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To understand redemption, we must talk about death

Bill Tammeus | Nov. 17, 2010 A small c catholic

My Presbyterian congregation [1] recently presented a four-part series on dying, which we gently called ?end-of-life issues.?

Even when we talk about death in our death-denying American culture, we seem not to want to name it.

Why? We?re all dying. In my newspaper each day I find a list of people who?ve done it [2]. We have a whole industry devoted to disposing of dead bodies. Our churches all have traditional worship services for when it?s time to acknowledge the death of a congregant.

But we put off making wills. We put off reconciling with friends and family. We put off drafting advance health care directives and appointing the people to hold our durable power of attorney and make health care decisions on our behalf when we can?t.

Why? Because maybe if we don?t talk about death it won?t rear its ugly head.

I?ve tried to write honestly about death for a long time. In fact, the first piece in my first book, *A Gift of Meaning [3]*, is a column I wrote from my mother?s 1996 funeral. And the epilogue in that same book is a piece I wrote about the death of my nephew, who was a passenger on the first hijacked plane to smash into the World Trade Center on Sept. 11, 2001.

This past summer I taught a weeklong writing class that I called ?Death and Its Mysteries,? and I took the class to a funeral home [4]so a funeral director could walk us through the process of what happens to a body from the time it?s received until it?s either cremated or buried. In fact, we all stood next to the crematory while it was reducing the body of one Joseph Rodriquez to ashes.

I mention all of this because our churches need to do a better job helping all of us think about -- and thus prepare for -- death. I?ve often said that if we don?t understand our own death we?ll never understand our own life.

One of the best new resources to help with that is a new book by Thomas G. Long of Candler School of Theology. It?s called *Accompany Them With Singing: The Christian Funeral [5]*.

Long complains that in many places Christians have abandoned traditional funerals with the body present in favor of disembodied memorial services that are primarily about therapy for the bereaved.

Mostly, Long acknowledges, this is a Protestant problem that finds its worst expressions among white, well-educated suburbanites. But I bet some of the death-fearing, anti-body instincts (as well as some of the well-meaning moves toward more tender pastoral care that have led Protestants down this path) are slipping into Catholic churches, too.

Here?s how Long describes what a Christian funeral should be: ?Someone we love has died, and so once again we get out our old scripts, assemble on stage, and act out one more time the great and hopeful drama of how the Christian life moves from death to life.?

It?s a chance to retell the gospel story as we accompany a loved one to the edge of mystery. Yes, some therapy occurs, but that?s not primarily what should be going on.

One reason we Protestants have moved away from traditional body-present funerals is that we don?t understand our own theology, specifically the doctrine of the resurrection of the body -- an idea much different from the old Greek idea of the immortal soul.

The church does not teach that our souls are immortal and just temporarily housed in disposable shells. Rather, the church teaches that only God is immortal and that if we are to be in eternal relationship with the divine it will be by the grace of God, who intends to redeem not just us but the whole of creation.

If your church isn?t providing a forum to talk about that idea and others associated with death, do what you can to make it happen. Now. Before you die.

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