

OPENING:

Last week, in our Epistle, we heard Paul's "Last Letter Home", this week we get his "Obituary", as his letter to Timothy comes to a close, and the grammar changes to the past tense.

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.¹

These have been good words of comfort at funerals and at all times through the ages. But what do those words mean... at a funeral, and what do they mean for us here today?

FUNERALS

In my short time in ministry, I have done a number of funerals, and very often I don't know the folks who I am burying *very well*. Sometimes even, I don't know them *at all* because of the pandemic or for whatever reason. Still, there is a desire by the family, and then by me as the preacher, to focus on the individual who has died. That's difficult when you don't know the person, or only second hand.

This goes for weddings too, by the way, there is an effort to make them personal, to tailor the service to the couple. I have given a fair number of sermons at both weddings and funerals, which were not tailored to the individual, and I can recall vividly me losing the **congregation's** focus very fast.

Such is ministry...

At my previous church, I did a funeral for a parishioner who died during COVID. Larry was 90 years old, he had had a beautiful life and marriage, he was a Korean War veteran, with a successful career afterwards, and children and grandchildren there to mourn him at the church.

Larry was also an avid runner into his 70s, so our passage from Paul to Timothy showed up:

I have fought the good fight, I have run the race, I have kept the faith.

I preached the funeral homily and the family was, in this case, appreciative of my efforts, they said "Charles, it felt like you knew him!"

¹ 2 Timothy 4.7

I had to admit to them that this was because Larry had written an autobiography² and I had read it. So, I was able to include, in my homily, stories about Larry having run a race in every state before his death and how, in the last years of his life, he donated his body to cancer research at Fairfax Inova.

If only everyone would write an autobiography, the funeral homily would be a lot easier!

FUNERAL HOMILY

I once attended a funeral where the pastor began his homily this way:

“We come here to celebrate someone who we all love.

We come to celebrate someone who sometimes did controversial things in life, who often surrounded himself with unsavory characters.

We come here to celebrate someone who did not always get along with their family and died too soon.

We are here to celebrate the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.”³

The pastor was trying to nudge people towards the idea that the protagonist, the main character, at *every* funeral is God. So, the sermon should ask and try to answer: ‘What was God doing in this person’s life?’

‘What is God doing in the people who came to mourn him/ her?’

“God as the main character” is a tough sell though.

Clergy at funerals usually operate with the idea that “Funerals are for the living.”

Those moments are for us to do the hard work of pastoring to folks who are present, who are going through a difficult time.

The main character *then* should be the family.

Meanwhile, those in the pews, are reflecting upon their loved one, on the course of their life, and the sadness of the passing.

The main character of the funeral is the one in the coffin, or in the urn.

In both those cases, God is out there, a character in the story, but remote and distant, the protagonist.

Here is how Bishop Ted Gulick tries to solve this problem, what to do for the funeral homily: “Usually I say ‘preach the resurrection as if it is the foundational reality of the universe, which it is, and, if there is some aspect of the deceased that illustrates that, then use that iconically....if not preach the resurrection.’”⁴

² Lawrence E. Dickerson. 2013. *Running All the Way: A Marine, A Runner, a Journey through Life*. (Independently Published)

³ “20th Sunday After Pentecost [C] – The Startling Nature of Scripture” (October 17th, 2022) *Strangely Warmed Podcast*. [20th Sunday After Pentecost \[C\] – The Startling Nature of Scripture – Crackers & Grape Juice \(crackersandgrapejuice.com\)](https://www.crackersandgrapejuice.com)

⁴ Funeral Homily for the Reverend Churchill Gibson, Jr. by the Rt. Reverend Ted Gulick, (April 12, 2008) at Immanuel Chapel, Alexandria, Virginia.

LEONARD

My first Funeral Homily, actually Eulogy, that I ever did was at my twin brother's memorial service some 18 years ago. Here I had the opposite problem from the dynamic described earlier: I knew the deceased oh too well. As I have spoken about the last few weeks, Leonard had been killed in Iraq, shot in a place called Karbala outside his tank. Six days later his widow and I were standing at the pulpit in the church I had grown up (St. Stephen's Culpeper) trying to make sense of it all for a packed church.

I looked over my Eulogy this week, maybe the first time since, and I definitely did not make God the main character. In fact, the most powerful portions were where I made it personal, made it about him and us.

I still had too many quotes, too many historical analogies (when will I ever learn.)

Here is the part that landed:

I miss his laugh, his ability to make others laugh and feel utterly ease. I miss his enthusiasm. I miss seeing the incredible Love that he showed for Sarah... I miss his intelligence, I miss his sarcastic humor. I miss him giving me a walkie talkie so that we could talk between cars when we were driving in separate vehicles. I miss twin talk, twin ball, twin time, and twin club feet and even twin jokes.

By the way, Leonard and I hated twin jokes

In the wreckage of that moment, saying anything at all was maybe saying something about the resurrection, was in of itself a statement of faith and God remaining the main character.

Our prayer book, by the way, gives the preacher an out for the funeral homily, a way maybe to avoid all the difficulty of what to say.⁵

The prayer book says "A homily *may be* preached..." at funerals.

However, my liturgics professor at Seminary said that was the "worst rubric in the whole prayer book" because if you give up your responsibility at that exact moment to say something about the resurrection and God's grace, than you are in the wrong business!!

PAUL:

In 2nd Timothy, Paul again is writing his own obituary, his own funeral sermon, but he seems to be breaking Gulick's rule and making it about himself, about his human effort.

⁵ *Book of Common Prayer*, 480, 495.

I have fought the good fight, I have run the race, I have kept the faith.
That's a lot of the 1st person pronoun...

We should pardon Paul this moment of self-congratulation, because Paul was his own toughest critic:

He said to Timothy: “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the foremost.”

To the Corinthians: “But by the grace of God I am what I am, It is I, but not I” and most famously in Romans: “I do the things I should not do, and I don't do the things,”⁶

There was no one more Jesus-oriented, more God-focused than Paul. Since that moment on the Damascus Road, Paul's first experience with Resurrection, God had always been the main character.

CONCLUSION

I have fought the good fight, I have run the race, I have kept the faith.

What if it's already happened, Paul is alive when he writes this but he uses the past tense. He writes that the race has been won, the crown was placed on his head, we have already been poured out as a libation, The reservation has already been reserved at the mansion.

Paul could say that because had already been born again, he knew what it was like to experience God's love. Resurrection was happening as his obituary was being written, as his funeral was happening, but somehow even before he had died.

It was happening, when Larry Dickerson gave up his body for cancer. Life was being created after death. I hope and I pray, in the letters that my brother wrote me from war, that God was creating something new. The past tense reveals that God was there all along.

If you are keeping score, that's what called using “illustrations from someone's life iconically” to preach the resurrection.

⁶ 1 Timothy 1.115 ; I Corinthians 15.10; Romans 7.15

This sermon has been a lot about what it's like to give sermons, so afford me one more tortured stretch as I close:

“St. Tim's is back” has always been a risky Stewardship Campaign theme, because it seems to suggest that we as a congregation, me as your ‘wet behind the ears priest-in-charge’, might be stating something that already has happened, that has not actually happened. We might be resting in our laurels, counting our chickens before they have hatch, might be claiming a reward for something that is not quite there already, it might be too self-congratulatory.

I think that's true. “St. Timothy's is back” is a that claim relies on hope and faith. But it does so, I pray, with the understanding that we are resting the agency on God, with God as the main character. **AMEN**