

The sermon as fulcrum

The role of preaching in worship

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Lots of books make fun of preachers. Comic strips poke fun at preachers' ineptitudes. Comedians see as fair game everything from television preachers' hairstyles to their fundraising techniques. And jokes about preachers, like jokes about lawyers, are acceptable in polite society. Utter the very word *preacher* and

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people get ready to laugh. I have taught preaching for many years, and one year my own students presented me with an auto-graphed copy of *101 Things to Do during a Dull Sermon*.

People seldom talk about preaching with enthusiasm and anticipation. I occasionally hear someone speak appreciatively of a particular sermon, or even compliment someone's preaching style, but seldom do I hear positive comments about preaching.

Even young children in the pews know that when the sermon begins, it's time to turn their attention elsewhere.

Some churches still attach great significance to preaching; without a Sunday sermon, they would feel they hadn't worshiped. Other congregations want to give the sermon a pass and are looking for other things to take its place in Sunday worship. They think preaching is just plain out of date.

Yet we often refer to ministers and pastors as preachers. Preaching is the role in which we see these people week after week. It is their role-defining action. We gather as a congregation, and our ministers and pastors preach the good news of Jesus Christ. So we refer to them as our preachers.

A look at the words used to designate the minister-pastor reveals that in Anabaptist-Mennonite circles in North America,

we have most often used the title “preacher.” The Amish refer to these leaders as servants of the book; Mennonites in the Netherlands called them teachers or admonishers or preachers; Russian Mennonites used the designation preacher or elder; in North Germany, they were known as teachers or admonishers. Whether the message is brought by a teacher, admonisher, or proclaimer, preaching has defined the role of minister.

What is preaching?

Preaching is both content and delivery. It is an activity so multifaceted that we don’t know if it is a biblical event, a theological event, or a cultural event. But for our discussion of the role of preaching in worship, we need to come to an understanding of what preaching is. The definition that I work with is: *Preaching is the public address form of ministry in which a word from God intersects with human need, and out of that meeting, lives are changed.* Four things are basic to this definition: public address, word from God, human need, and changed lives.

Public address implies that one person addresses a group. This activity is not a discussion, though discussion and questions might follow. Public address assumes the embodiment of the message. This form is not an e-mail or a Web site or a musical. These are not bad forms, but they are not public address.

A word from God alerts us to the fact that the Spirit of God ministers first to the preacher. We cannot speak what we have not first heard! Sometimes I think preachers are trying to find things to say, rather than listening for things to say. As a teacher of preaching, one of the most important things I try to help my students learn is how to listen to the Spirit of God. If we know what is given to us by the Spirit, we will know what to speak as our testimony and witness.

Intersecting with human need implies that the preacher will usually have a profound awareness of the congregation’s situation. The Spirit will know the congregation’s public and private needs, and if the preacher is listening to the Spirit, the sermon will address these needs. We preachers are often thanked for sermons we never preached, in which God’s Word intersected with a listener’s need by the power of the Spirit rather than by our conscious design!

The last mark of a sermon is that *lives are changed*. Transformation is a sign that the sermon is not just a speech but is initiated by God and shaped by our neediness. Out of that mix,

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changes in our lives emerge. Sometimes the changes are small, but they are changes nonetheless. Sometimes the changes are inner, but they are changes nonetheless.

If we preachers understood the role of preaching, we would be humbly honored to carry the name. What a difference it would make if we as preachers approached the pulpit every Sunday with the passion to convey clearly to the congregation a word from God that had been instilled in our hearts and minds through our study of the text and our quiet listening to God's Spirit.

It seems to me that if the congregation understood the role of preaching, they would begin to beg for more preaching, not less. We would have a thirst to hear the Word of God spoken to us in language and images we can understand. We would sit on the edge of our pews or chairs with our hearts and ears intently focused to hear the word that is being given to us.

What happens in worship?

Perhaps the second thing we need to agree on is what happens in worship. People come together to communicate with God—to praise, to adore, to confess their sins, to hear a word from God that speaks to their neediness, to give out of their means, and to receive a blessing as they go out into the week's work and activities.

The actions of the worship service include tasks the congregation performs. As a congregation, we are called to worship, we sing, we confess, and we pray. In these acts, we adore, we worship, and we speak. In these actions, the people address God. But when we get to the reading of scripture and the sermon that follows it, we turn a major corner in the worship service. Here God speaks to us. After the sermon, we respond to the word given to us: we sing, we pray, we bring our offerings and our testimonies. And then God gets the last word as we receive the blessing.

Scripture reading in worship often receives far less attention than it deserves. What would happen if those who presented biblical texts spent hours each week preparing? What a powerful thing it would be for the congregation to hear scripture imbued with the insights and energy and passion that come of internalizing a passage and preparing to speak it as the very Word of God. That kind of presentation of the word would capture listeners' attention in a way that the offhand drone of much scripture reading fails to do.

Like the eunuch in his chariot, we cannot understand the ancient text we have read unless someone tells us what it means. That is the work of the sermon.

I know of several congregations that expect the person reading scripture to meet with someone to assist them in their oral interpretation of the text. Reading that would be appropriate for the phone book or the dictionary is not good enough for the Word of God! Our faith lives are shaped by the Bible's stories. It behooves us to know these stories and understand them. We must always look for ways to help our congregations hear the old stories anew.

Scripture reading and preaching represent the voice of God in the worship service. Especially because the reading of scripture is often less than captivating, the task of preaching is vital in offering an interpretation of the text. Preaching serves the function of translating an ancient text for a contemporary audience. One task of preaching is to help make connections between the Word of God and the people within its hearing. The task is to allow the Spirit of God to speak through the preacher to the gathered body, providing insights, conviction, and comfort in relation to their needs.

So preaching translates the Bible into the language and context of the people. We read the text, and although we read it in the language of the listeners, it is still a text from long ago and far away. Like the eunuch in his chariot, we cannot understand unless someone tells us what it means. That is the work of the sermon.

What could be more important in our worship? The sermon is one of God's ways of communicating with us. I am concerned about any movement that encourages us to worship without giving the one we worship an opportunity to speak—and, I daresay, to speak as long as it takes to get the message across. Do

we set a limit to how long we can listen to a message from God? Though I think most of our listeners don't hear well after twenty minutes or so, I can't help but wonder how that might change if they felt that God had something important to say to them in the sermon. Presidents and prime ministers sometimes speak for an hour or more about important and complicated matters. No one gets up and walks out while they are talking. If we are merely listening to the preacher instead of listening for a message from God, no wonder we get tired of listening.

The role of the preacher as one who gives testimony or bears witness to what the Spirit of God has given is profound, as is the role of preaching in our worship services. We hold this space in our worship time as a time when one of us gives witness to what she has received. That might be a teaching, or an admonition, or a proclamation; any of these can be a witness to what the Spirit has given the one giving the testimony. So preaching is the witness of one person before the others to what God has done, or what he has been shown in the scripture for strengthening the listeners. I want to hear preachers talk about what they have been given by the Spirit, rather than about what they have decided to talk about.

In our worship services, scripture reading and preaching form the centerpiece, in the sense that some of the worship service helps prepare us to hear the sermon and some of the service helps us respond to the sermon. Another image would be that of a fulcrum. Other things move around it, but it holds the movement together.

How does worship take shape around the text and message?

If the preached word is the center of our worship, what is the center of worship planning? If preaching is to be the center of our worship, how does worship planning make sure that happens?

First, we decide what texts will be used. This task is essential, if we are to ensure that our worship addresses the needs of the congregation and that we speak the various messages from God. One reason sometimes given for using the lectionary is so our congregations will encounter wide segments of the whole Bible. My concern is simply that we cover the wide scope of the Bible over time. *Preparing Sunday Dinner: A Collaborative Approach to*

Worship and Preaching talks about the importance of menu planning.¹ I urge those charged with the responsibility to give care to the text selection process. Otherwise we tend to go back again and again to the same texts and the same basic messages.

Second, the person who is preaching on a given Sunday should come to the worship planning meeting having done his homework. The preacher will know the text well and will offer for the group's consideration some of the messages he has been hearing during study time and during quiet time before God. A scripture text has more than one message. The particular message we focus on will take into account the needs of people in this particular congregation. Remember, a good sermon addresses real needs.

If the preacher is clear about a message from God, and about why that message must be effectively delivered so the congregation will understand it, then the listeners are apt to sit up and listen carefully.

This is the "If Christ is the answer, what is the question?" issue. The messages of God speak to real needs.

Third, after the preacher and the worship planners have decided what the text and message will be, the worship planning group begins to think of songs, psalms, prayers, and other worship elements that can help the congregation prepare for and respond to the message.

Fourth, after hearing the planners' discussion, the preacher goes back to finish the

sermon with their insights and input in mind. In this way the sermon is the beginning and the end of the worship planning, but always with mutual respect among all involved, who give each of the parts its place.

An exception to this planning process is a worship service that focuses on one of the rituals of the church. Whether that rite is a communion service, a baptism, an anointing service, a marriage, or a funeral, worship planning will center on that part of the service. It is the task of the preaching to help worshipers understand what is happening in the ritual, so we can participate more fully. This same function might be true for some of the Christian year. The sermon helps us understand the incarnation at Christmas, walk the journey of Holy Week, make sense of the resurrection of Easter, and revisit the birth of the church at Pentecost. In these special times, the sermon may serve the worship event. In

most worship events, the rest of the worship elements find their place around the scripture reading and the sermon.

For years I have said that the single overarching reason for ineffective preaching is that the preacher does not know what the message is and what she wants to accomplish with that message. To put it more positively, if the preacher is clear in her own mind about a message from God, and about why that message must be effectively delivered so the congregation will understand it, then the listeners are apt to sit up and listen carefully.

In graduate school, a preaching professor asked our class to stand up, stand tall, and proclaim, "I am proud to be a preacher!" We responded pitifully, with weak voices that would have barely dribbled off the front of the pulpit. Again and again he cajoled us, until our voices displayed purpose and enthusiasm. "I am proud to be a preacher!" He was beginning to convince us. That is my purpose. We must be proud, not of ourselves, but of the calling given to us and especially of the Holy God whom we proclaim.

Note

¹ June Alliman Yoder, Marlene Kropf, and Rebecca Slough, *Preparing Sunday Dinner: A Collaborative Approach to Worship and Preaching* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2005).

About the author

June Alliman Yoder recently retired from her post as professor of communication and preaching at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart, Indiana.

Pontius' Puddle

