

One New Book for the Preacher

William L. Hawkins

Graves Memorial Presbyterian Church, Clinton, North Carolina

STRONG IN THE BROKEN PLACES: A Theological Reverie on the Ministry of George Everett Ross, by Leonard Sweet. Akron: University of Akron Press, 1995, 180 pp. \$26.95.

Homileticians advise preachers not to rummage through books and articles in search of sermon ideas and illustrations. Quite frankly, it is gauche to plunder anxiously for retail (or better yet, “re-tell”) purposes. Besides, if you go forth and read widely and well not only will all these things be delivered unto you in due season, but you will also become wise in the process. True enough I suppose, but what are you to do when you stumble across a book literally chock-full of quotable quotes and stories from beginning to end? At a glance, I counted upwards of 350, including those by the book’s author and protagonist. While the predictable references are there from Shakespeare, Wordsworth, C.S. Lewis, Buechner, etc., the surprise comes in the quality and number of illustrations from female and male authors some of whom are not only rare or even unheard of, but whose writings span much of the interdisciplinary, historical, and cultural landscape. When was the last time you cited the thirteenth-century Persian poet, Gulistan of Saadi? Trust me, you will want to use the citation from his poetry on p. 159, but good luck getting the pronunciation right.

Hemingway’s familiar phrase in *Farewell to Arms* provides the title for this one-of-a-kind book which author Leonard Sweet says, “... is best classified as a sequence of insights into matters spiritual, ministerial, theological, and biographical, and into the craft of preaching wherein they all are incarnate” (p. xi). The form of which he speaks takes shape in the person of one George Ross, late rector of St. Paul’s Episcopal Church in Akron, Ohio, the largest congregation in the state’s diocese where he served eighteen years, from 1972-1990. Having struggled through a failed marriage, the strains of relating to would-be “clergy killers” in his parish, and assorted health problems self-inflicted and otherwise, Ross resigned from the pulpit only months before his death from AIDS. The book is a reflection on Ross’s ministry at St. Paul’s, the church where, ironically in the case of Ross, Alcoholics Anonymous first began in 1935. It is a book, says Sweet, about “the story of ministry at its best and most gifted, and ministry at its worst and most wounded” (p. xii). Ross was one who became strong in the broken places, claims Sweet, at least at the point of his preaching, but likely in every aspect of his pastoral care. Using Ross as exemplar, Sweet’s “intent is to probe how brokenness can become a source of soul force and an avenue to creative energy” (p. 19).

To set the theme, Sweet invokes the wisdom of Carl Jung that “God is in the diseases” (p. xiii) and that our spiritual and psychological healing is found in the power of “the wounds of Christ” (1 Peter 2:21-25). Rather than evade the pain, says the author, we do well to follow the contemporary Jungian analyst and priest Thomas More and explore our emotional and physical problems, in order to coax from them the unique and life-giving wisdom only such experiences can provide. As George Ross preached, “we can be ‘greatest at our weakest’ when we allow God to ‘touch our

weakness with His strength” (p. 18). Both Sweet and Ross would likely go the next step and endorse the words of Eugenia Gamble: “That hole in your heart is God-shaped.” To this preacher, Ross sits close beside Fosdick on the homiletical bench. The text that best captures the spirit and hermeneutic of his twenty-two sermons included in the book is Paul’s thorn in the flesh (2 Cor. 2:9).

Sweet presents George Ross to us as one similarly committed to the ministry as the ever-faithful, dying priest we read of in Bernanos’s, *The Diary of a Country Priest*. At the same time you find in Ross a personality bedeviled with the kind of character flaws that haunt the “whiskey-priest” in Greene’s *The Power and the Glory*.

Sweet divides the main body of the book along the lines of a symbolic connection with the five wounds of Christ. He describes it accordingly:

his broken hands and feet symbolic of broken pieces of body

— our physical wounds;

his broken side, symbolic of broken relationships

— our communal wounds;

his broken head, symbolic of broken thoughts

— our mental wounds;

his broken back, symbolic of broken promises

— our actional wounds; and

his broken heart, symbolic of broken faith

— our spiritual wounds (p. 19).

Each section begins with a thematic essay by the author and concludes with four to five companion sermons by Ross that Sweet finds relevant to that type of wound. Sweet and Ross use words well. This book is poignantly pleasurable, and all pastors can benefit from it for reasons both personal and professional. It is one to which you will return often.