...in life, in death, in life beyond death...

Katherine Ashenburg, in *The Mourners' Dance: What We Do When People Die*, notes how “death makes conservatives of us all,” by which she means conserving past tradition. In the midst of shock or grief, we seldom have the resources to invent new rituals, so we tend to appeal to those which are already at hand. It is understandable that we would choose this particular path of least resistance, but there is also another dimension to this kind of conservatism. Faced with the quintessential experience of ultimate meaning, we turn to those practices which, at their best, have borne the test of time and have the capacity to connect us to the Holy One. Thus, in a culture marked by the idolatry of all things new, a Christian funeral can also be a profound act of counter-cultural resistance. Faith in the face of death celebrates the ancient and eternal promise of the Risen One. To place one’s existence in the context of this drama is a “radical” act—in the original meaning of that word: having to do with the root or source of things. If death makes conservatives of us all, a good funeral makes radicals of us all.

Here are three conservative/radical practices worth renewing or recovering in and around funeral practices:

**A Wake:** The three day period between death and burial was once a time for family and friends to gather, tell stories, sing songs, and dance. Today, often the community does not gather before the funeral service. Subsequently, those who grieve are put at a serious disadvantage, and the liturgy is forced to bear the total weight of all personal and social needs and expectations. The trend towards longer funeral services can be attributed in part to the loss of the tradition of the wake. Good grief work takes a village, and the community is often the best therapist.

**A Church Funeral:** In spite of the valuable services that funeral homes have to offer, congregational life is impoverished when we fail to experience the full breadth of our life together—from birth to death and beyond—surrounded by the symbols of our faith. To be sure, in our post-Christendom and pluralistic context, those who are not connected with the church, or those of other faiths, may be uncomfortable in our buildings (which are also often physically inaccessible). However, this is no reason to relinquish the ideal; rather, it is cause for greater efforts at hospitality.

**A Pall:** A pall is a large, rectangular cloth, about 10 x 5 feet, which covers the casket completely. In Easter colours and embroidered with Christian symbols, it evokes baptismal and resurrection themes. In some traditions, the presiders and pallbearers meet the funeral procession at the door to the church and place the pall on the casket with words of assurance. It also offers the benefit of reducing the distinctions among caskets, allowing dignity even to the most modest choices. Palls can be purchased at church supply stores or, better yet, made by local artisans and quilters. A church that offers a pall for use in its funeral liturgy vividly proclaims a theological promise in a pastorally sensitive way: We are all equal before God. We are all one in Christ. Welcome home.

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