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The African American Funeral Sermon: Divine Re-Framing of Human Tragedy

One of the most impactful moments of my young life was an encounter with an African American funeral sermon. I was of early college age, and one of my close friends was shot and killed in a botched shoe store robbery attempt. It was shocking and devastating for the young people in the neighborhood. My friend was well loved and the outpouring of grief was tremendous and deep. There is something about the grief of young people that is particularly painful. Maybe it is the false sense of invincibility that often parades in the guise of youth. At any rate, I remember the huge group of young people trying to come to terms with their grief. We went to the funeral and sat together five rows deep. The preacher did something for us. We did not know what he did, but when he got through preaching we felt better. I am sure it was not the preaching singularly, but if it was any one thing, it would have been the preaching. I do not remember what he preached. I do not remember what text or what Scripture he used. It has been years and years now. But I do remember that we all felt better. I understand now that what occurred was a divine re-framing of human tragedy.

Death and tragedy is an inevitable experience for every human being. In the midst of death and tragedy, we experience natural emotions such as grief, confusion, anger, and the inexpressible pain of separation. Re-framing is the process where one is enabled to look at tragic and painful events and emotions, and through the illumination of the Scripture and the presence of the Holy Spirit, one sees a truer spiritual reality. The African American preacher helps people look at the tragic through divine eyes of healing and mercy. While total re-framing is an arduous process that often takes years, it can begin with the funeral service and the African American funeral sermon. The African American preacher re-frames death, sickness, disease, and illness by assisting mourners to view tragedy from the divine perspective.

Since that time I have heard much African American funeral preaching. I have done an extensive amount of it myself. Regardless of the age, class, race, or sex of the deceased or the family, the

preaching assignment has always been the same: to help people re-frame earthly tragedy by looking at events through heaven's eyes. In my book, *They Like to Never Quit Praisin' God: The Role of Celebration in Preaching*,¹ I discuss looking at events through heaven's eyes as the nature and purpose of the African American sermon. Looking at events through heaven's eyes is called the *assurance of grace*. The nature and purpose of the African American sermon is *to help people experience the assurance of grace that is the gospel of Jesus Christ*. We offer people an *assurance of grace* that enables them to re-frame tragic events and look at them through heaven's eyes.

One of the fundamental ways the African American preacher helps people experience the assurance of grace is through the last stage of the sermon labeled as celebration. In my book, I say a great deal about celebration, but the following is the definitive statement:

Celebration is the culmination of the sermonic design, where a moment is created in which the remembrance of a redemptive past and/or the conviction of a liberated future transforms the events immediately experienced.²

The preacher helps the listeners to experience the remembrance of redemptive past and/or the conviction of a liberated future, and that experience re-frames the tragedy that is being immediately experienced. The African American preacher through the genius of celebration helps people see tragic events through heaven's eyes. Before the advent of psychological sciences, the African American preacher offered bereavement ministry through celebrative sermons. The genius of African American preaching has been the ability to sustain a people in the midst of the tragic by celebrating the gospel of Jesus Christ.

What is the process by which we re-frame? How does one construct a sermon to re-frame? While the scope of this article does not allow a detailed methodological discussion, the preacher must help people 1) face the stark reality of the bad news, 2) apply the gospel to the bad news, and 3) celebrate the gospel.

Step One: Face the stark reality of the death, tragedy, or bad news -- the preacher must help persons to face the stark reality of loss and separation. Many people have only partially begun to accept the reality of death. Because, especially during a funeral, the church is a safe place, if the preacher gently and skillfully prods, many people will allow themselves to feel, as much as they can, the full gravity of the death. The preacher must name the pain, grief, agony, etc. for what it really is. Once it is named, we move to the second step: What does God have to say about the stark reality?

Step Two: Apply the gospel to the bad news -- the preacher helps people to understand God's perspective on death? What is the word of the Lord unto the people that are experiencing this loss? What does the Bible say to this experience of grief and loss? What is the truth of God that will change perspective? The preacher applies the word of God to the tragic situation, and offers resolution that might take years to fully experience, but begins at the point of the funeral sermon.

Step Three: Celebrate the gospel – The preacher celebrates the resolution of the bad news. The preacher affirms and joyfully reinforces God’s resolution to the bad news. The preacher celebrates God victory over death, and God’s victory over death in this family’s life. The preacher celebrates the power of God to comfort, heal, and overcome death.

Someone will probably say that this method is easy when the person is “saved” or is a believer in Christ. According to this line of thinking, if a person is a believer, then we know that they have the victory in Christ, but what about when a person is not saved, or has led a life that has offended some? I do not believe that it is our preaching task to put a person in hell. It is our task to offer the compassion, the mercy, and the love of God to the family. Most of the time, I will not mention the negative, or the embarrassing, or the shameful part of person’s life at the funeral. Ultimately, I believe it is the preacher’s task to offer the family hope, not by pretending that the person was a saint, but by the proclamation of a word from God that offers hope and healing. My focus is a healing word to the family from the word of God.

One of the best examples of the methodology that I set forth in this discussion is the account of a sermon entitled “Uncle Wash’s Funeral.” It was found in slave narratives compiled in 1936. Ned Walker, a layperson, heard the sermon somewhere around 1866-67, and recounted it almost sixty years later:

Now 'bout Uncle Wash's funeral. You know Uncle Wash was the blacksmith in the fork of the road, across the railroad from Concord church. He had been a mighty powerful man. He used the hammer and the tongs on behalf of all the people for miles and miles around.

Uncle Wash joined the Springvale A.M.E. Church, but he kinda fell from grace, I guess. Somehow he was 'cused of stealing Marse Walter Brice's pig, and I guess he was guilty. At any rate, he was convicted and sent to the penitentiary. While he was down there, he contracted consumption and had to come home. His chest was all sunk in, and his ribs was full of rheumatism. He soon went to bed and died

Uncle Pompey preached the funeral . . . and Uncle Pompey really knowed how to preach a funeral . . . Uncle Pompey took his text from that place in the Bible where Paul and Silas was a-layin' up in jail. He dwelt on Uncle Wash's life of hard work and bravery--how he tackled kickin' horses and mules, so's crops could be cultivated and harvested and hauled. He talked 'bout how he sharpened dull plow points to make the corn and the cotton grow, to feed the hungry and clothe the naked. He told what a good-hearted man Uncle Wash was, and then he 'lloed as how his goin' to jail did not necessarily mean he didn't go to heaven. He declared it wasn't eternally against a church member to get put in jail. If it hadda been, Paul and Silas wouldn't a made it to heaven, and he knowed they was there. In fact, they was lot a people in heaven what had been arrested.

Then he went to talkin' 'bout a vision of Jacob's ladder. "I see Jacob's ladder. An' I see Brother Wash. He's climbin' Jacob's ladder. Look like he's half way up. I want y'all to pray with me that he enter the pearly gates, Brothers and Sisters. He's still a climbin'. I see the pearly gates. They is swingin' open. An' I see Brother Wash. He has done reached the topmost round of de ladder. Let us sing with all our hearts that blessed hymn, `There Is a Fountain Filled With Blood.'"

When they sang the second verse, 'bout the dyin' thief rejoiced to see that fountain in his day, Uncle Pompey cried out over the crowd, "I see Brother Wash as he enters in, an' that dyin' thief is there to welcome him in. Thank God! Thank God! He's made it into Paradise. His sins has been washed away, an' he has landed safe forever more."

Well sir, I don't need to tell you that the women started to shout on the first verse, an' when they got to singing' 'bout the dying thief in heaven, an' they seen the 'surance of grace that was in it, they like to never quit praisin' God (underlining mine).

¹ Frank A. Thomas, *They Like To Never Quit Praisin' God: The Role of Celebration in Preaching*, Cleveland: United Church Press, 1997.

² *Ibid.*, 31.