

Children at the grave

For career day at my daughter's school, I brought pictures of some of the things pastors do. The students were mostly interested in the funerals.

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Last spring the principal of my daughter's elementary school invited me to attend career day. I showed up in the lobby, alb on hanger, and sat with a pizza shop owner, filmmaker, and cardiologist before being ushered into the classroom to share about my job as a pastor. I'd brought pictures with me of some of the things I do—Sunday school, hospital visits, committee meetings, and funerals.

The children were mostly interested in the funerals. "Have you ever seen a dead person?" one asked. "Do you have to dig the hole to bury them?" "What happens when you die?" "Someone told me that dead people go to heaven. Is that true?"

Eventually the teacher announced that it was time for the next parent to take my place, but the children wouldn't let me go. Robed in white and crouched on a blue plastic chair, I watched as a small line formed in front of me. I felt like a priest

hearing confession as each child came forward and whispered in my ear a story of death.

“My cousin, he got killed selling drugs,” one boy said in a hushed tone, looking around to make sure no one was watching him. “He owed a gang money. They threatened to kill his mother.”

A girl came up next. She looked me in the eye and said, quietly, “My baby brother died last year. We had a funeral. I was so sad. I am still sad.”

They talked to me about what they’d seen, what had happened to their lives. They shared with me their grief and bewilderment. I realized that this might be the first time they had told anyone these stories. We often shield our children from death. We hide the news, tuck it away, hoping that we can avoid a collision of sorrow and childhood. We want to guard these precious years. But children know. They are seers, reading our bodies and anxiety and energy. They know much more than sometimes we hope they do.

Recently I preached at the funeral of a 99-year-old member of my congregation. As I sat in a back room behind the sanctuary, preparing the family for the service, I noticed two of Doreen’s great-grandchildren, a little boy and a little girl, sitting in a couple of the chairs. The girl was crying. I went over to them. “Is this your first funeral?” I asked. The girl nodded her head yes. I talked her through the service. We talked about cremation, about the box with her grandma’s ashes. I told her we would sing, and pray, and tell stories. I let her know that if she had any questions she could talk to me after the service.

Many children, including my own, are fascinated with death—fascinated by talking about it, acting it out, and making light of it. I recently sat next to a little boy who introduced himself to me by sharing his name and age. The next fact he offered was that his grandmother was dead. This event was significant; it marked him. Why wouldn’t he share it with a new person who was getting to know him?

Death is a strange land for all of us. But for children it is another mystery to be explored, another in a long series of human events to be worked out through investigation, questions, testing, and play.

Funerals make space within the church, among God’s people, for children to explore the strangeness of life’s end. It is here that they see adults vulnerable to grief, that

they sense the magnitude of what we face. Here children also learn that we carry this grief together. It is at funerals that we discover that, even in the end, there is nowhere we can go from God's love—because we see it in the people gathered around us.

This is why I am always concerned when a parishioner talks about wanting a memorial service, void of tears and wailing, a “celebration of life” that drives out any possibility of public grief. Getting the sadness out of the service may spare children our pain. But it doesn't protect them from death. Instead it changes grief from a communal act to something experienced alone, without others to bear it, without sharing in death's sorrow.

A funeral, on the other hand, offers a structure for the work of grief—the tools and words and actions that allow children to give shape to death's mystery. And it offers evidence that no matter how great the mystery, no matter how devastating the pain and sadness that follow, even when facing death we are never alone. The people of God who bear witness to the saints of God will one day hold us in their care.

At the graveside, I gathered Doreen's great-grandchildren around me. The little ones were toddlers; the oldest was 11. I bent down and told them that we were here to bury their granny, to say our final good-bye in this life. But in God's love, I said, we never have to say good-bye for good. One day we will have new bodies, and we will be together forever. In the meantime we may find that we get scared or sad when we think about death. Death is a bad thing. It's a sad thing. But we also believe that God is always with us. There's no place we can go to get away from God, not even when we die.

When it was time, we buried Doreen—ashes to ashes, dust to dust. Many of her family members took a shovel in hand and scooped dirt into the grave. The last to take up the shovel was Margaret, the little girl I'd talked with before the funeral. She joined the saints in the drama of worship, returning her beloved great-grandmother to the One who breathes life into our bodies of dust and who will love us into resurrected life in a communion of love.