

Commentary: Grieving over how we must grieve during pandemic

April 21, 2020

The last two funeral services I've conducted have been unlike any before in my ministry, and I've been at it quite a while.

I officiated my first funeral service almost 33 years ago, and I've led services in the decades since for scores of people ranging in age from 10 to more than 100. I've led funerals for all sorts of folks: ministers and miscreants, cowboys and curmudgeons, and just about everyone in between.

In the first 10 weeks of this year, my associate pastors and I conducted more than a dozen funeral services for our congregation, an unusually high number for us over such a brief period. Still, though atypical in number, they were typical for Baptist funeral observances: visitation with the family followed by a service at the church or funeral chapel, then the interment at the graveside and finally back to the church fellowship hall for chicken and potato salad.

The order of things, as well as the menu, sometimes can vary, but the essential elements usually don't. Until now, that is. Things are different now, and—of course—you know why.

Adjusting grief rituals to social

distancing

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed even our grieving rituals. I've officiated two services in April thus far, neither of which was a consequence of the virus, thank the Lord. Both of them were graveside only, however, and—supposedly—limited to 10 people. But my funeral director friends are kindhearted and instinctively want to comfort the grieving, not compound their grief. If they seem to have a few more than 10 fingers lately, I certainly wouldn't be one to call them on it.

To help make up for attendance limitations, one funeral home used Zoom software to stream an online “meeting” of the service, allowing the family of the deceased to issue invitations to participate. Using little more than a smartphone with an external microphone and wind filter, they made it possible for people from all over the country to attend safely and virtually, and attend they did. Necessity remains the mother of invention, it seems.

There have been other adjustments at those graveside observances, as well. Instead of a couple rows of chairs neatly arranged side-by-side under the tent for the family, the first of my two services had no chairs at all. I was told this was the cemetery's decision, made to promote social distancing, although perhaps also to avoid the task of having to disinfect chairs after each service. The second service at a different cemetery did have a few chairs set up, but all were separated by six or more feet. Both situations felt awkward to say the least.

There is a strong impulse within us to comfort the grieving through physical touch: hugs, pats on the shoulder or warm handshakes, at least. Social distancing has frustrated one of our most basic expressions of compassion.

The cemeteries have discretion over what they will and won't allow, of course, but one funeral director told me another cemetery in our

community is not allowing graveside services at all. Families are being told they can remain in their cars and watch their loved ones being buried, but they are not allowed to exit their vehicles at any time. Drive-by funeral services? Not a very comforting thought, is it?

How adjusted rituals are affecting us

Some are predicting mental health issues will increase among survivors in the wake of the pandemic because they were prevented from observing common grief rituals. Time will tell, but we will be wise to prepare for opportunities to minister to those with disenfranchised grief.

The impact of all this is felt not only by grieving families, but also by the funeral homes themselves. A funeral director friend with whom I've worked closely in recent years told me his bottom line is suffering.

Funeral homes can't provide the same kinds of services they have in the past, so they're taking similar financial hits as other small businesses who have been restricted from doing their work. The government's paycheck protection program will help in the short term, but for the long term, much uncertainty remains.

My experiences with funeral homes have shown them to be valuable colleagues when it comes to ministering to grieving families; so, I am praying for them as we navigate these challenging days together.

The pandemic has changed much about our lives in a very short period of time. Our world is a volatile and insecure place, as we have been reminded so harshly. Our God, however, is unchanging in his love and compassion, an anchor that holds no matter how stormy the sea.

We may have to adapt the ways in which we communicate that truth to the grieving, but thank God it remains true nonetheless. For that we can give

thanks.

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