

Practice Preaching

Stanley Hauerwas

Duke Divinity School, Durham, North Carolina

1. Can (or Should) We Practice Preaching?

“Practice preaching?” What could that mean? To practice preaching seems as odd as the suggestion that someone might “practice homosexuality.” How in the world would you practice being a homosexual? I understand how you might practice baseball, but how can you practice homosexuality?¹ Is preaching closer to baseball than being a homosexual? I think preaching is closer to baseball than homosexuality, but why will take some explaining.

Ken Woodward, in a recent article in *Commonweal*, “Ushering in the Age of the Laity: Some Cranky Reservations,” observed, “When journalistic colleagues discover that I am a Roman Catholic they always ask, ‘Are you practicing?’ to which I invariably reply: ‘I stopped practicing a long time ago,’ which is to say, I just go out and do it.”² Surely preaching is like being a Roman Catholic. That is, you just go out and do it. So to suggest that one should practice preaching does not seem quite right.

I have argued, however, that being a Christian is very much like learning how to be a practitioner of a craft. For example, in *After Christendom?*, I suggested that we ought to think of making disciples the way a bricklayer is trained.³ I did so to emphasize that Christianity is not so much a set of beliefs that are meant to give our lives meaning, but rather, to be a Christian is to be initiated into a community with skills, not unlike learning to lay brick, that are meant to transform our lives. To be initiated into a craft requires, of course, apprenticeship to a master through which we learn the basic habits of the craft sufficient for us to practice that craft as well as to discover the innovations necessary for the craft to have a future.

The notion of craft and the skills essential to the craft are natural to me, of course, as someone who has emphasized the importance of the virtues as the way to display the nature of the Christian moral life. The virtues, as Alasdair MacIntyre reminds us, are correlative to the notion of practice. By practice MacIntyre means, “any coherent and complex form of socially established, cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended.”⁴ Preaching, I believe, is such a practice since it is essential to the church’s very being. The church preaches because by its very nature the church cannot do otherwise. Preaching is not an activity done for some other purpose, some other reason, that is not already intrinsic to preaching itself. Accordingly, preaching requires and develops virtue in a community sufficient to sustaining preaching as essential for what that community is about. Which is but a reminder that preaching is fundamentally a political activity insofar as the church, through its preaching ministry, discovers the good we have in common.

It may still be objected that the idea that we ought to try to practice preaching does not seem like a good idea. Most congregations would not want to be subject to someone “practicing preaching.” Most crafts require that beginners learn to practice, but few of us desire to be the guinea pigs on whom such beginners practice. Surgeons must be

initiated into the craft of surgery by operating on someone for the first time, but few of us wish to be that patient.

Yet, the analogy of surgery is wrong for preaching. For, as I suggested above using Macintyre's account of practice, we must remember that preaching is not what a preacher does but rather it is the activity of the whole community. Preaching as practice is the activity of the church that requires the church to be as able listeners, well-schooled and well-crafted hearers, as the preacher is the proclaimer. Indeed, I suspect one of the great difficulties of preaching in the church today is the preacher's presumption that those to whom they preach do not have ears well-trained to hear. As a result, preaching is not the practice of the community but rather, as it so often is, an exercise in sentimentality.

2. The Authority of the Practice

Preaching as the practice of the whole church is an authoritative practice. Through the proclamation of the gospel, the church stands joyfully under the authority of the Word. Preaching as a practice of the whole community, therefore, can never be understood as that time when the preacher gives his or her opinions about this or that or shares with a congregation unique or peculiar insights they have learned. You know, or the one to whom you are listening knows, that you have abandoned preaching authoritatively if the sermon involves telling the church some bit of the wisdom discovered through our children. That is the surest sign the sermon is not the practice of the church, but rather an exercise meant to reinforce middle-class religiosity.

For preaching to be a practice intrinsic to the worship of God requires that the preacher, as well as the congregation, stand under the authority of the Word. That is why preaching should rightly follow a lectionary. To preach from the lectionary makes clear that preaching is the work of the church and not some arbitrary decision by the minister to find a text to fit a peculiar theme that currently fits the preacher's subjectivity. Rather, the exercise of the ministry of proclamation requires the ministers to make clear that the Word they preach is as painful to them as it is to the congregation. Such an acknowledgment makes clear that preaching is not just another speech but rather the way this people is formed into the Word of God.

The practice of preaching as the practice of authority, particularly in our culture, cannot help but be prophetic. It is a mistake to think that prophetic preaching occurs when the preacher holds up a specific moral challenge to the congregation. Rather, preaching as a practice is prophetic when it is done with authority. Where else in our culture do you find a people gathered in obedience to a Word they know they will not easily hear?

Such an exercise of authority is anomalous in liberal cultures which assume that all forms of authority cannot help but be authoritarian. As I have put the matter elsewhere, the story of modernity is that we should have no story except the story we chose when we had no story.⁵ People schooled on that story cannot help but think no one has the right to stand in authority over them. So the very idea that they should be trained to be faithful hearers of the Word proclaimed seems anomalous.

It is important to note that this is not simply another attack on American individualism. To be sure, we live in a destructively individualistic culture and society. But I have put the issue in the language of story exactly because I think it illumines our difficulties better than the notion of individualism. Our difficulty is not that we are just

individualistic but that we believe that there is actually a place from which we can choose our story. That, of course, is a story that we did not choose and which determines us to be people who are terminally self-deceived.

In contrast, preaching as the practice of the church is a constant reminder that the church is constituted by people who have learned that they have not chosen God. Rather, we are a people who have been chosen by God which, at the very least, means we discover that we are a people constituted by a story that we have not chosen. This is a story we would not have “made up.” Accordingly, to be a good hearer, to practice preaching, requires that we be schooled to be creatures. To be a creature means we must learn that our lives are gifts of a gracious God. We do not receive our lives as a gift because that would mean we already existed to receive our lives as a gift. Rather, our lives are gift. That we are so constituted requires the constant practice that comes through receiving the Word of God through preaching.

So preaching as one of the essential practices of Christian worship is a prophetic reminder to a culture bent on denying its status as creature. Through preaching, the church has been given the gift of prophecy through which we are made more than we could be. For, as the account of practice suggested above by MacIntyre, we know we are made more than we could ever imagine through preaching. That is why, I suspect, those who are set aside for the preaching ministry of the church often discover they acquire a power they did not know they had by being forced to proclaim the Word of God. To acknowledge that power can be frightening as we fear what it may mean for our lives. The joy, however, is to know what it will mean for the up-building of the whole church as God makes us more than we could ever be through the proclamation of God’s Word.

3. The Story that Requires that Preaching be Practiced

It should be obvious that preaching as a practice required by and for the church is not separable from what preaching is about. Preaching is the proclamation of the Word of God as found in the people of Israel and the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Preaching, therefore, is the practice that is meant to help us locate our lives in God’s story. To do that, preaching must be about God’s story through the explication of the scripture. Scripture is, of course, many stories—all of which, the church has taught us, help illumine the gospel.⁶

In the “Introduction” to William Willimon’s and my book *Preaching to Strangers*, I suggested that most preaching today fits what George Limbeck has characterized as an experimental-expressivist view of religion.⁷ The fundamental assumption of the experimental-expressivist view is that different religions are diverse expressions of a common experience. Such a view, of course, has been the very center of Protestant liberal theology as exemplified by such theologians as Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr. From this perspective, the gospel is seen as a provocative account of the human condition. Such theology, and the preaching that it produces, can be extraordinarily powerful as well as popular in a culture formed by the story that one should have no story except the story one chooses when one has no story.

Moreover, preaching in the experimental-expressivist mode can be quite artful. Literary examples are a natural resource as the preacher oftentimes finds Kahil Gibran more insightful than the Gospel of Mark. Moreover, such a view of preaching seems better able to show the relevance of preaching to the “real-life situations” of people as

well as to contemporary social problems.

But such preaching is not the practice of preaching required by the church. That practice is proclamation since it requires that the preacher and hearers be confronted by a Word that does not illumine what they already know but rather tells us what we do not know. That is why it must be done over and over again. Repetition is the key to helping us understand the material content of what it is we practice when we preach. It is the practice of the story of God that is not about the illumination of the human condition but rather about the proclamation of God found in the people of Israel and the life of Jesus of Nazareth. These are not general truths but rather a story that can be known only through hearing it proclaimed amidst that body of people gathered in the hopes that we will be faithful hearers of God's story.

Preaching is that practice meant to help us locate our lives, our stories, in God's story. But preaching is not meant to stand alone, but rather is surrounded by the whole liturgy of the church. Preaching is that part of the church's liturgy through which we are reminded of the story that shapes all that we do from gathering to sending forth. That is why preaching finally requires it be sealed by that other practice essential to worship, that is, the Eucharist. Word and table are forever bound together as those practices necessary for us to understand we are the baptized people of God. Through baptism we have been made the people of God capable of that strange but wonderful practice called preaching. What a wonderful gift.

NOTES

¹ Actually, "practicing homosexuality" is not as odd as it may sound. I suspect homosexual relations are no less complex than any relation. To be sustained they require a great deal of practice. Marriage names that institution for Christians through which we are given the time to develop practices we name as love. That same-sex relations are denied that institution makes such relations all the harder.

² Ken Woodward, "Ushering in the Age of the Laity: Some Cranky Reservations," *Commonweal*, CXXI, 15 (September 9, 1994): 9. Woodward goes on to observe, "What is it about Roman Catholicism, I've often wondered, that takes so much practice? I mean, it's not like learning to play the piano. Why is it you never hear of a practicing Presbyterian? Or a practicing Pentecostal? 'Observant' won't do either, as in the sentence, 'He's an observant Jew.' I know lots of practicing Catholics who are not terribly observant. 'Born again' simply doesn't fit Catholics, implying as it does that one has been 'saved' through accepting Jesus as his 'personal Lord and Savior.' Now I think we all need to be converted—over and over again, but having a personal savior has always struck me as, well, elitist, like having a personal tailor. I'm satisfied to have the same Lord and Savior as everyone else. Besides, Catholics can never be certain they are saved, even if they went to Notre Dame, which is one of the reasons Catholicism is so interesting." For my reflections on why Catholics might be asked whether they are 'practicing' see my "A Homage to Mary and to the University Called Notre Dame," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 93, 3 (Summer, 1994): 717-726.

³ Stanley Hauerwas, *After Christendom?* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 93-112. I develop the ecclesial significance of this point in my *In Good Company: The Church as Polis* (Forthcoming: University of Notre Dame Press).

⁴ Alasdair McIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2d ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 187.

⁵ Stanley Hauerwas, *Dispatches from the Front: Theological Engagements with the Secular* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 164-176.

⁶ As Robert Jensen puts it, "The story of the sermon and the hymns and of the processions and of the sacramental acts and of the readings is to be God's story, the story of the Bible. Preachers are the greatest sinners here: the text already is and belongs to the one true story; it does not need to be helped out in this respect. What is said and enacted in the church must be with the greatest exactitude and faithfulness and exclusivity the story of creation and redemption by the God of Israel and Father of the Risen Christ." "How the World Lost Its Story," *First Things* 36 (October, 1993): 22.

⁷ William Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas, *Preaching to Strangers* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 1-13.