

Reframing the Task of Pastoral Preaching

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In all the literature on preaching few topics are as neglected as its pastoral dimension. With perhaps as much foolhardiness as wisdom I have recently tried to make a contribution in that department,¹ but there is room for much more. One reason for the neglect seems to be an uncertainty among both homileticians and preachers about just what the essential task of pastoral preaching is. On the one hand we usually want to say that *all* preaching is part of pastoral ministry, but on the other we sometimes find real fights breaking out over the relative places of “proclamation” or “prophetic preaching” and “pastoral care” or “priestly preaching.” Preaching which seems to aim at making people “feel good” is put down (rightly so, in my view) as a narcissistic distortion of the gospel, while preaching which seems to think that undiluted theological statement meets people’s needs is dismissed as intellectualism. Just where are we?

Perhaps we are in a good position to do what family therapists suggest when things get muddled in complex human interactions and try to do some “reframing” of the issues. The idea of “reframing” is basically simple and literal: taking a picture out of one frame and putting it into another one so that the net effect is quite different even though the basic content, the picture, is objectively speaking the same. To reframe an issue in family dynamics, for instance, might involve the therapist’s suggesting that what looks like a problem (say, a teenage child’s misbehavior in school) could also be seen as a sort of solution (say, a way of diverting attention from the more painful issue of the parents’ failing marriage). What such a reformulation typically does is provide us with new *metaphors* for thinking about things, in this case the metaphor of “solution” rather than that of “problem.” Or to take another simple example, a couple complaining of the sexual problem of loss of physical interest in each other may bear (as in the case I now have in mind) from the therapist that it sounds more like an issue of a power imbalance in the relationship than one of sexuality. The situation and behavior are the same in either case; what has changed is the framework in which the behavior is viewed, or the metaphor with which it is expressed: power rather than sexuality.

What I suggest, then, is that one reason pastoral preaching is a troublesome topic is because we have either lacked or been using inadequate frames or metaphors for talking about its task. What I propose to do in turn is offer a reframing of the subject and a different set of metaphors simply in the hope that we may then find it more approachable for future discussion. That requires two steps. In the first we need to identify what sort of pulpit communication we have in mind when we speak of “pastoral preaching”; we need to define the behavior at issue. In the second step we need to do the reframing of the task itself, which involves introducing some new images and asking how

the pastoral preaching task might be envisioned from within their framework.

I. *When is Preaching "Pastoral"?*

Some would say, of course, that that question is either backwards or silly. Isn't *all* preaching "pastoral" in one way or another? Perhaps so in a broad sense, though I do not believe stopping there takes us far enough down the road of understanding what we mean. True enough, most preaching is done by people whom the hearers identify as their pastors, and there are bound to be some connections and resonances there even in the most unrelentingly theological discourse or biblical exposition. It is also true enough that all preaching is pastoral if we believe that sound theological thinking and accurate biblical understanding are in service to better personal faith, life, and action (even if that comes a little too close to saying that knowing such things is good for you even if it doesn't seem to matter a whit in terms of any live personal issues you happen to be struggling with). We can sharpen things up a great deal, though, by taking the question more seriously and asking what it is that makes or defines or identifies preaching which can be *distinguished* as "pastoral." I am suggesting three answers, which can serve as "definitions" of pastoral preaching.

First, preaching is pastoral in the sense that there is a pastoral *impact* to what is said, regardless whether it is negative or positive, intended by the preacher or supplied by the hearers. That is as close as we will come to saying that all preaching is pastoral, and it is not at all the same thing. The point is that there is a *dimension* of a sermon which is pastoral even if the overall effort is neither intended nor perceived to be so. This is a functional definition, asking in effect "What happened with this communication?" rather than "What type of message was it?" I imagine, for instance, that a sermon which most of us would say was inherently unconcerned with direct human affairs (perhaps a learned treatise on the significance of the iota subscript in certain theological words used by the Apostle Paul, or a meticulous exposition of the role of fire imagery in Old Testament apocalyptic) could be heard and valued as pastorally important by *someone*. Our job on this first definition would then be to take that reception seriously and ask what was involved in it, how even such unlikely material shaped itself as personally meaningful in a particular hearer, and so on.

Just as importantly, we need to take seriously that the *absence* of pastoral concern has a negative pastoral effect insofar as people feel themselves bypassed, unheard, or cheated. We can and should talk about the pastoral dimension of preaching even when a sermon would in no way fit into that category in any kind of homiletical typology. The pastoral impact of a completely intellectualized theological discourse on repentance preached the day after four of the congregation's teenagers were killed by a madman would, to say the least, be profound—even though negative. It will be important for us to keep this first definition in mind when we deal with the communicative value of what is said in preaching rather than with the rhetorical or stylistic or intentional pigeon-hole it occupies. Just announcing that a given sermon is "pastoral" does not

necessarily make it so, any more than calling it something else forecloses any possible pastoral impact, intended or not.

Secondly, though, there is preaching which deliberately sets out to touch and involve people's personal concerns, whether on an immediate or a more global level. This is probably the main way preaching is pastoral for most of us most of the time: we try to make it so. For our purposes now, let us also say that the *dominant strategy* or perspective of the sermon lies in this realm (taking us a step farther than the first definition). The intent is something more than just a matter of "applying" or "illustrating" the sermon's content in such a way as to graft otherwise relatively impersonal material onto living hearers. The content itself is shaped along a pastoral dimension. So long as we do not try to put too much weight on it, it probably does make sense to think of a typology here in which some sermons are dominantly concerned with pastoral issues, others with biblical interpretation, still others with systematic theological thinking, and so on. Our concern in this definition would be, therefore, with the sermon that sees itself as "pastoral" as opposed to a sermon (perhaps even on the same biblical text, theological topic, or social concern) which would take a very different strategy. (In fact, an instructive and revealing discipline for both preachers and congregations is to take a single biblical text that offers sufficient possibilities and develop, say three different sermons on it, from different typological perspectives. That can do a lot to get us unstuck from the outmoded hermeneutical idea that each text has a single "propositional" core meaning which, when found, leads us to the single "right" interpretation.) It is probably more in the realm of this second approach than anywhere that some of the mischief of preaching creeps in unintentionally, when despite our best efforts and sensitivities what we actually say goes against the grain of the sort of human experience we were trying to cultivate. Here, in other words, is where we become most self-conscious about the intersection of the roles of proclaiming the word and shepherding the people.

There is yet a third sense in which we can speak of pastoral preaching, however, and that is the occasion when the very subject of a sermon is itself an issue of pastoral import whether on an individual or community scale. When we "preach on" family breakups or depression or a conflict in the congregation or a disaster in the community, we have not only a pastoral *dimension* (the first definition) and a pastoral *strategy* (the second) but also a pastoral *subject* (the third approach). (My hope, frankly, is that more of this kind of preaching will be done as ministers are increasingly better attuned to and educated about the inner dynamics of the human experience. It strikes me as poor homiletical stewardship to let the whole area of mental health and human relationships remain a *tacit* dimension of our preaching—still worse, to leave it entirely to such diverse non-theological "preaching" as the popular psychological press, talk-show interviews, or *Redbook* magazine.)

This, then, is what we are going to mean by "pastoral preaching": the homiletical occasion when whether by its dimension, or its strategy, or its subject a sermon addresses and/or impacts the personally invested concerns of its hearers.

II. Reframing the Task

The second step we need to take is the reframing proper. I have no rational argument to make for what I am about to suggest. It comes from years of thinking and experience as a preacher and homiletician, to be sure, but also from the same number of years as a clinical psychotherapist. I have often wondered just what is the essential experience of receiving pastoral care or, in the context in which I work, psychotherapy. Leaving aside one's particular language system for the moment, in what sort of experience is the love of God realized as a here and now actuality? And could the same metaphors which describe that also describe, in their way, the task of pastoral preaching?

What I now believe is that the covenant God offers becomes real to us predominantly as the human experience of *being understood* and *being "held."* Providing the communicative environment in which such an experience can be had is, I suggest, a way of framing the task of pastoral preaching. There is nothing dramatic or terribly complicated about either of those metaphors, though the second has a somewhat technical background which I will explain in a minute. They are certainly not "types" of preaching. The point is that they offer a way of conceptualizing what pastoral preaching aims for and does which in no way weds us automatically to a particular subject matter or to an arcane behavioral language system.

The sense of being understood, when you come right down to it, is a less common experience than we might imagine—or wish for. Most of us, for instance, go through times when we are beset by the nagging fear that no one in the world knows just exactly what we are feeling, thinking, and experiencing at the moment. We are utterly alone. (I sometimes think that the most vulnerable times for such a reaction include being a teenager, being in love, and experiencing great loss.) Again and again I have seen counseling or pastoral care "work" purely and simply because the walls of such isolation are breached and a person feels him or herself to be understood—joined, perceived, known. The encounters Jesus has in the New Testament seem linked together by this very experience. Before people are healed or converted or commissioned they are understood, and the very unexpectedness of such an experience can be staggering.

It is often said that there is nothing judgmental in the stance of the caring pastor or therapist. I disagree. Many a word has been written about how the unconditional acceptance of the pastor reflects and in some way incarnates the gracious love of God, whether we choose to *talk* about it that way or not. I find that highly judgmental, however, and appropriately so. Such a position makes and communicates the judgment that knowing and understanding a person through and through is not going to scare me out of the relationship or entice me into trying to reform them. It is not the absence of judgment that makes being understood so powerful, but rather the very presence of the judgment that being understood does not leave you standing alone.

The sense of being understood can be conveyed even when the subject matter itself is not necessarily about issues of personal living or development. It is mainly a matter of communicating to hearers that we know enough about them to take their roles—probably the most basic communicative skill we ever

learn, incidentally—and talk to them accordingly *about whatever the topic happens to be*. Preaching on controversial issues offers a good case in point. Time after time I have seen such preaching fail (through resistance and rejection by hearers) not really because people were unwilling to consider the points offered but because the preaching lacked this essential pastoral base: it did not offer a sense of understanding the hearer even when, in the event, the preacher clearly aimed to disagree vigorously with them.

The sense of *being held* is one of the most powerful metaphors I know of, and it should be since it comes directly from the infant's earliest experience of its world. The influential child psychiatrist D. W. Winnicott introduced the concept a generation ago in his work on transitional objects and phenomena—the famous “security blanket” experience whose importance to psychological development far exceeds the popular image of Linus and his beloved rag. Winnicott reminded us of two things: one, that part of growing up involves a child's making the transition from fantasy world to real world, bridging the gap between magical expectations and the rough and tumble of life-as-it-is; and two, that basically adequate mothering was an irreplaceable essential in the process, characterized in part by appropriate emotional “holding” of the child as the strenuous transitional process is waged.²

A form of such “holding” is what happens in the therapeutic environment which with its “sanctuary” quality partakes of both fantasy and real worlds, enabling a person to retrace his or her tracks, so to speak, in service to a more durable transition experience. Much the same dynamic is to be found in the worship experience.³ Here is to be found the “in the world but not of it” quality of which the Gospel of John speaks; hardly a more apt phrase could be found to describe the transitional experience. The pastoral preacher is in this scene as much a transitional guide as is the therapist.

What goes on within the framework of this transitional experience is the other of Winnicott's two main points. Just as the mother “held” the child through its transition, so too the therapist represents a “holding” figure to the client—though not, of course, in a literal sense. I have my own personal image for that phenomenon, and perhaps it would be useful here. When my children were younger they would occasionally bring me precious objects to hold for them, perhaps while we were out walking: rocks, interesting sticks, a bird's eggshell. As they have grown older they have begun to give me other things to “hold”: the worries of an early teenager, a dream that excited and confused a child just beginning to know what dreams are anyway; stuffed animals from earlier years put away in the attic and rediscovered for a brief flirtation with “the way it used to be,” a tearful phone call reporting the beloved guinea pig's death. Holding these things for them is both an important and a delicate operation, as I have learned to my sorrow in the times I botched the job, perhaps by saying without thinking, “What do we need another old rock for anyhow?”

Both as a therapist *and as a preacher* I simply do the same thing: I hold the precious things people bring—their histories, fantasies, hopes, relationships, worries, symptoms, all the rest. In the process, of course, I hold *them* because that is the nature of a transitional object or experience: it carries part of the person himself or herself with it; that is how it does its work. I come

more and more to realize that my skillfulness as a therapist does not depend so much on the expertness of my interpretations or the insightfulness of my observations as it does on my reliability as a “holder.” The same is true when I preach. Even though here I am doing all the talking, I remind myself that in effect I am holding people through their concerns and issues, most of which are unknown to me but which I inescapably touch with what I say.

Keep in mind that with these two metaphors I am not talking about the content of any particular sermon but about a way of imaging the task of pastoral preaching: it is the frame, not the picture itself, that is the issue. It is not that I announce to my congregation, “Now I am trying to understand you” or “Now you are being held,” and it is not that psychological points and topics are the substance of my preaching. It is rather that when I wonder what it is I set out to do when preaching pastorally—and hence what it is in particular that I will say in a given sermon—I can be informed and my work shaped by these metaphors. They provide a way of looking at the communicative environment and relationship I propose to establish in the preaching.

III. *A Letter From the Pew*

Whatever wisdom there may be in these suggestions comes mainly from what people have told me—explicitly and implicitly—about their experience of preaching. One way to illustrate what the task of pastoral preaching looks like when reframed as I have tried to do is to “overhear” what those people are saying. I have been one of the lucky ones in the mentors I have had, the people I have served, and the opportunities that have come my way. I wish that every preacher could have it that way, and some part of that hope is why I try to write books about it. Thinking along those lines, an idea came to me: I wish every preacher could one day receive in the mail a letter such as the following:

Dear Pastor:

You do not know me yet, but I have visited your worship services several times now. I sit toward the back, am an unremarkable middle-aged person, and act and dress like the reasonably well put together human being I am. But listening to your, or anyone’s, preaching constitutes a risk of sorts, and I wanted to tell you about some of my fearfulness about that before we go too much further. Since I do not know you, nor you me, and we therefore have no axes to grind, it is a good time to be candid.

I am not always sure why I come to worship, but I have discovered over the years that no matter how routine and habitual the reasons for my getting there, once I sit down something else begins to happen. I have no particular sensitivity for “holy things,” but it is clear enough even to me that being in worship means something at least a little out of the ordinary. No one needs to persuade me of that; I am already ready for whatever it will bring, and I want you to know it is a little frightening at times. Since you are obviously in charge of things, I find myself hoping you will, well, be a little careful with me (even though, in truth, I do not break easily).

I hope, for instance, that you will know a little about what it feels like to be in my shoes—or pew, maybe. No, I certainly don’t expect you to know my

life history—after all, we have never met. What I mean is, I want you to know that the aches and struggles I imagine you too have felt (and put aside, as a professional must, when you are up there in the front) are what I sit there holding in my hands. I want you to be on my side, to understand a little of my role. Perhaps it is contradictory, I being a stranger and all, but you see I want to feel known and understood. Maybe it is more fair to say I want to feel that you are prepared to offer that understanding, that it is a top priority for you, waiting for whatever chances circumstances might give to make it more concrete.

Then as I wait for you to start talking, I find myself hoping you will be able to help me make sense of what is going on with me. It is almost like going to the doctor for a diagnosis of what is wrong, I guess, though I certainly do not expect you to be a physician or even a mental health expert. But still there is this desire to have someone help me put what I am dealing with, day in and day out, into perspective, to find out what it really amounts to, especially as a Christian believer—though I hope you will not press me too hard to say *exactly* what that means!

Will I be able to sense that your commitment in this service is to me as a person, rather than to something else—your theological thinking or your Bible study perhaps? I have heard other preachers, I admit, who were nice enough but gave me the impression that the *first* item on the agenda was something besides me as a human being; and for a while there I found myself believing that before anything else I ought to be concerned for believing the right things or backing the right causes. Somehow, it never worked, I suppose because while as a person I could do all that, I somehow couldn't make much headway with any of it *until* I felt my being a person had been taken seriously.

Let's face it, even though I am a fairly tough character and have been around a lot, I sit here wanting you to be gentle with me. I don't mean "coddled," mind you. It's just that sometimes preachers seem so worried that anyone is going to take them seriously they forget how powerful what they say really is. I remember once wondering why my little boy reacted so strongly when I spoke firmly to him, until I listened to myself on a tape recorder and realized just how big and forceful I sounded. No, I'm not talking about your voice, but I want you to know it sometimes doesn't take as much as you might think to get through to me. I'm pretty sensitive about some things, especially the painful ones, and it seems to me they are the ones that get talked about the most when I read the Bible or hear good preaching.

Now here is a tough one: sometimes I get frightened at something and pull back into a kind of shell that looks on the outside like self-control or maybe even indifference. The strange thing is that even when that happens I somehow hope you will have the courage and sensitivity to see through it, and maybe to talk to me as though it weren't there. I don't mean ignoring it, or battering down my gates, or anything like that. I guess I don't want you to be put off by me; I want you to know that sometimes I'm just protecting myself when I seem to resist what you have to say, and that's when I need you to be braver about it than I am.

Another thing that ministers seem to me to have a hard time with: I want

you to take your time with me. You (not you personally, or at least I don't know yet whether this is the case) seem to rush a lot, to feel that everything has to be accomplished right now. Yes, I know there really is a lot of urgent business in the world, but with everyone else around me demanding that things be done yesterday, I come here hoping for a little more patience and a lot more time. If I get it, I'll be back, don't worry.

One last thing, and here I admit I'm out of my territory. But I hope you don't come on sounding like an amateur psychiatrist. What I want, I mean, is what I guess you might call a theological approach. Now careful here! I don't mean I want you to talk theology instead of talking about me. But it is important to me that my faith gets connected to my life, and I have had all I want of ministers who never quite get around to that. I was told I was "O.K." for so many years I nearly forgot who "I" was sitting in church, if you know what I mean. It just seems to me that a healthy religion fits hand in glove with healthy personhood, and that's what I am hoping to discover more about.

Thank you for listening. I want to hear what you have to say.

NOTES

¹ *The Restoring Word: Preaching As Pastoral Communication* to be published by Harper and Row, 1986.

² See, for instance, D. W. Winnicott, *Collected Papers: Through Paediatrics to Psycho-analysis* (London: Tavistock, 1958).

³ See for instance, my article "Worship As Anti-structure: The Contribution of Victor Turner," *Theology Today* Vol. XLI, No. 4, January, 1985, pp. 401-409. A seminal book which develops a parallel theory in detail is Bruce Reed, *The Dynamics of Religion: Process and Movement in Christian Churches* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1978).