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In this essay Braxton uses the funeral of his father to discuss the preacher's role and the basics that he or she must achieve during each funeral.

### **Farewell to my Father: Funeral Reflections from a “Preacher’s Kid”**

*Brief Biography of James Allison Braxton Sr. (1929–2004)*

James Allison Braxton was the third of eight children born to Allison V. and Belle H. Braxton in Tappahannock, Virginia. He was licensed in 1950 and ordained in 1954.

James completed his undergraduate and graduate studies at Virginia Theological Seminary and College in Lynchburg, Virginia, earning the Bachelor of Arts in 1954, the Bachelor of Divinity in 1956, and the Master of Divinity in 1975. In 1982, Virginia Seminary and College conferred upon him an honorary Doctor of Divinity.

Early in his ministry, Rev. Braxton served the following congregations: Grafton Baptist Church in Middlesex County, Virginia; First Baptist Church in Iron Gate, Virginia; Falling Springs Baptist Church in Falling Springs, Virginia; and Main Street Baptist Church in Clifton Forge, Virginia. On April 2, 1969, Rev. Braxton assumed the pastorate of the First Baptist Church in Salem, Virginia. After forty-five years of pastoral service, he retired in June 2002.

Rev. Braxton also established himself as a respected leader in the community and in the Commonwealth of Virginia. His legacy of leadership includes his tenures as the twentieth president of the Virginia Baptist State Convention; dean of the

of the department of religion, Virginia Seminary and College; president of the Ministers' Conference of the Roanoke Valley; president of the Citizens' League of Salem; president of the local chapter of the NAACP; dean of religious education and vice-moderator of the Berean Valley Baptist and Schaeffer Memorial Baptist Associations; and chair of the Children's Home Trustee Committee of the Children's Home of Virginia Baptists.

Rev. Braxton was married for forty-four years to the former Louise Earlyne Sledd of Clifton Forge, Virginia. Four children were born to this union: Zenobia Simone, James Allison Jr., Chanda Linnet, and Brad Ronnell. In his lifetime, Rev. Braxton received many awards and accolades. He especially cherished his selection as the Southwest Virginia Father of the Year in the Field of Religious Activities, an award he received in 1993 for his impeccable character, devoted service, and outstanding accomplishments.

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I belong to various social and professional groups. Typically, these organizations require membership dues, attendance at functions, and service projects. The group in which I have held longest membership is an unusual association. Unlike fraternities and sororities, admission into this group does not involve pledging. Membership occurs from the decisions of others, not from personal choice. Those belonging to this group usually go by two letters, PK. Yes, I am a "Preacher's Kid."

I thankfully acknowledge that I am the son of the Reverend Doctor James Allison Braxton Sr. For forty-four years, he faithfully walked by the side of my mother, Mrs. Louise S. Braxton. For more than forty-five years, he shepherded Baptist congregations in Virginia. With tenderness and paternal wisdom, he reared four children. With compassion and pastoral skill, he guided parishioners into a deeper communion with God.

Moreover, he was a pastor's pastor. He possessed a special anointing for encouraging and enabling ministers. His exemplary conduct as a husband, father, and pastor greatly influenced my own embrace of the pastoral and academic ministries.

Listening to his preaching, I accepted Jesus Christ. By his hands, I was baptized in water and into the faith. Under his authority, I was licensed and ordained into the gospel ministry. On the strength of his and my mother's prayers, I completed three university degrees and entered the professorate. I am the man I am today because James A. Braxton Sr. was the man he was throughout his life. Recently, my family and I said a fond farewell to my father as he made his transition from life to life eternal.

On a warm Tuesday evening in August 2004, my mother spoke chilling words to me in a phone conversation. She calmly declared, “Daddy passed.” My father’s rapidly declining health had prompted my wife and me to visit my parents in Virginia just the weekend before. As my wife and I left that Sunday evening to return to Nashville, I never expected that within forty-eight hours the chariot would swing low and carry Daddy home.

My mother continued that Tuesday conversation: “Brad, I want you to think about a minister who can officiate the funeral and preach the eulogy.” I responded, “Mama, with your permission, I would be honored to officiate the funeral and preach the eulogy.” Immediately, I heard both relief and concern in my mother’s voice as she asked, “Are you sure?” I answered, “Yes, ma’am, I’m sure. I always knew that I would preach Daddy’s funeral. I can think of no greater honor than to assist in Daddy’s home-going.”

What a home-going it was! On Saturday, August 7, 2004, the First Baptist Church in Salem, Virginia, where my father had served as pastor for thirty-three years was filled to the brim. Because of the expansive crowd, many persons watched the funeral on closed-circuit televisions in various overflow rooms. Congregants, civic and educational leaders, and more than fifty ministers and pastors came to worship God and utter words of thanksgiving for a life well lived.

That day, in a little Baptist church in a small suburban community, God’s resurrection hope manifested itself in a huge way. In the words of some who attended the funeral, “The service felt more like a revival than a funeral.” To have the word revival associated with the funeral was a great affirmation of the power of that service. Revival means “to live again.” The funeral for a Christian, and especially for a saintly preacher, should testify that death’s grip on us is tenuous and temporary. In God, we will live again!

I want to reflect briefly on the pastoral, theological, and homiletical dimensions of officiating and preaching at my father’s funeral. I offer these reflections both to assist fellow preachers and as words of tribute from a grown and grateful preacher’s kid.

## **PASTORAL DIMENSIONS**

Since “death awakens our hopes and fears for our ultimate destiny,”<sup>1</sup> care and thoughtfulness should characterize pastoral leadership of a funeral. Officiating the funeral of a parent (or any close relative) requires an even greater degree of sensitivity and self-awareness. As I prepared the funeral liturgy and eulogy, I assumed two identities. Simultaneously, I was “mourning son” and “pastor.” Each identity possessed its own qualities.

As mourning son, I joined my mother, siblings, and entire family as we experienced our personal loss and lament. As pastor, I served as a public mediator of God's healing and hope to a family, congregation, and community. Any attempt to deny my personal sense of loss as I prepared for and performed this public act of ministry would have been spiritually unhealthy and psychologically dishonest. Nevertheless, my decision to serve publicly as pastor placed necessary boundaries on the expression of my personal emotions.

I have guided many families through bereavement. As I attempted to provide pastoral care to my own family, I had to remind myself of the counsel that I have given to other families. In my pastoral experience, family members of the deceased often desire to read a poem, sing a song, or offer a tribute during the service. I have urged family members to examine thoroughly the emotional weight of such acts.

Theoretically, family members often consider themselves capable of participating directly in the funeral. However, the actualities of the funeral—including a family's intensified grief and the presence of a casket—can emotionally overwhelm even the most stoic persons. The release of emotions at a funeral is natural and even desirable, but the complete loss of emotional composure of a family member who has an active role in the order of worship can significantly reduce the healing capacity of the service. In spite of my willingness to officiate the funeral, I had to count the emotional cost, bearing in mind that my pastoral experience offered no ironclad guarantee of my emotional composure.

Typically, I maintain a calm demeanor even in stressful situations. Nevertheless, pastoral sensitivity and self-awareness compelled me to ask myself repeatedly, "Brad, are you really ready to do this?" I have preached hundreds of sermons, but this sermon would be unique. In addition to establishing eye contact with my listeners as I led worship and preached, I would also have to gaze upon a casket containing the earthly remains of my father.

During the days before the funeral, conversations with God, my family, and friends provided opportunities to test my emotional stability and readiness for the task. These conversations, along with the family's support of my decision to serve as "pastor," created in me a growing sense of divine empowerment for performing this public role in the midst of personal loss. Additionally, the day before the funeral, God further enabled me to function publicly as pastor. During my early morning devotions, as I lay on the floor praying, God graciously opened my tear ducts. Rushing rivers of tears doused the carpet as I thanked the Lord for the blessings of a godly father. That private moment solidified my ability to provide public pastoral care.

## **THEOLOGICAL DIMENSIONS**

Funerals serve a variety of functions. They provide rituals of separation, facilitate the grieving process, and assist mourners with their transition to new phases of life.<sup>2</sup> In a Christian funeral, hope is the theological thread uniting these functions. Hope is a “trusting anticipation of the future based on an understanding of a God who is trustworthy and who calls us into an open-ended future.”<sup>3</sup> While Christian funerals provide ample room for us to reflect on the past of the deceased, their primary purpose is to remind us of our future with God on and off these earthly shores.

Hope occurs whenever our souls stand on tiptoe, anticipating God’s next move. As small children, many of us stood on tiptoe, trying to see (and grab) the moist homemade cookies on our parents’ kitchen counter. The anticipation of sweetness in the future altered our bodily posture in the present. When death arrives, its bitter and decisive blow knocks us back on our heels. Theologically, a Christian funeral invites us to rock forward on tiptoe again, so that we, God’s children, might eagerly await a sweet future.

At my father’s funeral, hope beckoned our souls to stand on tiptoe as we celebrated my father’s joyful entrance into God’s eternal future. In pastoral care to my family, preparation of the liturgy, and leading of the funeral, I emphasized the presence of hope in three intentional ways.

First, on the night before the funeral, I encouraged our family to stand during the singing of hymns at the service. I know the custom of allowing the family to sit during the hymns. While mindful that the heaviness of grief during a funeral can make standing a task, I asked my mother and siblings to take an active role in demonstrating the hope of the gospel. With dignity, the entire family responded to my request, offering leadership even in the midst of our loss. During the hymns, the family stood physically on our feet because our souls had already assumed their tiptoe posture.

Second, the language I used in the funeral bulletin underscored the presence of hope. As the liturgist, I wanted the funeral program to supply more than simply a photograph of my father and his dates of birth and death. When congregants entered the sanctuary, the funeral bulletin would serve as the first written text they encountered. Even before hearing or reading Scripture during the service, congregants would engage the bulletin. Thus, the bulletin had theological work to accomplish. According to John Witvliet, “The earliest Christians announced the hope of the resurrection with every detail of their

[funeral] observance.”<sup>4</sup> This ancient Christian attention to the “hope-full” capacity of the smallest funeral details can enrich our contemporary funeral practices.

On the front page of the program, I entitled the service: “A Celebration of Life and Life Eternal.” Underneath these words was a handsome color photograph of my father. Then, I listed my father’s dates in the following manner:

May 21, 1929: The Beginning of Life  
August 3, 2004: The Beginning of Life  
Eternal

I refused to insert the word death on the front page of the funeral bulletin. This refusal constituted no denial of death. The casket before us prevented such denial. Instead, the fullness of resurrection hope, with its celebration of life, simply pushed death off the front page. While hope acknowledges death, hope also puts death in its proper place. The sting of death used to be “front-page news.” For Christians, the resurrection creates new front-page news: “Extra, extra, read all about it, those who live in Christ ‘will never stop living.’”<sup>5</sup>

Third, at the cemetery, I accentuated the presence of hope. As I held dirt in my hand and prepared to commit my father’s body to the ground, I reminded all those gathered that a cemetery is a place for laughter. Easter is God’s cosmic chuckling at the presumptuousness of death. Because of the resurrection, death can no longer parade around as an ultimate reality. In Christ, death is penultimate. Life is ultimate! Prior to dashing dirt on that casket and declaring, “Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust,” I let out a hearty, hope-filled laugh. This farewell to my father was not final. God has promised a family reunion!

## **HOMILETICAL DIMENSIONS**

A funeral sermon possesses enormous healing potential. As a family and community confront the rupture of death, a preacher’s careful sermonic words can apply much balm. When preparing my father’s eulogy, I wanted to avoid two dangers. Some eulogies do too much. Other eulogies do too little. I will examine each danger.

A eulogy that does too much forgets that a funeral proclaims the gospel in more ways than simply the preached word. For instance, the music, Scriptures, words of tribute, presence of concerned congregants, and the fellowship meal after the service work in tandem with the eulogy to mediate the assurance of God’s abiding love.

When ministers act as if the eulogy is the sole mediator of the gospel, they place unnecessary pressure on themselves and typically preach unnecessarily long eulogies. Since other aspects of my father's funeral also preached the gospel, my eulogy was approximately twenty-five minutes long, which was just ten minutes longer than my normal eulogies. The precious relationship I shared with my father warranted the extra time. Yet, in my preparation, I whittled away at the sermon until the manuscript was fewer than 2,100 words. I could limit the words in the eulogy because the funeral would communicate the gospel in other "words" as well.

Rituals are a powerful and often underestimated language in worship. By ritual, I mean ceremonial, symbolic actions by which people express their deepest convictions.<sup>6</sup> Rituals are especially appropriate during rites of passage such as death, and they "ensure that we attend to such events fully, which is to say, spiritually, psychologically, and socially."<sup>7</sup> Powerful rituals occurred during my father's funeral, and they, too, proclaimed the gospel.

For example, prior to the closing of the casket, my mother honored my father's request and placed one red rose on his chest. My father was an exceptional gardener. This ritual spoke on many dimensions. The rose symbolized his relationship with the earth and plants. As my mother engaged in this ritual, I offered to the congregation still another level of meaning. I reminded congregants that the Christian tradition refers to Jesus Christ as "The Rose of Sharon." Thus, the rose also proclaimed my father's intimate relationship with Jesus Christ. Carefully enacted funeral rituals such as this one can curb a preacher's temptation to do too much in a eulogy. As Shakespeare once suggested, there are sermons in stones—and roses too.

While a eulogy can attempt to do too much, it can also accomplish too little. A eulogy that accomplishes too little focuses more on the life of the deceased than on God. We derive the word eulogy from Greek words that mean "good word." Primarily, a eulogy should present the "good word" of God's presence, actions, and promises. Effective eulogies sensitively seek to include significant details from the life of the deceased. Yet, a eulogy's ultimate aim is to situate the life of the deceased and the hurt and hope of the mourners within the eternal boundaries of God's gospel.

I entitled my father's eulogy "Dividends of an Undivided Life." The central Scripture was Matthew 5:8: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God" (NRSV). In that text, the phrase "pure in heart" describes persons of integrity who are undivided in their pursuit of righteousness. Such persons receive God's favor. Using the metaphor of the

marketplace, I suggested that investors in righteousness receive blessings—divine dividends—at an extraordinary rate of return. Because of his undivided life, my father received the internal blessing of being at peace with himself; the external blessing of the respect of his family and community; and the eternal blessing of now being fully in God’s presence. The eulogy amplified details of my father’s life, but the homiletic focus remained on God. At the eulogy’s conclusion, contagious joy erupted as the congregation and I celebrated the incorporation of my father’s life into the eternal life of God.

I count it a signal honor to have officiated and preached at my father’s funeral. My father lived long enough to witness the letters Ph.D. behind my name. As important as those letters are, I wear two other letters with an even greater sense of pride: PK.

### NOTES

1. John D. Witvliet, *Worship Seeking Understanding: Windows into Christian Practice* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 291.
2. Gene Fowler, *Caring through the Funeral: A Pastor’s Guide* (St. Louis: Chalice Press 2004), 115–132.
3. Andrew D. Lester, *Hope in Pastoral Care and Counseling* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1995), 62.
4. Witvliet, 306 (emphasis added).
5. *Ibid.*, 294 (author’s emphasis).
6. Lawrence S. Cunningham, John Kelsay, R. Maurice Barineau, and Heather Jo McVoy, *The Sacred Quest: An Invitation to the Study of Religion*, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1995), 79–80.
7. Ronald L. Grimes, *Deeply into the Bone: Re-Inventing Rites of Passage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 5.