

Some Missing Prerequisites

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I am regularly amazed by and grateful for the quality of preaching that is being done among us. My impression is that many, many preachers do their work regularly with grace, courage, diligence, and imagination. My comments thus are an attempt to "think with" preachers. My sense is that even among the ablest of preachers, however, the task is very difficult. On the one hand, I sense the enormous, inchoate power of intimidation that operates between preacher and congregation, so that the preacher cannot speak fully and freely the truth she knows, because the congregation will not bear it. To live daily with such silent intimidation from well-intentioned folk is an immobilizing experience. On the other hand, I sense considerable frustration among the more courageous, because when the truthful scandal of the gospel is voiced, it is often wrongly heard or not heard at all. The outcome is that risks of a costly kind have been taken by the preacher, to no apparent effect. Such real but ineffective risk, after a while, is debilitating. The constant realities of intimidation and frustration are exceedingly wearing in terms of fatigue, stress, resentment, a sense of defeat, and eventually a failure of nerve.

My assignment in this paper is to think about what is required in order that preaching might be more effective, that is, might evoke serious transformation. My impression is that the issues and problems are largely communal and "systemic," and we have been a long time getting in the condition we are in. Because the issues are communal, systemic, and long in coming, my judgment is that characteristically the preacher is not at fault, but is the victim of larger problems, or at best is a coconspirator. The preacher is much more the victim than the perpetrator of ineffectiveness, and I have no intention of "blaming the victim." I suggest three large requirements for effective preaching that for the most part are absent or inoperative in much of our preaching.

I

Preaching requires *an intentional embrace of an ecclesiology*. That is, effective preaching occurs among those who are prepared to enter into a self-conscious context of speaking and hearing that is committed to and unembarrassed by odd communication. This does not mean that every listener must "believe everything," or that preaching is among the already persuaded; rather this is different communication to which the gathered listeners give some provisional assent. Proclamation takes place in a community of proclamation, and proclamation is its reason for being gathered. When the church gathers for preaching (and for liturgy which is the context of preaching), it gathers with an awareness of having a different identity that permits a different universe of discourse.

1. An intentional ecclesiology makes an assumption about the *cruciality of baptism*. Those who listen to preaching either have accepted baptism or are being invited to baptism. The premise of this odd communication is that we have come prepared to die to what is old in order to be raised to newness of life (Rom. 6:4). The gathered listeners either have accepted a distinctive, radically alternative identity and vocation in the world, or are being invited to such a distinctive identity and vocation. In such an environment, different affirmations can be made that do not need to conform to the reason of the world (Rom. 12:2). The preacher can make affirmations, utter claims, voice promises, and sound commands that make sense only in a community given to baptism.

A lack of intentional ecclesiology, however, a failure to recognize that this is a baptismal gathering, causes listeners to imagine that there is no peculiar identity or vocation here under consideration. When listening (and therefore speaking) is conducted without baptismal context, very little can be said and less will be heard.

2. An intentional ecclesiology operates with a *distinctive universe of discourse*. We talk differently here and all present are open to that different discourse. Preaching is a conversation that takes place in a certain "language game" to which everyone inchoately subscribes for the extent of the conversation. That universe of discourse is rooted in elemental narrative testimony, going back to the first witnesses who reported their transformation, and is sounded in ways we could describe as prophetic and apostolic. Words, phrases, and speech forms belong to the texture and rationality of this community, and the preacher can operate with freedom in such modes.¹ The preacher does not always need to be looking over her shoulder, justifying her rhetoric according to some other norm or criterion. Where there is lack of consent about our mode of discourse, where there is anxiety about our ways of saying what we are authorized to say, the nerve is cut in communication.

My impression is that the church has been willing to sue everyone's language except its own. In conservative contexts, the danger of apostolic narrative has been traded for scholastic language that is reduced to dogmatic assertion and moralism. In liberal contexts, speech among the "cultured despisers" of faith tries to walk carefully around the scandal and ends up a benign affirmation of the *status quo*. Where the language is uncertain, a great deal of energy is used assuring the listener that nothing will be said which the world regards as foolish or weak. When the preacher moves away from a prophetic, apostolic mode of discourse, there is very little left to say that needs to be said by the preacher.

3. An intentional ecclesiology is deeply linked to the normative character of the *canonical text of scripture*. The church community has staked its life and its identity on the claims of the scriptural text. The primal witnesses speak. Our faith is given in their testimony. This does not mean that there is agreement about the construal or interpretation of the text, but only the expectation that preaching is to see what fresh, live word from God is given and mediated through this text. It follows that the preacher need not be defensive about this text and its use; conversely, the preacher and the congregation are not free to lust after other, "better" texts which are in fact some one else's

canonical text, perhaps Freud, or Jung, or Marx, or Parsons, or Geertz, or Whitehead, or Hobbes, or Locke, or whomever.

My impression is that for much of our prattle about "the authority of scripture," there is very little trust in the truth of the text.² On the one hand, critical study has regularly sought something more normative behind the text. On the other hand, what sounds like a "high view of scripture" is in fact trust in imposed confessional traditions that are rooted, not in the text itself, but in some cultural crisis to which the church has made concrete response. Given the twin temptations of critical suspicion and confessional imposition, we have left little space for the voice of this text itself as the house where God's children may play.³ We stay embarrassed and tentative about the text, not being aware that it is indeed a countertext that is not a willing junior partner to any of our other cultural or intellectual commitment. And when the text is not seen as foundational, then the preacher's entire speech begins in jeopardy and without a ground of authority.

My impression is that such an intentional ecclesiology and its elements of baptism, universe of discourse, and text are largely absent in the preaching of our kind of church. At the most, ecclesiology is understood as a form of polity, power, and governance, as in "We are all Presbyterians here." We do not, however, understand this affirmation to refer to our baptism, our modes of discourse, and our canon. Our church identity does not for many people lead to a conclusion: (a) that we meet under the aegis of a baptismal identity that endangers all other identities, (b) that the purpose of meeting is odd communication which the world describes as foolish, and (c) that the text on which we stake our faith is a countertext and has few epistemological allies in the world. Where these understandings do not prevail, preaching happens in an intellectual, cultural vacuum in which the preacher scrambles endlessly to make a credible point of contact with the listening congregation which is indifferent to baptism, outside the circle of evangelical discourse, and resistant to normative canon. Where such intentionality is lacking, listening is done through managerial or therapeutic expectations that derive from other cultural contexts that are alien to the scandal.⁴ Inevitably, preaching is then miscommunication that almost by definition cannot generate passion for ministry or will for mission.

II

Preaching requires *an explicit practice of social criticism and social possibility discerned in large scope, articulated in close concreteness*. The conversation that is preaching is not in a cultural vacuum and it is not an isolated moment. Consequently, the preacher must have a larger vision of what a sermon intends to do, so that there is long-term strategy about the "human predicament" and the "evangelical possibility" that are juxtaposed in the sermon. Where there is no overarching strategy for the preacher that endures through time from sermon to sermon, no larger sense of crisis, no sustained notion of hope and intentionality, the power of preaching diminishes and descends to triviality and probably mediocrity. When a sermon is not part of a larger sense of our theological situation, the sermon is often reduced to inanity. Sermons

then end up as clever ideas, *ad hoc* responses to circumstances of the moment, or the preacher's pet project.

1. The preacher (and it is hoped the congregation) must have some general sense of what the crisis is, in the midst of which they meet. The signs of the crisis are daily and immediate among us: alienated personal relations, distorted power relations, inhumane economic practices. These various pathologies issue in abuse, despair, anxiety, fatigue, and brutality. These several signs, however, are not to be confused with the real issue. We each have, to be sure, our preferred way of identifying the underneath crisis. Some of us believe that the maltreatment of the poor is the focal issue of our time. Some of us imagine that the abuse of the earth and the "greenhouse effect" are most elemental. Some of us have decided that the threat of nuclear arms is the main danger. Some of us conclude that the overriding issue is secularization and the knee jerk response of frightened religion. More personally, we may believe that the issue is distorted sexuality or economics gone awry, so that we cannot afford a house.

All of these judgments witness to the reality of our social context. We need, however, a larger theological articulation. My own inclination is to say that our theological situation consists in the *demise and collapse of the old world of preference and domination* that we have grown to trust and count on. The disappearance of that world, which touches every fact of our life, may indeed be engineered by the rise of the third world peoples, by the powerful emergence of Islam, or by the release of energy for human liberation. Our theological reality, however, is that God is now dismantling and delegitimizing the life-world that most of us have come to know, love, and rely upon. It is the *loss of our known world* that is our common situation. That is our common situation every day, all day, including the days when we gather for preaching and for listening. We are haunted, perhaps troubled, perhaps exhilarated, but haunted. The haunting which pervades our life is daily and concrete.

2. The preacher (and it is hoped the congregation) must have some general sense of the promise and summons of the gospel that is powerfully made to those whose world is ending. All the way from creation to Easter, our canonical text asserts that God is at work for newness, working something fresh and healing beyond our expectations or data. This general sense is not simply pastoral or therapeutic reassurance, but a *primordial theological conviction that God wills a good future*. As the old world is taken from us, all of us together are summoned to choose, embrace, and receive a new world that is marked by God's outrageous resolve for mercy, justice, compassion, and peace. The move from a world of domination to a world of mercy is a big move, one we make reluctantly, a little at a time.

3. The overarching strategy from sermon to sermon (given these assumptions) requires the practice of social criticism that processes *the ending of a world* to which we cling, and the practice of social possibility that processes *a world emerging* by the power of God, a world we seldom welcome and hesitantly receive. The preaching task, sermon by sermon, text by text, is to enable the listening congregation, one at a time and all together, to relinquish the world dying before our eyes, and to embrace the new world of God's

faithfulness that is "at hand," crowding in on us, but only glimpsed most days. Our common situation means that this massive evangelical transformation, wrought through God's ominous discontinuity, is what must be talked about and what may be talked about, in a community grounded in baptism. Moreover, as the congregation meets to hear and to receive, it may be confident that the sermon is the only place in town where an honest conversation is offered about the foundational crisis of our life lived in the presence and in the absence of God. It is not important that the preacher read the crisis exactly as I have characterized it here. It is urgent that the preacher have some "large reading" of public reality, or the chance for serious preaching is forfeited at the outset. The preacher will usefully ask how each particular sermon addresses the ongoing transformative process of our life.

Given such a large sense of crisis, of threat and possibility, the sermon is a mode of communication marked by two important features which are theological in character. First, the sermon is not time to talk about the deep change that has happened elsewhere, as though the sermon were simply a journalistic report or the minutes of actions taken elsewhere. No, the sermon is the meeting. The sermon is not a report but an event. To the extent that the sermon is indeed the sounding of "the word of God," the very enactment of the sermon enables the listener to make a move from the failed world to the new world God gives. Like a serious therapeutic conversation, the transformation to be accomplished is to be worked here and now in this company, in this speaking and hearing and nowhere else. The sermon is the arena in which people relinquish and receive, and depart changed, renewed, transformed, raised to new life.

Second, this large, almost cosmic drama of transformation is processed a bit at a time, one text at a time, one conversation at a time, through an ongoing parade of images, metaphors, symbols, narratives, memories, and visions. There are two temptations when we use our frail voices on such grand themes. One temptation is to generalize about the crisis; generalization will not do, because we live our lives concretely, one day and one scene at a time. The other temptation is to take a day or a scene in isolation, as though it were not a part of the larger drama. To generalize is to lose the poignancy of the dailyness; to isolate the moment is to miss the larger sense toward which all our moments are gathered.

Effective preaching requires that all our specific, detailed living be understood as a part of a larger drama being acted out in the presence of God. Effective preaching requires that all our specific, detailed texts be understood as crafted exposes of the story of our life with God. Our lives are about only a few things; those, however, are of utmost seriousness. Our scatteredness, however, tempts us to imagine that there is no larger drift or sense either to our life, or to God's word toward us.

Where the sense of largeness is lacking, where we do not understand the crisis of great loss or the alternative of great newness, sermons are twittered away in good advice, happy reassurances, or harsh intimidation. The outcome of such twittering is the desperate sense that my life really is not about anything. Then nothing is expected and nothing can be counted on. The power of

technical reason which apportions reality into operational units robs us of any wholeness that permits mission. Where there is no larger sense in preaching, we likely will not understand our crisis nor discern God's alternative for us.

III

Preaching requires an *intentional self-critical hermeneutics about authority, transformation, and communication*. Put more simply, there is need for a thoughtful awareness of who speaks, who listens, and what happens. I have no doubt that much of an effective hermeneutic happens accidentally. My impression is that we could be much more intentional and explicit about the dramatic dimensions of the preaching enterprise.

1. Who speaks. Of course it is the preacher who speaks; we are all schooled in the conviction that preaching is "truth mediated through personality." No doubt. That correct affirmation, however, is freighted with problems that evoke intimidation and frustration. Not without cause have we insisted that preaching is proclamation of God's word and that the text proclaimed contains God's word.⁵ Such claims are endlessly problematic and at times exploited in arrogant and authoritarian ways, as though the preacher could speak *ex cathedra*.

A hermeneutic of God's word, however, means something other than license for the preacher. It means that the congregation gathers to be addressed by God's speech, by the sounding of God's purpose, will, character, and promise. At its best, preaching is indeed a voice other than our own. The authority of such speech is other than the claim of the preacher; that which is said is (and had better be) a disclosure other than the opinion of the preacher. This is indeed the holy moment of address when none other than God "calls into existence things that do not exist" (Rom. 4:17). The speech of this God is always "yes," (II Cor. 1:19-20), though God's life-giving "yes" contradicts our treasured idolatries. The speech of God is specific, concrete, and crafted. God's summoning, forming work is done as does the artist; God forms what did not exist before the moment of artistry. The moment of such crafting and forming is not for "projects," but for the giving of God's majestic self.

2. Who listens. The ones gathered are either the baptised or the ones summoned to baptism. Our lives, however, are endlessly complicated so that a baptized ear has to sort out the static. I suggest that this odd communication concerns those who are on overload, who resist authority, and who are nearly talked out of a capacity to respond. We do not easily listen in our society and we do not want to be addressed.⁶

We are on overload because we live in the midst of din and hammering appeals, all seeking a piece of our commitment. After a while, we can hardly sort out the voices; we grow indifferent, not wanting to hear any of them. We are exhausted by much speaking that contains no serious speech, that surely never offers an unqualified "yes."

We are resistant to authority. The ideology of modernity nurtures us to refuse access to anyone concerning the serious places in our life. We are deluded enough by "democratic" myths and notions of self-sufficiency, that we are prone to listen only to voices that echo our vested interest.⁷ As a result, we

are not much inclined to the authority of the preacher. Beyond that, we are not much inclined to be addressed by a “voice of holiness” which makes a total claim and which subverts the underpinning of our carefully arranged lives. We will listen only to lesser voices of lesser claims which are comfortably domesticated. The problem of course is that lesser voices make only innocuous gifts and promises too easily credible.

3. What happens. There meet in preaching the holy “yes” of God and the befogged ears of the almost baptized. In that moment of speech, we anticipate the breaking of conformity and the working of transformation (Rom. 12:2). The aim of evangelical preaching is indeed transformation. What is lacking among us is attention to the ways in which transformation happens and the kinds of wondrous, miraculous speech that permit, authorize, and energize such change. We preachers might well ask of our own experience: Who changed us? How do we change? Who said what that gave us newness?

I am persuaded that transformative speech is never didactic, never systemic, never moralistic, because such speech either reenforces what we already thought (and so occasions no change), or it drives us to defensiveness (which never evokes change). Speech that transforms us is speech that breaks the grip of present tense reality, that envisions and imagines an alternative world, that moves us outside our guarded preconceptions and our treasured nonnegotiables.⁸ Such speech is characteristically poetic, playful, dramatic, and artistic—dangerously open-ended, not offering conventional certitudes, but affirming possibilities not grounded in our present controlled arrangements. This means that the speech evoking transformation is unlike almost all other speech in our society. It is unlike other speech in *what is said*, for it has as its subject the Holy One who is never a predictable character to plot. It is unlike other speech in *how it is said*, for the *how* of imagination is linked to the *what* of gospel.⁹

Preaching that is done in the context of U.S. culture now occurs in an odd circumstance. On the one hand, the old power arrangements and the trusted epistemological certitudes have failed, and are at least in jeopardy.¹⁰ We have much less to count on than we used to. On the other hand, the old “Christian consensus” no longer compels wide public assent. Indeed, there seems to be assent mostly where our interests are reiterated as “truth.” As a result, preaching no longer happens (except in rare, very protected places) from an assured, accepted center. More likely, Christian proclamation is a voice at the margin, or at the most a voice in the cacophony that is granted no cultural priority or privilege. Old expectations of authority simply do not operate.

That difficult moment of preaching in our culture is also a moment of enormous possibility for new courage and freedom in preaching. Because the difficulty is also a possibility, it is important that we be *intentional about a communal identity* rooted in a text and embraced in baptism. It is crucial that we be *thoughtful and honest about the large social reality* that places us commonly in a crisis. It is urgent that we *think through our speech situation* that may let us speak and hear differently, trustingly, and obediently. The notions of *ecclesiology*, *social criticism*, and *hermeneutics* may sound too abstract. I mean only to think again about the powerful, but largely unacknowledged

accomplishments of modernity which have robbed preaching of its conventional percentages. It is my expectation that intentionality about these three items will permit a new authority—not like that of the scribes (Mark 1:22!)—an authority that gives life. The preacher, like the word, may be freshly unfettered. Someday soon preachers may stand in the pulpit and notice that the immobilizing powers of modernity have been broken. It will be a day! It will be some sermon! It will be some miracle, the miracle to which we draw nearer each time we preach faithfully.

NOTES

¹ On the cruciality of a specific universe of discourse for transformative communication, see Elizabeth H. Wolgast, *The Grammar of Justice* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), especially 195-213.

² Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), has traced the power of modernity to cause loss of confidence in narrative, but clearly the issue concerns not simply "narrative," but the authoritative text more generally.

³ The phrase is from Raymond E. Brown, *The Sensus Plenior of Sacred Scripture* (Baltimore: St. Mary's University, 1955), 28.

⁴ In making reference to managerial and therapeutic expectations, I am of course alluding to the work of Robert Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

⁵ The daring claim that proclamation is indeed "God's word" has been explicated in a magisterial way by Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics I 1, The Doctrine of the Word of God* (New York: Charles Scribner and Sons, 1936), 98-111.

⁶ See Jacques Ellul, *The Humiliation of the Word* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), and more popularly Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986).

⁷ On the cruciality of listening for living, see Eugen Rosenstock-Huussy, *Speech and Reality* (Norwich, VT: Argo Books, Inc., 1970). In paraphrasing and challenging Descartes, Rosenstock-Huussy writes: "The first outcry of human self-consciousness about society is the word 'Listen!' And as long as this word is not recognized as the cornerstone of our whole building of social science, this science will never come of age. 'Audi, ut vivamus.' Listen and we shall survive." "Audi, ne moriamur." Listen, lest we die. Human survival and revival depend on speech" (23-25).

⁸ On the cruciality of speech for liberation and subversion, see Garrett Green, *Imaging God, Theology and the Religious Imagination* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1989).

⁹ On the cruciality of "how" for "what," see Gail R. O'Day, *The Word Disclosed* (St. Louis: CBP Press, 1987), 11-15 and *passim*, and Robert Coles, *Times of Surrender* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1988), 45-46, with reference to William Carlos Williams: "'It's important,' he once said, 'to listen not only to the complaints of your patients but how they put them into words for you—how they choose to say (and regard) what they want to tell you.'"

¹⁰ On the epistemological subversiveness of the gospel, see Sharon D. Welch, *Communities of Resistance and Solidarity: A Feminist Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985). For a more theoretical reflection on the epistemological crisis, see Max Horkheimer, "The End of Reason," *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader* ed. Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt (New York: Continuum, 1982), 26-48. On the epistemological crisis, Horkheimer writes: "Pain is the means of calling men back from the noumenal world into which all empiricist philosophers and even Kant forbade them to penetrate. It was always the best teacher to bring men to reason. Pain leads the resistant and wayward, the phantast and utopian back to themselves. It reduces them to the body, to part of the body. Pain levels and equalizes everything, man and man, man and animal" (46).