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Priscilla Anne Adams Date

A Matter of Life and Death: How Eulogists Inform and Influence Homegoings

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Abstract

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By Priscilla Anne Adams

In a religious context, the term “homegoing” refers to the deceased’s journey to be with the Lord in heaven. This incarnational theology of death as the beginning of a glorious hereafter and not just an end serves as the basis for the homegoing funeral ritual. Homegoings began as and became a way for enslaved persons to preserve their heritage, defy slavery’s cruel machinations, and gain the liberty that slavery had denied them in this life. Today, the unsettling jubilant nature of these homegoings stands in stark contrast to the grief and hardships that plague the African American community. Acknowledging grief does not signify weak faith or a fractured belief system. The power inherent in lament forces acceptance of pain. Jesus offers a healing balm for the individual and the community. To conduct homegoings that will effectively minister to the needs of bereaved parishioners, the eulogist must understand the cultural heritage of this ritual, which is characterized by individuals’ ambivalent feelings and grief as well as individual and communal lament over the plight of the African American community. By developing ministers appropriately, rethinking the liturgy, and recovering lament and celebration, the eulogist can assist in homegoings that typify an incarnational theology of death.

A Matter of Life and Death: How Eulogists Inform and Influence Homegoings

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A Final Project Submitted to the Faculty of the

Candler School of Theology

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Ministry

2019

Emory University

A Matter of Life and Death: How Eulogists Inform and Influence Homegoings

Introduction

My brother Eric was the oldest of eight children. Considered one of the smartest boys in our county, he skipped two grades in school and graduated early. Attending such a prestigious college as Morehouse was quite an honor for someone from my little rural community in South Georgia. Regrettably, he did not graduate from Morehouse. Nevertheless, he still remained my role model. Because I did not grow up with a father, Eric was the closest father figure that I had. During my senior year in high school, Eric, of his own accord, gave me a car. In doing so, he told me that he was pleased that I had been conscientious and responsible enough in securing a part-time job at the local grocery store. Eric was the first person, besides my mother and grandmother, who openly acknowledged my accomplishments and encouraged my college pursuits.

Unfortunately, February 13, 2013, is a day forever etched in my memory. On that day, I received an unforgettable phone call from one of my sisters. She reluctantly shared with me that my big brother had passed away. He was only 65. After nearly fainting from the news, I then began to process this traumatic information and prepare for the Homegoing, which was to take place in my provincial hometown of Quitman, Georgia, where Eric had relocated after concluding his business dealings in Washington. My mother and eldest sister oversaw most of the arrangements. The current pastor of my home church, Bethel African Methodist Episcopal (AME), was asked to deliver the eulogy. I was asked to read an Old Testament scripture of my choosing for the service. Through tears and sobs I read, “For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth, and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see on my side, and my eyes shall behold, and not another.

My heart faints within me."[1] This scripture provided comfort and reassurance that the day of my brother's burial was not the last day of his life. Job, like my brother, had gone through tumultuous times in his life; yet, "these verses express the sufferer's confidence that a kinsman will step forward and perform the necessary actions to afford Job justification in death."[2] Because of Jesus, our Redeemer, death did not have victory over my brother's life. This truth sustained me throughout the turbulent days, weeks, and months ahead.

During my brother's Homegoing service, I detected an uneasiness that is rather difficult to articulate. I perceived that something was being forced upon me. I sensed that I had to be strong and put forth a joyous, upbeat countenance. I did not believe that I could pour out my heart in inconsolable grief for my brother. Why did I feel that way? After all, I am a Christian and a minister of the Gospel. If anyone should be full of praise, it should be me. Shouldn't it? Not only was this an uneasiness I experienced as a bereaved family member, but other parishioners at my current church evidently felt this uneasiness as well.

To conduct Homegoing services that will effectively minister to the needs of bereaved parishioners, the eulogist must understand Homegoing's cultural heritage. This service is characterized by ambivalent feelings and grief as well as individual and communal lament over the plight of the African American community. By developing ministers appropriately, rethinking the liturgy, and recovering lament and celebration, the eulogist can assist in Homegoings that typify an incarnational theology of death.

1. Job 19:25-27.
2. Matthew Suriano, "Death, Disinheritance, and Job's Kinsman-Redeemer," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 129, no.1, (Spring 2010): 65.

Understanding the Heritage of Homegoings

In a religious context, the term "homegoing" refers to the deceased's going home to be with the Lord in heaven. This Christian based service, most commonly held in a chapel or church where the deceased is usually buried in an affiliated cemetery, gives families an opportunity to celebrate the life of their loved one. Juan Floyd-Thomas in *Liberating Black Church History: Making it Plain* postulates, "It was only once the Black preacher officially preached the funeral sermon over the dead that the family and larger community could fully enjoy peace of mind in the knowledge that the spirit of the deceased was truly set free."[3] Thus, the eulogist plays an important role in aiding families who believe that their loved ones will be resurrected to rest eternally in the bosom of Jesus.

The Homegoing funeral ritual has its origins in Ancient Egypt, where the people held a rich culture of preparing for a funeral and preserving the deceased for his/her after-life.[4] This precious legacy was continued in the United States by enslaved persons who were not permitted to gather and conduct their funeral rituals because slaveholders feared that they would conspire to revolt. Slaves who died were ordinarily buried without any ceremony in unmarked graves in non-agricultural ground. Ironically, when a member of the plantation owner's family died, the enslaved persons were responsible for funeral preparations as well as the elaborate family gatherings held to mourn the deceased.[5] Being forced to bury someone else's loved ones when one cannot even afford to weep over one's own is the height of hypocrisy. To exacerbate matters, enslaved persons often died at the hands of a savage overseer, meaning that their loved

3. Juan M. Floyd-Thomas, *Liberating Black Church History: Making It Plain* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2014), 49.
4. Sara J. Marsden, "Homegoing Funerals: An African-American Funeral Tradition," March 5, 2013, https://www.us-funerals.com/funeral-articles/homegoing-funerals.html.
5. Ibid.

ones could not voice their rage or indignation. As a result, Homegoings became a way for enslaved persons to preserve their heritage, defy slavery's cruel machinations, and gain liberty that slavery had inhumanely denied them in this life. Even though slavery in the United States ended 156 years ago, its vestiges remain prevalent in society today.

The Homegoing Service is preceded by communal practices that support the family during their bereavement. Jakara Griffin, author of "Home-goings: A Black American Funeral Tradition" describes these practices in detail.

> There are several aspects that set [the Homegoing service] apart from the traditional funeral, including the week-long visitation to the bereaved family's home, the wake, and the elaborate funeral procession. About a week prior to the service, a plethora of friends, neighbors, co-workers, and family members who live in different areas of the world travel to visit the bereaved family every day to offer their condolences.[6]

Because an enormous amount of time is spent with the bereaved family before the Homegoing service, it seems contradictory that the service would ignore this aspect of grief.

Here, in Georgia, the wake is usually held the night before the Homegoing and is more of an informal service with praying, singing, and exchanging short vignettes about the departed. Not every family has a wake, but many customarily do. Then "on the day of the funeral, a group of police escorts arrive to the bereaved family's house, and the family is escorted to the church [in chauffeured limousines]….The service itself is often an emotional, high energy event that entails family members singing African American hymns and a boisterous eulogy by the pastor."[7] All of these aspects combine to create a vibrant Homegoing service, yet they also silence perceptible grief if the eulogist is not deliberate in addressing mourners' sorrow.

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6. Jakara K. Griffin, "Home-goings: A Black American Funeral Tradition," last modified April 23, 2017, https://scholarblogs.emory.edu/gravematters/2017/04/23/home-goings-a-black-american-funeral-tradition/

7. Ibid.

Saint Philip AME Church in Context

One aspect of pastoral care at Saint Philip AME Church is assisting families in the planning and preparation of Homegoing Services. After meeting with families in my pastoral care role and attending a number of funerals, I became concerned with the disconnection between the loss of a loved one and the Homegoing service. Whether I was present after a loved one had been rushed to the hospital or asked to be present in the final moments of a loved one's transition, the amount of sorrow and anguish these families experienced was palpable. Sadly, the Homegoings, for the most part, were filled with praise and adulation and displayed little evidence of lament. This improper balance concerned me deeply because the Homegoing should be a service in which grief and loss are expressed as often as praise and adulation. Thus, it is essential for eulogists to assist their congregants by allowing space for both lament and celebration.

Before I joined Saint Philip, the church already had a rich and impactful history within the community. A predominantly African American church, Saint Philip has been in its present location since the 1970s and has experienced alternating growth and decline from that decade to the present. The church came to Decatur at a time when African Americans did not live in the area. The previous pastor, Rev. George Moore, felt God calling Saint Philip to relocate, but some parishioners disagreed and thought that the church should remain in the Reynoldstown area. Moving to DeKalb County turned out to be providential because DeKalb was the second most affluent county for blacks in the United States at that time.[8] Saint Philip benefited greatly from this move and is currently one of the largest AME churches in the Sixth Episcopal District, which comprises the entire state of Georgia.

8. Herman "Skip" Mason Jr., *Images of America: African American Life in DeKalb County, Georgia 1823–1970* (Charleston: Arcadia Publishing, 1998), 6.

Additionally, Saint Philip is an aging congregation and as such is seeing more of its members pass away. As a result, we usually average two to four Homegoings per month. Because of its size and longevity, Saint Philip has the unique opportunity of being a haven for the community, particularly regarding Homegoing services. The community depends on Saint Philip to conduct funerals of notable and prominent citizens. Our church family comes together and offers condolences to bereaved families. Homegoings are a way for the community to celebrate the deceased person's presence and contributions. Those who have their Homegoings at Saint Philip sometimes do not have any church affiliation, hence the need for an accurate representation of God and space for the bereaved to express the full range of their emotions.

Rituals and Ambivalent Feelings

The Homegoing is a ritual that helps maintain order and offer structure to our lives. They also help us analyze the ambivalent feelings that sometimes conflict with our experiences. "One of the greatest threats to order, meaning, and community in human life is the disruptive effect of ambivalent feelings…Theologically speaking…ambivalence is not in and of itself sin, but rather a part of the created complexity of the human psyche."[9] Not knowing exactly how to feel when one's loved one is no longer in pain yet no longer living is difficult. Should they rejoice that their loved ones are no longer suffering, or should they grieve that their loved ones are gone? These contradictory feelings can be difficult to handle alone. With the proper Homegoing, however, these ambivalent feelings can be addressed. Ramshaw in *Ritual and Pastoral Care* believes rituals help us cope with ambivalence in two crucial ways: "The first is by reinforcement of the preferred emotion; the second is by contained expression of the unwanted,

9. Elaine Ramshaw, *Ritual and Pastoral Care*, ed. Don S. Browning (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 30.

conflicting emotion."[10] Homegoings as they are currently practiced typify the first ritual method more than the second. The celebratory timbre of Homegoings becomes the focal point. The loud music and the uproarious eulogy both contribute to an insincere ritual. However, "the second ritual method for handling ambivalence is to provide a safe mode of expression for the conflicting emotions. This method is dependent upon the first, for expressing negative feelings can only be safe against the backdrop of the ritually established continuity of the positive."[11] Sadly, the predominant ethos among most eulogists is to encourage family, friends, and loved ones to ignore their feelings of sorrow and despair and immediately celebrate the life of the deceased without acknowledging their significant loss. When one enters the worship space, no matter the occasion, one should expect ritual honesty, not ritual dishonesty.

Oftentimes, Homegoing services disassociate the grief that accompanies death. By ignoring this all too vital aspect, ministers and laity, whether knowingly or unknowingly, support a spurious approach to death because it ignores the sorrow associated with death. Brueggemann emphasizes the devastation of such an act: "One loss that results from the absence of lament is the loss of *genuine covenant interaction* because the second party to the covenant (the petitioner) has become voiceless or has a voice that is permitted to speak only praise and doxology. Where lament is absent, covenant comes into being only as a celebration of joy and well-being."[12] This lopsided approach to death does more harm than good as it paints God as being One who allows only favorable events to take place in a person's life. This spiritual damage prevents the comprehensive scope of the Gospel from being manifested and stunts spiritual growth. When

10. Ramshaw, *Ritual and Pastoral Care*, 31.
11. Ibid., 31-32.
12. Walter Brueggemann, "The Costly Loss of Lament," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 11, no. 36 (October 1986): 60.

lament and grief are not expressed, healing is hindered. "While accent on the celebration of life can be seen as a robust thanksgiving to God for the blessing the deceased has been in the lives of those gathered at the funeral, it can also serve to mute the disruption and loss that has occurred."[13] Acknowledging the loved one's presence and the contributions he/she made while here on Earth is crucial to developing a healthy sense of self and loss. By silencing the hurt, one never moves past the engulfing pain that ensues.

From a historical, traditional, and cultural standpoint, there needs to be a balance of both lament and celebration during Homegoings. The church should be a place where a person is able to reveal even the deepest of emotions. Eulogists should foster an environment where grief and lament are acknowledged as a healthy way to process emotions. Psychologically or psycho-spiritually, the ability to handle ambivalence promotes a parishioner's healthy spiritual formation.

Homegoings allow the opportunity to mourn the earthly loss of a loved one while also rejoicing in the heavenly home the loved one has gained. Before grief and loss can be incorporated with praise and celebration in the Homegoing service, however, grief and loss must be acknowledged and not excluded. According to Mark W. Stamm, "We live in a culture that often denies the reality of suffering and death, along with the many challenges and limitations of embodiment. We see docetic tendencies in claims that worship must always be upbeat and worshipers made comfortable. One can also detect a retreat from the Cross with funerals that allow little room for lament."[14] If we examine Homegoings closely, we see that they are worship services meant to honor the rituals and traditions that we hold dear as we say farewell to our

13. Richard Nysse, "Funerals before the Funeral Service," *Word and World* 34, no. 1 (Winter 2014):85.
14. Mark W. Stamm, *Devoting Ourselves to Prayer: A Baptismal Theology for the Church's Intercessory Work* (Nashville: Upper Room, 2014), 107.

loved ones while also acknowledging our belief that death is not the final end to a person's life. As believers, our faith teaches us that we have a home in heaven. It is needful to have a balance of both. To negate lament is to deny a viable part of our lived theology.

Acknowledging Grief

The eulogist is not the only one responsible for a thorough understanding of eulogies but initially does bear most of the burden. As Peter Wherry believes, "The …eulogy, then, becomes [an] exercise in healing homiletics, as well as didactic and transformative between the church and the wider community."[15] Exploring the subject of grief and how Christians grieve is a crucial component of this dialogue. By educating the congregation, eulogists can demystify the assumption that Christians do not grieve, especially during the Homegoing service. When done correctly, the Homegoing service is the perfect place to grieve.

Homegoings should help parishioners through their unsettled emotions by giving them the space to grieve. When the eulogist admonishes people to "celebrate" the life of someone and the congregant is not at the point of celebrating, then eulogists are not helping parishioners. Truthfully, the eulogists become complicit in a disingenuous and dishonest relationship with God and the faith community at large when they do not allow space for grief. Unfortunately, "some contemporary funerals, in an attempt to replace the black crepe of the past with an emphasis on resurrection hope, have managed to suppress all grief and protest. This may be acceptable at the funeral of someone who lived a long, full life and died a peaceful death, but when the death was untimely, tragic, or violent the funeral must say something in addition to alleluia."[16] The eulogist

15. Peter M. Wherry, *Preaching Funerals in the Black Church: Bringing Perspective to Pain* (Valley Forge: Judson Press 2013), 30.

16. Ramshaw, *Ritual and Pastoral Care*, 32-33.

must address the tangible grief that permeates the atmosphere in order to provide comfort to the family and those in attendance.

To address the way in which many African American eulogists approach Homegoings, one must understand the multiple ways in which we grieve. Peter M. Wherry in *Preaching Funerals in the Black Church: Bringing Perspective to Pain* contends,

> A pastor must allow family members permission to experience the normative pain of grieving, and bringing perspective to that pain is to generate a healthy climate for empowered healing within the family. The desired outcome of empowered healing is creating a climate which allows people to reach a state of acceptance of the obvious facts while maintaining wholesome relationships within the family and a working faith in God.[17]

Empowered healing provides an opportunity for each person to grieve in his/her own way. No two people grieve alike primarily because each person has his/her own special and unique relationship with the deceased loved one. When a beautiful member of our church passed away, both of her daughters spoke at her Homegoing service. Each daughter told different anecdotes of her relationship with her mother. For the daughter who was a flight attendant, her mother was her travel companion. For the daughter who was a church stewardess, her mother was her best friend. Both daughters had the same mother, yet each daughter had a uniquely different relationship with her. Consequently, the ways in which they grieved were radically different and required sensitivity on the part of the eulogist.

Being cognizant of the eulogist's role when it comes to Homegoings can ease the emotional toil of losing a loved one. In the PBS video, *Homegoings*, the eulogist's approach is rather irresponsible. He unashamedly declares before a packed congregation, "I know my brothers and my sisters [that] we are sad on today. But I'm not going to *let* (emphasis mine) you be sad while

17. Wherry, *Preaching Funerals*, 54.

I'm standing because we are here for a celebration. Not a celebration of death but a celebration of a new life."[18] These words further complicated the manner in which the congregants proceeded throughout the service. The eulogist would not *let* the congregants be sad as if he had total and complete autonomy over their thoughts, feelings, and actions. The death of a loved one produces a human void that cannot be praised away or shouted away, even at the eulogist's command. The death depicted in the video was of a beautiful and loving mother and grandmother. The thought that one would not be sad at the burial of one's mother and grandmother is somewhat absurd. However, the eulogist, based on the power inherent in his role as a leader chose to demand subjugation from the woman's children and grandchildren, rather than stand with this family as they traversed this poignant path. Walter Brueggemann in his seminal work, "The Costly Loss of Lament," asserts, "...covenant minus lament is finally a practice of denial, cover-up and pretense, which sanctions social control."[19] This eulogist's disregard for the parishioners' grief was careless and suffocated the mourning that should take place at the Homegoing service. His actions were perplexing and problematic because he left the children and grandchildren without much-needed support and guidance from their spiritual leader.

Individual Lament

As a regular eulogist at Saint Philip's Homegoings, I encourage parishioners to express their emotions. I usually begin by announcing, "There will be times during the service when you feel like crying, and you should by all means cry." This affirmation of the acceptability of crying was met with deep appreciation from one member after a Homegoing. With tears in her eyes, she personally thanked me and stated how those words allowed her to cry profusely. Her reaction

18. Christine Turner, dir., *Homegoings*, 2009, PBS, 2013, DVD (emphasis added).
19. Brueggemann, "The Costly Loss of Lament," 60.

sparked within me a need to assess the prevailing message that compels parishioners to shy away from crying during a Homegoing service.

Eulogists must be mindful of the parishioner's relationship with God as they approach the Homegoing. Sometimes grief can skew our perception of God and we are left feeling empty, abandoned, angry, and alone. "When someone we love goes away from us, our comprehension of God is changed and sometimes severely disturbed. When we lose what we value, we wonder about God's providential care. Even when one's confidence in God is a source of strength in grief, it is still necessary to gain a new understanding of God in the apparent senselessness of loss."[20] Grief does not diminish the power and magnitude of God but rather offers a possibility to reframe our view of God in a way that may strengthen our faith.

Our society is uncomfortable with death, which complicates the manner in which we grieve. According to Mitchell and Anderson, in *All Our Losses, All Our Griefs*, "grief is the normal but bewildering cluster of ordinary human emotions arising in response to a significant loss, intensified and complicated by the relationship to the person or object lost."[21] Nancy Duff, in her essay, "Recovering Lamentation as a Practice in the Church," highlights an interesting perspective regarding society's view of death. As she states,

> [American] society and the church discourage us from expressing intense feelings of sorrow or anger when we experience a significant loss in our lives. When there is a death in the family, for instance, people are allowed very little time off from work, and when they return they are not expected to talk too much about their loss. No one wears visible signs of mourning as was once the custom, and the expectation is that one will move quickly back into the everyday routines of life. For Christians, continued expressions of grief after a death are considered a sign of weak faith.[22]

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20. Kenneth R. Mitchell and Herbert Anderson, *All Our Losses, All Our Griefs* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983), 97.
21. Ibid., 54.
22. Nancy J. Duff, "Recovering Lamentation as a Practice in the Church," in *Lament: Reclaiming Practices in Pulpit, Pew, and Public Square*, eds. Sally Brown and Patrick D. Miller (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 6.

Grieving the loss of a loved one does not nullify one's faith, as many falsely equivocate. The psalmist believes faith is imperative to walk through the valley of the shadow of death.[23] Given that grief is a vital part of human emotions, failing to grieve is counterintuitive and benefits no one. Isaiah's description of Jesus as one who was "despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief"[24] displays Jesus' intimate familiarity with grief and loss. Jesus is not one who dismisses or abandons us: He promises to be our refuge and strength never leaving or forsaking us,[25] especially during times of grief and loss.

Despite Jesus' presence during our times of sorrow, the prevailing ethos is to stifle our grief. Unfortunately, unexpressed grief can lead to even more distress and suffering. A recent Huffington Post article discussed potential consequences of suppressed mourning. Mourners may:

- Stay stuck in anger, pain and resentment.
- Get stuck in numbness, the first stage in the grief process, we may lose access to important parts of our inner, feeling world.
- Have trouble engaging in new relationships because we are constantly emotionally and psychologically "reliving"; we're preoccupied with a person or situation no longer present, we have not, in other words, processed the loss and moved through it.
- Project unfelt, unresolved grief onto other relationships or situations, placing unfelt and unacknowledged feelings of hurt, pain and/resentment where they do not belong.
- Lose personal history along with the un-mourned person or situation; a part of us dies, too.
- Carry deep fears of subsequent abandonment, betrayal or disillusionment.[26]

23. See Psalm 23:4.
24. Isaiah 53:3.
25. See Psalm 46:1 and Hebrews 13:5.
26. Dayton, Tian, "Why We Grieve: The Importance of Mourning Loss," *The Huffington Post*, April 3, 2017. https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2017/04/03/why-we-grieve-the-importance-of-mourning-loss.html.

This inexhaustible list mentions the negative effects of grief on our mental and emotional health. That mourners can suffer these deleterious effects if their grief is stifled intensifies the need for the eulogist to address the sorrow that accompanies death.

Communal Lament

Being able to lament in the midst of the Homegoing service is paramount and essential. Sadly, congregants are often told not to display their true emotions and to "be strong" and have a "stiff upper lip." These faulty admonitions force dissembling and impede healthy processing of our grief. W. Derek Suderman in "The Cost of Losing Lament for the Community of Faith: On Brueggemann, Ecclesiology, and the Social Audience of Prayer" focuses on the consequence of lament for the congregation. He reiterates how Brueggemann wrote of lament and primarily focused on how it affects the individual and the individual's relationship with God. However, Suderman concludes that lament affords the entire congregation an opportunity to lament which binds the community of faith together. "The language of lament provides a hermeneutical irritant that prompts discernment and invites - even demands - a response from its listeners."[27] Communal lament is integral to our mental and emotional health and strengthens our faith.

Communal lament informs our responses to others. An additional biblical example can be found in the shortest verse in the Bible, "Jesus wept,"[28] which details Jesus' reaction to the death of his friend, Lazarus. Jesus joined the community of mourners and wept with them after hearing that Lazarus had died. Some commentators have stated that Jesus wept because the people had little faith, while others believe that Jesus wept because he was intimately familiar with this family and had spent many evenings at their home. I believe that Jesus wept for the latter reason

27. W. Derek Suderman, "The Cost of Losing Lament for the Community of Faith: On Brueggemann, Ecclesiology, and the Social Audience of Prayer." *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 6, no.2 (Spring, 2012): 215.
28. John 11:35.

and that his display of emotion demonstrates the importance of our weeping with others as well. Scripture instructs us to "rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep."[29] Just as Jesus joined the community of mourners, we should do likewise when we gather at the passing of a loved one. Because we are made in the image and likeness of God, we too, have the capacity to be intimately aware of our fellow sojourners' grief. Jesus' familiarity with grief and sorrow should aid us through the emotional incongruities associated with death. As God incarnate, Jesus is able to understand and empathize with *all* aspects of grief and loss and is the One from whom we should seek consolation.

Communal Plight

Our community was shaken by three tragic deaths at once. Three family members, a grandmother and her two grandchildren, were tragically killed on their way to Sunday morning service by a reckless driver attempting to elude police in a high-speed car-theft chase. Because of the size of the service and the media coverage, the Homegoing was held at Saint Philip. Seeing three caskets, two of which were child-sized, positioned in front of the church was a powerful moment for the entire community to mourn these catastrophic losses. Our hearts ached for the woman who had lost her mother and both of her children. Words cannot adequately express the heaviness that permeated the sanctuary. The Homegoing warranted an opportunity for the community to demonstrate their utter outrage over this tragic triple loss of life.

The unsettling jubilant nature of these Homegoings stands in stark contrast to the hardships that plague the African-American community. Senseless deaths in marginalized communities continue to be a source of consternation surrounding death. Although Black Churches are not monolithic, high-spirited Homegoing services are typical. Their celebratory nature can seem

29. Romans 12:15.

rather formulaic and rudimentary with little, if any, regard for precious and insurmountable loss. Awareness of the plight of many urban areas and rural communities should help churches meet the needs of their parishioners, but lacking this awareness does just the opposite. Current African American health disparities indicate African-Americans are:

> 44% more likely to die from a stroke, 40% more likely to die from breast cancer, 52% more likely to die from cervical cancer, … 3 times more likely to die from asthma, 25% more likely to die from heart disease, … 3 times as likely to die from a pregnancy related complication, 2 times as likely to die from prostate cancer, 8 times as likely to be diagnosed with HIV, 9 times as likely to die from HIV, [and] 72% more likely to die from diabetes."[30]

Unfortunately, even more troubling statistics plague our children. African American children are "2.5 times more likely to die as infants, 2 times as likely to die of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) …and 61% more likely to attempt suicide in high school."[31] Consequently, many African American communities are enshrouded by grief and loss, which churches cannot avoid addressing.

These death rates display life in the African American community as frightful; thus, the church must address these conditions and help those who attend Homegoing services and are dealing with grief and loss. As noted scholar Luke Powery maintains, in *Spirit Speech: Lament and Celebration in Preaching*, "The language of lament is vital for African American preaching communities because it links to the particular reality of pain and suffering experienced by African Americans in the past and present. A denial of lament is a denial of African American history, the Holy Spirit, and the history of Christ and historical memory."[32] Because of our unique experiences in the United States, it is crucial to acknowledge the grave loss of life that

30. "African American Health Disparities Compared to Non-Hispanic Whites," accessed February 21, 2019, https://www.familiesusa.org/product/african-american.html.
31. Ibid.
32. Luke Powery, *Spirit Speech: Lament and Celebration in Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009), 93.

continues to envelop our communities. While every Homegoing is not the result of the aforementioned statistics, many of the deaths can be traced to them. Furthermore, remnants from slavery and Jim Crow such as mass incarceration and police brutality persist within the African American community. Sadly Homegoings, for the most part, continue to be relatively unaltered contradictions that hearken to a time when African Americans were not legally permitted to express themselves.

Most people would avoid sadness and grief because of its discomfort; however, that option is impossibly unrealistic. Barbara Holmes, in *Joy Unspeakable: Contemplative Practices of Black Churches,* shares her concern that African Americans have forgotten how to lament. In an effort to praise their way through various trials and tribulations, many do not articulate the pain, sorrow, and hurt that accompanies a valley experience. Holmes, after giving a description of the ways in which African American churches have rhythmic and lively services believes "it is as if we fear the silences and ecstatic moments that might bring listening and memory. Whatever it takes, we do not want to expose the hidden and corrosive unwept tears."[33] Fearing the quietude usually means avoiding the emotions and feelings that lead us on a path of healing and wholeness. Facing these emotions then and there is the only way to experience liberation.

Open acknowledgment of lament forces us to admit the pain we are experiencing. Powery insists, "Lament is embedded in black cultures and has been a part of the experience for oppressed people across the world."[34] James Weldon Johnson further alluded to this pain in "Lift Every Voice and Sing," also known as The Negro National Anthem, where he highlighted the treacherous waters African Americans have traveled: A portion of the stanza, "Stony the road we

33. Barbara Holmes, *Joy Unspeakable: Contemplative Practices of the Black Church* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2004), 94.
34. Powery, *Spirit Speech,* 94.

trod/Bitter the chast'ning rod, / Felt in the days when hope unborn had died;[35] reflects the undue misfortune and heartache that has plagued African Americans for centuries while the anthem as a whole signifies perseverance in the midst of disproportionate violence and pain that oftentimes resulted in death. In an article by C. Michael Hawn, the former choral director of Morehouse College's Glee Club, Wendell Whalum, is quoted as saying, "progression of the three stanzas is that of praise, lament, and prayer."[36] Couched between praise and prayer is the middle passage of lament.

Preaching and the Power of Lament

People often overlook the power inherent in lament as it gives credence to the struggles many face on a daily basis. Richard Dillon, in "The Unavoidable Discomforts of Preaching about Death," acknowledges that death is a difficult topic to preach but gives biblical examples of the necessity of doing so.

> If Christian preaching and Christian worship are held accountable to the Bible, it is difficult to see how they can administer anesthesia for that last appointment of Everyman. The one strikingly clear trait of all biblical discourse about death is its unblinking *realism* in accepting death as the corollary of creaturely life, the dispensation of life's Creator and the sign of unqualified human subjection to him.[37]

Death is not omniscient and cannot be allowed to exaggerate its purpose here on Earth and convince people, particularly believers, of an omnipotence it does not possess. Many have allowed death to become this looming figure but Jesus has placed everything under His feet.[38] Death, hell, and the grave are all subject to Jesus and have no power over Jesus or believers.

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35. James Weldon Johnson, "Lift Every Voice and Sing," *African Methodist Episcopal Church Bicentennial Hymnal* (Nashville: AME Publishing Company, 1984), 571.
36. C. Michael Hawn, "Lift Every Voice and Sing," accessed February 13, 2019, https:www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-lift-every-voice-and-sing.html.
37. Richard Dillon, "The Unavoidable Discomforts of Preaching about Death," *Worship* 57, no. 6 (November 1983): 487.
38. Hebrews 2:8.

While the pastor and congregation play a vital part in understanding the balance between lament and celebration, it is important for the individual to assess his/her own feelings as well. The beauty of our relationship with God is that it cuts across the pastoral, communal and individual continuum in an effort to prognosticate the gospel. Wherry posits, "Preaching at a funeral is not actually Christian preaching at all if it is simply maudlin re-telling of the life of the deceased. There must be a connection to biblical themes and the redemptive love and power of God through Jesus Christ. Without this, the message may be a speech, it may even be an elegy, but it is definitely not a sermon."[39] There are many eloquent speeches in today's lexicon, but all of them pale in comparison to the Good News "that while we still were sinners Christ died for us."[40] Jesus' death on the Cross provided a way for all of us to be reconciled to God. The basis for Jesus' actions is his love for humanity. "For God so loved the world that He gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him may not perish but have eternal life."[41] This oft quoted scripture summarizes God's redemptive love, and each eulogy should point listeners to this truth.

Ministerial Development

In an effort to assist ministers at Saint Philip in understanding the importance of ministry, our pastor teaches hour-long monthly ministers' sessions. One particular lesson he taught was called "Preaching the Eulogy." Pastor Watley began the meeting by expressing the need for all ministers to have a better understanding of eulogies. His initial question "What is the Eulogy?" provided the focal point. After several ministers gave their definitions and explanations, he then gave his. According to his definition, the eulogy is a word of commendation and praise,

39. Wherry, *Preaching Funerals*, 54.
40. Romans 5:8.
41. John 3:16.

particularly for someone who has died. In this same meeting, Pastor Watley discussed the purpose of the eulogy. He believes that the purpose of the eulogy is to comfort, encourage and empower the living and to help the living say goodbye to the deceased, who are in the hands of God.[42] Pastor Watley conferred a great deal of important information to us during that meeting, and his instruction has been a useful resource for the ministerial staff. The distinction some make between the eulogy and words of comfort could be combined in order to speak well of the deceased and speak life to the living. The two do not have to be mutually exclusive and both can be conveyed in a loving, caring manner.

Hopefully, the eulogy is a reminder of how the person's life here on Earth mirrors the Gospel and affects the community. Part of the eulogist's role is leading people in expressing their emotions, not judging them or forcing them to move past grief. The eulogy is, however, a time to allow parishioners to contend with their emotions. According to Peter Wherry, "Success has been achieved when the family and friends have been afforded the opportunity for healthy grief and worship in a context of order and compassion.[43]An orderly Homegoing service laced with heartfelt compassion is needed during times of bereavement.

On one occasion after Pastor Watley had just been appointed to our church, I recall the eulogy he delivered in the face of one of the toughest aspects of death: burying a child. The child's grandparents were faithful and dedicated members of our church. Before the service, the family asked our pastor to pray with them. This request signified a depth of pain requiring additional support. Our church was not accustomed to having a child die in our congregation. The text was Psalm 121 with an emphasis on the first two verses. "I lift up my eyes to the hills -from where

42. William D. Watley, "What is the Eulogy," (lecture, Saint Philip AME Church, Atlanta, GA, May 17, 2017).
43. Wherry, *Preaching Funerals*, 18.

will my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth."[44] The primary focus of this eulogy was to look to God for strength, even when someone's faith is shaken. Pastor Watley did not try to make the family praise God or rejoice at the death of their beloved son. He did not try to force them to see the good in their son no longer being alive; rather, he acknowledged their pain and offered them solace in God. These words certainly offered space for lament and celebration.

On a separate occasion, Pastor Watley's eulogy involved the death of another member's son. The son was in his thirties and had been in a head-on car collision; his mother was a very active member of the church. Our pastor began by sharing how Jesus died in his thirties and how his mother, Mary, was grief-stricken by his death. This story resonated with everyone because we knew that this young man's mother was equally heart broken. In his attempt to correlate Mary's loss to this mother's loss, Pastor Watley demonstrated the profound impact of the death of a loved one. The chosen text was John 19:25-27, which describes Jesus' family and friends near the Cross during his crucifixion. Pastor Watley encouraged those in attendance - and especially the young man's mother - to do what Mary did: stay near the Cross. These four words – stay near the Cross- emphasize the proximity of Jesus during times of grief, loneliness, despair, and uncertainty. Pastor Watley also included a favorite hymn of the church, *Jesus, Keep Me Near The Cross*, to support this point. The lyrics convey the comfort one finds by being in close proximity to Jesus: "Jesus, keep me near the Cross/There a precious fountain/Free to all a healing stream/Flows from Calvary's mountain."[45] Pastor Watley's words, accompanied by this familiar

44. Psalm 121:1.
45. Fannie Crosby, "Jesus, Keep Me Near The Cross," *African Methodist Episcopal Church Bicentennial Hymnal,* (Nashville: AME Church Publishing, 1984), 321.

hymn, helped provide necessary psychological and emotional supports to this mother who had just buried her only child.

The eulogy conveys the significance of calling on one's faith and supporting those who are experiencing grief and loss. Our pastor did not try to offer a panacea during the two disturbing moments described above. Instead, he encouraged those families to experience the bevy of emotions as they handled one of the most burdensome and overwhelming situations life has to offer. His eulogy took the sting out of death by allowing the family members left behind to embrace their actual pain, hurt, and anguish.

Rethinking Liturgy

Having the appropriate liturgy is sine qua non for a balanced Homegoing celebration. Simon Chan in *Liturgical Theology: The Church as Worshipping Community* affirms, "…to discover the shape of the liturgy, therefore, is to discover the true way of worship or the way of reorienting the church toward the Christian worldview." [46] First, the liturgy during the Homegoing should offer appropriate space for lament. The current liturgy that is being utilized in the AME Church is rather esoteric and does not lend itself to space for lament.[47] For these reasons, I suggest the following changes to improve this liturgy and meet the needs of grieving families.

Initially, the wording of the liturgy in the *AME Book of Worship* only lists the word *prayer*. One can be more descriptive by using the phrase "Prayer of Intercession" as opposed to only the word "Prayer." Christian liturgical traditions include several types of prayers, and the prayer notation should provide more direction for the faith community in a funeral setting. For example,

46. Simon Chan, *Liturgical Theology: The Church as Worshipping Community* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 62.
47. "The Order for Burial of the Dead," *Book of Worship of the African Methodist Episcopal Church* (Nashville: AME Sunday School Union, 1984), 71.

in AME tradition, a minister is selected to pray extemporaneously during the Homegoing. A simple wording change can denote the way in which the prayer's purpose is to minister to those assembled for the Homegoing in a deep, abiding way. The Prayer of Intercession is an opportunity for the minister to pray for those in attendance and beseech God to comfort them during their time of loss.

The Scripture heading in the liturgy is also vague. Biblical passages can be pre-selected to determine which scriptures are most appropriate. Presently, AME ministers select the scripture or give the family the option of selecting their own.

Regarding song selection, the music director speaks with the family and asks them which song they would like the choir to sing. The AME Church could offer a written guide to the family consisting of songs that would be appropriate for a Homegoing.

The term *eulogy* also does not adequately describe the words that will be used to minister to those in attendance. One suggestion is that in place of the term, Eulogy, one can use the wording, "Words of Comfort," which would afford the congregants space to express their grief and sadness. These subtle changes in wording can begin the process of creating more space for lament within the service. With such minor changes to the liturgy, people would receive a more complete Homegoing program upon their arrival to the service that would transform the atmosphere and prepare hearts in advance for a Homegoing space cultivated for lament and celebration. Perhaps, these minor changes will assist with the flow of the service and allow it to become a more thoughtful space for lament.

The content of the eulogy itself is another aspect of the Homegoing that should be reconsidered to create space for expansive emotions of grief. I interviewed several AME pastors and ministers and asked about their perceptions of the eulogy in terms of celebration and

lament.[48] They agreed that there needs to be space for lament and celebration. Rather than the preacher aiming solely on celebration, the content of the eulogy should also focus on helping the family and friends through their period of mourning and loss. The eulogy typically celebrates the life of the deceased person, but it can also shift to ways the life of the deceased person can help the living. As part of the eulogy, the pastor should remind congregants that grieving is not a sign that someone lacks faith but rather is an expression of love. Letting the congregation know that grieving is expected and even recommended would resonate with attendees.

Nonetheless, the content of eulogies must offer space for hope in relation to lament. As Luke Powery writes in *Spirit Speech: Lament and Celebration in Preaching*, "Homiletical lament is no different; it is a sermon form that begins with the truthful declaration of human pain but moves toward hope because of a strong belief in the presence and power of God. At times, the anticipation of hope is evident through the interjection of statements of good news while painting the picture of sad news."[49] Hope underpins pain and offers space for being able to process the grief and loss. It also emphasizes that death does not have the honor of taking a bow. Scripture bears this out: "But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope."[50] Having hope is one way to balance lament and celebration and makes healthy grieving possible.

Recovering Lament and Celebration

Celebration has been an unbalanced part in most Homegoings. Dwight Stevenson, in "Eleven Ways of Preaching a Non-Sermon," speaks to the singular emphasis on celebration, indicating that "Such preaching sounds as though it has only one text: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,

48. See Appendix 1.
49. Powery, *Spirit Speech*, 92.
50. I Thessalonians 4:13.

Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. It is closely allied to … 'the Jesus Stereotype' – the problems of mankind concretely stated and painfully experienced, but nothing from the Christian side, but booming generalities – Jesus is the answer!"[51] Even in our remembrances of our loved ones, there are still often questions that remain unanswered because the eulogist chooses to forgo the Crucifixion and preach only of the Resurrection. By doing so, the eulogist diminishes the power inherent in the Crucifixion which makes the Resurrection possible. Had Jesus not died on the Cross, the Resurrection would not have occurred. Both the Crucifixion and the Resurrection are central to our Christian faith.

Thus, a combination of lament and celebration are crucial for preaching Homegoings. According to Powery, "Without the practice of lament, there can be no true celebration, which is an acknowledgement of God's intervention in the midst of pain."[52] Celebration assures that sermons will have good news, but by itself may lead to a false optimism while lament alone can lead to fatalism. Again from Powery, "Sermons that only stress lamenting the world and providing social critique do not provide the necessary hope found in the Spirit of Resurrection; and sermons that only celebrate do not present a realistic picture of human life grounded in the Spirit of Crucifixion."[53] Celebration and lament offer recognition of the vicissitudes of life that accompany us all. Both lament and celebration are needed when conducting Homegoings and a deliberate effort should be made to present a balance between the two. It is essential for the church as a community to have a eulogist who will value their pain while also celebrating their abiding faith.

51. Dwight E. Stevenson, "Eleven Ways of Preaching a Non-Sermon" *Lexington Theological Quarterly* 10, no. 3 (July 1975): 25-26.
52. Powery, *Spirit Speech*, 99.
53. Ibid., 100.

An Incarnational Theology of Death

Recently, Pastor Watley was asked to deliver the eulogy at the sudden passing of a young church member who had committed suicide. Our pastor used the story of the death of the Shunammite woman's son[54] as the text. He reminded attendees that the mother in this story knew to take her son to the man of God who had prophesied his birth. The woman did not know why her son had died, but she sought answers from God. Pastor Watley reminded us that only God knows why things happen as they do, and he implored us to seek God for answers. In addition, Pastor Watley assured us that we can take all of our questions, doubts, and uncertainties to God. At the request of this young man's mother, after the eulogy there was an altar call for those who were not saved. Five young adults about the age of the deceased young man were attending and came forth to pray the prayer of salvation. Even though this young man's life had ended, new life in Christ was discovered by five of his friends.

In the Bible, Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha was ill and word was sent to Jesus in hopes that Jesus would come and help prevent his death. Mary and Martha, who had the pleasure of having a close relationship with Jesus, were expecting Jesus to come to them right away. My speculation is that they were not expecting their brother to die. Upon receiving the news of Lazarus' illness, Jesus remained where he was two additional days. By the time Jesus arrived to their hometown of Bethany, Lazarus had been dead for four days. Martha was perturbed with Jesus and asked Him why He had not come sooner.

Jesus' reply helps us better understand the theological ramifications of the Resurrection. He politely reminded her that her brother would rise again. Hastily, Martha responded, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day." Martha's incomplete knowledge of the

54. See 2 Kings 4:8-37.

Resurrection caused her to misunderstand Jesus' true identity. In an article by Stephen Kim, he writes, "While it is true there will be a resurrection in the future, Jesus wanted Martha to know that as the Messiah and the Son of God, He has authority over life and death."[55] Jesus' statement discloses a certainty that magnifies the Resurrection. Jesus, in revealing his identity, was "reiterating the truth He had been teaching all along, namely that eternal life begins here and now, and those who believe in him already have that life."[56] Jesus' power over death causes those who believe to have new life.

The story of Lazarus, which is found in John 11, is also quoted at the beginning of each AME Homegoing as the ministers and bereaved family enter the sanctuary for the processional. Certainly, Jesus had raised numerous people from the dead, but the Resurrection to which Jesus referred not only takes authority over life and death here and now but also in the hereafter. Anderson and Foley, in *Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals: Weaving Together the Human and Divine* mention the way in which Jesus comforted His disciples prior to His death and reminded them to embrace his death: "The embrace of death as the completion of Jesus' life became one of the stories his disciples remembered in their grieving. For Jesus and for us, the end of life is a new beginning in the memory of God and in the memory of those we loved and who love us."[57] Death is not the end but rather the beginning of a glorious hereafter.

Ultimately, Mark Chapman in "The Authentic Word in the Face of Death: Reflections of Preaching at Funerals" believes the Cross is the foremost aim when preaching funerals:

> This is not the 'theology of glory' because it does not intend to make people feel good, but rather to make people feel the cross - and then the resurrection. It is in fact, the very

55. Stephen S. Kim, "The Significance of Jesus' Raising Lazarus from the dead in John 11," *Bibliotheca Sacra 168,* no.669 (Jan-Mar 2011), 59.
56. Kim, "Significance," 58.
57. Herbert Anderson and Edward Foley, *Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals: Weaving Together the Human and the Divine* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 100.

> essence of the 'theology of the cross': the right word at the right time of how God in Jesus Christ, grasps in himself …the pain and sorrow and broken dreams of life scared and scarred by death; how God in Christ, taking that grim reality of ours into himself … ascends with us in his nail-pierced hands to the Father and the life of God.[58]

To understand God's view of death, one must embrace the Cross of Jesus Christ. To overlook or omit the cross is a grave error and not emblematic of the full scope of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Consequently, Thomas Long, author of *Telling the Truth about Death and Life: Preaching at Funerals*, succinctly explains the real purpose of a eulogy. While many would think that the eulogy is for comforting the family or remembering the deceased, Long offers a more plausible reason. He asserts that

> we do not preach at funerals to primarily provide comfort – though solace and support are, thank God, often given through the sermon. And we are not there to explain why all of this happened – though the hunger for meaning in the face of meaninglessness, thank God, is often addressed in what we say. What is more, we are not there to supply spiritual solemnity to an already somber situation. What we *are* there to do is to unmask a lie.[59]

This lie, according to Long, is that death has ultimate power. Too often, one does not understand the role of death and the indisputable fact that death does not have the final word.

In "O Sing to Me of Heaven: Preaching at Funerals," Long elaborates on this belief by admitting a major facet of death: "Funeral sermons that spend all of their time on gentle themes of comfort and pastoral care miss both an opportunity and the point. Death is running after the pilgrim throng pointing gleefully at the lifeless corpse and trying to outshout the gospel. It is the great privilege of the funeral preacher to shake a fist in the face of Death, to shout again the renunciation of baptism, and the cry of Easter triumph, 'O Death, where is your victory?'"[60] The

58. Mark Chapman, "The Authentic Word in the Face of Death: Reflections of Preaching at Funerals," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 22, no. 1 (February 1995): 42.
59. Thomas G. Long, "Telling the Truth about Death and Life: Preaching at Funerals," *Journal for Preachers* 20, no. 3 (Easter 1997): 4-5.
60. Thomas G. Long, "O Sing to Me of Heaven: Preaching at Funerals," *Journal for Preachers* 29, no. 3 (Easter 2006): 24.

goal of the eulogy is not simply to make parishioners feel better but to serve as a theological reminder that death is never victorious.

Moreover, Donald Deffner posits an example of the distinct and unique purpose of the eulogy in "Proclaiming Life in Death: The Funeral Sermon." He contends, "…a funeral sermon is the announcement of the Good News that Jesus Christ has conquered death and the grave *for us.* It is biblical preaching that focuses on Calvary and the empty tomb, so that mourners may deal with the reality of death and have the certain hope which God gives us for life now and the life to come in heaven."[61] While death may be crippling for some, it is vital to remember that death is one step on a larger journey; for the believer, death is actually the beginning of a new life. Unfortunately, many would like to forgo the Crucifixion and focus only on the Resurrection. However, doing so is impractical and betrays the Gospel. There would be no Resurrection had there been no Crucifixion. When the subject of death is raised, a thorough reminder of the Crucifixion is needed.

> "The price we pay for this is that the pain of the loss of life is papered over: both the pain of dying that the deceased endured and the pain of no longer having the deceased in our lives. When death is not treated as the loss that it is, then the promise of the resurrection is no longer an outrageous claim. Trivializing the death trivializes the resurrection promise. There should be a defiant tone in the promise of the resurrection - it defies all logic. It defies the finiteness of the stiff, dead body. The resurrection is best viewed from the foot of the cross where there can be no denial of death."[62]

The Crucifixion supplies the foundation for the Resurrection and should not be overlooked.

Anticipated Outcomes

Homegoing celebrations should balance lament and celebration. This balance can be achieved first by changing the wording and tone of the liturgy by providing comfort for those attending the

61. Donald L. Deffner, "Proclaiming Life in Death: The Funeral Sermon," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 58, no. 1 (January 1994): 7.
62. Nysse, *Funerals*, 85.

Homegoing service. Second, the Homegoing should acknowledge the absence of one who was loved and will be missed. Third, the content of the eulogy must shift from primarily praising God to nurturing a space that will hold the pain of mourners. Fourth, the pastor's preaching should affirm that grief does not signify weak faith or a fractured belief system.

Homegoings have historically been heartfelt, but they need to offer a balance of lament and celebration. By offering guidance on the prayers, scriptures, and songs to be used in Homegoings, we can more easily help church members through challenging times in their lives. For example, I created a handout to assist bereaved families with planning for Homegoings and selecting scriptures and songs for these services.[63] Further, more attention can be given to the liturgy in order to consider the needs of the mourning community.

An innovation that has never been tried at Saint Philip, but might be if approved by my pastor, is to incorporate a post-service survey [64] after the Homegoing Services. This survey can help the Minister of Pastoral Care assess improvements for future Homegoings.

Conclusion

The Homegoing for a twenty-eight-year-old member of our congregation provides the foundation for future Homegoings that will balance lament and celebration. This young man came to Saint Philip as an employee and not a member. His work as a sound engineer was impeccable. God began to transform his heart, and one Sunday he left the sound table and walked to the front of the church to surrender his life to the Lord. More than his work ethic, we all admired him as a single father who lovingly doted on his two small children. He made sure they were at church every Sunday, and they attended Sunday School. His bout with lupus and leukemia cut his life short, but we were thankful for the brief time we had with him. His life had

63. See Appendices 2 and 3.
64. See Appendix 4.

meaning. I shall never forget the day that his mother called and asked me to come to the hospital because he was nearing his mortal end. Surely, I thought I had misheard her. I traveled to the hospital and was there during his last breaths on Earth. His family had gathered around his bedside and kept telling him over and over through pain and anguish, "I love you. We love you." It was the most beautiful experience I could have ever imagined. Their love for this young man touched my heart and reminded me that life is fleeting.

This experience accompanied me throughout the week as I prepared the eulogy. I wanted the service to be filled with lament and celebration. I chose the scriptural verse: No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us."[65] This passage spoke of the beauty of this young man's life and God's ability to conquer death, hell, and the grave. As I delivered the eulogy, I acknowledged the hurt we felt as a church family at not seeing him anymore and no longer fellowshipping with him. However, we also rejoiced in knowing that he was no longer in agony. The Homegoing reflected our belief that he was with Jesus. As various episodes of his life flashed across the screen during the video tribute, we were able to listen to the music and reflect upon his life. "I'm coming home, I'm coming home. Tell the world I'm coming home. Let the rain wash away. All the pain of yesterday. I know my kingdom awaits. And they've forgiven my mistakes. I'm coming home, I'm coming home. Tell the world I'm coming home."[66] With these lyrics, we said good-bye to our friend and rested in the comforting knowledge that he was home.

65. Romans 8:37.
66. Diddy-Dirty Money with Skylar Grey, "Coming Home," track 4 on *Last Train to Paris*, Bad Boy Music, 2010, compact disc.

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Appendix 1

Survey

1. What is the purpose of the eulogy?
2. How do you prepare a eulogy?
3. Is the eulogy different for believers than nonbelievers?
4. Do you think that Homegoings have lost lament?
5. Do you think there needs to be space for lament and grieving at the Homegoing?
6. Why is there an emphasis on celebration during Homegoings?
7. Does that emphasis detract from lament?

Appendix 2

Abbreviated List of Scripture Readings

Old Testament

Job 19:23-27

Psalm 23

Ecclesiastes 3:1-4

Isaiah 57:1-2

New Testament

Matthew 11:28-30

John 14:1-3

Romans 8:35, 37-39

2 Corinthians 1:3-4

Philippians 1:23-27

I Thessalonians 4:14-17

Revelation 21:1-7

Appendix 3

Abbreviated List of Hymn Selections

Amazing Grace

Blessed Assurance

Great Is Thy Faithfulness

Hold to God's Unchanging Hand

How Great Thou Art

It Is Well, With My Soul

What A Friend We Have in Jesus

Appendix 4

Post Homegoing Survey

1. What is the most memorable aspect of the service?
2. What was most memorable upon your initial arrival at the church?
3. During the service, were there any words or phrases that you did not understand?
4. If you could change one thing about our service, what would it be?
5. What is one thing you would have liked to have done that was not done?
6. Was there anything we could have done to make things easier for you?