
There's No "I" in "Funeral"

by the Rev. Canon David Boyd

This past Sunday, parishioners gathered for "Changed, Not Ended," a workshop exploring our Episcopal funeral liturgy. Together we reflected on the theology of death and Christian burial, talked through practical questions, and experienced an instructed liturgy. During the service, each participant lit a votive candle in memory of a loved one, holding their name close in prayer. Seeing the many candles flickering on the bier transformed the liturgy from a funeral for no one in particular into a memorial for the whole communion of saints. I want to share the brief homily I gave at the service, in case it helps you to contemplate your own funeral. And if you would like a companion in that holy work of preparation, the Pastoral Care team would be honored to walk with you.

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A Homily for "Changed, Not Ended"

You've just spent some time contemplating your own funeral: what hymns you'd want, what scriptures to read, what stories you'd hope people might tell. That's good work. Hard work. Loving work. You've helped those who will one day gather to remember you. Bless you!

This service marks time to bless our work, to experience our own end, and to hold in our heart those names we still remember. This is no abstract exercise. On cards, in candle flame, each of us carries someone, a real life full of real stories, stories of real love. How I wish I could tell each story from the pulpit, hold up each name, and honor each of their witnesses to the Gospel. This is the moment for that in the funeral liturgy: the remembrances and the homily. This is the moment God's promises heard in scripture mingle with our memories, opening a window into Christ's grace at work.

Here's my thesis: we celebrate our lives most fully when we celebrate Christ's victory over death, which gathers our stories into his story.

Put differently, there's no "I" in "funeral."

A funeral is never only about one individual in isolation.

In the Church, we celebrate a person's life by setting inside the larger life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

It is a good and holy thing to capture the deceased through remembrances; please paint me a picture of a person fully alive! I want to hear about your passions and pastimes. I want to hear about the many ways you love your family and your friends. I want to imagine what your slice of heaven looks like. Leave behind good stories to tell! It is good to tell these stories because those stories always point beyond themselves. They become testimonies to God's good work, illustrating the story of salvation. In this way, a funeral that is authentically "you" becomes a portrait of faith, the ultimate witness of someone who has bet their life on God's resurrection power. We sing cherished hymns, and in doing so we join our voices to the songs of angels: "holy, holy, holy!" We share Eucharist, joining in the same heavenly feast that our pioneers in faith now enjoy.

And in the end, all our music and memory culminate in a prayer of commendation: placing their story, their person into God's hands, trusting that their life is no longer their own but hidden with Christ in God.

So, as you've been planning your funeral, you haven't really been planning a service about *you*. You have been praying over an enduring witness. Your hymns, your scriptures, your stories, they all help capture who you were, but even more, they proclaim who Christ is. Every choice you make witnesses to the truth that your life has meaning because it is joined to Jesus.

That's why there's no "I" in "funeral". Because in Christ, our mortal "I" is always taken up into the eternal "we": the communion of saints, the fellowship of the Church, and the everlasting banquet of God's kingdom.

That is the good news we proclaim, even in the shadow of death: that in Christ, our life is changed, not ended. Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia!