The Funeral Meditation

“All things go on as usual, and yet there is no longer anyone who believes in it.” Søren Kierkegaard

Perhaps nowhere is the secular age felt more forcefully than at a church memorial service. Family and friends, colleagues and neighbors, attend a worship service that has very little relationship to what the audience actually believes about life and death. This cultural rite of passage unexpectedly provokes a clash of cultures. The unsuspecting secularist may not even consciously diagnosis this confrontation or she may simply write the funeral service off as old-fashioned. The prayers, hymns, and testimonies are respected for their aesthetic and therapeutic value. In the moment they are inspirational. They hold existential meaning. The value of the service lies in offering a feeling of resolution for those who grieve. Attendance signifies respect. It is a way of saying, “I’m sorry for your loss.” The signed memorial book in the foyer lets the family know, “I’m here for you.”

For many in the audience, Jesus’ words, “I am the way, the truth, and the life,” mean as much as “The hope in our hearts and the faith in our souls comforts us and lets us begin anew.” In the absence of universal truths, the secular age equates salvation with sentiment. Faith in God is no longer needed for the feeling of transcendence. The pre-existing condition of spirituality can be satisfied without covenant or creed. Expressive individualism is the product of exclusive humanism. Humans inhabit a immanent universe that only knows the transcendence that they themselves create.

Meaning is customized according to personal tastes and preferences. Purpose is creatively self-engineered. Significance is in the eye of the beholder. Yesterday’s image-bearers of God create today’s gods in their own image and call it art or emotional grounding or psychic grace. In the secular age authentic spirituality is the individual’s personal and peculiar quest for self-identity. This quest may be satisfied in any number of ways: surfing, sex, adventures, travel, golf, cars, sports, music, grandkids, you name it. The “selfie” is our culture’s only objective picture of reality. At funerals it is the all important “self” that is remembered, eulogized, and celebrated. Any talk of Christ is subject to the secularist spin that translates the old categories of objective truth and real transcendence into altered states of consciousness and greeting card sentimentality.

The balance between secularity and spirituality is maintained as long as the feeling-in-the-moment prevails. But when the pastor begins to preach the mood of the audience shifts. There is a restlessness, visible in shifting bodies, invisible in shifting minds. In a Christ-haunted culture, the audience anticipates the gospel, but is unsettled by it. Even when the gospel is effectively distinguished from religion it comes across as foreign. The gospel proclaimed is intrusive. The revelation of God remains stubbornly resistant to translation into secular modes of spirituality. Skeptics stiffen. Nominal Christians daydream. Teenagers roll their eyes. The preacher’s familiar words are no longer believed, but tolerated as an old custom.

The secular intrusion requires a strategy. How do we make the gospel not only clear but real? How do we preach to both Christians and non-Christians at once? We cannot ignore the prevailing atmosphere of unbelief nor surrender to the easy dismissal of truth as anachronistic spirituality. We can no longer assume that the audience believes what we believe.
1. The first strategic initiative involves showing up. We are like Jesus at the house of Jairus. The mourners think they know better. Jesus said, “Stop wailing. She is not dead but asleep.” But “they laughed at him, knowing that she was dead” (Luke 8:52-53). Jesus is unperturbed. The beauty of the gospel is its compelling love, in spite of ridicule. Jairus’ faith is real, but unbelieving mourners make up the audience.

The setting is an ordinary home. In this case, the gospel goes to the people, even to those people who do not believe. God intrudes on secular personal space. There is no sacred sanctuary, no religious symbols to confuse the issue. In the home of Jarius, amidst the mourners, there is no ambiance of spirituality. The scene captures the mixed emotions of human despair and secular spirituality. This is the “demographic” that pervades the audience of today’s memorial services. The mourners wail in grief and laugh in disbelief. They perceive the gospel to be delusional, something of a joke in the real world. Jesus heard the laughter but proceeded to take the girl’s hand. He said, “My child, get up!” and right there Jesus performs a miracle and heals the young girl. “That’s very nice,” the secularist explains. “If every memorial service were a resurrection service, we would all be believers!” But we know they’re not. Grief is real.

2. The second strategic initiative reveals deep compassion for the human condition. At the grave of Lazarus, Jesus was overwhelmed with sorrow, not so much over the loss of Lazarus, who he was about to raise from the dead, as over the painful tragedy of the human condition. In this case, the mourners see Jesus weeping and say, “See how he loved him!” (John 11:36). But for some in the crowd this empathy was not enough. They lamented, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?” Secularists in the pew may say something similar: “If your God is so real why didn’t he keep this believer from dying?” But God doesn’t heal all the diseases or prevent the accidents. She is gone and we feel the loss.

In the case of Jairus’ daughter and Lazarus, Jesus acted in the moment to bring them back to life. The promise of the future was glimpsed in the immediate present. In the gospel of John these miracles are called signs that identify Jesus as God Incarnate. They are pointers to the resurrection power revealed in history, but not of history. Jesus proved in action what the church proclaims, that he is “the resurrection and the life.” But there are no naturalistic proofs that convince the secular mind that this is an empirical fact like E=mc2.

3. The third strategic initiative is an honest acknowledgment of how difficult it is to believe. We admit that it is much easier not to believe than to believe. We live in a culture of unbelief, making agnosticism more plausible and predictable than faith in Christ. It is easier to believe that death ends all than to believe in the power of his resurrection. This is why the apostle’s bold declaration, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes.” is coupled with an in-depth understanding of the religious and irreligious roots of unbelief (Rom 1:16).

In the story of the rich man and Lazarus, Jesus offers an interesting take on the secularist’s inquiry into disbelief. Two men die: a poor man and a rich man. The poor man is named. Lazarus used to languish at the rich man’s gate, but now Lazarus sits beside Abraham in glory. The rich man who lived in luxury all his life is in a place of torment. He pleads with Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his brothers (Luke 16:19-31). “Let him warn them,” begs the ex-rich man, “so that they will not also come to this place of
torment.” Abraham replied, “They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.” But Abraham’s reliance on biblical preaching is not good enough for the rich man who is agonizing in hell. “No, father Abraham,” he objects, “but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.” The former rich man wants to send his brothers convincing proof. He implies that without this proof his brothers will not repent. But Abraham is not convinced, “If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.”

4. The fourth strategic initiative is the proclamation of the gospel. We believe that the gospel is true not only for Christians, but for everyone. To frame our meditation with the simple preface, “For Christians, Jesus is the resurrection and the life,” instead of boldly declaring, “Jesus is the resurrection and the life,” changes everything. The qualification, “for Christians,” implies that Christians simply have a distinctive way of talking about spirituality. As if to say, we use our language and Buddhists, Moslems, and agnostics use their language. If I say, “I’m speaking to Christians,” I have politely segmented my audience and effectively invited the non-Christians to tune me out. Same spirituality, different languages, suggests that we all mean the same thing. We just use different words to say that we all value life. It sends a signal that we don’t want to offend. The gospel works for Christians. The Koran works for Moslems. Just as “love” can be communicated in a variety of languages, the quest for transcendence can be sought in a variety of spiritualities. But this is not what we are saying!

In many of our churches the most ordinary memorial service has become a scene reminiscent of Paul’s experience on Mars Hill. Paul began, “People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious.” Paul’s Athenian audience’s quest for spirituality made a conversation possible and his point of contact was an altar with the inscription: To An Unknown God. The altar symbolized Athenian pride, their broad-minded inclusion of all possible gods, even the unknown god, but to Paul the altar represented their confusion and ignorance.

Paul proceeded to reason with his audience, making a case for the independence of God and the dependence of all human beings on God. Paul didn’t debate, he proclaimed. “The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else.” Instead of the gods being subject to man-made artistic expression or philosophical speculation, Paul argued that the God of Creation was completely independent. It is not what we can do for God that counts, but what God is doing for us every moment of every day that leads to worship. God is not subject to us, but we are subject to God. The living God is neither contained in temples nor detached from our lives. God “does not live in temples built by hands,” but “he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else.”

To a foreign and skeptical crowd, Paul opened up the possibility of dialogue. He calmly refuted false forms of spirituality and boldly introduced the God of creation and the Lord of the nations. Over any racial and ethnic divide, he stressed his oneness with the Athenians and humanity’s relationship with God. He argued that we cannot reduce the divine being to “an image made by human design and skill.” Then, he concluded:

“In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by
the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead” (Acts 17:30-31).

The gospel preached at a memorial service ought to frame a decisive question that is bound to spark the imagination. The Author of all creation and the Savior of the world are one and the same. The history of nature and the history of redemption are revelations of the same God. Each reinforces the wonder, awe, beauty and truth of the other. Chosen in Christ “before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight” unites the physical and material creation with the spiritual and historical reality—all of which is designed by God (Eph 1:4). This is not a rhetorical flourish, but a statement of fact. The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who authored DNA and ordained redemption, has purposed “to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ”(Eph 1:10). Everything in nature and redemption is moving forward according to plan—“the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will.” Albert Einstein asserted that “without belief in the inner harmony of the world there could be no science.” The apostle Paul goes further and asserts that the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ has not only created an inner harmony but an ultimate convergence. The cosmos is not a coincidence. History is moving toward its fulfillment.

We have a huge decision to make: are we the holy possession of God in Christ, personally chosen by God, predestined for communion with God, adopted into the community of God’s people, recipients of God’s grace, redeemed by his personal sacrifice on our behalf, and signed, sealed and delivered by the promised Holy Spirit, OR are we the accidental product of an impersonal universe, subject to blind chance and random forces, existing in a sphere of energy devoid of promise, plan, purpose and fulfillment? This isn’t about religion; this is the gospel.

The challenge between the secular age and faith in Christ runs right through the memorial service. This clash of cultures is nothing new. Like Jesus at Jairus’ house we seek to be present to those who grieve even if they when they believe the hope we profess is delusional. Their laughter does not intimidate the love of the gospel. We weep as Jesus wept at the tomb of Lazarus. The audience may question God’s love and power, but we identify as Jesus did with the pain of the human condition. Both within and outside the sanctuary belief is hard and unbelief is easy. We have no illusions that embracing Resurrection hope is anything but a work of the Spirit of God. Unbelief is the culture’s default position. True confession, “You are the Christ the Son of God,” only comes as a result of the blessing of God. As Jesus said, “. . .flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but my Father in heaven.” Like Christ’s apostle, we evade religious jargon and pat answers. We find a way to boldly proclaim the gospel of grace to even those who have no patience with talk of Resurrection.

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