

Conversational Preaching: A Proposal

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I am a preacher and a teacher of preaching who is profoundly at home in the postmodern world. Let me say a word first about this often maligned word *postmodern* and then about preaching.

As I listen to scholars describe the postmodern world, a number of whimsical images come to my mind. Some scholars envision “Postmodern” as a scary country that should be avoided at all costs; their obsession is how to shore up the infrastructure that supports the beloved homeland, “Modernity.” Other scholars agree that there’s something scary about this alien country called “Postmodern,” but for them the train called Western culture on which we are riding has already crossed the border; they lament the loss of their former homeland and throw themselves, with varying degrees of enthusiasm, into the task of exploring the new world; at the same time their hearts remain in the “old country.” Others who recognize “Postmodern” as an unexplored territory don’t seem particularly afraid, but they prefer to describe its contours from across a fence.

My experience has been different. It was as though one day, while pursuing my graduate studies at Emory University, I woke up, looked around at the postmodern landscape, and said, “Wow, this is home.” I had been living in this world for a number of years without knowing its name. While I do not agree with everyone who writes as a citizen of my new country, I relish the sense of belonging. What delight—that there is room here for me and others whose experiences left us on the margins of the modern world. What a heady feeling of release from a mold that crimped and pinched and never cared about my unique gifts and idiosyncracies.

In the modern world there were definitions of the word *woman* according to which we flesh-and-blood women were ranked, valued, or dismissed. And I was painfully aware that I didn’t help write the definitions. In the modern world there were definitions of the word *preacher* according to which we flesh-and-blood preachers were ranked, valued, or dismissed. And I was painfully aware that I didn’t help write those definitions either. In the modern world it was hard, some of you know what I mean, it was hard to swim against the norms, to entertain the possibility of other possibilities. But as a woman and as a preacher, I never quite fit the definitions.

In the postmodern world all definitions, by definition, can be reworked. And the starting place for redefining can be what flesh-and-blood women, or flesh-and-blood preachers, actually do.

This brings me to my rethinking of the “whys,” “whats,” and “hows” of preaching? Thinking about preaching is in my bones. And I have supplemented bone-knowing with reading widely and deeply in homiletical theory. There’s classical theory that defines preaching as persuasively presenting a truth so that the ideas in the preacher’s mind are shaped in the minds of the congregation. There’s kerygmatic theory that defines preaching as faithfully communicating the gospel so that God becomes the Preacher and the sermon becomes a saving event. There’s contemporary theory that defines preaching as replicating a transforming experience of the text so that the

congregation has the same experience of transformation. The problem is that none of these fit what I try to do when I stand in the pulpit and what I hope for when I sit in the pew. Conversations with students and other preachers have convinced me I am not alone. Our stories of preaching, our stories of church are different from the stories of those who previously defined “preaching”—and “women,” for that matter.

In the postmodern world these “small stories,” our lived experiences from the fringes of the modern world, are no less important than the stories of those who were “somebodies” in the “old country.” In fact our “small stories” become our starting points for expanding former definitions. We attend to and reflect on our experiences, our actual practices, and our hopes as preachers. Then, as we speak and write these reflections, in the postmodern world, since we are preachers, the meaning of the word *preaching* by necessity stretches to embrace us.

So, here is a description of preaching that seeks to take seriously my and others’ alternative experiences of ourselves in the pulpit and the pew. Here is a proposal that demands the enlargement, the confirmation, as well as the correction of other descriptions of preaching.

What is the purpose of preaching? If the aim is not primarily to win consent from the congregation to a truth claim, nor to communicate the unchanging heart of the gospel as God’s saving Word, nor to facilitate a transforming event, why do we preach? My proposal is not an “instead of” but an “in addition to.” Sometimes preaching accomplishes one of the three aims purported by the dominant theories. But in addition, preaching’s goal at times is to gather the community of faith around the Word where the central conversations of the church are refocused and fostered. I call this a conversational understanding of preaching.

In conversational preaching the preacher and the congregation envision themselves as exploring together the mystery of the Word for the lives of the worshippers, as well as the life of the congregation, the larger church, and the world. The preacher and the congregation gather symbolically at a round table where there is no head and no foot, where labels like clergy and laity blur, and where believing or wanting to believe is all that matters. Here the preacher is neither the expert in scriptural interpretation nor the answer person in matters of faith. Here the preacher is simply the one charged with the responsibility of focusing the homiletical conversation for the particular service of worship. Although one person may do all the speaking during the time set aside for the sermon, it is the priesthood of believers, the entire community of faith, that is responsible for exploring the Word and deciding its meanings, its claims, its direction pointings. Conversational preaching aims to gather the community of faith service after service, week after week, year after year, around the Word.

Conversational preaching also aims to nurture the central ecclesial conversations. These essential conversations are multiple. There is the divine-human conversation between the community of faith, a people with a semblance of distinctive identity and communal agenda, and the Word as found in all its complexity and elusiveness in scripture. There is the divine-human conversation between the community of faith and God, the foremost character in our ongoing “small” story as the covenant people. These divine-human conversations also include the Word or God in partnership with individual believers, each with an unrepeatable configuration of personal stories and webs of storied relationships. And there are also the human-human conversations. These, too, are multifaceted, expanding from the preaching moment in ever-widening

circles. These conversation partners include those who preach and those who do not, those who are confident in matters of faith and those who find themselves awkward and unsure, those for whom church is a second home and those who rarely set foot in institutionalized holy space, those who are “like us” and those whose ideas come from “off the wall” or “out of left field,” those who are glib and those who are mute, those who are successful in the eyes of the world and those whose true selves have been slammed and silenced. Conversational preaching seeks to gather these voices together, paying particular attention to those that have been drowned out by the din around the round and the rectangular tables of our world and paying particular attention to the whispers and the pauses where people’s voices are missing. Conversational preaching wrestles with Word and words, with Silence and silence, seeking to invite everyone to participate in those conversations that shape the ongoing stories of God’s people.

The “why” of conversational preaching is to gather the community of faith around the Word where the central conversations of the church are refocused and fostered. For me this “why” demands a new “what.”

What is the content of preaching in this postmodern world where “truth,” even gospel truth, is suspect as part of the modern world’s agenda to keep former definitions in place? In the postmodern world no “truth” is objective, absolute, ontological, or archetypal. The only way I can speak of “truth” is eschatologically. There will come a Day when we will understand, but until that Day we live by faith and hope, not by sure knowledge, clear facts, or unambiguous truth.

What is the content of preaching in this postmodern world when every articulation of faith and every experience, including experiences of grace, are colored and textured by the race, the gender, the class, the nationality, the age, the personality type, the education level, and the list goes on, of the one articulating and experiencing? Does preaching’s content slide into the quagmire of relativism where everything is slippery and unstable? No. In conversational preaching the sermon’s content is a proposal offered to the community of faith for their additions, corrections, or counterproposals. The sermon’s content is a tentative interpretation of scripture that acknowledges, as best it can, its limitations and biases. Most importantly, the sermon’s content is a wager on the part of the preacher: a new insight that has brought comfort or challenge; an old faith claim revisited in new life circumstances; a resting place, oasis, or scenic overlook along the congregation’s or the preacher’s pilgrimage with the Spirit. In conversational preaching the preacher searches for meaning arising at the intersection of a text and life’s myriad experiences. The preacher searches for meaning that makes life livable and, by the secret workings of the Spirit, grace-filled. This meaning is then submitted to the community of faith via the sermon for their answering meanings. One meaning funds multiple meanings, one experience of grace funds multiple experiences of grace, one proposed articulation of the gospel funds multiple articulations of the gospel, through the Spirit that prods and prompts the hearts and minds of the congregation.

This centrifugal movement of preaching is answered, and probably preceded, by a centripetal movement. Sermon after sermon, service after service the Spirit is shaping for God a people who in fits and fractures give evidence of a hope that God’s promised shalom is worth our living and our dying; who, however discordantly or contrapuntally, raise a collective voice that glorifies God. Through time the Spirit

weaves together the threads of multiple meanings, variegated experiences of grace, and diverse articulations of the gospel, to fashion and refashion the community as the household of God.

Conversational preaching flows from faith and hope into faith and hope, struggling to discern the ever-changing patterns in the indistinct mirror called Word, truth, gospel, or revelation, through which we now see dimly and distortedly. Conversational preaching is faithful not in relation to some “objective” standard of Word, truth, gospel, or revelation, but in relation to the health of the multiple conversations that *all* contribute to the formation and reformation of God’s people on our way toward the eschaton where we believe and hope we will see God face to face.

Conversational preaching’s “hows” work hand in hand with these understandings of preaching’s “why” and “what.” I will say a brief word about sermon language and then sermon form.

Conversational preaching offers an alternative to two standard “rules” about sermon language. The traditional rule is that sermon language should be clear to insure that the preacher’s message is accurately transmitted. A more contemporary rule is that sermon language should be poetic, evocative, and, in a word, performative—that is, capable of enacting the activity to which it refers—to insure that the preacher’s experience of the text is reenacted in the congregation. Both of these understandings presuppose a hierarchy which privileges the preacher’s knowledge or experience above the congregation’s knowledge or experience.

Conversational preaching, however, values poetic, evocative language because of its ability to invite to the sermon round table the experiences, thoughts, and wagers of all those present and even of those absent. The preacher’s words remind the worshippers of their own lives, limitations, sins, moments of grace, and unnamed glimpses of the Spirit at work. Sermonic metaphors and images play along the edge of what we know of God’s Mystery. Sermonic words wrung from the depth of human experience dance from the edges of lived life to its center and back, inviting Mystery to be a part of our always too small stories.

The “how” of conversational preaching also involves sermon form. Inductive sermons, as described by Fred Craddock, and narrative sermons, as described by Gene Lowry, are potentially heuristic forms that invite the congregation to work out their own meanings in a give-and-take with the Spirit. The worshippers need not take the particular journey presented by the preacher; rather the sermon’s possibility intentionally funds a wealth of possibilities. The story-sermon is also potentially a heuristic form that allows the worshippers to overhear a proposal, interpretation, or wager and, by the aid of the Spirit, decide their own conclusions.

Conversational preaching is communal, heuristic, and nonhierarchical. As preachers we do not claim to know truth or to have a privileged grasp on the gospel. Our experiences of grace are always particular and biased, never universal or paradigmatic. Yet we preach—because our lives, our faith, our hopes, our stories, depend on it. In the postmodern world, where stories collide and clash, where no single story is “the whole truth and nothing but the truth,” retelling our stories as the people of God is essential to our remaining the people of God. In preaching we articulate our wagers, go public with our interpretations, frame our meanings, as one possibility in the zigzag, erratic journey of God’s people. My story or your story as the preacher with our unavoidably particular wagers, interpretations, and meanings is neither more nor

less important than the story of every other believer, congregational groupie, or hanger-on who hopes against hope to trade secondhand beliefs for firsthand discipleship. In fact, in this topsy-turvy world, at times it is the preacher, particularly when we are in need of a season of silence, who becomes the groupie, the hanger-on, and it is a church member who speaks the life-restoring word.