful and caring, Tom Long's book is a refreshing step back. Am I a seasoned veteran who has learned a few things or a pastor repeating the same worn out practices with only a nod to sound theology while on the slippery slope of whatever the culture has to offer up as the wisdom of the day? Yes, I think of myself as being faithful and caring but the book raises some good questions. My comments on Tom's book come in two forms; first reactions to the practice of leading funerals and second, theological questions.

Tom writes that the funeral is "about the intertwining of two narratives;" namely, the gospel story and the life of the person who died. (P. 78). I describe this in the language of truth telling. The pastor is to tell the truth; namely the truth of the gospel and something of the truth of the life of the person who died. Given the secular setting of funeral as a "churchified" awards banquet or roast, combined with the occasion of the funeral for a rather difficult person, some enter a funeral with the sinking feeling that we are all going to tell some lies about the S.O.B. in the casket. It is remarkable to see the change in posture and expression when I say something like, "Tom had a difficult life and we all know that he made it difficult for the people around him." And, as any pastor knows, it is a whole lot easier to speak of the grace and mercy of God

in the face of an obvious sinner in contrast to the subtle or respectfully, skillful sinner. I use the language of pastor as a kind truth teller when describing the pastoral function at funerals.

Second, our cultural setting of confusion about funerals coupled with a growing secular community that is simply lost in worship means that the pastor needs to be explicit but not patronizing. We need to tell people what we are doing; that educational component in Tom's description of the eight purposes of a good funeral (pages 137-139). So, for example, I use a Call to Worship within the opening of the service, not simply the standard reading of scripture. Knowing that some folks have no idea where they are or what they are doing, I include the words, "Let us worship God." I say things like, "May these ancient words of the people of faith come alive today as the living word in our lives ...". And, even though it might make some good liturgical scholar cringe, I put the commendation into print and use it as a unison prayer so that all gathered stand and say together, "Now, into your hands, O merciful savior, we commend your servant Mary. Acknowledge we humbly pray" I have family and friends, believers and skeptics, together saying the words. Even those who are tight lipped and stoned face for the hymns stand to speak. Not so subtle, possibly, but hopefully, explicit without being patronizing.

Theologically, I appreciate Tom's central theme that the worship is the sending off of a loved one to God; a final step in a journey that began in baptism and a step that is accompanied by the singing of the church. It is about the deceased and not simply therapy for the living.

Yet, my first question is about baptism, of all things. If the theological power of the funeral springs out of baptism we run into the problem of the confusion in the church about baptism and the ambivalence that many experience about infant baptism. The links are quite obvious with adult baptism as the person chooses a new life over the old and, then at the funeral, is ushered into the new life of the resurrection. While we might hope and wish that baptismal theology is solid and meaningful for the church today, I find it a shaky platform to launch the gospel proclamation for many of our listeners. We pastors, steeped in sacramental theology, may not like this but I think it is true. Recently, at the opening of a confirmation class when parents are invited to remind their children of their baptism, one highly committed and faithful set of parents said that they don't recall ever telling their son about his baptism. These parents are of the best and strongest leaders within the congregation but the sacramental practices of the church are not that central to their vibrant faith. This couple is not unique. (I realize that this would be different in highly liturgical congregations.) As a result, I am more inclined to rest my funeral worship within a theology of God's mercy and radical grace than in an overtly sacramental theology.

One of Tom's points that I take some exception is the emphasis on the presence of the body. I fully agree that Platonic dualism is so assumed by many that even the discussion of the resurrection of the body sounds strange. But I do not think that the presence of the body

necessarily changes anything. The typical instruction to a child when there is a body in the casket is something to the effect, “She is not really here, this is just her shell left behind, her soul is with God.” And, regardless of our instructions about bodies, souls and resurrection, the tide has changed in our culture. For some very good reasons, like the stewardship of space, the disdain of trying to preserve a body with vaults and caskets and practical issues of families at a distance, our people will continue to move in the direction of cremation, the donation of bodies to schools or the newer request for “green funerals.” Therefore, the reality of death and the proclamation of resurrection will need to be by way of story and prayer. The gritty reality of a body in plain view or a casket to usher to the cemetery in the church yard are simply traditions that we can not and possibly need not re-claim. This means that the role of the pastor in this worship drama becomes a bit more difficult since the “props” are taken away. We are left with words before the living Word, carried by the word of scripture, uttered by frail and fragile carriers of the word. That’s the role of the pastor.

It is this intertwining of two narratives with a keen ear to the cultural setting of the people that intrigues me.