

How to Preach a Funeral for Someone You Do Not Know

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Have you ever been asked to preach a funeral for someone you do not know? If it has not happened in your ministry yet, it likely will. Your phone will ring and a version of this conversation will follow:

“Pastor Jones?”

“Yes?”

“This is Rick Smith down at Hazy Chapel Funeral Home and Gardens. How are you today?”

“I’m fine, Rick. What can I do for you?”

“Well, pastor, we have a decedent who wasn’t a member of any church, his family members are not members of any church, and no one in the family knows a pastor. Are you available anytime tomorrow or the next day to do a service for him?”

The first time I received such a call I was nonplussed. How could an entire family not know a single pastor between the lot of them?

As it turns out, it is not as uncommon as I thought.

As Western culture becomes, in some respects, more detached from church you may find your local funeral director making more such calls. Like Christmas and Easter—the only times some folks think about church—funerals join weddings as the only two times some folks are likely to think about a pastor.

But, how can you effectively preach the funeral of someone you do not know? Is that not a little like trying to describe a car you have never driven or food you have never tasted? It may feel that way but you can do it in a way that encourages the family and makes Jesus prominent. Here’s how:

If possible, talk to the family if advance.

Unless it is an unusual circumstance where no time is available, not knowing the decedent does not mean you have to do the service unprepared. Try to meet the family members or friends before the service. Talk to them and get stories just as you would if a church member died.

Do not overlook the role of the funeral director. He or she spends a considerable amount of time with the family and can provide insight to the family dynamics, who among them is level-headed, and who is struggling the most. When possible, I talk to the funeral director before speaking with the family. Meeting beforehand can provide content to help personalize your sermon.

Expect the unexpected at such funerals.

When you do a lot of funerals for church people, you grow accustomed to a certain rhythm: enter the chapel/auditorium, a song or two (often a favorite singer from church), a family member might speak, you speak possibly joined by another pastor, maybe another song, then exit for the graveside.

Funerals for those outside church life don't always follow that pattern.

On one occasion I met with a family the day before the service. The mother/grandmother had passed away and was to be cremated. What I did not know was the cremation was taking place *after* the service rather than before. When I arrived for the service lo-and-behold, the deceased was laying out in a bed like she was taking a nap. Not only that, but some of the grandkids were climbing up on the bed with her.

I don't even liked open-casket funerals and there she was laid-out in her nightgown. Worse yet (from my point-of-view) the portable podium I was to use for the service was placed near the head of the bed. I've never been able to move my eyes independently, but I'm pretty sure I kept one of them on Grandma the entire service.

Don't assume anything about the deceased's spiritual life.

You will sometimes hear the stories make it pretty clear where the person is spending eternity. I once did a funeral for a woman whose family did not know a pastor. I met the very small family and a couple of friends at the funeral home preparing for a graveside service that would be held on a bitterly cold, overcast winter day. Among that group of fifteen or twenty people were the husband, her son, their drinking buddies, and the bar managers from several area bars. They were a miserable, hopeless looking bunch.

Even so, rather than making public assumptions about a woman I had never met, I talked about the difference between hope and hopelessness in times of death.

On the other hand are those who, though finding a pastor was difficult, had a clear testimony of salvation and a life to match. I choose not to "preach them into heaven," as the saying goes. Instead, I remind the friends and family no one's good works get them to

heaven. Salvation through Jesus is the only way the dearly departed will experience heavenly blessings. Speculating about eternal destinies is less effective than the certain message of hope in Christ.

Emphasize the reality of death.

Whether I know the deceased or not, I always ask the assembled, "What if it was *you* in the casket? What if we were gathered for *your* funeral today?"

Many people will not talk about death and are loathe to consider their own mortality. Funerals are the most obvious place for people to deal with the reality that they won't walk this earth forever. If we do not know a single person at the funeral we can still remind them decisions about the afterlife are made before death, not after it.

Preach Jesus.

Even if you find out the unknown deceased was a scoutmaster and philanthropist, after telling the stories and encouraging the family, talk about Jesus.

Almost no one leaves in the middle of a funeral, so I always preach Jesus at some point. If no one knows a pastor, there is a decent chance some of them don't know Jesus, either. It does not have to be a crusade sermon. Close with some truths about the need for salvation, the means of salvation, and the blessing of salvation. It will plant a lot of seeds and maybe some of them will fall on fertile ground.

Preaching the funeral of someone you do not know may seem daunting, but it does not have to be. Trust God to give you the right words, be gracious and loving to the family, then allow the Holy Spirit to do His work even if you never see it happening.

Anyone have experience with preaching funerals of people you don't know? What are some other helpful suggestions?