

## *What the Bible Says About*

### - DEATH AND THE CHRISTIAN FUNERAL -

#### **FUNERAL SERMONS AND EULOGIES - WHAT CAN I EXPECT?**

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**Principle:** *Preaching at funerals and memorial services proclaims the Gospel.*

Whenever the pastor plants his feet in the pulpit he becomes God's spokesman to His people. Therefore, the funeral sermon shall proclaim the Lord's Word about death. Namely: the Lord's mercy for sinners, the Lord's Resurrection, and support belief in the resurrection of the body and eternal life for those who believe.

Thus, the sermon shall not be an extended eulogy, though the deceased is certainly remembered and referenced in the message. Admirable as his life may have been, God's mercy to a fallen sinner is the Gospel accent (1 Tim 1:15).

Lutheran preaching avoids somber discussion of life and death, tear-wrenching sentimentality, and accents that are purely moralistic or humanistic. Likewise, sermons that argue against grieving or frame grief as guilt and imply weak faith are also damaging. "Jesus wept" (John 11:35).

A sermon that reminds of God's promises serves well. More than a homily that embodies scattered reflection, the sermon speaks the central truth of the Scripture text and unfolds with structure that is evident, yet subtle. There is a point to discern, comfort to take, and a treasured word to keep.

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Warneck, Richard H. *Pastoral Ministry: Theology and Practice* (pp. 314-315). Concordia Publishing House.

While a pastor will take care to address the specific concerns of the mourning family, friends, and congregation, there are two essential elements that are common to all Lutheran sermons: Law and Gospel.

In a funeral, the Law has often done its work before a word is ever preached from the pulpit. The Lord speaks to us in His Law, which shows us His righteousness and our sin. The Law is meant to humble the proud and arrogant and show them their need for a Savior. We know that death is not good, that creation was not meant to be like this. When a loved one dies, we are reminded again of our own mortality. We are brought up short with the realization that we, too, will one day breathe our last breath. It simply remains for the sermon to show the root cause of the tragedy of death: sin. "The wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23).

Then the Gospel, which gives us the Lord's righteousness and the forgiveness of sins, sweeps in and drives out despair and sorrow. The Gospel is meant to lift up the humble and despairing with the certainty that our sins are forgiven. Our Lord Jesus Christ defeated death, destroyed the devil, and won the forgiveness of all sin through His death on the cross and His resurrection from the grave.

In the funeral sermon, we hear that God has given this victory over death to our loved ones both in their life and now in their death. We hear that the deceased even now stand before the Lord's face in glory and know the fullness of joy that is His presence. We hear that their suffering is over, that their battle against the devil, the world, and their sinful nature is finished, and that they now know perfect peace.

Unlike a eulogy, which focuses on the past, a Christian funeral sermon focuses on the present and the future. The faithful departed rejoiced in the Lord's grace in their lives, they rejoice even more now as they enjoy the presence of Christ, and their joy will be complete on the great day of the resurrection of all flesh.

Unlike a eulogy, which is about the good works of the departed, the Christian funeral sermon is about the works, life, and death of Jesus. It is faith that fights back despair, and faith comes from hearing the Word of Christ (Romans 10:17).

The funeral sermon, like every Christian sermon, proclaims the Good News of Jesus and His goodness for us. As we walk through this vale of tears, we have the confidence that Jesus does not leave us as orphans but comes to us with His comforting promises. We rejoice in His goodness to our beloved dead, and we rejoice in His goodness to us as well. The funeral sermon gives these Gospel promises to all who hear it, and by faith in these promises, our hearts are sure that we, too, will reach the place that Jesus has prepared for us (John 14:1-4).

Finally, the funeral sermon directs the hearts and minds of the mourners to the Christian's great hope: the return of Jesus, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. The funeral service is the halfway point between our Baptism and our resurrection. We "plant" our dead in the ground in the hope that they will rise up on the Last Day, having passed through death life everlasting (1 Corinthians 15:35-49).

Wolfmueller, Bryan. Final Victory: Contemplating the Death and Funeral of a Christian (pp. 28-29). Concordia Publishing House.

The sermon has its own structure, but it may include a number of recommended components.

1. Get in touch with the mourners, the family and friends, at the outset, possibly citing a shared experience with the deceased.
2. Focus briefly but gently on the reality of death.
3. Celebrate the goodness and faithfulness of God for poor sinners that is evident in Holy Baptism and countless blessings enjoyed during the life of the deceased.
4. Lead bereaved persons to peace with God and the hope of everlasting life through faith in Jesus Christ who is our sin-atoning Savior and the resurrection and the life (Rom 5:1; 8:1; John 11:25).
5. Draw mourners together before the living Lord who comforts us in our sorrows (2 Cor 1:4).

Warneck, Richard H. Pastoral Ministry: Theology and Practice (p. 315). Concordia Publishing House.

**Mother of a  
Michigan teenager who killed himself is suing the  
Archdiocese of Detroit after a priest 'questioned  
whether her son would go to heaven' during his funeral**

By [VALERIE EDWARDS FOR DAILYMAIL.COM](#) and [ASSOCIATED PRESS](#)

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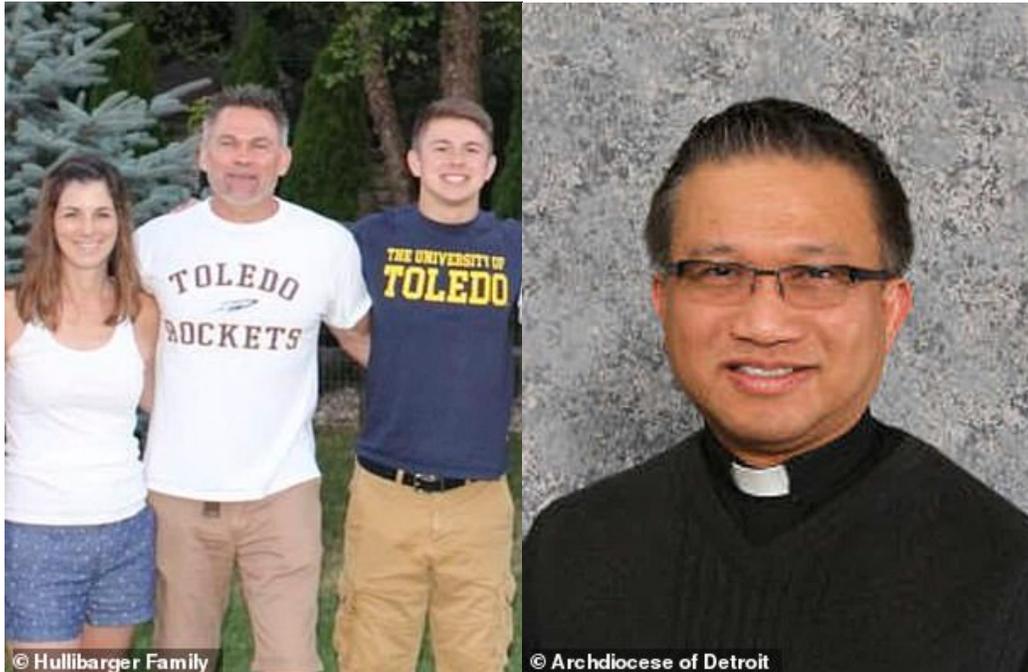
The mother of a Michigan teenager who killed himself is suing the Archdiocese of Detroit for the alleged harm she suffered during his funeral when a priest questioned whether her son would go to heaven.

The lawsuit filed Thursday in Wayne County on behalf of the teen's mother, Linda Hullibarger, names as defendants the archdiocese, Our Lady of Mount Carmel Parish and the Rev Don LaCuesta.

Hullibarger and her husband, Jeff, said they met with LaCuesta in December 2018 to plan funeral services for their 18-year-old son, Maison, and made it clear they wanted the priest to deliver a positive and uplifting message that celebrated the life of their son, according to the complaint.

The suit alleges LaCuesta instead turned his December 8, 2018, homily into a message regarding suicide, questioning whether the teen would go to heaven, according to The Blade.

Hullibarger said in a statement that she and her family had 'no idea, no indication that was going to happen'.



**Linda Hullibarger (far left), the mom of Michigan teen, Maison (left, in blue shirt), who killed himself is suing the Archdiocese of Detroit after Rev Don LaCuesta questioned whether her son would go to heaven during his 2018 funeral**

The Bedford, Michigan, family had not disclosed the nature of the youth's death to the priest, according to the suit.

'No parent, no sibling, no family member, should ever, ever have to sit through what we sat through. And it's happened before. When you're already beyond devastated, why would you make it even worse? No words can describe that (because) you don't think you could feel any worse,' Hullibarger added in the statement released by Charles E. Boyk Law Offices LLC.

Death by suicide has been considered sinful by the Catholic Church and other religions for centuries, but the church has softened its stance in recent decades.



**Maison (pictured) killed himself in 2018. His funeral was held on December 8, 2018**

Following her son's funeral service, Hullibarger sought LaCuesta's removal.

According to her lawsuit, a call with Bishop Gerard Battersby confirmed that church officials believed that what LaCuesta did was wrong but would not remove him.

Hullibarger's attorneys said in their statement that the lawsuit 'seeks to hold Father LaCuesta, Our Lady of Mt Carmel Parish, and The Archdiocese of Detroit accountable for the actions of Father LaCuesta and to ensure no further harm to the parish and local community'.

The archdiocese said Thursday in a statement that it does not comment on pending litigation and referred to its December 2018 statement on the priest's actions.

In that statement, the archdiocese said in part that it acknowledges 'that the family expected a homily based on how their loved one lived, not one addressing how he passed away'.

'We also know the family was hurt further by Father's choice to share Church teaching on suicide, when the emphasis should have been placed more on God's closeness to those who mourn.'

'Father LaCuesta agrees that the family was not served as they should have been served,' the release from the archdiocese continued.

'For the foreseeable future, he will not be preaching at funerals and he will have all other homilies reviewed by a priest mentor.'

According to the family, LaCuesta 'wondered if he had repented enough to make it to heaven and made him out to be a sinner.'

A version of the homily was obtained by **CNN**, but it makes no mention of heaven and says God would forgive 'even suicide'.

According to the public version, LaCuesta did say: 'We must not call what is bad good, what is wrong right.'

As for whether or not Maison would get into heaven, LaCuesta did not address the subject explicitly.



Maison's parents Jeffrey and Linda said the priest's comments made them feel like their son was sinner



The lawsuit filed Thursday in Wayne County also names Our Lady of Mount Carmel Parish (pictured), where the funeral was held

### **THE PRIEST'S HOMILY**

It is with great difficulty that I stand before you knowing the pain and anguish you are going through. But I am aware, as well, that I am only a humble, unworthy mouthpiece. I ask God to use my words to bring the light, comfort and healing you need.

Is there any hope to offer in this moment? Must we only speak of our profound grief, our indescribable sorrow, even our anger and confusion at how such a thing could have happened? Is there any word from God that might break into our darkness like a ray of light? Yes, yes, a thousand times. If we Christians are right in believing that salvation belongs to Jesus Christ, that it does not come from us--and that our hand cannot stop what God allows for us, then yes, there is hope in eternity even for those who take their own lives.

Having said that, I think that we must not call what is bad good, what is wrong right. Because we are Christians, we must say what we know is the truth – that taking your own life is against God who made us and against everyone who loves us. Our lives are not our own. They are not ours to do with as we please. God gave us life, and we are to be good stewards of that gift for

as long as God permits. The finality of suicide makes this all the worse. You cannot make things right again.

Neither can [REDACTED]. And this is much of the pain of it all.

Things are left unresolved, even if it felt to [REDACTED] like this was the only way to resolve things. You want to turn the clock back and say, 'Please don't give up. We can work through this pain together.'

But now you will have to work through this pain by yourselves, or with those close to you now who will need to lean on you even as you lean on them.

On most people's mind, however, especially of us who call ourselves Christians, on our minds as we sit in this place is: Can God forgive and heal this?

Yes, God CAN forgive even the taking of one's own life. In fact, God awaits us with his mercy, with ever open arms. Sacred Scripture says clearly: God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us (Romans 5:8). God's abiding mercy is what sets us to ask for it. Although God doesn't dangle his mercy like a carrot, waiting for us to ask for it in order to receive it, we do have to believe in our hearts, express with our words, and show in our actions – that it is always there.

God wants nothing but our salvation but he will never force himself on us, he will not save us without us. That's how much he loves us. Because of the all embracing sacrifice of Christ on the cross God can have mercy on any sin. Yes, because of his mercy, God can forgive suicide and heal what has been broken.

Because God is merciful he makes allowance for the spiritual, mental, and emotional despair that leads to suicide. God is able to read the heart, to know the whole truth of a person's life, and thereby to pass sentence with mercy. God knows something we must discipline ourselves to do in these moments – he knows not to judge a person's entire life on the basis of the worst and last choice the person made.

God can look at the totality of a human being's life and celebrate all the good that came from it, even while taking seriously the tragic choice that ended everything. And then he shows his mercy and love in ways beyond our limited understanding.

Nothing can separate us from the love of God, the great St. Paul assures us (in that Reading we just listened to). Nothing – including suicide. Who will bring any charge against God's chosen ones? St. Paul asks. It is God who acquits us. Who will condemn? Christ Jesus sits at the right hand of God even now, interceding for this one who could not stand before God on his/her own.

Truly, none of us can stand before God on our own. We all need Christ to intercede for us, to plead our case. And here's the good news: Christ has never lost a case!

What will separate us from the love of Christ? St. Paul answers that question with a display of words that cover everything he can think of in so little space.

Not death or life, not angels or principalities, not present things or future things, not powers or height or depth or any other creature will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. What did St. Paul leave out of that list? Nothing.

He did not list suicide, but he did not list murder or gossip or greed either. He covered all of those things in the final flurry of words that includes anything else in all creation. No deed is too evil to be beyond the forgiveness of Christ.

No tragedy is too great to separate us from the love of God. If that is so, if the Scriptures can be believed, if God can be trusted even in this, then it gives us hope and guidance for how to manage our sorrow and anger and loss. We give it all to God. We hope...we can only hope. We do not carry it ourselves. We try to give thanks for the blessings of life we knew and shared with [REDACTED], with this child of God. And we remind ourselves that he is not lost to God who seeks to save all of his children. And so, we take great comfort and consolation in all this.

Nothing-not even suicide-can separate us from the unconditional love of God. It is to this all-merciful love that we, through our prayers, entrust and continue to entrust the soul of [REDACTED].

Let us not deny him now of the help he needs most-our love expressed through our trusting prayers.

My dear friends, today, and in the difficult days to come, when darkness threatens to envelop and darken our hearts, let us raise high the bright light of our Redeemer and proclaim his saving mercy: Praised be Jesus Christ, now and for ever!

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**Read more:**

- [At a teen's funeral, a priest condemned suicide and 'basically called our son a sinner,' mother says - CNN](#)
- [www.freep.com/st...](#)

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Martin Luther: I don't share the opinion that suicides are certainly to be damned. My reason is that they do not wish to kill themselves but are overcome by the power of the devil. They are like a man who is murdered in the woods by a robber. However, this ought not be taught to the common people, lest Satan be given an opportunity to cause slaughter. Such persons do not die by free choice or by law, but our Lord God will dispatch them as he executes a person through a robber. Magistrates should treat them quite strictly, although it is not plain that their souls are damned. However, they are examples by which our Lord God wishes to show that the devil is powerful and also that we should be diligent in prayer. But for these examples, we would not fear God. Hence he must teach us in this way.

These words from the "Table Talk" (which is not the written words of Luther himself, but purport to be recorded from Luther's informal conversations "around the table") do not approve of suicide at all, nor does Luther make it an acceptable act for a Christian. He does not say all suicides must be treated as Christian and given a Christian burial (the 2003 Luther movie is inaccurate in depicting Luther as an innovator in suicide burial practice. Yet it does reflect the theology of Luther, in which he is really making a theological point that only faith saves and we cannot look to our own works—good or bad.)

### **The Public Service for a Christian Who Committed Suicide:**

Our discussion proceeds to the funeral or memorial service conducted for the Christian who took his or her life. Former pastoral practice did not proceed in this direction. In fact, it did not proceed at all. Suicide was interpreted akin to the unforgivable sin against the Holy Spirit, although mostly it is nothing of the kind (cf. Matt 12:31–32; Heb 6:1–6). Sinning against the Holy Spirit is unconditional apostasy. Is this the case with suicide? Pastors and theologians once concluded that suicide forfeited any opportunity to repent for this sin against the commandment “You shall not murder” (Exod 20:13). Without repentance, the consequences are disaster—losing forgiveness, condemnation, and damnation. Pastors in former generations reasoned in this manner, and they refused to conduct a Christian funeral for a suicide victim. This was the accepted practice.

Today, pastoral practice differs significantly. Suicide is certainly serious, because it shortchanges opportunity for repentance, and nonrepentance has terrifying consequences. No argument here. We concede the possibility that by premeditated defiance and action, a Christian may indulge in unbelief and precipitously take away life. This is a serious transgression against God. But who can arrive at such an assessment and judgment in the face of the mystery surrounding suicide? A larger question surfaces here. Does every Christian who commits suicide do so in denial of faith in Jesus Christ? A related question also surfaces. Is mental anguish or mental disorder or mental breakdown leading to suicide always an instance of ultimate unfaith? Answers to these questions transcend our limited capacity to discern. Leave the judgment to God and go forward, conducting the funeral or the memorial service in a manner free from overtones of judgment. Again, this does not question the seriousness of suicide. No impression should be given—especially to the young—that suicide is an option in place of coping with life and its difficulties. Let the Church not trivialize suicide, lest in copycat fashion the young imitate a friend who took his or her life.

Services for a Christian who died by suicide are according to the customary order. No special format is needed. We move with the tribute and the worship similar to services conducted for other Christians. A carefully prepared sermon may include five accents:

1. Acknowledgment of the reality of death that occurred by suicide
2. Questions that are as painful as they are unavoidable
3. The judgment is God’s alone
4. The Gospel proclaims God’s love in Christ
5. Commendation of the deceased Christian to God

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A eulogy is not in the best Christian tradition. An obituary may be read that focuses on the Gospel promise of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ our Lord and not on the good deeds of the deceased.

It might be appropriate for family and friends to say a few words about the beloved dead in a more casual setting, such as during the visitation or a reception or family gathering after the service.

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Lutheran Service Book Agenda (p. 117). Concordia Publishing House.

## **eulogy (n.)**

mid-15c., from Latin *eulogium*, from Greek *eulogia* "praise; good or fine language" (in New Testament, "blessing"), from *eu* "well" + *-logia* "speaking". *Eu legein* meant "speak well of."

### **Why (Real) Lutherans Do Not Do Eulogies**

By: Rev. Jason P. Peterson

#### **Q: Why do some churches always include eulogies for the deceased, while others forbid eulogies during the church service?**

A: A eulogy is commonly understood as a speech or piece of writing that praises someone or something, typically someone who has just died. In some traditions, this might be given by a pastor, or perhaps the floor might be handed over to a close friend or relative to give a positive description of the person's life. On some occasions, congregations even open the microphone to any person with something to say about the deceased.

For many congregations, particularly among individualistic Americans, this seems a natural thing to do during the services following a friend or relative's death, but for others, a eulogy would be extremely foreign, and in fact, would be understood as a standing against what that congregation believes and teaches. While there are many factors which influence how a congregation or denomination approaches the practice of giving eulogies, several seem to be most prevalent:

First, if a congregation understands the Office of the Ministry to be something instituted by God to preach His Word to the congregation and administer His Sacraments, it would be unheard of to hand the pulpit over to a non-pastor in the midst of a service or to allow non-ordained persons to speak authoritatively in the course of any service of the church. This would immediately rule out most eulogies.

Additionally, in congregations which take seriously the responsibility to proclaim only pure teaching, it would be unthinkable to allow speeches in front of the congregation which may include elements contradictory to the congregation's beliefs.

Similarly, a congregation's understanding of worship plays a large role in their approach to eulogies. Much like congregations who see worship as an offering from the individual or congregation up toward God worship in one way, while

congregations which understand worship to be an occasion where God delivers His grace down to the congregation, particularly those who focus that delivery in the Word and Sacraments, worship in other ways; approaches to eulogies follow a similar pattern.

If a congregation understands a funeral's purpose to be that of honoring the deceased and making the mourners feel better, a eulogy is a natural element to include. However, if a congregation understands the purpose of a funeral to be that of honoring God by proclaiming Christ and to give the grieving hope in the face of death through the promise of Resurrection, eulogies would be potentially difficult.

The most important factor, though, seems to be the church's understanding of salvation. The historic position of Christianity, and that by which it stands out from the world's other religions, is that God saves by grace alone, through faith alone, because of Jesus alone, and that good works play no role in this. Historically, Christians even discourage the faithful from looking at their good works as evidence of salvation. In such a case, the giving of eulogies during the funeral service would only confuse the communication of that belief, and if the eulogist is not particularly careful, may even explicitly contradict that belief. Therefore congregations which this approach to the idea of salvation by grace alone typically do not include eulogies.

In contrast, some denominations believe that the Christian cooperates with God in saving themselves by doing good deeds. Based on that understanding, recounting the deceased person's goodness at their funeral would fit what they believe.

Even those which do not believe that the Christian helps save themselves by good works often turn them back to their deeds by other routes. For example, John Calvin strenuously defended salvation by grace alone, but he directed believers to look at their own good works as comfort and evidence that God had saved them. John Wesley looked at the Christian's good deeds even more favorably than Calvin, going so far as to assert that Christians were capable of moral perfection in this life and relying heavily on the Christian's good works in their remaining saved after conversion. In these cases also, it makes sense that eulogies would be part of a congregation's funeral ceremony.

Like most questions about worship, the inclusion or exclusion of eulogies comes down the connection between belief and practice. Churches who believe in certain ways will naturally lean toward eulogies, while churches which believe in other ways will find them to be problematic and request that such expressions be shared privately among the mourners or reserved for the visitation or the funeral luncheon rather than included in the services of the church.

**“For Me to Live is Jesus” (LSB 742-TLH 597)**

- 1 For me to live is Jesus,  
    To die is gain for me;  
So when my Savior pleases,  
    I meet death willingly.
  
- 2 For Christ, my Lord, my brother,  
    I leave this world so dim  
And gladly seek another,  
    Where I shall be with Him.
  
- 3 My woes are nearly over,  
    Though long and dark the road;  
My sin His merits cover,  
    And I have peace with God.
  
- 4 Lord, when my pow’rs are failing,  
    My breath comes heavily,  
And words are unavailing,  
    O hear my sighs to Thee.
  
- 5 In my last hour, O grant me  
    A slumber soft and still,  
No doubts to vex or haunt me,  
    Safe anchored in Thy will;
  
- 6 And so to Thee still cleaving  
    When death shall come to me,  
I fall asleep believing  
    And wake in heav’n with Thee!

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