

Too Close to Home? Preaching the (Almost) Unpreachable

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I

My father preached a series on peace and justice and lost all the retired admirals, one by one.

Our minister only talks about race relations in private.

R . . . is trying to lead the congregation toward some understanding of the poor, but he has to go very gently.

I've gotten into trouble over prophetic preaching, so in this church I've defined my preaching role as pastoral. That's my real strength anyway, and things have gone a lot better.

We are very socially concerned, but there's a lot we can't preach about because we have so many corporate executives in the congregation. They wrap themselves in the flag, and we can't afford to lose them.

These voices represent clergy in five mainline Protestant denominations.

They all show a reluctance to take hold of social issues and preach about them in a direct fashion. Are these ministers cowards? Do they misunderstand what it is to preach the gospel? Or is the task sometimes too difficult for any person? When the really tough issues raise their heads too close to home, is it inevitable that "One who listens to God cannot listen to the world. And one who listens to the world loses God."¹ Who among us has honestly faced this dilemma and never stumbled?

Because we wish to help people—as well as to maintain church membership—we may shy from confrontation, both in the pulpit and out of it. We fear that those who leave the fold will never return. But we do not like holding back. Sometimes the tension between what we would do, and what we feel we can do, turns into anger, and in our hunger and thirst for righteousness we overreach ourselves and attack our hearers for not being responsive to the leadership we would like to exercise. That is when, as in the following two examples, we say what we do not quite wish to:

The Worship Committee has asked me to preach this morning about homosexuality. But the problem in this congregation is not homosexuality. The problem is your homophobia.

We have had a series of congregational meetings about the plight of the homeless. I've listened to every speaker, and now it's time for me to put

in my word. I think that anyone who feels afraid of having homeless people coming into the church building does not know who Jesus Christ is.

As Buechner has pointed out in his gracefully poetic way, there is no gospel without tragedy.² And there are times when every preacher must seriously consider whether integrity requires a sermon that—if delivered—would hit the congregation like a blunt instrument. The stakes can look high. As a pastor asked Hauerwas and Willimon in a Bible study on the story of Sapphira and Ananias, “Is it worth provoking a coronary in a couple over a little thing like a piece of real estate?” Can the price of accountability to the gospel be too high?³

There were times when the words of Jesus fell on their hearers like blockbusters. Quite often, his way of speaking was to confront the worldliness of the people around him. For example, when the rich young man was told what he must do to be saved, “his countenance fell, and he went away sorrowful . . .”(Mark 10:22).

No article or book or method can dissolve the radical confrontation between the world of our lives and the world of the gospel. But confrontation is not in itself a value, and it can be counterproductive. It is strong medicine, and it is not the only means we have of proclaiming a Word which—even without the imperfections of our proclamation—is a “hard saying” (John 6:60).

In this article I aim to provide some assistance for the preacher who must address difficult issues in the community, who faces the prospect that a call for change or even a reminder that we stand under judgment for what we treasure will be too hard a saying—“too close to home”—to be heard. I do not offer formulas for “community conflict” or “social justice” sermons; there are books to consult,⁴ but they cannot offer formulas either. What I hope to do is to offer some guidance to the minister who, with the help of prayer and thought and study— and of conversations with the congregation and with scripture— will risk trying to find his or her own way toward leading the congregation without losing them.

For that purpose, I have drawn upon remarks made by people in two communities, people upon whom more social change was thrust than they were ready to accept. In dialogue with their statements I place some biblical texts, so as to form an implied discussion between people who feel threatened by change, and scriptural texts through which we can learn and preach. I describe ministers in these communities engaging with the impending changes in their communities, and with the reactions of their congregations. And I will suggest that we should think of preaching in its broader context in ministry. The way may be best prepared for the message, or its transforming potential best realized, when part of your vision is communicated elsewhere than from the pulpit. Indeed, sometimes it is wise to stand back and let people see for themselves what is there, in the direction you are looking. After all, the ideas we like the most and implement the most faithfully are the ones we think we thought up ourselves.

II

Suppose a halfway house, or a group home for people who are disabled in some way, or a clinic, or affordable housing is proposed for a community. The newcomers would be people who do not meet the community's spoken or unspoken criteria for membership, and the cry is heard, "Not in my back yard!" What can we do to be truthful witnesses to the gospel, and efficacious, when our parishioners feel that their world is threatened? Here is how the "not in my back yard" issue surfaced in two New Jersey communities, "Hightops" and "Midbury."

Hightops is decidedly upscale in land values and housing costs. It's the sort of place where your children's orthodontist would live. Midbury, on the other hand, is a middle-middle class community of store owners and salespeople. In both communities, church members were confounded when outsiders (in one case a nonprofit foundation, and in the other the state government) proposed that there should be a new kind of neighbor: retarded persons in one, and people with modest incomes in the other. Each plan seemed designed to bring "undesirables" into the club-like uniformity of a suburban American neighborhood.

For a time the preacher in Hightops watches and listens. After all, there are a few churches in town, and anyhow not all the perturbation is coming from church members. But then he reads in the local newspaper that a number of people, including members of his own church, are raising funds to hire a law firm to find a way to exclude the group home for the developmentally disabled. He also learns that threats have been made against the owners of the house, and that there is talk of firebombing if anyone moves in. The newspaper reports that there have been firebombings in communities like his. What to do?

For a time the preacher in Midbury stands back also. He is tired of suburbs, and to provide a more exciting dimension to his ministry he travels on solidarity missions to Central America when he can. He does not want to say that his congregation is hostile to people of different backgrounds, but in defining them he evidences his own attitudes by telling an interviewer that "rich Jewish storekeepers" who have moved to Midbury are the ones who won't accept the people who need affordable housing. Then some of his parishioners write a detailed, well-drafted open letter, published in the local newspaper, which argues that new affordable housing should go elsewhere. More prosperous communities nearby, it says, have no such burden, no affordable housing at all. Why us, *again*? The minister reluctantly discerns that the problem in the community is a problem in his church as well. He begins to wonder why his congregation, so generous with gifts for relief of suffering in Central America when he preaches on that subject, are now so "selfish." What next?

In neither community would a statement of moral absolutes be helpful at the outset. "Hunger and thirst for righteousness" (Matthew 5:6) cannot be imposed as a code of law. And respect for members of the congregations, if nothing else, requires that their ministers discover with some precision which attitudes are held, and why. We expect others to listen to us; we should not be seen as refusing to listen to others.

When the two ministers recover from the shock of discovering that some

of their own parishioners are reacting against the prospect of a different kind of neighbor, and that many others quietly support them, they can explore the reasons behind the resistance. In Hightops, there was fear that the disabled persons would be dangerous, and that realtors were involved in a plot to reduce the value of properties for quick acquisition. There was the feeling that group homes do not "belong" in a place where some market values exceed a million dollars. And there was indignation reported in a newspaper:

They say these people have as much right to be here as we do. That's wrong. My children would like to live here, too, but they can't afford it. These people, their only qualification is the state is going to take care of them. I worked three jobs to get here.

In Midbury, there was also a feeling that residents had "paid their dues" and now were entitled to the good life. As one person put it in a letter,

I have worked hard all of my life, some days 14 and 16 hours. My goal has been to someday be able to move my family out to the country into a nice home. After years of marriage and three children, my wife and I, working like dogs, obtained our goal. We bought a lovely home . . . We put our all into the down payment, and we go without many luxuries to pay our monthly mortgage on time.

Now we've been here two years and find out about the possibility that [affordable] homes will be built a half-mile from our home . . . I have compassion for low-income people who do not have the earning capacity of others. But who has compassion for the people who give up stress-free lifestyles, time home with their families, automobiles that are nice and new, and vacations? . . .

Low-income people should live in low-income areas. Let's think about the poor work animals who try so hard and strive all of their lives to upgrade the lives of their families by sacrificing for a nice area and home. For what! The area is so beautiful here, but the congestion will change things.

Is the plan for the future to not have nice and poor areas anymore? If so, what is the point of striving, of doing without, of hard work, of sacrifice? Let's change the plan and put [affordable] housing elsewhere.

III

It is easy to criticize the cries of the people who believe that what they have is nothing but their proper reward. They have forgotten that "the earth is the Lord's (Psalm 24:1), belonging to the One who says "the land is mine," who reminds us of our dependency and contingency by telling us we are all "strangers and sojourners" in it—God's tenants (Lev. 25:23).⁵ The attitude of self-sufficiency manifested in the quoted texts, the sense that the speakers' comforts have come through their own works and worth, is of course the original sin of "pride."

But we should not start out by naming the sins of others. Rather, our first step should be to hear what our parishioners are saying. As we learn where our

people are, we can lead them to question the facts—or misconceptions—on which they rely. Through listening, we are likely to discover an underbrush of misinformation needing to be cleared, and some of that work can be done through sermons. Is a retarded person placed in a group home likely to be another Son of Sam? Is an occupant of affordable housing more likely to sell crack than to turn out for coaching Little League? We must not allow fears to feed on poisonously misleading stereotypes. (When we seek to dislodge such images, however, our gifts may be challenged to the utmost, since stereotypes of out-groups are often held with ferocious tenacity.)

Second, we can acknowledge that some of our parishioners' fears may have a basis in reality. If a community faces being swamped by a great influx of people with very serious problems, then churches can work toward changes in site plans and toward seeing that the right kinds of support services are provided. Dumping is good for no one.

Third, we will find that there are attitudes that must be confronted. So many people only want neighbors who are cookie-cutter versions of themselves. But as Jürgen Moltmann put it, "The friendship of Jesus cannot be lived and its friendliness cannot be disseminated when [fellowship and solidarity are] limited to people who are like ourselves" Perhaps we can preach the parable of the Good Samaritan afresh, finding new relevance in its discovery that a good neighbor came from a disparaged ethnic group. And people in comfortable circumstances easily forget that Jesus shared his table with the poor and despised, and with "sinners."

Along with prejudice against people who are different, there may be a concern that the tremendous profits associated with owning real estate during the last decade are being threatened. But most likely, profits will not be threatened if new neighbor proposals reflect competent planning. And the important question is not whether profits are threatened, but rather: what lies in the hearts of the fearful? Is money valued ahead of everything else? Has the fear of monetary loss, or an unending desire for gain, taken center stage because other concerns have been neglected? Does life feel empty because a series of achievements fails to provide satisfaction?

The preacher who probes his congregation's sentiments and priorities will be ready to draw upon biblical material. For example,

The land of a rich man brought forth plentifully; and he thought to himself, "What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?" And he said, "I will do this: I will pull down my barns, and build larger ones; and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; take your ease, eat, drink, be merry." But God said to him, "Fool! This night your soul is required of you; and the things you have prepared, whose will they be"? So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God (Luke 12:16-34).

The rich man filled ever-larger barns and put God out of mind. He worshipped "abundance of possessions" (v. 15) rather than treasuring and expecting God's kingdom (vv. 31, 34, 40). He had sought not sufficient possessions,

but surplus; his heart was covetous and he had not been "rich toward God." God required his empty soul, while his full barns passed to others. The rich man was condemned not because he sought to keep his harvest dry, and not simply because he wished to be rich, but because he put his possessions ahead of his soul. He put aside and neglected the pursuit of all values except one. He put another god before God. And he was judged for what was in the depths of his heart.

In the same way, Sapphira and Ananias were condemned in Acts 5 not because they brought only part of their wealth to the apostles, but because they said that what they brought was the entirety. "How is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God" (v. 4). They put another god before God.

The lie that Sapphira and Ananias told, like the earth-boundedness of the rich man, had in common the placing of another value above that of God. That idolatry was not only a matter of mental attitude, but also of action. Both what we feel and what we do reveal the truth about what we hold most dear. "For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (Matthew 6:21).

The stories of the rich man and of Sapphira and Ananias can serve to remind us, as well, of the insidiousness of that first sin, "pride." How easy it was for those unfortunate people to forget that all things in creation come from God and go to God, that the comforts we crave in life are not ours alone, and that life itself is not an entitlement! But when those truths are real to us, we can love God and neighbor, and we can recognize God and neighbor in a stranger.

IV

I have envisaged preaching as aimed in part at the uncovering, as well as the reformation, of deep motives and understandings. Toward those ends, it may be helpful to think of preaching as part of a larger ministry. Through education and retreats, discussions and debates, in all kinds of conversation, the way may be prepared for hearing and following the formal message. Involving people in the process of deciding what is right, when biblical texts and "community texts" encounter each other, is potentially the most powerful means of persuasion.

And involving people in doing things, as well, is part of changing their outlook. Although we often think that attitude change comes first, and then action, it can work the other way too. Learning and serving can lead to a change of heart. The good news includes the discovery that the congregation *can* serve the Lord through extending itself for others.

A happy ending to the "not in my back yard" situation would include, therefore, not only "new eyes to see" the congregation's commonality with its neighbors as children of God, but also some tangible means of helping the newcomers become a part of the community. The Welcome Wagon concept need not be the exclusive property of commercial enterprises. Perhaps in consortium with other churches, the congregation can find ways to reach out to the newcomers, to help them find their way into the existing community (and in some

cases into the church), and to discover and meet particular needs.

NOTES

¹ Walther Zimmerli, *The Old Testament and the World* (London: SPCK, 1976), 1.

² Frederick Buechner, *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977).

³ Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, "Ministry as More Than a Helping Profession," *Christian Century* vol. 106, no. 9 (March 15, 1989), 282-284.

⁴ See, e.g., Samuel D. Proctor, *Preaching About Crises in the Community* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1988); David H. C. Read, *Preaching About the Needs of Real People* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1988); Ronald J. Sider and Michael A. King, *Preaching About Life in a Threatening World* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987); William H. Willimon, *Preaching About Conflict in the Local Church* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987); Kelly Miller Smith, *Social Crisis Preaching* (Macon GA: Mercer University Press, 1984).

⁵ See also Psalms 104:27-30 and 139:13-16; cf Numbers 27:16, "the God of the spirits of all flesh."

⁶ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 121.