

Story and Image in Sermon Illustration

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Story telling is widely seen as the homiletic new wave . . . a movement in preaching with a dynamism and vitality which may finally supplant topical preaching's three points and a poem. Its advocates point to the many advantages of the narrative sermon, ranging from foundational support in narrative theology and hermeneutics to the shift toward a new "personalism" in the pulpit.¹ When the preacher begins a story on Sunday morning, ears are unstopped and scales fall from the eyes. If for no other reason, preachers are turning to a more frequent use of stories because their congregations become more alert and interested when disruptive speech gives way to the narrative.

In a number of cases, sermons have clearly moved to some sort of full narrative structure,² but it remains the case that most use of story in preaching relates to the task of illustrating conceptually developed ideas. Here, too, may be detected some important shifts in the traditional conventions as to story illustrations. At this point, there seems to be good news and bad news. The good news is that the old style "war horse" illustration finally seems to be on the wane. These grand old stories of the (largely male and Victorian) heroes of the faith sound increasingly quaint in late twentieth century preaching. As these old friends visit sermons less frequently, the hearers are no longer asked to adopt a previous era's culture and values in order to be persons of faith. The bad news is that a new breed of story illustration has exploded on the scene with its own ambiance and implied value system. Conveyed largely through the commercial homily services, these latter day canned illustrations more often trade in "warm fuzzy" pop psychology and tales of the underdogs. Presumably the purpose here is to evoke congregational guilt while soothing it somewhat before the benediction. Given both the old and new sermon illustration, perhaps it is time to assess the limits of story when employed as an illustrative system and to suggest another option which may not involve as many potential liabilities. The limitations of story illustrations are proposed through the following theses:

1. *Most first person stories do not serve their intended purposes of demonstrating solidarity with the congregation and providing an immediacy to the "point."* Ironically, the typical first-person story served up by the preacher distances him or her from the people by either introducing homiletically extraneous issues or by connoting a pulpit posture of hero or victim. These self-disclosures intended as examples of common experience in many cases serve to highlight and set the preacher apart. Moreover, it is almost impossible for such stories to get their point across; they will typically serve to illustrate the preacher rather than the sermon.³ The exception here may be in the Black church where the preacher is invested with a much stronger communal identity and his or her story is more

readily "our story."⁴

2. *Extended story illustrations are problematic with regard to any homiletical intent.* Under the banner of preaching as storytelling the proportions of story illustrations have swollen noticeably. These rather elephantine stories circulate with some rapidity from pulpit to pulpit, being traded among preachers like baseball cards. Their purpose, seen especially when they are used as an introduction, is not so much to illustrate as to serve as quasi-scripture. The authority for a sermon's message, as well as the organization and message itself are all derived from the extended non-biblical story. Ironically, the biblical material present within the body of the sermon may actually be serving to "illustrate" the dominating story's purposes.⁵

Among the many difficulties with this misuse of story, two overriding concerns must be noted, one methodological and the other theological. With regard to the former, the preacher who utilizes such extended story illustrations runs the risk of leaving the hearers stranded in the story. For better and for worse, the more extended a story in the sermon, the more difficult it becomes to remove the congregation from its narrative "world" and refocus its attention elsewhere. This difficulty in extrication is compounded if the material which follows an extensive story is devoted to a conceptually-oriented explanation of the story's intended meaning. Such material is almost never heard by the congregation; they will remain within the story and assign their own meanings to it. The preacher's options become, then, to expand the story further into an exclusively narrative sermon,⁶ or to employ story illustrations which are considerably more economical and even terse. Turning to the latter concern, the question becomes that of the theological "fit" of these big stories with the biblical witness. Unfortunately, most of these vast illustrations romanticize and moralize on the faith. Only the rare extended sermon narrative is crafted in such a fashion as to be theologically congruent with the specific pericope. And almost none of the larger stories in current circulation reflect such congruence or fit with regard to any specific portion of biblical material.

3. *Sermonic structures involving parallel development of biblical and contemporary stories will not integrate in the consciousness of the hearers.* Instead of a creative fusion of the biblical and contemporary, the two narrative systems will present themselves as competing worlds within which the congregation is asked to live. Almost unconsciously, the hearers will choose the narrative context which is most concrete, detailed as to characterization and setting, and aligned with lived experience. That narrative context which will "form" in the consciousness of the hearers will, with few exceptions, be that of the contemporary story. The other half of the doublet will not be able to unify itself with the more dominant story nor actually be remembered by itself. For congregations with a vividly presented contemporary story, a more distantly presented Bible story will fade from consciousness as it is being told.

Illustration and Image

In spite of the identifications of certain questionable uses of story within a sermon, it remains the case that well-focused, brief stories can be effectively employed for illustrative purposes. In many cases, however, the preacher does not need to elaborate the illustration into a full narrative system; rather, a clearly focused image can be equally effective in forming the thought in the consciousness of the hearers. These images all come to awareness within the context of some story or other, some lived experience, but they gain an independent life in our memory and lurk in our subconscious. Because of their concreteness, images are considerably more determinative for personal and communal identity than conceptual definitions. In fact, Christian ethicists have argued recently that images of self and world orient not only how we see reality, but what we see as well.

What it is profitable to will depends upon the identity of the self that wills. A sense of identity is the result of a process of imaging; it is simply a cluster of images that inform the consciousness of the self, bringing specificity to its volition and liberty, and counseling it to pursue something rather than everything.⁷

This image-formed vision of self and world largely determines volition and specific behavior. Consciousness can be reached only by the preacher through the images that narratives project and that consciousness retains. Consequently, it is not just the case that images *may be* used within illustrative systems in preaching, they may well *have to be* employed if the sermon is to communicate meaning and value.

By way of example, the imagery employed in a recently preached sermon⁸ will be identified and interpreted with reference to its function and interplay. This sermon, dealing with the raising of Lazarus (John 11:1-44) was shaped with references to the plotting of the biblical narrative.⁹ The four component sections or "movements" of the sermon were:

- I. In the midst of life's dyings, we ask: "Jesus, where were you when we needed you?"
 - II. And Jesus responds, "I am the resurrection and the life."
 - III. But what does this do to the world's definitions of life and death?
 - IV. The question then comes: "Do you believe this?"
- Conclusion: "Come out!"

Given these four elements of the structure of the sermon, the images within each will be explicated and discussed as to their intended function. It should be noted that in none of these illustrations is it necessary to move to a narrative system; the only full "story" is the biblical story of Lazarus.

Movement I. What is sought here are images which express our longing for the Lord in the midst of the "deaths" we experience in life. These are times when we want to say with Martha, "Lord, if you had been here," this loss would not have happened. Three types of "dyings" in the midst of life are explicated here—the dyings of our loves (the lost relationships), the dyings of our worth (rejection by others), and the dyings of death (the death of family or friends).

Since these categories are still expressed in rather conceptual language, much more specific imagery is needed in order that this entire movement not be lost in its hearing. Therefore, "the dyings of loves" is imaged by a marital (or other) separation in which "the old rituals are still continued for a while, yet the one we loved now feels strange even to touch." "The dyings of our worth" is image through rejection, because of what we stand for, or our race or sex. Knowing this rejection, the old spiritual, "I've been 'buked, I've been scorned," does a solemn dance in our mind. Finally, "the dyings of death" are established by the images of the funeral of a loved one where we gaze at the green of the plastic grass and smell "the cut, used flowers." Within this first movement, images are chosen which span across sensory experience—touch, hearing (an "internal" kind), sight, and smell. Following each image, a perspective is then established which will persist as the "place" of the hearer until near the end of the sermon. "And we, too, join in the dying . . . the grave clothes are wrapped around us, the tomb door slams shut, and we are alone."

Movement II. Since a perspective has been established of the hearer in the tomb, this next movement must take into account this point of view or intentionally redirect it. The logic of the text calls for this shift, however, only at the end of the sermon and the hearers, then, must remain in the tomb. Jesus as the resurrection and the life is imaged by the Te Deum, sung at the Wedding Banquet of the Lamb which is joined by the saints at "Mt. Bethel Church, who are having their homecoming this weekend with dinner on the grounds." We hear this triumphant song of all the saints rather muffled, "from behind the thick, tomb door."

Movement III. The world's understanding of life and death is imaged through its technology. "Almost every week we watch a hospital show on T.V., and the patient is hooked up to a heart monitor. The rhythm looks normal for a while, but then there is a crisis and we see only a straight line." This conventional definition of life and death, though, is upset by the Johannine theology of eternal life in Christ. The confession that Jesus is resurrection and life is not reserved to only those saints who "from their labor rest"; in the midst of this life, with its death and its dyings, eternal life is given in Christ Jesus. This reversal is given through a reversal of the image system—"What if the guy driving the BMW with the gold American Express card and all the golf course memberships is 'flat line' and the little grandmother who volunteers for work in Old First's soup kitchen is a bouncing, picture of life? What if the world's categories are all backwards? Life in the midst of our dyings, eternal life now. . .? What if the world has it all wrong?"

Movement IV. The issue now becomes the nature of our response to this life-giving confession. Jesus asks Martha regarding the affirmation concerning resurrection and life, "Do you believe this?" But while belief in the Johannine sense does involve rational assent, "belief in," something more is at stake. Commitment to, sharing in, and worship of are also components of Johannine belief. The image presented here is of a man and woman who do believe in each other though much more is involved. "The two join hands and the man says to the woman, 'I take you to be my wife' and the woman says to the man, 'I take you to be my husband.' Rings are exchanged and the church rejoices in

this union, this covenanting, this wedding. Not only does this marriage imagery expand the usual definition of "beliefs" but it also implicitly links this question of belief in Christ to the confession of Christ as resurrection and life (the *Te Deum* was sung in Movement II at the Wedding Banquet of the Lamb). There is no attempt to explicitly link these image systems—to be obvious here would be to detract from the power of this interplay of images. Almost subconsciously the relationship is established, and such interaction of images, as David Buttrick observes, may have "awesome power."¹⁰

Conclusion. The perspective established within the first movement is brought to immediacy once more. "The stone is rolled away, our name is called, and we are summoned out of our tomb. We blink in the brightness of this new day and the obsolete grave clothes are unwound and thrown away." (In Movement I, it was the funeral flowers which were thrown away.) The conclusion ends with this gift of new life raising the same question for us as it did for Lazarus—"So now, what do we do?"

What is important to note, in summary, is that while each of the component parts of the sermon are illustrated, those illustrative systems are all essential to the meaning of the respective movements. Furthermore, these systems are comprised of imagery developed to interplay with each other and designed with a point of view in mind. In no case, however, was it necessary to elaborate in illustrative image into a narrative; the only "story" in the sermon is the biblical story of the raising of Lazarus, . . . and of ourselves.

NOTES

¹ Charles Rice, "The Expressive Style in Preaching," *The Princeton Seminary Review*, vol. 54, no. 1, (March 1971), p. 188.

² See Charles Rice, "Shaping Sermons by the Interplay of Text and Metaphor," in *Preaching Biblically: Creating Sermons in the Shape of Scripture*, ed. Don M. Wardlaw, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1983), pp. 101ff for a discussion of these alternative narrative structures.

³ I am indebted to David Buttrick for this insight.

⁴ See Henry H. Mitchell, *Black Preaching*, (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1979).

⁵ Innumerable "stewardship sermons," based on stories such as the familiar "Desert Pete" tale, inevitably display this tendency. If scripture is present within such a sermon at all—the biblical witness being rather optional within this approach—it can only serve to illustrate a message of works righteousness derived from the big tale.

⁶ See Charles Rice, "Shaping Sermons by the Interplay of Text and Metaphor," pp. 106-109.

⁷ David Bailey Harned, *Images for Self-Recognition: The Christian as Player, Sufferer and Vandal* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1977), p. 2. See also Stanley Hauerwas, *Vision and Virtue* (Notre Dame, Indiana: Fides Publishers, 1974).

⁸ "The Raising of Lazarus," preached on All Saints' Day, 1985, at York Chapel, Duke University Divinity School, Durham, North Carolina.

⁹ See David G. Buttrick, "Interpretation and Preaching," *Interpretation*, vol. 25, no. 1, (Jan. 1981), pp. 46-58 for an explication of this "phenomenological" approach to the plotting of a pericope's movement and structure.

¹⁰ David G. Buttrick, "Intensive Seminar on Biblical Preaching," sponsored by the Board of Discipleship, United Methodist Church, 1981.