

A Word from Your Pastor

WHAT IS THE POINT OF A FUNERAL? This is the question I would like to write about this month because it is an important question to know the answer to.

It's a very relevant question too; because we all die. And before we do, we see all sorts of loved-ones die. These times of our lives are often very difficult. During these times we need the most comfort and support from those who share in our grief. So we spend time with family and friends who knew the one who died. We reminisce about good times, trying times, joyful and sad times, and so forth. These are the times. What would we do without the support and love of those closest to us?

But what do we need the most? All of these other things, as wonderful as they are, do not explain at all the point of a Christian funeral. *But the word of God most certainly does.* That's what we need the most. Think of it! Just as it is what our loved-ones needed the most in the hour of their death, so it is what we need the most as we grieve the fact that we must now live without them. We need the comfort and peace that only Jesus can give. Through His Gospel, no one is closer to us in our pain than He is. This is the point of a Christian funeral.

IN ORDER TO UNDERSTAND THE PURPOSE OF A FUNERAL, we need to understand the purpose of going to church. Is church primarily a place to receive support and love from a close community? Do we gather here mainly in order to be socially uplifted and consoled in our earthly sorrow, and then also to be entertained in our earthly excitement? No. God forbid. We gather here because this is where Christ gathers His dear lambs through Word and Sacrament. We gather here in order to hear the voice of our Good Shepherd who leads us through the valley of sin, doubt, death, and sorrow— Who brings us to the

green pastures of His word that nourishes us and makes us fit for everlasting life. We gather to receive the forgiveness of our sins and eternal salvation, which comes through Christ alone.

Now, certainly church is where our friends are. I would hope so. Jesus does not gather us so that we might ignore one another, but so that we might love one another, bear each other's burdens, teach, admonish, and console one another (Colossians 3:16). Certainly such friends as these will also do what any true friends do. They'll have fun. They'll share each other's lives. They'll talk. They'll plan. You know.

But what brings us together – *what creates true fellowship* – is not what we find in common with others. No. It is what God gives us to share. Because what we *do* have in common by nature is a deep need for God to have mercy on sinners – sinners who in their weakness and corruption receive even now in their bodies the due wages for their rebellion against God. But God meets us in our common need for mercy by being merciful to us. He does this by preaching to us, by teaching us, by consoling us in His word. And He gives us something to share in common that our social interactions could not procure: the forgiveness of sins, the spotless robe of Christ's righteousness, and eternal life in heaven.

God creates Christian fellowship. It is a fellowship, or communion, that lasts forever, because it is fellowship with Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God. The primary reason that we gather in church is in order to hear the word of God that creates this fellowship by creating and sustaining us in the true faith. When we receive Christ in true faith, then we receive life in the midst of death!

NOW GOING BACK TO THE POINT OF A FUNERAL, the reason we have funerals in church is for two reasons: First, it is in order that those

who mourn the death of their loved-ones might be comforted with the word of God. This much is obvious, right? But there is another reason. And it is actually the greater reason; because, contrary to popular assumption, funerals are not primarily for the living. They are for the dead!

Really?! It seems pretty obvious that funerals are for the ones who are left behind, doesn't it? Funerals are for the living! That's what everyone says. But it is not so. The primary reason for a Christian funeral is in order that we might commend to the Lord the one who has died a Christian death. ***And thus it serves as the last opportunity for the one who can no longer utter his voice to give a testimony of his Christian faith.***

We don't do funerals in our church based upon the faith of the bereaved. We do funerals based upon the confession of the one who has died. That's why we don't have funerals here for those who never came here. It certainly isn't to say that those who grieve the death of such a one lack faith. It isn't even necessarily to say that the one who died lacked faith. It is to say that the reason we do funerals in church is because this is where the faith was taught. And so this is where the faith is confessed. A funeral for the *dead* in church is the privilege of the one who found *life* in church. And this is a privilege that we should not deprive our Christian loved-ones of when planning their funeral services for them.

And consider this! What comfort will you need when your Christian father or mother, brother, son, daughter or wife has died? Yes, you will seek out companionship. Your siblings, children, and those closest to you will cut the loneliness and pain. But what is it that your deceased Christian loved-one would want you to have and hold firmly in your grief? What is left for him to say to you whom he has left behind? If your loved-one was a Christian, you know

exactly what he would want you to hear: The Gospel.

That which comforted him in his final days is what will comfort you in the difficult days ahead. That which gave him eternal life in heaven, even while he saw his body fail on earth, is the true consolation that you need. It is to know that, though your loved-one dies, yet shall he live (John 11:25-26). You need the words of Jesus, who conquered death by dying on the cross in our place, thereby making peace between God and sinners. This Jesus rose from the dead to bring life and immortality to light (2 Timothy 1:10). This is the Gospel. This is what brought life in the midst of death while waiting at the nursing home or in the ICU. It alone is what created saving faith. And this is what brings life to you as you gather in church to commend to the Lord your believing parent, sibling, child, or spouse. It is the Gospel. That's what church is for – in life and in death.

SO, ARE FUNERALS FOR THE DEAD OR FOR THE LIVING? Well, let's not forget who is living! The one whose lifeless body lies in the coffin at the front of the church was baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. He was given eternal life. And that is what he has in heaven while he waits even now for the resurrection of all flesh. This means that a Christian funeral is primarily so that this living faith can be proclaimed – from the grave, as it were – from heaven – to you, who by faith will soon join the throng of Christians who have gone before us.

In Jesus' name, Amen.

– ***Pastor John Christian Preus***