

Preaching in an Age That Has Lost Its Moral Compass

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For the 1995 Easter issue of *Journal for Preachers*, write an article on “Preaching in a Culture That Has Lost Its Moral Compass.” That was the article requested by the editors; this is the article they got.

This article was supposed to be a sort of Billy Graham tirade on how we ought to preach in an age which has lost its way, morally speaking. Begin with instances of the moral mess in America, Bill Bennet’s tokens of a crumbling culture—declining SAT scores, pregnancies out of wedlock, deaths due to murder. Then move to the ways we preachers may prophetically address these ills in our sermons. That was the article I wanted to write; this is the article I wrote.

Something in us preachers would love to point to instances of ethical putrification in our congregations. When you stand up to preach on Sunday mornings, it’s First Church Corinth all over again, maybe Sodom and Gomorrah, depending on your geographical location. How I love to fulminate against *their* sin! How we love to think of ethics as a series of detached ethical quandaries suffered by our parishioners.

Yet back in December, second Sunday of Advent, a prickly text from Malachi, jerked me by my clerical collar, shook me up and down, and spoke:

But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap;...and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver... (Malachi 3:1-4).

Don’t worry, I assured my December congregation, the prophet’s not talking about you. A wrathfilled God is coming to the temple, but not for you. God’s after those who make their living at the temple, *the clergy*. “He will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them...until they present offerings to the LORD in righteousness” (3:3). We priests, contemporary “Descendants of Levi,” we who live off of religion, praying, prophesying, preaching, making offering to God in behalf of the people squirm when Malachi raves about the, “...priests, who despise my name. You say, ‘How have we despised your name?’ ...By thinking that the LORD’s table may be despised....I have no pleasure in you says the LORD....I will not accept an offering from your hands...” (1:6-7, 10).

God says to us clergy, “You wear me out” (1:13).

“The lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and people should seek instruction from his mouth, for he is the messenger of the LORD of hosts. But you have turned aside from the way; you have caused many to stumble by your instruction” (2:7-8), says Malachi. (Here, of course, the prophet is speaking of clergy who are also professors of theology in seminaries.)

After the prophet takes a swipe at priests who have committed adultery and fooled around with various members of the choir (2:14-16, you can look it up), then begins

the Advent call from Malachi. "Who can endure the day of the LORD's coming? He is like a refiner's fire,...like...soap...and he will purify the descendants of Levi...."¹

Shortly after the night I was ordained, pharmacists bested clergy in the annual list of the "most admired" professions. Then we were beat in the "most admired" list by firemen, letter carriers, and AMWAY distributors.

At the beginning of 1994, *The Christian Century* had a recap of the most significant religious news from the past year. One story was of a number of prominent priests, charged with sexual abuse of children. Another told about a major embezzlement case at a large church in the Midwest. Malfeasance at the National Council of Churches. Clergy-laity trysts in Texas. We mainline clergy snickered when the news was of the sexual shenanigans of TV evangelists, but this was close to home, mainline liberals, and none of us laughed.

When a fellow United Methodist preacher from Fort Worth bit the dust this fall after his multiple sexual harassment episodes were made public by some courageous women, his fall hardly merited the headlines, so many of his fellow clergy had fallen before him.

A friend of mine, an economist, was asked to serve on the board of a church charitable organization which helps needy children. His first days on the board were a sort of religious conversion experience for him, so inspired was he by the work of the organization, so impressed was he by the tremendous amount of need. But then he learned of the salaries, the real salaries of some of the clergy staff. He uncovered accounting irregularities. After prayerful consideration, he brought it to the attention of the directors and....he was dismissed from the board.²

He told me, "I think clergy, because they tell themselves that they are doing the work of the Lord, are particularly susceptible to self-deceit. If you're feeding hungry children, none of the moral rules apply to you which apply to other mere mortals."

Malachi, and the words of a Yahweh worn out by clergy, have summoned me to consider the loss of a moral compass, not among our congregations, but among us clergy. We preachers need look, alas, for signs of ethical disorientation, no farther than the pulpit.

II

My friend, Stanley Hauerwas, was recently asked about the moral confusion of contemporary clergy. Hauerwas said something to the effect that, "You have these people who get out of seminary thinking that their job is to 'help people.' That's where the adultery begins."

What?

"So you have these clergy," he continued, "who have no better reason for being in ministry than to 'meet peoples' needs.' So little Johnny needs picking up after school. And Johnny's mother, since she is working, calls the pastor, who has nothing else better to do, and asks him to pick up little Johnny. And the pastor thinks, 'Well, I'm here to help people.' So he goes and picks up little Johnny. Before long the pastor meets a parishioner who is lonely and needs love and then, when caught in the act of adultery, his defense is that he is an extremely caring pastor."³

I recalled what I thought to be, at the time, a rather silly article in *The Christian Century* by (who else?) a pastoral care professor entitled, "Clergy Adultery as Role Confusion." I wondered what about, "Clergy Adultery as *Sin*." But the more I have

thought about it, the more I see that professor's point. In a culture of omnivorous need, all-consuming narcissism, clergy who have no more compelling motive for their preaching role than "meeting peoples' needs" are dangerous to themselves and to a culture without a moral compass.

Certainly, there are many possible sources of clerical moral ineptitude. Malachi would little understand the ways in which we clergy have been encouraged to wallow in the same psychotherapeutic mire as our people — meeting our needs, looking out for number one, if it feels good do it, the relentless scanning and feeding of the ego.

Yet Malachi would surely call us back (or is it *forward*?) to clerical lives grasped by something greater than ourselves, namely our vocation to speak and to enact the Word of God among God's people. Here is my modest thesis: *We would be better people, you and I, if we were more faithful preachers.*

Clergy ethics has its basis in homiletics. Morality is a matter, not of being unattached to any external determination, free to think and act on the basis of our personal feelings of what's right. Contrary to the beliefs of liberalism, morality comes as a gracious by-product of being attached to something greater than ourselves, of being owned, claimed, commandeered for larger purposes.⁴ Which is to say that any account of the moral life begins and ends with the question, Who is the God whom we worship?

III

My own moral ineptitude, and its link with my homiletical deficiencies, was brought home to me a few years ago. Shortly after the war with Iraq, I received a note from one of the older members of my congregation, a note written on light blue stationery, neatly folded, a note written in a frail, but still lovely hand.

"Have you preached on this particular episode, have you mentioned it in one of your recent sermons? Now that I can't get out and about, I listen on the radio to your sermons, but I do not recall your having mentioned this."

She was referring to a newspaper story (the clipping neatly folded within the same light blue envelope) about how American troops had buried alive as many as six hundred Iraqi soldiers in their trenches during a battle. "By the time we got there," one soldier was quoted as saying, "all that was left was hands and arms sticking up out of the sand."

"What does this do to the moral character of our nation?" she asked, in graceful, antique handwriting on the blue notepaper. "I grieve for the soul of our country. Where is the moral voice of our clergy in these matters?"

Her words stunned me into renewal of my vocation. The problem, it seemed to me now, was not that I had been too timid in my preaching, too fixated in pop-psychology to notice the ethical cataclysm taking place outside our sanctuary, too absorbed with the purely personal problems of my affluent congregation — although I am. My problem was not morality in itself. My problem was that I had not been enough of a preacher to let the Word have its way with me and my preaching. I have worshipped at the wrong altar.⁵

I recalled a wonderful comment by Walter Brueggemann, something said to us preachers like, "If you are a coward by nature, don't worry. You don't have to be courageous to be a preacher. All you have to do is to get down behind the text. You can say, 'This is not necessarily me saying this — but I do think the text says it.'"

We can hunker down behind the text! Disjoined from service to the text, all I can do is to serve the congregational status quo, run pastoral errands for the world as it is rather than let God use me to create a new world. And that is not only no fun, it's also immoral.

I must make clear in my preaching that I preach what I have been *told* to preach.⁶ I serve the text, not those who listen. I must thereby help my listeners recover the adventure of being those who are baptized to listen to the text, those who bear the burden and the blessing of bending our lives in conformity to the demands of scripture.⁷ Morality is always a liturgical matter; who is the god whom we worship?

In a culture which has lost its moral compass (what we did in Iraq for Exxon has its counterpart in what we are doing to one another in bedrooms), that old lady's note on blue stationery called me back to the ethical significance of preaching.

IV

I would like every seminarian in my denomination to read what is, in my opinion, one of the best novels of the late nineteenth century, certainly one of the best novels on the peculiar moral dilemmas of clergy. It is Harold Frederick's, *The Damnation of Theron Ware* (1896). A young Methodist preacher is called to preach, but called more so to advance socially through his preaching. Stifled by the confines of petty morality in the midwestern town where he serves, Mr. Ware longs for a larger stage on which to display his homiletical talents. His best friends—the urbane Father Forbes of the nearby Catholic church, Dr. Ledsmar, the town's one social Darwinian, and Celia Madden, a wealthy connoisseur of the arts—represent all that Ware wants to be in life. The more these friends urge him to sample a social life out of his present reach, the less he regards his own ministerial vocation. His vocation becomes a career, a path up the social ladder through the flattering, eloquent art of his preaching.

Adultery (what is there about us clergy that makes us so susceptible to this temptation?⁸) is not far behind. When Ware finally confesses his love for Celia, she announces to him that his presumed "improvement" has only served to render a once adequate pastor into a first class bore. Ware eventually leaves the ministry, victim of his own craving for status and recognition.⁹

Of course, Ware's descent to the level of a rather common adulterer has nothing to do with his inability to meet his personal needs or with his being out of touch with his feelings as a man. His descent is related to his inability to be attached to his vocation as a preacher. When that vocation becomes a mere means to an end, flaws in the preacher's character which may have been overcome by the preacher's commitment to the ethics of good preaching, are magnified.

Elsewhere I have reflected upon the great fiction of our age, the notion of the person without a role, the idea that we are most fully moral when we have divested ourselves of all external claims upon us.¹⁰ The liberal self, detached from any history, any claim upon the self other than the claims one has personally chosen, does not exist. All of us are busy being determined by something — even the claim that I am living only "for myself" is an externally imposed claim by contemporary American society. So the question is not, "Will I serve some purpose larger than myself?"¹¹ for freedom from such determination is impossible. The question is, "Will the master whom I serve be true or false?"¹²

Preachers are those who are fortunate enough to have our lives caught up in the

demanding, never quite finished, wonderful adventure of helping the church to hear God's Word. Aristotle taught that it was too much to expect ordinary people to be good. About the best one could do for ordinary folk was to teach them good habits. Of the three artistic forms of proof which Aristotle listed as available to the public speaker — logos, pathos, and ethos — Aristotle knew that ethos, the character of the speaker "constitutes the most effective means of proof" (*Rhetoric*, I, ii).¹³ Every time we stand up to preach, our characters, as they have been formed by the habits required for preaching, prove to the church that it is possible to make very ordinary folk (like preachers) into saints. That is, it is possible even for people who are innate liars to speak the truth. It is possible for people who are cowards by nature to be so caught up in some project greater than themselves that, despite themselves, they are heroic. I think it was after tackling a particularly difficult preaching assignment that Paul was bold enough to say to the Philippians, "Imitate me, you have a worthy example in us" (Phil. 3:17).

Homiletical habits — disciplined, weekly study, honesty, and humility about what the text says and does not say, confidence in the ability of God to make our puny congregations worthy to hear God's Word, a weekly willingness to allow the Word to devastate the preacher before it lays a hand on the congregation — all these are habits, skills of the homiletical craft which form us preachers into better people than we would be if we had been left to our own devices. I think this is what Paul was getting at when he told the Corinthians that it would have been nice if he could have preached to them with flattering, eloquent words but, being a preacher he single-mindedly "decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (I Cor. 2:2).

Yes, we live in a culture which has lost its moral compass. Lies are told on the floor of the Senate and in bedrooms. We pass by the "hands and arms sticking up out of the sand" without a twitch of conscience. In such a time, it is easy to lose our way. Therefore we preachers would do well to cling to our vocation, to determine to know nothing save that which the church has called us to preach, to serve the Word before we bow before other gods.

That dear, departed resident alien among us, William Stringfellow said it so much more eloquently than I, with his words, with his life:

To know the Word of God in the Bible, a person must come to the Bible with a certain naivety, confessing that if God exists at all, God lives independently, though not in isolation, from anyone's intelligence, longing, emotion, insight, or interpretations, even those that divine the truth. One must be open to God's initiative, be bereft of all preconceptions, surrender all initiative....One must take the appalling risk....When a person is so naked, so helpless, so transparent, when one so utterly ceases to try to justify oneself or anyone or anything else, one first becomes vulnerable to the Word of God....When a person becomes that mature as a human being, he or she is freed to listen and at last to welcome the Word....That person is enlightened to discern the same Word of God at work now in the world,...Thus is established a rhythm in the Christian's life encompassing intimacy with the Word of God in the Bible and one's involvement with the same Word active in the world.

Who could blame the great God for being worn out with us clergy (Mal. 1:13)? Our poor preaching, Malachi indicates, is not just a matter of lousy homiletical technique,¹⁴ it is also a failure of character, a moral matter of tragic proportions. Yet this is the season of resurrection. For us preachers the Easter prophetic promise is that the Lord may even yet purify us descendants of Levi, may soap us down, fire us up, call us back to our chief task — to be yoked so securely and joyously to the Word that in the process of proclamation of the Word, we become the Word and as it dwells in us richly.

NOTES

¹ See Elizabeth Achtemeier's commentary for a fine exposition of this passage in *Interpretation: Nahum-Malachi* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press), 1986.

² See Randy Frame, "Christian Children's Fund Practices Questioned," *Christianity Today* (Nov. 14, 1994): 71.

³ Hauerwas and I worked on some of these themes earlier in our article, "The Limits of Care: Burnout as an Ecclesial Issue," *Word and World* (Summer 1990): 247-253.

⁴ I am following an argument here similar to that of Stanley Hauerwas in his article, "Practice Preaching," in the Advent, 1994 issue of *Journal for Preachers*. Indeed, you might want to go back and review that article, reading it in tandem with this article. You might also see my article, "Why Being A Pastor Is More Important Than Being a 'Person,'" *Theology Today* 50 (1994): 580-585.

⁵ This woman's exhortation to me, her preacher, illustrates Stanley Hauerwas's assertion 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." Hauerwas, "Practice Preaching."

It should be noted that this woman was an eighty-year-old Presbyterian. She had been trained, I presume, to expect something of her preachers and to hold her preacher accountable through her own "preaching" on the light blue notepaper.

⁶ Again, Hauerwas, "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...the exercise of the ministry of proclamation requires ministers to make clear that the Word they preach is as painful to them as it is to the congregation." "Practice Preaching."

⁷ See my *Peculiar Speech: Preaching to the Baptized* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1992).

⁸ The modern poet, Sisson, in a mock address to John Donne the preacher, notes a curious relationship between preaching, sex, and ambition:

"...the vain, the ambitious and the highly sexed
Are the natural prey of the Incarnate Christ."

"A Letter to John Donne," *The New Oxford Book of Christian Verse*, 285.

⁹ For more recent fictional treatments of the moral demise of preachers see James P. Wind, "Clergy Ethics in Modern Fiction," in *Clergy Ethics in a Changing Society: Mapping the Terrain*, ed. J.P. Wind, R. Burck, P.F. Camenisch, and D.P. McCann, (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991).

I would add to my list of required moral reading for clergy Peter DeVries, *The Mackerel Plaza*, 1958; Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*; John Updike, *A Month of Sundays*, 1974; and Andrew Greeley, *Thy Brother's Wife*, 1982.

¹⁰ "Clergy Ethics: Getting Our Story Straight," in *Against the Grain: New Approaches to Professional Ethics*, ed. Michael Goldberg (Valley Forge, PA.: Trinity Press).

¹¹ "This is the true joy in life, the being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one;...the being a force of Nature instead of a feverish selfish little clod of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy." George Bernard Shaw, *Man and Superman*, 1903, Epistle Dedicatory.

¹² This point is argued so well in Stanley Fish's reply to Stephen Carter, "Liberalism Doesn't Exist," *The*

Duke Law Journal (1987): 997.

¹³ Richard Lischer, *Theories of Preaching* (Durham: Labyrinth Press, 1987), 3, notes how the great homiletical treatises after Augustine, through the Middle Ages, as well as the later work of homileticians like Baxter, and Schleiermacher expend much energy in discussions of the character of the preacher.

¹⁴ Stanley Hauerwas has suggested that ethical theory was devised as an attempt to have ethics without character. Through rules and principles we hope to achieve the good deeds which come, not from right rules and principles, but from good people. There is a sense in which I believe that homiletical theory and technique may be an attempt to have good preaching without having preachers with the requisite character for good preaching.

See also Stanley M. Hauerwas, "Clerical Character," in *Christian Existence Today* (Durham, North Carolina: Labyrinth Press, 1988), 133-148.