

Protagonist Corner

The Sermon That Flew

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Something happened last summer that does not usually happen to me. The occurrence was so rare, in fact, that it can be pinned down to a specific time and place. To put it bluntly, a sermon I preached sprouted wings and flew.

That does not happen often. Like anybody else's, my sermons are of uneven quality. Some of them sprint, others limp. Some roll along, others need to be carried. An occasional sermon has held enough promise for me to launch it into the air, only to watch it plop to the foot of the pulpit like a wingless dove. But one sermon actually flew. It sprouted wings, fluttered around, and took off. More to the point, it built a number of nests within the congregation.

Ever since that unusual occasion I have reflected on how this event came to be. For the life of me, I do not know what I did to help make it happen.

The setting was an intergenerational conference on a college campus for Presbyterians from Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and northeastern Ohio. I served with a couple of colleagues as part of a worship team, mutually sharing duties as liturgists and preachers.

The first night did not go well. I drew the straw to preach for the opening service on Sunday evening. My sermon aimed to gather a strange, new community and reflect on the gospel which had brought us together. It was a flop. I spoke for twenty minutes to three hundred weary travelers, ignored the fact that forty-five percent of the congregation was under the age of fifteen, and stomped around in deep theological muck of my own making. It did not help to preach in a lecture hall of a college science building, from a wobbly lectern strategically located beneath a large projection screen, and adjacent to a dissection table.

But when I preached the following Wednesday, my sermon received more than a good hearing. A number of people actually said it was a life-changing experience for them. When the conference was over, many evaluation forms noted that the Wednesday sermon was "a highlight during a rich and rewarding week." Ever since I have wondered, "What did I do right?"

The scripture text was unremarkable. Mark 2:23-3:6 relates the final two of five controversy stories where the Strong Man of God rips up the hedges of organized religion. After episodes dealing with forgiveness, the inclusion of disreputable people, and fasting, Jesus speaks of new wine which bursts old wineskins. My text picked up on the following two ruptures of those wineskins, as the disciples plucked grain on the Sabbath and Jesus healed someone on the wrong day of the week. It seemed like tame and typical synoptic material.

Yet the sermon on that text took flight from the pulpit and landed among the hearers. No preacher knows how a sermon will be met by people in the congregation, but every preacher wants such a meeting to occur. It could create a point of conflict, or facilitate a point of contact. Who knows?

I have questioned whether the positive response to this sermon came from the appropriateness of the theological issue it raised. The sermon dealt with the tension between the keeping of rules and the life-affirming celebration made possible by the

advent of God's reign. Maybe some of the Presbyterians in that science hall were facing such a tension in daily life or in their home churches. Perhaps this sojourn in a distant place brought the issue into clearer focus, and dealt with it in a way that never could have happened in the familiar chancels back home. If so, glory be to God. But how could I have predicted it?

One worshiper that night pumped my hand enthusiastically, thanking me for "the best example of neurolinguistic programming" he had ever heard. I had no clue what he was referring to, although upon reflection the sermon offered a blend of synapse and synecdoche, tactile image, and abstract reasoning. The text spoke of plucked grain and theology, of withered hands and the propriety of Sabbath behavior. There was something for every Myers-Briggs type, I suppose, although that was not a conscious inclusion on my part.

Did the sermon form contribute to the impact? Perhaps. The communication design was a split-story, a technique borrowed from the writer of Mark's gospel. I began by telling of a personal experience as a camp counselor, when I confronted the choice of either unplugging or joining an impromptu teenage dance. I named the theological issue without resolving it. Then the sermon moved into a deepening discussion with the text. Coming to clarity about the issue at stake, I moved back to my original story, informed by what we had learned from interacting with the text. In conclusion, I asked the congregation to decide their preference. "Which will it be?" I asked. "Keeping the rules or celebrating life? Unplugging the music or joining in the dance?"

Such a sermon could be indicted on charges of congregational manipulation. I had stacked the deck, after all. The sermon attempted to put the hearers in a position of agreeing with me. To its defense, this sermon placed the burden of decision with the listener. While there may have been a certain amount of listener satisfaction in hearing the original story brought to closure, the sermon did not end there. It called for an ultimate response beyond a preacher's capacity to evoke a response, an invitation to discipleship that listeners were free to choose or ignore. At the sermon's completion, a deep silence I did not create signaled that many of those present were pondering the invitation.

There is one thing we preachers seek above all else: to become weekly midwives to a Word born anew. To bring God's beloved children to a place of glory and recommissioning. We were ordained for that purpose. But how do we make it happen?

No doubt Wednesday's worship service was a contributing factor. The evening liturgies had been crafted with care, with no stray images apart from those suggested by the biblical texts. By midweek, our team approach to worship leadership was familiar, as was our reliance on the rhythm of morning and evening prayer. The sermon was one small part of each service's attempt to proclaim the Word. The liturgy was more than mere scaffolding for somebody's marble pulpit.

I suspect some of Wednesday's worshipers were moved more by the service rather than the sermon. We began with an extended hymn sing, loosely shaped in the form of evening prayer. Then came the sermon, with its split-story about the dance. It was followed by the singing of "Lord of the Dance," with third and fourth graders coming forward to allemande around the Table. Eyes twinkled with delight.

And hearts were also moved with conviction. One person after another remarked how the worship event prompted them to recommit their daily lives to the work of God's reign. A few people even wrote me letters to say as much. How can that be

explained?

To some extent the congregation was primed for the preaching. It was an uncommon gathering of kindred spirits and quickly made friends, a training event for local church leaders and their children. Yet this makeshift congregation was a microcosm of any other, a stew of belief and agnosticism, sorrow and celebration, experience and innocence, sin and saintliness. After three and a half days living cheek-to-jowl in a college dormitory, I had a good idea about the real concerns and hopes of those to whom I preached. I spoke in their vernacular tongue. No cultural translation was necessary.

Or what of my own physical condition and emotional state? I recall feeling “tuned up” for Wednesday’s sermon, having taken a nice nap that afternoon and a refreshing swim before supper. There was ample time to read through the manuscript and free myself from its printed pages. Each of these factors prepared me to preach. It resulted in a rare pulpit occasion when my concentration did not waver and my tongue did not trip. Unlike most busy Sunday mornings, I was fully present for the moment.

Perhaps this mental awareness also contributed unspoken communicational touches — intuitive gestures, facial expressions, and voice modulations — which I did not realize at the time. “The art of preaching,” Charles Rice notes, “is very largely a function of availability...the willingness and ability to be keenly open and alive to the community’s situation.”¹ Such availability is difficult to measure, but easy to recognize.

When all is said and done, however, the most telling comment on the sermon may have come from an elderly woman who asked for a printed copy. With some hesitation I handed over the original manuscript. She scanned it for a minute and then said, “Is this it? Surely there was more.” She was absolutely right.

I had never experienced such an occasion before and may never experience it again. It might be worth letting my right arm wither to have it happen more frequently.

At the same time I confess my continuing lack of understanding for the cause of this rare event. Was it an evening when various homiletical skills converged to great effect? Was it a pure gift from God? Or was it a touch of both, a mixture of technique and grace, human preparation and divine breath? I do not know. But I do know that my words became the Word of God to that congregation, at that time, in that place. It was a bright, shining moment when I caught a glimpse of what God can do with a preacher’s imperfect and unfinished work. It scared the hell out of me.

And yet I pray, “Lord, let it happen again.”

NOTES

¹ Charles Rice, *The Embodied Word: Preaching as Art and Liturgy* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1991), 128.