

“Weighing The Heart”
September 25, 2022

Luke 37-42

I was not one of the ones who woke up in the middle of the night this past week to watch Queen Elizabeth’s funeral. In recent days, however, I have spoken to a few of you who set your alarms for the middle of the night. For those who saw the funeral in real time, I suspect it was a once in a lifetime experience. Likely the only queen any of us will ever see or know.

There are very few, if any, figures on our planet who could attract in their death the kind of worldwide attention and fanfare Queen Elizabeth garnered in recent days. Her life and her death were a unique phenomenon given her ninety-six years of age, the more than seven decades she has ruled on the British throne and the ten-day mourning period where so many admirers were given a chance to express their well-wishes and condolences. For those who knew Queen Elizabeth personally, she was by their account a woman of uncanny grace and wit, both charming and humble. To say she was beloved by millions who did not know her personally feels inadequate in terms of capturing the heartfelt adulation people felt for her.

To be fair, the Queen did have her detractors. Despite the constant media scrutiny of the royal family, Queen Elizabeth represented the primary public face of the British monarchy. As such, for many people living specifically in sub-Saharan Africa and the Caribbean, the Queen bears at least some responsibility for the oppressive excesses of the British empire and the way in which so many countries in those regions of the world continue to remain subject to British colonial rule.

Nevertheless, Queen Elizabeth’s larger than life legacy remains intact. And when it came to her funeral this past week and all the events leading up to the funeral, there is arguably no country in our world better suited than Great Britain when it comes to the task of grand, large-scale ceremony and pageantry. I could tell from the still pictures and video replays how carefully the Queen’s funeral was choreographed and orchestrated, down to even the most minute details. All in a concerted effort to portray the extraordinary dignity and majesty the occasion of a queen’s death demanded.

Looking back, even the statistics are hard to fathom. Three hundred thousand people stood in line for hours to pay their last respects to the Queen. More than two thousand spectators and mourners were seated inside Westminster Abbey for the funeral service. Including more than one hundred heads of state. And untold numbers of people watched on television and livestream. From beginning to end, what a spectacle the whole thing was...!

As someone who performs a significant number of funerals myself each year, I was reflecting the other night on Queen Elizabeth’s funeral. And my mind took me back

to a day about two and a half weeks ago when I led two funerals. One in the morning and one in the evening.

In the days leading up to those two funerals, I met with various family members and loved ones. With their help, I put together two services that reflected how much the one who died was loved by those closest to them. And how much both of them would be missed in the days to come.

What I didn't fully appreciate until the day of the two funerals were the similar circumstances involved in each death. Both of the funerals were for young men who died of drug overdoses. They both died alone, before anyone could find them in time to administer Narcan and other lifesaving measures. And they both left fiancés and one child behind, in addition to parents, siblings and other friends and loved ones.

According to the family members I met with, both young men were ready to seek out help for their addiction, much as they had done at other, earlier points in their lives. They were both gregarious, well-loved, full of laughter and good humor. In the end, however, both of them died lonely, solitary, tragic deaths...heartbreaking illustrations in the midst of a nationwide opioid epidemic that is claiming the lives of too many, too young, too soon.

There was no pomp or circumstance at either of the two funerals I led. No formal procession. No orchestrated, choreographed details. Instead of thousands and thousands of mourners, each funeral was attended by fewer than a hundred people. And most of the people who gathered looked shellshocked. With the kind of stunned expressions I see on the faces of mourners who gather at a funeral for someone perceived to die well before their time. Or someone who dies in a manner that is sudden and catches people off guard.

And somewhere underneath the two funerals I led that day was the unspoken, thinly veiled specter of stigma. Based on the fact that we don't talk as openly about drug addiction as we could or should. Coupled with the fact that we too often look at drug use and drug addiction as a character weakness or a bad lifestyle choice rather than a disease. In two funeral services where anyone who attended was welcome to stand up and share a story or a memory or an image of the young man who died, and a number of people took the opportunity to speak aloud, only one person at each service made reference to the struggle of addiction and the devastating consequences the addiction caused.

So many marked contrasts to the funeral for Queen Elizabeth, at least on the surface. In my mind, I started to think about the two young men and Queen Elizabeth side by side and compare the lives they lived, the impact they made and the legacies they left for family and friends who live on in this world.

And then I stopped thinking about them together. Because it's too easy to judge. And human beings are so good at it. We think we understand the lives people live, the choices people make, the struggles people endure every single day. We assume that

numbers and titles and credentials define a person's worth. Even if we don't know someone intimately or at all, we draw conclusions all the time about how important a person is and the morals and values that define them and how many people they influence over the course of their lifetimes...

Jesus was really clear in today's Gospel lesson about resisting the urge to put labels on people as though we know them. "Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven."

And how quickly we forget or dismiss what Jesus went on to say a few verses later. We are convinced we see the smallest speck in the eyes of our family members and friends and neighbors. Yet we conveniently ignore the huge log in our own eye that we would do well to notice and then pull out...

So much of what Jesus preached and taught involved trying to get his followers to see one another through the eyes of a God who loves God's people unconditionally. A God who values every human being equally and abundantly. And a God who accepts us and embraces us, even when it appears on the surface as though we don't deserve it.

There's a single verse in the Old Testament Book of Proverbs that sums it up for me directly and succinctly. "All deeds are right in the sight of the doer, but the Lord weighs the heart." (21:2)

It's not up to you or to me to weigh the hearts of people around us. Even if we think we somehow can or should. When it comes to the lives we lead all the way to the time of our deaths, we put our trust in a God whose love for each one of us is fierce and uncompromising. In spite of the choices we make and sometimes because of the choices we make. Certainly, regardless of the credentials we hold and any fanfare or acclaim we garner.

Whether we are the queen in a royal monarchy who lives into her nineties with a lifetime of accolades and vast material wealth to her name. Or a young man who is addicted to drugs, whose life is cut short because they can't escape the grip of a relentless disease. Or anyone else. The truth is we are first and foremost, before we are anything else, children of God. Claimed by God as God's very own. Loved by God without judgement and without condemnation. And promised divine forgiveness and mercy that knows no bounds.

You and I may think we know what's right for ourselves or for someone else. In the end, though, you and I don't weigh the heart. The God who loves us more than we will ever know, and the God who claims us in life and in death. God is the one who does the weighing. Amen.

