

# Two kinds of funerals

by Gene Edward Veith

A young man I knew died in a tragic traffic accident. His death was utterly sad. At his funeral, his friends were all wearing T-shirts adorned with his picture. At the front of the church were heaped up flowers, footballs, and stuffed animals. On top of his coffin was a picture from his senior prom.

The service began with a recording of his favorite song, a heavy metal power ballad. The preacher gave a eulogy, praising how the teenager was such a good friend, such a good person, recounting some of the funny things he used to say, telling about the dreams he had for his life. Everybody in the church was crying.

Then his best friend got up to say a few words. He was sobbing. He finally croaked out his good-bye, as the congregation joined his sobs. His girlfriend recited a poem she wrote about how much she loved him. Then, the boy's grief-stricken father had to get up in front of everybody to talk about his son.

As if all of this emotion were not wrenching enough, the funeral director next played a video, showing highlights of the boy's life — his baby pictures, playing with his friends, enjoying Christmas with his family, waving at the camera.

There was not a dry eye in the house. People said what a beautiful funeral it was.

Another funeral I attended was of another young person who died a tragic death, one that was even more senseless and horrible. She had been raped and murdered by a serial killer. (I was one of the elders on duty. My job was to keep the news media away from the family.)

At this funeral, the congregation sang old hymns. They were in a minor key, but the lyrics centered on the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The grievers joined together in a responsive reading of the Word of God.

The pastor, garbed in black, read more texts from the Bible. Instead of a eulogy, the pastor recited the facts of the girl's life, emphasizing her baptism, her catechesis, her confession of faith. He described how she joined the church, her confirmation, and her regular reception of the Lord's Supper.

The pastor, preaching from the Bible, gave a sermon on our travails in this wicked world, on how the Son of God entered our sinful condition, how in His sacrifice and His promises, we have a sure and certain hope that this poor child has entered into everlasting joy. The justice of God will be manifest, and so will His mercy, and He will wipe away every tear.

We sang some more hymns. The mood was sad and somber, but the Word of God that permeated the whole service was like a lifeline. Or, rather, like a strong arm supporting us in our grief. Yes, we cried, but the funeral gave us strength.

Our culture does not know how to handle death. We insulate ourselves from it. The dying pass away out of sight.

We are terrified of death. And so we sentimentalize it.

The contemporary funeral deals with grief by indulging it, even feeding it. A successful funeral — with its heart-wrenching personal testimonials, its parade of mourners pouring out their anguish, the emotional manipulation of the congregation — works by creating an emotional catharsis. The upsurge of feeling can indeed feel cleansing. As at the ending of a tragedy, the emotions are purged. The bereaved feel drained. The aftermath, in Milton's words, is "calm of mind, all passions spent." The grievers really do feel better.

But how different is a traditional Christian funeral.

In a Christian service of the burial of the dead, the mourner's grief is fully acknowledged and shared. But it is channeled into contemplation and prayer. The grievers are given not catharsis but consolation.

That consolation is not to be found in how good of a guy the dear departed was. Even Christian funerals sometimes miss this point.

My former pastor refused to deliver eulogies. It is not fitting, he would say, nor is it comforting, to dwell at a funeral on the dead person's good works. When we die, we dare not stand before God claiming how good we are. So that must not be the emphasis at a funeral.

The dead person's only hope is the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That is the only hope of the grievers at the funeral, who, having been forced to confront the reality of death, tend to be uniquely receptive to spiritual truth.

My pastor would deflect attention from the person who died to the Person who died and rose again. He would preach Jesus — the cross, the atonement, the imputation of His righteousness, the resurrection — as the victor over death, hell, and the grave.

He would not preach this into a vacuum, but into the hearts of the grieving family and friends. He would connect Christ's resurrection to the resurrection of their loved one and to theirs.

We did not leave this funeral drained, but comforted. He moved us from desolation to faith. We still hurt, but we were given hope, not in ourselves — at a funeral we experience as at no other time our frailty and helplessness — but in Someone stronger at a time when we need strength.