

Preaching in the Middle of a Saintly Conversation

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“He was not a hero or a magician or a chess player, or an obsession. He was a certifiable member of the human race, direct, fallible, and unexpectedly wise when it counted....He said he lived by the Bible and history.”

Mary McGrory writing in the Washington *Star* about the death of Harry Truman

Of all of the goals of preaching, the one most urgent — and, ironically, the one most often overlooked — is the making of “practical saints.” No measure of fascination with the latest fashions in homiletics — with narrative structures, inductive movement, image grids, intending consciousness, or postmodern polemics — can cloud over the basic fact of Sunday morning: that a preacher stands before a congregation of people who have somehow gathered this day, impelled by God-only-knows-what motivations; that these trembling, conflicted, and compromised people are called, improbably, to be the saints of God in the world; and that, furthermore, it is the unrelenting job of preaching, as Ephesians reminds us, to help equip and build them up for the task of ministry.

William Muehl, formerly of Yale Divinity School is only slightly alarmist when he describes the Sunday situation in his book *Why Preach? Why Listen?*:

It is, I am sure, important to remember that the people to whom we preach do not in many cases have a well-defined faith or even a poorly defined faith.... They have, for the most part, some fragmentary religious commitments that are related to one another and to some degree integrated in the give-and-take of domestic affairs, commerce, education, politics, and a host of other dynamic and demanding areas of what we like to call the “real world.”

It is instructive, if somewhat dismaying, to realize how many of the men and women in the pews almost did not come to church that morning. And that in all probability most of them feel that they are there under false pretenses, that everyone around them feels more confidently Christian...than they do themselves.¹

One of the main jobs of the preacher is to edify the church, which means nothing less than boosting the confidence of those timid souls in the pews that their fragmentary understanding of the Christian faith can be filled in and knitted together in such a way that it can be spoken, lived, and practiced — by *them*, and not just be church professionals.

Absurd Sainthood

If preachers are going to equip the saints, then we need to know what sainthood looks like when it comes in a more proximate form than Saint Francis or Mother

Teresa. What does it mean for the people in our hearing, the people who look back at us from the pews every Sunday, to become “practical saints”? How do saints in our day pass the time?

Our first attempt to see practical saints in action takes us through the dark and astonishing maze of the mind of Søren Kierkegaard. In *Fear and Trembling*, we find Kierkegaard tracking our same quarry, searching for his own version of the “practical saint,” an elusive figure he calls the “knight of faith.” The knight of faith is quite difficult to locate, he acknowledges, because true, saintly faith has a deceptively mundane appearance. Contrary to the popular assumption that saints go through life acting in other-worldly ways (what Kierkegaard calls making “movements of infinity”) the truly faithful do exactly the opposite: having already experienced movements of infinity, they now are free to stride into the workaday world making “movements of finiteness.”²

This is confusing, of course, even absurd (to use a Kierkegaardian term). If saints go around disclosing their saintliness only through “movements of finiteness,” how can one know a saint when one sees one? How can one tell whether these “movements of finiteness” grow out of “movements of infinity” or whether they are merely finite and mundane to the core? Kierkegaard candidly admits that he has never actually spotted “any reliable example of the knight of faith,”³ but he allows himself to imagine an encounter with him, a meeting that provokes a shocked gasp:

Here he is. Acquaintance made, I am introduced to him. The moment I set eyes on him I instantly push him from me, I myself leap backwards, I clasp my hands and say half aloud, “Good Lord, is this the man? Is it really he? Why, he looks like a tax collector!”⁴

This Kierkegaardian knight of faith, with the face of a tax collector or a clerk or a grocer, bears no heavenly glow or glance that betrays him; his exterior has no obvious “cranny through which the infinite [peeps].” He is, instead, a thoroughly earthly human being who takes delight in everything that he sees. Walking along the beach, he looks more like a shopkeeper out for a breath of fresh air than a poet stalking a metaphor. Toward evening, he walks home from work with the firm gait of a postman, and any who join him along the way will find him conversing not about heaven but about the supper that awaits him, a simple meal of roasted meat and vegetables, which the knight nevertheless describes with all the savoring passion of a master chef. At home, he lounges at an open window, gazing out at the world, interested in everything — the bustle of human life, the play of children, even the crawling of a rat into a sewer. “He lives,” maintains Kierkegaard, “as carefree as a ne’er-do-well, and yet he buys up the acceptable time at the dearest price, for he does not do the least thing except by virtue of the absurd.”⁵

That’s the key, of course, the concept of the absurd. A knight of faith can be completely absorbed in every aspect of the world around her or him because, absurdly, none of it is of ultimate consequence. In Kierkegaard’s view, faith has allowed the knight to release the grip on the things of the world and, then, paradoxically granted the freedom to take back the world as a gift, to grasp “everything again by virtue of the absurd. He constantly makes the movements of infinity, but...he constantly gets the finite out of it, and there is not a second when one has a notion of anything else.”⁶

There is much to learn here from the moody and enigmatic Dane, but we shall be content to emerge from his labyrinth with at least this one truth: sainthood expresses faith's heavenly leap paradoxically as an earthly walk, absurdly embodying the sublime in the pedestrian.⁷ Although there are occasionally grand and dramatic moments of faith, the fact is, most of the time the Christian life consists of small gestures. The "great saints," honored in the church's calendar and preserved in its stained glass, are martyrs and miracle workers, but the "practical saints" mainly get up in the morning, head out the door, and show their courageous and heroic holiness in the hundreds of small decisions woven into the mundane fabric of the day. They speak this way to their children instead of that; they make these decisions at work instead of those; they react to challenges one way instead of another; they laugh at this and not that; their feet take them down this path instead of that one.

I have experienced, I believe, in various seasons of my life, a bit of this "absurd" Kierkegaardian faith. For example, in 1973, after several years in congregational ministry, I made a decision to do doctoral work and to shift into academics. For various reasons, I knew in April of that year that I would be heading off to graduate school in September, but April seemed too early to inform my congregation. In fact, I postponed the announcement of my departure until early August.

Between April and August, therefore — in other words, for nearly five months — I knew I would be leaving, but my congregation did not. In one sense, this secret made me completely immune from their judgment on my ministry. If they loved or despised my sermons, if a committee decision went my way or against me, it mattered not. I knew I would soon be gone, and I was free, totally free.

Ironically, though — even absurdly — I found myself more invested in them and more engaged in my ministry than ever. Knowing I would soon be leaving, I took risks; I poured myself into the church; I came alive in new ways. Indeed, in those final five months, they got the best ministry from me they had ever received. Having been freed from them in my mind, I was now free to embrace them again with delight and vigor. I remarked to a good colleague how strange it was that, knowing full well that I was temporary and that my time with them was short, I had learned to love and serve my congregation better than ever. My colleague grinned and replied, "That is what the whole New Testament is about."

Bedpan Sainthood

A second, and somewhat clearer, portrait of "practical saints" emerges in the grateful memory of novelist Reynolds Price, whose recent book *A Whole New Life: An Illness and a Healing*, movingly describes his decade-long battle with spinal cancer. He endured several lengthy stays in Duke University hospital, and there he discovered the difference between a "medical professional" and a "practical saint." He draws a sharp contrast between the constant kindness he experienced from the night nurses in the hospital, the "calm black women who'd answer my calls in the predawn hours of this painful stay," and the aloof noncommunication of the highly trained oncologist in charge of his case:

My presiding oncologist saw me as seldom as he could manage. He plainly turned aside when I attempted conversation in the halls; and he seemed to know literally no word or look of mild encouragement or comradeship in the

face of what, as I later learned, he thought was hurried death....It's often said by way of excuse that doctors are insufficiently trained for humane relations. For complex long-range interaction with damaged creatures, they may well need a kind of training they never receive; but what I wanted and needed badly, from that man then, was the frank exchange of decent concern. When did such a basic transaction between two mammals require postgraduate instruction beyond our mother's breast milk?⁸

The night nurses, on the other hand, were as full of grace as the oncologist was as full of disinterest. They were able, by "something more than an accidental grace...to blend their professional code with the oldest natural code of all — mere human connection, the simple looks and words that award a suffering creature his or her dignity."⁹ Price remembers these nurses as...

the only persons in my recollection of my hospital stays who ever asked my opinion of my care — was I being treated well? What else did I need? Certainly no medical doctor ever asked. Many times since, I've thought that if I were ever to donate a work of art to Duke, I'd commission a realistic bronze statue of a black woman in a nurse's uniform and ask that it stand by the hospital door.¹⁰

If Reynolds Price ever gets around to donating that statue, it would be — make no mistake — the statue of a saint, a practical saint. A practical saint is not the sort of saint who pulls a supernatural stunt, like causing an image of the Virgin Mary to appear on an Ohio water tank; to the contrary, a practical saint is the kind of person who empties a bedpan in a way that preserves the patient's dignity and speaks a healing word of quiet compassion and encouragement amid the routine bedside chatter.

Reading David McCullough's superb biography of Harry S. Truman, one comes away with the impression of Truman as a "practical saint." Early in his life, McCullough reports, Truman committed to memory both Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and a simple prayer he would recite throughout his life:

Almighty and Everlasting God, Creator of Heaven, Earth and the Universe: Help me to be, to think, to act what is right, because it is right; make me truthful, honest, and honorable in all things; make me intellectually honest for the sake of right and honor and without thought of reward to me. Give me the ability to be charitable, forgiving and patient...help me to understand the motives and shortcomings [of others], even as Thou understandest mine. Amen.¹¹

These "were more than words-to-the-wise," writes McCullough; "they were bedrock....Not everybody lived up to them, of course, but to Harry it seemed everyone ought to try."¹²

And Harry did try, at least as McCullough tells his story. Truman had many rough edges, and his moral vision was not always clear, but there breathes in the speech of the man the ethical discourse of a practical saint. For example, when he was expounding on the need for the Marshall Plan, he was asked whether the United States

would ever “get any credit...for sending all this stuff to Europe.”

“I’m not doing this for credit,” Truman replied. “I am doing it because it’s right.”¹³ The words of the old prayer, “without thought of reward,” words memorized as a child, were now finding life in the saintly speech of a politician.

Or again, late in his life, in a series of filmed interviews, Truman, among other things, reminisced about Franklin Roosevelt, told delightful stories about backstage politics, indicated his admiration for the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius because he had the welfare of the people at heart, disagreed with Billy Graham’s notion about the impending end of the world, and spoke of his agonized decisions about MacArthur and the Korean war. At one point, concern was expressed that Truman was not wearing the same necktie he had worn in a previous filming. Truman, the practical saint, knew the difference between what mattered and what did not. He wondered aloud if his necktie were really all that important, “because if while I’m talking about Korea people are asking each other about my necktie it seems to me we’re in a great deal of trouble.”¹⁴

What we find in Truman is of importance to preachers. Phrases uttered in worship, taken into his heart, gave Truman (and a few other rare cases of politicians — perhaps Jimmy Carter and Mario Cuomo would be contemporary examples) a vocabulary, and thus a way of seeing and being, a moral frame of reference he would otherwise have lacked. Because, in Truman’s youth, somebody talked a certain way in worship, Truman was enabled to talk that way in life.

In his last years in Kansas City, Truman went on morning walks, often with Thomas Melton, a neighbor and the pastor of the First Presbyterian Church. Melton recalls that Truman did most of the talking, even pausing most days to speak to a beautiful ginko tree that stood along their route. What did the former president say to this ginko tree? According to Melton, Truman, the practical saint who had surely been shaped by the biblical notion of all nature praising God, would announce to the tree, “You’re doing a good job.”¹⁵

Standing in the Middle of the Communion of Saints

If one of the chief goals of preaching is the equipping of practical saints, then our theological image of preaching needs to be adjusted. The famous neoorthodox Word of God theologies portrayed preaching as a revelatory lightning bolt, crashing in with supernatural power from the outside. There is truth here, of course, and, when the world was full of Nazis, as it was when these theologies came to flower, it is the truth most needed.

But, one problem with the “lightning bolt” images of preaching is that the sermon becomes discourse unlike any other form of Christian speech. Nobody else speaks like the preacher; indeed, one of the problems of neoorthodoxy was the logical impossibility of any human being, the preacher included, speaking the Word of God. In other words, absolutely nobody speaks like the preacher speaks, even the preacher! In the purest strains of neoorthodoxy, preaching was both the human activity most needed and, at the same time, most impossible. Preaching was *sui generis* utterance — unique, unprecedented speech, the free act of God.

The fact of the matter, though, is that ordinary Christians talk like preachers all the time and have many opportunities to preach the gospel in what they say and do in ordinary circumstances — in the way they show kindness, in the way they speak the truth, in the way they vote, in the way they laugh, in the way they take stands for grace

and justice in the hidden corridors of workaday life. Practical saints are everyday preachers, proclaiming the good news in much of what they say and do. Like Harry Truman, they take bits and pieces of what they have read in the Bible, what they have prayed in the liturgy, and what they have heard in sermons, and venture forth with a salty, rough-hewn theological vocabulary to be God's people in the world.

For example, take the case of Episcopal layperson Deborah Bly, who worked as a clerk in a theological book store. Early one morning, before the store had opened, a man, dressed in the garb of a Hasidic Jew, rapped on the door. When Bly went to see what he wanted, he politely asked if he could come in. Even though it was forty-five minutes before the store was scheduled to open, Bly ushered him in.

"Would you like any help," she inquired.

"Yes," he said. "I want to know about Jesus."

Bly quickly took the man upstairs to the christology section of the store, pointing to works by E.P. Sanders, Rudolf Bultmann, and Albert Schweitzer. "I showed him all the books we had about the historical Jesus.... I started to go downstairs, but he called me back."

"No," he said, "I want to know about Jesus the Messiah. Don't show me any more books — you tell me what you believe."

"My Episcopal soul shivered," Bly confesses. "I gulped and told him everything I could think of...as much as I could sputter out in my confusion, in the dark."¹⁶

One of the primary tasks of preaching is to equip practical saints like Deborah Bly for occasions like that. I do not mean that the preacher should merely tell her and others from the pulpit that she should be ready to bear witness to Christ but also to respect people's religious heritage; I mean that the preacher should talk like she will talk, that sermons should include examples of discourse that model, among other things, what it means to speak honestly and personally of Jesus while still respecting the dignity and religious tradition of another human being.

This means that part of preparing to preach means thinking through how the folk in the congregation will be expected to talk and live as practical saints in the coming week. They will be involved in thousands of conversations — familial, economic, political, evangelistic, romantic — in scores of places — at work, over the backyard fence, in the mall, around the coffee pot. The sermon is an act of Christian speaking that occurs in the center of a web of gospel speech. One good way to imagine the task of preaching is to think of the sermon as the completion of this line: "When you, as one belonging to Jesus Christ, speak with your neighbor, you shall speak like this...."

Years ago, P. T. Forsyth maintained that "the one great preacher...is the church. And the first business of the individual preacher is to enable the church to preach." When an employer calls in an employee for discipline, promotion, or dismissal, the conversation can be full of grace or it can be full of manipulation. When a teacher has a parent conference, the talk can be redemptive or deflating. When a person in the office confesses a need, the response of a co-worker can be merciful or dispassionate. If this employer, this teacher, and this co-worker sit in the pews on Sunday, the preacher has the privilege and the duty of preaching sermons that are so full of the grit of life that they model what it means to be a practical saint, an everyday preacher, one who speaks and lives the gospel. Several years ago, I was at a church in Alabama, scheduled to preach at the morning service. A few minutes before the service, the pastor got up from his desk and beckoned me to follow. "Come here," he said. "There's

something I want you to see.”

I followed him down the stairs and into the educational wing. We approached a Sunday school classroom, and the pastor pointed to the glass window set in the classroom door. “Look,” he urged.

I peered through the glass into a kindergarten class full of activity. In one corner of the room, a teacher was reading a story to a group of children. In another corner, a teacher was assisting children in building something with blocks. In still another area, children were gathered around an adult with a guitar, learning a song.

In the middle of the room sat an elderly woman, calmly and slowly rocking in a rocking chair. Every now and then, a child would break away from a group and come to sit on her lap as she rocked. Occasionally, the woman in the rocker would say something to one of the teachers, and the adult would respond with a laugh and a nod of the head. The actual teaching was being done around the edges and in the corners, but this aged woman in the center was radiating grace around the room.

“She used to be the only kindergarten teacher,” the pastor informed me. “But now that she is late in her life, others do the teaching. But she still comes every Sunday morning to sit in the center of the room and provide a blessing.”

Not a bad model of preaching. We come to stand in the center of the church, in the middle of the communion of saints, and preach in such a way that blessing radiates to others, equipping them to speak the gospel as “practical saints” in the world.

NOTES

¹ William Muehl, *Why Preach? Why Listen?* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 11.

² Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 48.

³ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁸ Reynolds Price, *A Whole New Life: An Illness and a Healing* (New York: Atheneum, 1994), 56.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 132.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 133.

¹¹ David McCullough, *Truman* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 55.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, 583.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 979.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 984.

¹⁶ Deborah Griffin Bly, “Go Tallit on the Mountain,” *Books and Religion* 19 (Spring, 1992) as reported in Milton J. Coalter, Jr., “The Craft of Christ’s Imperfect Tailors,” *Theology Today* L/3 (October, 1993), 394.