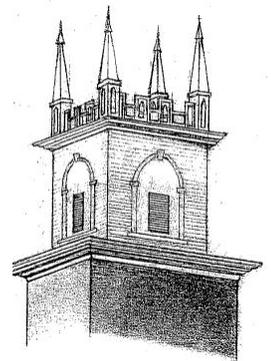


+ N.E.W.S. CONNECTION

Pittsford Congregational Church
United Church of Christ
121 Village Green
PO Box 570
Pittsford, VT 05763



Vol. 23 No.03

March 2023

Message from the Pastor

“Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted.”

Our shared recent experience in the loss of a lifetime church member prompts me to weigh in on a topic that touches us all. Rituals surrounding death have changed dramatically over the last fifty years. According to those with long memories, calling hours at funeral homes made it easier for families than the days when bodies were laid out at home, always a burden for those who cooked and cleaned.

Consider my own examples: Nana Dwyer died in 1964 when I was five. She had a two-day wake, afternoon and evening, at a funeral home our family had used for two generations. By the time Grandpa Dwyer died in 1971, my father chaffed at the idea of a two-day affair with the funeral Mass on the third day. My uncle, however, countered that it would be disrespectful to do anything less than what we had for my grandmother. And so, the two-day wake persisted for another decade in my family.

The late 1980s started to see a shift in how families observed mourning rituals. My other grandmother lived in Florida for many years. On one of my last visits to her, she told me she wished to be cremated and her ashes scattered in the Everglades. From the frown on my face, she knew that I was not enthralled with the idea. “Oh Nana,” I said, “I can’t bear the thought of you mingling with alligators.” She retorted with, “I don’t belong to any church, and with two divorced husbands, it gets complicated! Where am I supposed to go?” “In your parents’ burial plot,” I said. “Fine, you make the arrangements.” I did!

After Nana died, my childhood friend Rev. John Perry presided over a dignified graveside service in the presence of immediate family. My mother and her sisters all agreed that being together for prayers and farewells helped assuage our grief. Her name, with the dates of her birth and death, are carved on his parents’ cemetery stone.

When my father died in November 2015, my mother wanted neither calling hours nor a service. That was her decision for her husband of 57 years— I did not argue. Nonetheless weeks of weird limbo ensued as I acknowledged cards and other condolences. In the meantime, Dad’s ashes remained atop a bureau in our guest room. Six months later, after my mother had chosen a cemetery stone, Dad’s ashes were interred in St. Alphonsus Cemetery. For me, that act completed the last chapter of Dad’s life on earth.

From my experience, and from having organized many funerals, we short circuit the process of grieving when we go from death to a celebration of the decedent’s life with nothing in between. I do take into account that if a person or family was not part of a church, then a church service may seem artificial. But when someone has been part of a church community, it is altogether fitting that the worshipping church needs to gather, to pray

together, to sing together, to acknowledge loss, to console one another, and to hear the healing words of scripture.

The societal shift from former bereavement rituals has many complex reasons including cost. Sometimes in requesting “nothing,” we think we are sparing those who come after us. We all know death can sometimes amplify existing fracture lines in families. Some hurts are beyond our control. Let us remember though we cannot control the lives of others beyond our own deaths, and we who are left behind need to mourn and be comforted.

A life lived in faithful fellowship needs to be concluded in the presence of faithful fellowship.

Michael F. Dwyer, Pastor