

Reflections On A Funeral

Introduction

- A. Last month I attended five funerals over a period of about ten days. The funerals were different.
1. In some cases I did not know the person who had passed. I was there because I knew their loved ones and wanted to offer my comfort.
 2. But that was not the case for all of the memorials I attended.
 - a. Susan Duncan was the wife of one of our elders back in Orlando where I used to preach. Over the years of our work there, Susan and I worked closely together in our Bible classes. Her three daughters were in my Bible classes; they are like my own kids. Susan and David were our good friends. In fact, the family wanted me to share with you how much Susan appreciated the live stream of our service. It enabled her to worship with God's people for many months before her death.
 - b. Twelve hours after Susan passed, Vernon Hinely passed away. He was an elder of the same congregation. Of course Vernon and I worked closely together over the seven years we were in Orlando. He took care of our young family. He and his wife Bonnie were our dear friends as well. It is a very sad time for that spiritual family. Keep them in your prayers.
 3. I am very grateful for the shepherds here who urged me to attend these funerals...and to all of you for your patience and understanding.
- B. I will say that sitting through five funerals over ten days did stir my thinking.
1. I was forced to ponder some of those "big picture" issues that our busy lives allow us to ignore.
 2. We shouldn't do that. My life should be defined by the big picture, not by all the little daily tasks I do (**Ecclesiastes 12:13; Matthew 6:33**).
 3. I want to share with you some of the thoughts that came to my mind as I sat through all of those funerals.

We fight a bitter, ugly, futile struggle against death.

- A. It doesn't always seem that way.
1. It don't think we sense this bitter struggle in our youth. I think young people largely ignore death...and with good reason.

- a. Very few people will die in their youth. The vast majority live beyond their teens and into their twenties and thirties. And so, many are able to put out of their minds any thought of the end, at least most of the time.
 - b. Life doesn't allow us to completely dismiss it. Even when we're young, friends and loved ones die. We attend their funerals and, at least for a moment, are forced to consider the fate that confronts us all (**Ecclesiastes 2:14-16**).
2. The older we get, the more this reality imposes itself on us.
 - a. I had a friend share with me at one of the funerals that she always wondered why her dad read the obituaries every day. She acknowledged that she now finds herself taking a peek and being a bit disturbed by how close those ages are getting to her own.
 - b. We begin to fight it. We think more about eating right, losing weight and exercising. Part of that may be about improving the quality of life. But let's be honest, a big part of those efforts are about increasing the quantity of life.
 3. When we get sick, the battle intensifies.
 - a. We spend small fortunes (if not everything we have) on doctor visits, medications and treatments. We endure the side effects and suffering that come with those treatments...all in an effort to forestall the inevitable.
 - b. At several of the funerals I attended I heard people comment in the valiant fight this person waged against some terrible illness. We do fight.
- B. And we lose; all of us will one day lose the battle (**Hebrews 9:27**).
1. I think that's the hardest thing about attending a funeral. We are reminded that all men pass this way, that one day it will be my turn too.
 2. When that time comes, we try to cover the occasion with an appealing veneer.
 - a. We place our loved ones in satin-lined boxes.
 - b. We surround them with beautiful flowers.
 - c. We dress in our Sunday and gather to talk about lasting legacies.
 - d. We travel in shiny cars to quiet, beautiful places to lay them to rest.
 - e. We place expensive granite reminders over that place in the ground where they are laid.
 3. But it all just serves to mask an ugly reality.
 - a. My good friend said it best after losing her husband of sixty five years. She said: "I walk around this house and find memories of him in every room. I left him at the hospital many times - sometimes for weeks - and came home to an empty house. But I always had the hope that, at some

point, he was coming home and his presence would fill this house again. This time, he's not coming home.

- b. Death leaves us with this grim, irreversible reality that our loved ones are gone and they are not coming back.
 - c. It is the source of unspeakable grief - grief that even provoked the Lord grieve (**John 11:33-35**).
 - d. It is a bitter, ugly and futile struggle we wage against death - one that leaves us longing for hope.
4. Which brings me to the second thought that ran through my mind as I sat through those five funeral services.

We need Jesus.

- A. Unbelievers have clever little sayings that they offer up in the face of death.
 1. For example:
 - a. I heard about one guy who said, "I just assume that when I die, I will go back to whatever state I was in before I was born. I don't remember that being too unpleasant; so, I'm not worried about it."
 - b. Sometimes you will hear people say that we just go back to being "one with nature" or it's just "the circle of life."
 2. I guess that sounds clever and intelligent to some...at least when you're twenty five and death seems a long way off. But bury a few good friends, or your mom and dad; or let a couple of decades pass and begin facing the reality of your own death and suddenly those meaningless platitudes just don't cut it.
 3. I guess some think it's sophisticated to be an atheist in your twenties and thirties, but get old and sick and it's pathetic.
- B. In the face of this bitter, losing battle we wage with death, we need Jesus. I thought about that as I sat through all those funerals.
 1. We need Jesus because He reversed the irreversible.
 - a. After His death, His disciples were hiding out in fear. They thought it was all over. Jesus was dead; and He wasn't coming back.
 - b. Or was He (**Mark 16:1-8**)? Jesus reversed the irreversible. He died, and came back from the dead.
 2. His victory gives us hope of victory.
 - a. To the disciples facing death in the book of Revelation, Jesus said this (**Revelation 1:17b-18**). When Jesus says He has the keys, He is telling

- us that He has authority over death and the place to which the spirits of those who die go.
- b. He wants us to know that, when we die, we go to a place where He has already been and over which He has authority.
 - c. And one day, Jesus will exercise that authority and the dead will be raised.
 - d. This was the promise made by the Holy Spirit to the Thessalonians who were worried about their loved ones who died (**I Thessalonians 4:13-18**). Death is not the end. Jesus is coming back. When He does, the dead will be raised and the righteous will be with Him forever.
3. There is hope. The irreversible can be reversed. Death does not have to be the ultimate human tragedy (**John 5:28-29**)!
 4. But here's the key: that hope is only found in Jesus (**Acts 4:12**). If I am going to share that hope of being raised to be with God in the end, then I've got to get connected with Jesus.
 5. Which brings us to one last thought that ran through my mind as I sat through all of those funerals...

How I live really does matter.

- A. (The story of two brothers) Lots of nice things are said about people at their funerals. Have you noticed that?
 1. In fact, you can learn a lot about how someone lived from the kinds of things others say about them as they reflect on their lives.
 2. But when I listen to a speaker at a funeral, I'm listening for one thing. I want to know if this person knew Jesus; did they serve Him; did they share in the hope He offers?
 3. In the end, this all that matters.
 - a. Jesus told us that, one day, we would be judged by His words (**John 12:48, II Corinthians 5:9-10**).
 - b. Where we spend eternity when this life is over will be determined by what happens on that day (**Matthew 25:31-33, 46**).
 - c. And so, ultimately, the only thing that really matters is this, did I do what Jesus wanted me to do (**Ecclesiastes 12:13**)?
 4. People do not go to heaven simply because others were able to say nice things about them at their funeral.
 - a. Cornelius was a good man. There were lots of good things that could have said about him (**Acts 10:1-2**). But he still needed Jesus (**Acts 11:14**).
 - b. Jesus spoke of some very religious people who would be lost because they did not obey Him (**Matthew 7:21-23**).

5. How we live really does matter!
- B. On the same day that Susan Duncan was being remembered, there was another funeral taking place - the funeral for Whitney Houston.
 1. These two women could not have lived more different lives.
 - a. Whitney had what most people want more than anything - a great talent, the great wealth and possessions that went with it, great fame...
 - b. Susan didn't have any of that. From the world's perspective, she lived a simple life. She was a stay-at-home mom who loved her husband, raised three girls and taught Bible class on Sunday. Her name was never in the paper and there was no media coverage of her funeral.
 2. But I would argue that Susan did with her life the things that really mattered. She loved Jesus and her life was devoted to serving Him.
 - a. She spent her time laying up treasure in heaven (**Matthew 6:19-21**).
 - b. In the end all of Whitney's fame and fortune will not help her when she accounts for her life before God, as we all will.
 3. The truth is that Susan chose to do the things that really do matter!

Conclusion: What are we choosing to do with our lives?

- A. It's an important question. One of the really hard things about attending a funeral is that powerful reminder we receive that all of us must pass this way (**Ecclesiastes 7:2**). We can't ignore such "big picture" issues. I have to live my life recognizing that one day I will die and answer for my life before God.
- B. Do you need to starting doing something different? Do you need to start doing with your life the things that matter? Let today be the beginning...

- David A. Banning