

One New Book for the Preacher

Randall K. Bush

First Presbyterian Church, Racine, Wisconsin

THE PREACHING LIFE by Barbara Brown Taylor. Cowley Publications: Boston, 1993.

In Tom Stoppard's play, *Jumpers*, one of the characters remarks that there came "a calendar date - a moment - when the onus of proof passed from the atheist to the believer, when, quite suddenly, the Noes had it." Pinpointing that moment is a dreary game for historians. Recognizing that we exist on the far side of that moment and must choose to accept the onus of proof is the constant challenge of preachers. Good preachers help us attempt this task with creativity, confidence, and hope. Barbara Brown Taylor is a good preacher.

The title of her recent book is illuminating. This is not "A Preaching Life," a three-word title focused like a center stage spotlight upon the author and her presumably exemplary, or at least noteworthy, career. No, it is "The Preaching Life," a title which speaks not of an individual but rather about a vocation. By her choice of the definite article over an indefinite one, Taylor chooses to broach this subject in a way which invites others to share experiences from their "preaching lives." This intentional collegiality marks much of Taylor's writing and preaching, a quality I find especially helpful and engaging.

The book's first half consists of seven autobiographical chapters which discuss Taylor's personal experience and views on the ordained ministry, scripture, worship, and preaching. If the title had not already been used elsewhere, this section could well have been called "A Chorus of Witnesses." Taylor's anecdotal self-reflection on her call reminds me of Thomas Merton's autobiography; her discussion on vocation echoes the thoughts of Stanley Hauerwas, while her chapter on imagination brings to mind the writings of Madeleine L'Engle and Annie Dillard. Taylor has the ability to add her voice to the larger chorus of Christian writers, amplifying historic themes and prophetic topics without losing her own distinctive style.

When Taylor says "I" on matters of faith, she wants her listeners and readers to say, "Me, too." In her own words:

The sermon is no place for a virtuoso performance; it is a place for believers to explore together their common experience before God. The stories I tell from the pulpit are not just "my" stories but "our" stories, which are God's stories too. The stool of my sermon rests evenly on those three legs. If any one of them is missing (or too long or too short) the whole thing will wobble and fall.

Creating a balanced sermon is a difficult task even for the best homiletic stoolmaker, but Taylor achieves this goal in ways which are instructive and inspirational for those of us who have wobbled through many a Sunday morning message.

The second half of this volume includes thirteen of her sermons, all relatively brief

presentations wrapped comfortably around a single biblical text. Though she uses illustrative material generously, her focus never shifts away from the homily's scriptural foundation. Taylor does not succumb to the flawed philosophy that a sermon's orthodoxy and value should be judged by the number of scriptural citations the preacher has squeezed into the message. Nor is she held captive to "lectionary legalism," which assumes that every passage assigned for a given Sunday must make at least a cameo appearance in the sermon. That is akin to believing that various church potluck entrees can best be served from a single pot.

Taylor's sermons are not erudite compositions. Choosing carefully which battles she cares to fight, Taylor has a tendency to oversimplify and gloss over varying viewpoints about historical details and biblical characters. At times she paints with a broad brush, as I noticed when she discussed lepers and scribes in two of her sermons. But when this occurs, it is because of the goal of her larger "canvas" and its intended viewing audience. She does not preach to professors and conference attendees, but to bulletin-reading, offering plate-passing, pew-sitting congregations, people who have chosen for at least one hour that Sunday morning to say "Yes" to God. As Taylor explains it, "Every time I put a sermon together, I rehearse the reasons why and the ways in which I believe in God. Given the world we live in, the case cannot be made too often."

What I did not find in Taylor's book is a discussion about the fundamental assumptions about preaching, the role a twenty-minute monologue can play in this world of twenty-second soundbites. While Sunday morning homilies should not be relegated to the category of dinosaurs, they are an exceedingly rare form of communication in late twentieth-century society. No questions from the floor, no panel discussions or equal airtime for opposing viewpoints; simply a one-sided presentation to a captive audience. Rationales for the existence of sermons have both historical and denominational labels: a Reformed emphasis on education, an evangelical desire for conversion, a liberal insistence on social activism, a pragmatic focus on stewardship concerns and paying the bills. Yet in the end, preachers do sermons largely because we are expected to do them; congregations listen largely because they are expected to listen.

Taylor recognizes that "faith in God is no longer the rule; it is the exception to the rule, one "option" among many for people seeking to make sense out of their lives." Yet she remains committed to the traditional, homiletical option about how the gospel is to be presented weekly to help people in their spiritual journey. Proof of this fact is found in her latest book, *Gospel Medicine*, which contains twenty-six more sermons by Taylor. She acknowledges that she is not a politician or physician, but rather a public speaker of the gospel. Since that is the only medicine she has to dole out in measured, homiletical doses, she is content to do so with all the skill, grace, creativity and sincerity at her disposal. In this age when the "Noes" seem to have won the election, Taylor warns us not to concede victory too soon. There is more to be said and heard on the topic of Christian faith, especially when someone as qualified as Barbara Brown Taylor chooses to speak on the preaching life.