

1 Epiphany 2020

You are each God's beloved daughters and sons. With you God is well pleased. Amen

I have often wondered what I would like to have on my headstone, if I have a headstone. I feel like it is my last chance at a parting shot to the world. I was looking at some actual inscriptions on headstones:

Merv Griffin put on his:

--"I will Not be right back after this message"

Rodney Dangerfield

--There goes the neighborhood.

Others that I found:

--Died from not forwarding that text messaging to 10 people

--I was hoping for a pyramid

--I made some good deals and I made some bad deals. I really went into the hole with this one.

--He loved Bacon. Oh, and his wife and kids too.

--Well this sucks.

Here is one that I wrote for myself:

--I got this headstone for 30% off.

When it comes to sermons, many ministers would rather preach at a funeral than a wedding. You would think that it would be the exact opposite. At a wedding, although a joyful experience, those in the seats are either thinking about what they would do differently at their own wedding or they have already been there and done that, some more than once. The wedding sermon is for the couple and not so much for the guests. At a funeral however, most folks tend to pay attention to what is being said as it brings us closer

to our own mortality. The funeral service is not for the deceased but for the living. Of course, this also has led to some unusual funeral services.

One pastor told a story about a gentleman in his congregation who had passed away 4 years ago. The family wanted a baseball theme following throughout the service. As such, they wanted peanuts and Cracker Jacks given away to all who attended the service. Also, at the close of the service, the family requested "Take Me Out to the Ball Game." He knew Bill was a Cubs fan, so gave the family the option of a nice calm rendition of "Take Me Out to the Ball Game," or, if they wanted, he told them that he could give them the full Harry Carey rendition. Needless to say, four years later, people still talk about Bill's funeral. Another pastor tells about the funeral of one of her parishioners. "Yvonne was always eccentric, and that fact came shining through when her family said that her final request for her funeral was that as the casket was being escorted out of the sanctuary, "Y.M.C.A." should be played and people should be encouraged to dance out of the sanctuary, which they did". Although certainly not traditional, I think that both of these would have been fun and brought a little bit of joy to the celebration of those lives.

This past week, Jan and I attended the funeral of a dear lady at St Michael's in Lansing. I knew Florence fairly well, but Jan knew her very well as Jan had attended St Michaels for a number of years. Florence was one of the matriarchs of St. Michaels. The funeral itself was a pretty typical Episcopal funeral although Florence had chosen Rite 1 as I know some here might prefer to do. Florence had sat down with the priest to plan her funeral service 13 years earlier. This was amazing to me as she was only 80 now. So, at 67 yr. old, she was way ahead of the game so to speak. I use the term game because Florence was a huge

Michigan State fan and we were let in to a little secret; underneath her beautiful sweater that Florence was wearing, she had on her favorite Michigan State t-shirt. By preparing way ahead of time, Nikki, as priest, knew what Florence wanted, the hymns had been picked out and the viewing and funeral were held at the place Florence loved, her church. The family was relieved of the burden of planning a funeral; especially since Florence's death was sudden and unexpected. It is a reason why I have encouraged each of you to think about doing the same; planning your funeral that is, not actually dying.

All of the funeral services that I have presided over since coming back to Michigan have taken place in the funeral home itself and most of them planned by the families. Many of you know that I moved back to Michigan from Idaho. One of the places that I used to visit as a supply priest was at Ascension Church in Twin Falls. There was a fairly recent article in the Twin Falls newspaper which discussed the changing trends in funerals. The article said that Funeral homes are trying to shed their reputations as dark and somber places of the dead — by building party rooms where mourners can raise a glass, and their spirits, to celebrate the life of a loved one.

Cremations, also on the rise, are less expensive, giving families flexibility in planning a memorial service. And even in Idaho, it all adds up to the decline of the traditional, dressed-in-black funeral.

“Ten thousand-dollar funerals — nobody wants that anymore,” said Heidi Heil, mortician and owner of the Serenity Funeral Chapel in Twin Falls.

In response to these changing times, funeral homes such as Heil's are getting more flexible with what they offer.

“We are becoming more and more event planners,” Heil said. “Venues and event planners.”

But even Serenity Funeral Chapel, with its outdoor patio and indoor kitchen, can't offer the same thing an event center can. It's part of why Heil put her business on the waiting list for a liquor license in 2013. Yep, that's right; a liquor license.

And not just in Idaho. There is one in southern IN and one in Milwaukee. This is probably pushing things a bit far, but, there is no doubt that funeral homes are offering more services these days.

I think that more formal church services will be around for quite a while, but like many things associated with the traditional church today, things are changing.

Our reading from Acts this morning will come up again as one of the readings for April 12th, which happens to be Easter Sunday. This reading from ACTs make a lot of sense for Easter as it relates the story of Jesus being crucified, raised up on the third day, and his post-Resurrection appearances to the disciples. But it also is fitting for the season of Epiphany. Traditionally, the Feast of the Epiphany celebrates the revelation of God incarnate as Jesus Christ through the visit of the Magi to the Christ Child, and thus Jesus' physical manifestation to the Gentiles. For Eastern Christians, on the other hand, Epiphany commemorates the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River, seen as his manifestation to the world as the Son of God. Peter presents the reality of Jesus to the Gentiles in the home of Cornelius. Peter saw death firsthand in a very real way; the death of his friend and leader. Peter, whose attitude toward death had undergone a transformation, moving from his bold claim that he would gladly die for Jesus (Luke 22:33), to being so afraid of dying, that he

denies three times, even knowing Jesus. (Luke 22:54-62). Peter had seen death up close and personal and it was no picnic.

It was Peter who ran to the empty tomb in response to an unbelievable report that Jesus had been seen alive (Luke 24:12).

As Acts 10 opens, a Gentile Roman centurion named Cornelius had a vision in which God commended him for his prayers and giving to the poor (v. 4). The angelic messenger told Cornelius to send for Peter who was staying in Joppa and to invite him to come to visit. This was an invitation that Peter would normally politely refuse as a pious Jew because going into a Gentile home and eating Gentile food would make him unclean.

But the next day, Peter had his own vision of a feast lowered down from the heavens to which God invited him. The feast contained unclean animals that Peter rightly refused, but a “voice” corrected him saying, “What God has made clean, you must not profane” (v. 15).

As if to reinforce the message, Peter saw this vision three times (v. 16). When Cornelius’ messengers arrived, Peter went with them, stepping across the threshold of a Gentile home and inaugurating a visit that would have previously been unthinkable. And it was all because of the defeat of death accomplished in Jesus Christ.

That’s what Peter tells Cornelius and his household. “God shows no partiality,” says Peter, “but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him” (v. 35). God had sent out that message through Israel, but it was **now** open to everyone, Gentiles included; a fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham that “all the nations of the earth” would be blessed through his family (Genesis 12:3). Jesus was the embodiment of that promise, anointed with the Holy Spirit and with power, doing good and battling the

work of evil (v. 38). Peter had been a witness to all that Jesus said and did, and although Jesus had been crucified, and the cross was a symbol of a humiliating death, “God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.”

In Romans Chapter 6; Paul says: “Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? 4We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. 5For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his. 6For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin.”

All of this is accomplished through our baptisms.

In our Baptismal Ceremony, the priest prays: (Pg. 306 BCP)

We thank you, Father, for the water of Baptism. In it we are buried with Christ in his death. By it we share in his resurrection. Through it we are reborn by the Holy Spirit...”

There is much joy in this ceremony; but no frivolity; no making fun of death; but a celebration of a new birth in Jesus.

The reality of death will never go away. But because of our Baptism, we already share in the new life of Christ and will experience the full joy and celebration of that new life in heaven. That is the message we proclaim to the world.

AMEN!