

The Theater and Preaching

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I

Someone once asked Samuel Miller, then dean of the Harvard Divinity School, where he would go to church in New York City to be *moved*. Miller confessed that he was at a loss to guarantee such a pulpit, but that he could recommend three *plays*. One could use such a story to suggest what is not true: that the pulpit is generally lifeless and in need of stimulation and material from such exciting quarters as the stage. To take a more positive view, we have only to keep in mind that this high view of theater came from a theologian and preacher. When we think clearly about what preaching *is*, at its best, and consider what drama is, essentially, then their affinity appears.

One could give an article on this topic to show in theological and aesthetic terms what that affinity is. The subjects come readily to mind: drama as we know it in the modern world was born among the preaching friars of the middle ages; Christianity, by virtue of its sacramental and language-oriented theology, is particularly hospitable to the theater as a place where the ordinary human experience is both imitated and transcended; the liturgy and the staged play have much in common, in their use of time and space as well as in their combination of the tragic and the comic; the Bible's preachers and storytellers, like the best of our playwrights, are given to imagination but not to sentiment (a prime example would be the parables of Jesus), to passion but not so much to parading feelings or piety; the best sermons, like the best plays—that is, those that have the greatest effect—do not *preach*. As the poet Yeats said, "Only that which does not cry out, does not explain, does not teach, does not condescend, is irresistible." In the pulpit as well as on the stage, the play is the thing. In homiletics, or in trying to formulate the doctrine of the Word of God, we speak of the *word-event*, on the stage of the moment for which the playwright hopes, when every member of the audience comes and stands on the stage, as part of the action or as one of the characters.

One could, following Tillich, develop these ideas in the context of a theology culture: since religion is the substance of culture and culture the form of religion, then obviously such a phenomenon of culture as the theater is of the greatest theological significance. But our interest here is in the more practical matter of taking the preacher to the theater and bringing the play to the pulpit. Toward that end, this paper will be a chronicle of an evening at the theater, of moving from that experience toward a sermon, the preparation of the sermon, and reconsideration of the whole experience. Practical matters and theoretical and theological considerations will appear all along the way.

II

The Circle Repertory is just off Sheridan Square, and we were no sooner inside on a muggy August evening than we wondered whether for twenty-five dollars we couldn't have found a more comfortable and cheerful spot somewhere uptown. But among the off-Broadway shows *Balm in Gilead* had had the best reviews. We entered past a dirty urinal and public-toilet graffiti only to find ourselves in a down-at-the-heels West Side coffee shop which had not been swept, it appeared, any more recently than Seventh Avenue out front.

Our seats were front row center, which meant that we were in the middle of the action and soon to be approached by the monte men, smooth talking and flipping their three cards faster than the eye could follow. People around us lost a few dollars: it *was* just like being out on the street, especially as the cast of twenty-nine began to take over the coffee shop: prostitutes, pimps, transvestites, junkies and dealers, the new girl on the block, the mentally ill, and the just plain ne'er-do-well. Up on the wall was the usual menu, from burgers to breakfast, and such signs as "No Dancing" and "\$1 minimum in booths." To the right was the washroom through which we had entered, into which the street people were constantly trying to sneak, past the vigilant owner and the large bouncer/counterman. To the left, in shadows and one story above the stage, a by-the-hour hotel room.

Though the play lasted more than two hours (the fact that several conversations might be going on at one time made it seem longer), the story is quickly told, what story there is. We actually do not learn much about these people at all, certainly not about their past. There is one extended monologue in which Darlene tells us about her life with Cotton, in Chicago, and we get some insight into what has brought her here. But for the most part all we see is broken, lost people coping as best they can on scraps of food and human interaction. The small plot revolves around Joe, whose ambition gets him involved with drugs and the mob, and leads eventually to his death in the booth where he and Darlene have become regulars. *Death* is a mild word for it: the mob's man, in slacks and sweater, stabs Joe with a footlong hypodermic needle. The action is repeated three times.

The play is relentless, almost without relief. One woman, almost comatose from heroine, spends the entire play except for one trip to the roof for a shot, hanging, half-on, half-off the stool, her hold on the counter as precarious as the life which screams and scratches around her. We see, as the play goes on, that she is everyone here, barely able to hang on, just waiting for the next fix, of one kind or another. Joe and Darlene could be Adam and Eve, and a couple of young lovers anywhere, when they take their clothes off and she rubs his back in the cool bedroom. And there is now and then a moment when someone listens, or they laugh. But for the most part, we are left with it, nothing closer to balm than a cup of coffee, memories, or a needle in the arm.

III

I tell my students in preaching that the surest way *not* to enjoy/experience

a play is to go to the theater looking for sermon material. What John Crossan says about the parables, for example, and about metaphor in general is true of drama:

When a metaphor contains a radically new vision of world it gives absolutely no information until after the hearer has entered into it and experienced it from inside itself. In such cases the hearer's first reaction may be to refuse to enter into the metaphor and one will seek to translate it immediately into the comfortable normalcy of one's ordinary linguistic world. . . . One must risk entrance before one can experience its validity.
(*In Parables*, 13)

As with all of our experience, including that of the arts, we can turn metaphor into mere illustration, and if we move too soon in that direction, making of everything grist for the homiletical mill, then we will not actually *go* to the play. Crossan says that the difference between *metaphor* and *illustration* is that in the one case I am used by the metaphor, but illustrations I simply employ for one agenda or another. So, the play is the thing, and the first thing is to *be* there, as far as possible in the mood and expectancy of any human being. As one of my students put it: "Preachers, it would seem, need to live their lives like other people and *then* to make something of it."

On the other hand, we do have this vocation to preach which impinges on everything we do. On many an evening out the preacher will no doubt leave the theater—or perhaps this will happen in the midst of the play—thinking about how this might serve the Sunday sermon. In the case of a play like *Balm in Gilead*, the preacher may, at first, draw a complete blank. I came away from the play not a little depressed, ill-prepared to face the grime of that part of Manhattan, and far from inspired to the task of preaching. As almost inevitably happens when one of my theological colleagues is around, my companion asked, "Well, did you find a sermon in that?" I was grateful that I did not have to preach on the play that night, or even the next day.

But as often happens, the play had its own way, and with time its characters and scenes re-presented themselves as powerful images of struggling, somehow surviving people. In this regard the stage is very like the pulpit: the best sermons are not easily summed up over Sunday dinner, reduced to so many neat points, easily assimilated ideas. It is the event itself—multifaceted, appealing to imagination, calling for deep participation—which has power. The marks of a great play, as of a compelling sermon, were all there: the theatergoer's participation in coffee-shop life; the hard but real human images, the undeniable *people*; the unresolved situation, calling for some invading word, some transcendent presence, more than could be said or done then and there. So the play in resisting use moved toward redeeming metaphor.

We could probably follow a rule of thumb: the more difficult the play to assimilate, the more promising for preaching. Experience with this play would confirm that. The title itself added to the difficulty: most churchgoers would expect something religious in a play of that title, and I found myself expecting, half hoping to hear someone like Mahalia or Ethel belting out the spiritual. But Lanford Wilson held back, kept our noses in the worst of it, gave us the

barest hints that he even knew the biblical setting of the phrase. It was only as days passed that I began to hear some of the lines as the scenes came back: Tyg, in an obscure conversation in the corner is telling someone that "they had a salve back there in Egypt that could cure most anything." And in time the death of Joe, stabbed three times with a brutal needle, began to count too.

So, the play stayed with me and led eventually to looking again at the familiar text in Jeremiah. With the play as foil against which to study the pericope, exegesis took on new life, certain motifs sprang to attention. For example, in Jeremiah 8:18—9:1, the prophet gives no suggestion that the calamity of the people is a punishment for sin; rather, he reveals his complete sympathy with his stricken people. Not only is the harvest past, (April to June), but the season of summer fruits fails also. The metaphor is one of desperation. Surely, says the prophet, there must be relief from somewhere, some medicine, some good physician who can help. Maybe from Gilead, the rough hill country east of Jordan, a place fabled for its healing ointment, could come some balm.

In this case the play led the preacher back to Scripture, and the result was a second look at a well-worn text. This may often be the case with the arts; we are looking for the freedom-with-responsibility which will allow what Robert Raines call "raiding the Bible." This possibility calls for even better knowledge of Scripture, a *dwelling* in the Bible which allows us to bring its stories, images, characters to a sermon which might well begin with a quite secular play. Taking such latitude calls also for even greater faithfulness in exegesis and theological reflection. Perhaps it is not so important that we always begin with the text as that once we are there, however we may have come to the text, we listen carefully, honestly. It may well be, too, that coming by way of a play makes for this deeper, more intense listening. In the precise meaning of the word exegesis is a *leading out* of the text: a play might well be one more means of accomplishing this leading out, by putting to the biblical tradition the questions of life in our time. Raines is to the point here when he says that "the Bible is just so much wind until we put up our lives as a sail." In this case, *Balm in Gilead* provoked and enabled attentiveness to the text. This renders somewhat artificial the notion that every sermon must begin with the studious exegesis of a predetermined pericope.

IV

Sermon, *Balm in Gilead*

From the beginning of the play until the end, there was no relief.

To begin, we had entered the theater through the toilet, and once inside found ourselves sitting in the middle of the set, a down-at-the-heels West-Side coffee shop which had been swept no more recently than the New York streets from which we had sought refuge.

Even the air conditioning could hardly cope with the muggy August evening. Before the play had even begun we wondered if we weren't maybe *too* far off Broadway where we could have seen a nice musical.

But if there was anything in the title at all, maybe we could count on Mahalia or Ethel breaking into all of this with a soulful, "There is a balm in

Gilead. . . .”

As if the eyesore set were not bad enough—it looked exactly like a thousand coffee shops that serve as home and hearth for street people—they were all there: prostitutes, pimps, junkies and dealers, transvestites, the new girl on the block, the mentally ill, and the just plain ne’er-do-well. From behind the altar-like counter, the proprietor, his big bouncer and a waitress with ornamental handkerchief, dish out coffee and burgers, try to keep them out of the washroom and to enforce the rules: “\$1 minimum in booths,” “pay when served,” “NO DANCING.”

Before the play had even started the monte men had tried their tricks on us, flipping three cards faster than the eye could follow, lifting a few bucks along the first row, as if \$25 were not enough to pay for seeing yet more of the unwashed people and sleazy streets we had left outside.

It was hard to take, this earliest play of Lanford Wilson, and I left the theater puzzling over what it had to do with the prophetic poetry from which the title comes. So I went back and read the passage from Jeremiah.

(Read here Jeremiah 8:18—9:1)

One of the interesting things about this is that there is no suggestion at all that the calamity which has befallen the people—and we do not know what it was—is punishment for sin.

The prophet is simply expressing his deep sympathy, is weeping with those who weep, standing with them, or, as his fellow prophet Ezekiel has it, going down to the camp of the exiles to sit where they sit.

The poem is their question, the crying of their hearts, as the prophet imagines it: “Is there no balm in Gilead?” Isn’t there someone, somewhere who can heal my people? The prophet puts it as a question, not as an affirmation, and in that is revealed the depth of his identification with these suffering people.

As I say, we got no relief, and there was not a suggestion of a song by Mahalia. We left the theater with that unsatisfied feeling, like needing a shower, or a square meal.

But it wasn’t a play to be left behind in at the Holland Tunnel, or to be washed off easily in hygienic suburbia.

The characters kept coming back.

Joe. He is young, wants to make it, gets involved with the mob and a fast buck in drug dealing. He ends up stabbed to death with a foot-long hypodermic needle. Curiously, the action is repeated, almost ritually, three times.

Darlene, the new girl on the block, who in a long monologue remembers a failed love affair in Chicago and reveals her mixed hopes and fears in the city.

The blonde, who listens for half an hour to Darlene’s story, just listens.

The stool hanger. She is virtually comatose with heroine, hangs, half on, half off the stool center stage through the whole play, her hold on the counter as precarious as the life which scratches and screams around her.

Tyg. Tall, handsome, sly. In an obscure conversation in the corner booth—frequently all of the cast of thirty are talking at once—he tells a nameless man, “They used to have in Egypt some kind of salve. It could cure just

about anything.”

Now if we were to try to refresh Tyg’s memory of that story he so dimly remembers—a wonder-working salve somewhere down in Egypt—how would we put it.

Right, Tyg, there was the prophet Jeremiah, whose people are suffering; they have gone through some terrible calamity and the future looks bleak.

The *salve* you talk about was a famous remedy coming from the rugged hill country across the Jordan River, the balm of Gilead.

In the face of insurmountable trouble, a wounded and broken people, Jeremiah the poet puts his people’s question: “Surely, somewhere, there is a remedy, a way out of this. There has to be a way, someone who can heal our hurt.” Surely, we would say, at the Mayo Clinic, or Sloane Kettering, or in Houston, there has to be a remedy. It can’t be hopeless.

The answer is not forthcoming.

Jeremiah, like his people, is carried away into exile and dies far from home. Hope goes unfulfilled:

“The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved.”

And the prophet, weeping for his people, looks for signs of God’s presence:

“Is the Lord not in Zion?

Is her King not in her?”

Is there no balm in Gilead?

Is there no physician up to our case?

It is not that the New York street scene is worse off than a good many manicured suburbs, when you come down to it.

It’s just that the question is so blatant there.

I said that there was *no* relief, and that is close to the truth.

There was the time when the blonde listened,

when Joe and Darlene turned a leatherette booth into home and a pay-by-the-hour hotel room into loving intimacy. . .

They do manage to laugh, and there is the old coffee shop itself and the family, of sorts, that it shelters. From *their* point of view, I suppose even the drugs and booze could be called *balm*.

But finally, there is no healing, no final succour, no rescue.

She is still on drugs, hanging on for dear life, and Darlene is going to end up like the worn out women around her.

And when Joe gets it from the mob, a brutal needle jabbed three times into his young body, we see, if ever so dimly, that though there may never be any way out of this, in the midst of it is the one who goes with his people into exile,

who does not leave us in these mean streets,
who takes in his own body these wounds.

Oddly enough, even though Mahalia didn’t come through, I found myself singing, right there in the middle of it all, as you probably would to, despite all the

evidence to the contrary,

“There is a balm in Gilead, to make the wounded whole. . . .”

V

The tendency will be, in moving from a play like this to the pulpit, to foreclose prematurely in one of two ways: 1) this play is *not* gospel, even anti-gospel, with no clear word of redemption, or 2) this play has some quite obvious, but here arcane Christian symbols which should be emphasized (the counter as altar, Joe’s “crucifixion,” the specific reference to the “salve in Egypt”). To follow either conclusion would block full participation in the drama and, in the long run, would not serve proclamation of the gospel. Instead, what is needed is openness, despite discomfort, toward a new experience, and sufficient patience in waiting for the play to have its own way.

In fact, in this particular case it is only as one experiences the *absence* of gospel, the desperate situation of these people, that the prophetic poetry of Jeremiah opens toward proclamation. In other words, it is the *experience* of the play, albeit everything but soothing, which creates a new hearing for the familiar text.

The preacher, then, in the confidence of the gospel and in the working of the Spirit, can sit loose to modern drama, open to the playwright’s creation. In the same way, the preacher can be light on her feet with the text, allowing the prophet’s poetry its way with us. There is no need to make everything *fit*, but finally to bring all to the feet of the Crucified One with something of the humility and reserve that we see in Lanford Wilson’s play. The cross is there, but it is not in its usual, taken-for-granted, gilded form.