

# *Less is More: Preaching as a Liturgical Act*

Charles Rice

Drew University Theological School, Madison, New Jersey

For the first time, in Atlanta in 1982, the North American Academy of Liturgy and the Academy of Homiletics met together. It was a difficult meeting, reflecting accurately the distance between liturgy and sermon in much of American Protestantism. It was also a remarkably productive meeting, for forcing conversation on the position of preaching in the cultus, reflection by practitioners and teachers which this article intends to further.

One case in point. Those who planned the Atlanta liturgies framed both the reading of the lessons and the sermon with silence. After the reading of the gospel and before the sermon, silence; when the preacher sat down, silence. that simple change—silence is for most of us liturgical innovation!—had an immediate, discernible impact on the sermons: as the week moved along, the content, tone, style, mood of preaching was shaped by the liturgy. The homiletician's fears were confirmed: liturgy might be dangerous to the sermon. One American pulpiteer came right out with it: "If we keep on with this liturgy business, we are going to lose preaching."

## I

First, "this liturgy business." Garrison Keillor has taken a very high view of liturgy. When asked what the sermon should sound like, the bard of Lake Wobegon replies:

When a minister stands in front of people, (he) is interrupting what the people have come to church for. (He) had better have a good reason for doing that. . . we go (to church) to look at the mysteries, and all the substitutes for communion with God are not worth anyone's time.<sup>1</sup>

What the people are doing there, liturgy, in this view of things becomes the real business, not only of Sunday morning but of life. This is, of course, foreign to us, both in the organized worship we mount and in daily life. How many people if asked, "why do you go to church?" would come up with anything like "to look at the mysteries" or if asked "what is life's most important work?" would come close to "worshipping God"? But can we, sitting straight-backed in our pews listening to sermons as we do, deny it?

It may well be true that getting serious about liturgy is subversive to preaching. As it now stands communion Sunday is quite likely to see the sermon reduced to a "meditation." Homileticians suspicious of liturgists have good reason: more liturgy probably does mean less preaching, both in terms of

time allocated in the service and in laying out the week's work. But would not less be more?

Since Vatican II liturgical styles have moved toward simplicity. Minimalism in church architecture, especially in Europe, expresses the liturgical reforms which seek to recover what is essential to Christian worship. The unadorned spaces, openness to light, earthiness, and human scale of many new church buildings suggests a liturgical sensibility that is increasingly chaste and understated. Paralleling that in the liturgy is the return to the simple symmetry of the service of word and table, to congregational performance of music, scripture, and prayer, and to silence.

Take, for example, the reading of scripture. Vatican II declared that "Christ is present in His Word, since it is He Himself who speaks when the Holy Scriptures are read in the church."<sup>2</sup> This means that the reading of the Bible merits careful preparation, time in the service, silence following the reading, and the liturgical regularity of following the lectionary. It also means that introductions and explanations, mini exegeses, are not only superfluous but perhaps downright detrimental to the hearer's apprehending Christ's presence. What is more, in this way of seeing it the scriptures mediate God's word before the preacher stands up. Accordingly, such liturgical scholars as James White tell us that the lections have their own life in the worshipping congregation and should be read faithfully whether or not they are preached upon. What we have, then, is a liturgical act of the greatest simplicity: someone reads the Bible, without comment, while the people listen, keep silence, and in this, as William Skudlarek says, find the "real presence" of Christ.<sup>3</sup> It is this simple act which is at the heart of the worship of Taizé.<sup>4</sup>

## II

We have made some moves toward locating preaching in liturgy. The revivalist's order of service which puts the sermon at the end and almost inevitably reduces everything else to build-up, gradually gives way to a eucharistic pattern, the word leading toward the table. The increasing use of the lectionary, too, locates preaching liturgically: the preacher speaks as one who like the congregation listens to the given texts, so that preaching is not so much to the people as among them, organic to an ongoing liturgical life. These shifts, away from locating the sermon at the apex of worship, and toward a commonly held corpus of biblical texts, have given many preachers the sense of preaching in the liturgy, even of being carried by it.

But there is considerable lag, between what we know about the history and nature of Christian worship and what occurs on Sunday morning. The earliest accounts of the church's life show the preacher at the table, probably sitting, speaking among the people who have brought bread and wine to make eucharist. The preacher, according to Justyn (c. 150 A.D.) is the president of the eucharist, and it is at table that preaching occurs. We are far from this, and the consequences of our losing this connection are far reaching.

Karl Barth defined proclamation on such a model: "By 'proclamation of the Word of God' we are to understand withal, primarily and decisively,

preaching and the sacraments.”<sup>5</sup> By this definition, preaching is at every point, in its inception, preparation, and delivery—whatever its distinguishing characteristics and however much it may depend upon the preacher’s person and craft—a function of the community of the baptized gathered around the holy table. Even the content of the sermon, as language coming from the community—its common texts and its common life—for the community, through the speech of one person, is analogous to the liturgy proper, where common bread and wine become, at the hands of one, the gifts of God for the people of God. This is, as Barth and virtually all of the reformers before him held, the proper place of preaching, at the table. Luther’s emphasis on preaching—he refers to the church as “das Mundhaus”—should not lead us to think that he would locate preaching elsewhere than in the eucharistic community of baptized believers.

This is the place where the preacher stands. There is no place to preach apart from the table, and apart from the eucharistic community there is no reason to preach. Preaching belongs to the church, to the community which gathers to meet the risen Christ and in doing so to clarify its mission and renew its hope, and that is a matter of inseparable word and table. Commenting on Barth’s theology of proclamation, Dietrich Ritschl writes:

The sermon and the Lord’s Supper are not “contradistinguished,” but it is the one life-giving Word that is present in both. The presence of the risen Lord and the expectation of His return are the decisive elements in the sermon and the Lord’s Supper: we bear in mind both when we say “proclamation.”<sup>6</sup>

The word of God occurs in this peculiar place, where under the signs of broken body and shed blood, the church celebrates. Standing there, the preacher can be realistic, facing up to the world’s plight, and beyond all mere optimism, hopeful. If preaching moved closer to this anamnesis of Jesus, we might be somewhat more up to P.T. Forsyth’s call: “The cure for boredom in the pulpit is not brilliance but reality.”<sup>7</sup> Eucharistic preaching is more likely to have this quality.

The preacher who stands at the table is also more likely to keep his or her feet, to remember why and what we preach. The sacraments, in all their materiality, hold us to the gospel: “*Ho logos sarx egeneto*” (Jn. 1:14)—preaching, too, can and must say this. But in a way which preaching can never do, the sacrament underlines *sarx* and *egeneto*.<sup>8</sup> The preacher who keeps the baptism in view will remember that it is God who calls, saves, leads, sustains these people, and that quite apart from the issue of the sermon, these people are received by God in baptism. The sermon before the table will not take a tone which suggests that God’s love is somehow conditional upon morality, theological affirmation, or simply agreeing with the preacher: the liturgy itself is proceeding toward the moment when one more Jesus will eat with sinners. This is the place, at the table, where gospel preaching is most assured.

### III

Much preaching in America is out of place and has lost its feet. The legacy of the Reformation, though it would come as a shock to the reformers, is schism between preaching and the sacramental community. In the place of the mass, and to carry out the program of the new movements, the sermon assumed a very large place in Protestant worship. This has continued to the present and has been reinforced by the revivalist movement, individualism, our susceptibility to the huckster, our practical bent. Also, one can hardly argue with success: it was the preachers who won frontier America for Protestantism.

That preaching has been separated from its proper context is revealed by the "electronic church," and in more disturbing ways by the availability of Bible and sermon to various groups lobbying for one cause or another. Is it possible that a religious-political coalition, with a narrowly focused platform amounting to a value-specific agenda, could gain political power, at least in part, by the use of preaching? And to what degree would responsibility for that lie with our willingness to accept as normative preaching apart from baptism and table? Is it the case—and there is much precedent in the history of the church in America to say so—that anyone may stand up with the Bible and be a preacher? Are we willing to perpetuate that? Do we in fact give tacit approval to such a notion when the sermon is anything other than a liturgical act, in organic connection with the sacramentally formed community?

At the table where the suffering One is remembered, the triumphant Christ is host, the Spirit is present to the baptized faithful, and God is praised and thanked, the preacher is more likely to keep to the gospel, against all chauvinism, moralism, and parochialism, the petty and puerile, the unworthy agenda. Setting preaching squarely in the liturgy is the best fence against its perversion, as William Skudlarek tells us in a remarkably prophetic passage:

Worship, or liturgy, or sacrament, then, is something far more than the setting of the sermon. It is even more than the *kairos* of preaching. . . . It is, to use that old but at times still helpful category of scholastic philosophy, the "final cause" of preaching: its end, purpose, and goal. To say this is not to deny that preaching is to bring people to faith, or that it is to have an influence on their behavior. Rather, it is to affirm that faith and obedience are both to go one step further and be transformed into praise and thanksgiving. Unless this step is taken faith can all too easily degenerate into doctrinal rigidity, and obedience into legalistic conformity. Authentic praise and thanksgiving—that is, praise and thanksgiving flowing out of a recognition of the graciousness of God (faith) and propelling us to actions of love and justice (obedience)—is ultimately the mark of effective proclamation of the word of God.<sup>9</sup>

The most evangelical preaching, then, recalls baptism and leads toward eucharist; that is the only safe place to preach, if one would speak and live in faith. We have a picture of the liturgical matrix of all that the church is and does, in Paul's letter to the Colossians:

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; in all wisdom teach and ad-

monish each other; with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs sing with grace in your hearts to the Lord . . . give thanks to God the Father through (Christ) (3:16-17).

This is a call to worship and an order of Christian worship: the place of preaching is the community which does all that it does, teaching and preaching, singing and praying while giving thanks, making eucharist.

#### IV

In the most practical terms, what does this mean? What steps might we take toward preaching as a liturgical act?

First we could get beyond the usual way of putting it, preaching *and* liturgy. The present arrangement of theological studies and the division of professional societies perpetuates the idea that preaching can be done apart from a community's liturgical life. This stems in part, no doubt, from the assumption in theological studies that *lex credendi* precedes *lex orandi* and that preaching is to be identified with the former.<sup>10</sup> Homiletics might profitably move closer to liturgical studies, even toward becoming one discipline in that more comprehensive field.

The obvious implication of this is that the normative gathering for Christians is the eucharist, of which the service of the word is a part, an idea foreign to the majority of protestants. In the church in which I grew up we went to Sunday school and "stayed for preaching." That way of thinking is deeply ingrained in Protestant America. When, in the opening scene of the BBC's *The Long Search* Martin Marty introduces Protestantism (as one of the world's religions), he takes us to a New England meeting house with a large, lofty pulpit. In many of our churches today the focal point at worship is a large Bible on an infrequently used table, a symbol which accurately captures the Protestant ethos.

The integration of word and worship might be advanced by relatively simple means. Even when there is no communion, the order of the service can be eucharistic, with the offering and prayers appearing at the same places in the service as on communion Sunday. Simply by standing at the table for the prayers of the people and the Lord's Prayer the presiding minister can gather the community in such a way as to connect the whole service with eucharist. This will be all the more effective if the pastoral prayer—one more clericalism—gives way to bidding prayers which invite the congregation to do its liturgical work.

Preaching on the texts from the ecumenical lectionary connects preaching with liturgy: the preacher, from the outset of preparing to preach, recognizes the community's texts as the "place" of preaching. The preacher is not, as a rule, trying to "come up with ideas" so much as listening to the texts. And if the lectionary becomes a tool of pastoral work, the texts finding their way into nursing homes, study groups, board meetings, the pastor's daily office, then there is a forging of many links between the preaching task and liturgical living from Sunday to Sunday and season to season.

Topical preaching, giving titles to sermons, and aiming at a thematic unity in the service probably work against a real integration of preaching into the liturgy. Titles carry the connotation of "the preacher's thing," and the liturgy built around a theme is very likely to be oriented to the topic of the sermon. The thematic service holds the congregation's nose too close to what the leader wants them to see and so blunts the power of the liturgy's diversity and its appeal to the imagination, at the same time as it in effect reinforces the idea that the whole affair is the context for the preacher's performance.

There may be, too, quite simple means of giving the congregation a new awareness of their ownership of preaching, that it is no less than prayer and offertory, a function of the community. Some communions provide the versicles which suggest this: the preacher and congregation stand together at the beginning of the sermon in prayer, in acknowledging the Trinity, in a responsive greeting. This suggests that what is about to happen is itself part of the liturgy, and the more routinely this is done, the more the liturgical connection.

The simple act of standing in the pulpit is another way of acknowledging the community's ownership. That struck me as I was being escorted to a high pulpit; the deacon showed me to the stairs and then closed the gate! It is not unusual for congregations to assume that they own the preacher; how much better to cultivate a sense of owning the preaching. The pulpit is a powerful visual symbol of the ongoing life of the community, out of which we preach, so that the decision to preach at another spot should be well considered.

The proliferation of translations of scripture is problematic for liturgy. Many of us grew up reading and hearing at home, memorizing in Sunday school, and hearing from the pulpit one version, probably the King James. When the preacher read the Bible and sang its poetry as part of the sermon, it was ours, and part of the power of preaching was the familiarity of ownership we felt. Would it not be an advantage, liturgically, to agree upon a common text for home, church school and worship?

Finally, much depends upon the pastor's self-understanding and even upon his or her deployment of time and resources. Does leading the congregation in worship mean, primarily, preparing to preach? Is it possible for the leader of worship to be a worshipper? Can one do the work of preaching without its becoming a usurping obsession? Should one?

I have been suggesting to my students that they try to make less of preaching in order to make it better. "Better" would mean well-integrated into the community's worship, organic to the whole liturgical life of the congregation, not so burdensome or productive of anxiety, and evangelical in the sense of keeping close to the essential gospel. One place to start is in laying out the week's work: Monday morning read the texts as part of a time of prayer and meditation; live with the texts and take them on pastoral rounds and into the administration and teaching of the church; read toward the middle of the week what the scholars have to say; by Thursday be writing sermon and preparing liturgy; and by Friday supper have all in hand, including arrangement with those who will participate in leading Sunday's worship. Take Saturday off, following the rhythms of one's friends and neighbors, and go to worship on Sunday, as nearly as possible, as one who brings a special offering, the sermon, as

his or her particular contribution to the eucharistic celebration.

Such a week would include taking time for the arts, for being with a variety of people, for reading as widely as possible, and for a day-to-day liturgical life. The minister would move among the people in the same spirit in which he or she leads worship, as one presiding, enabling people to do their work before God, daily work, and liturgy.

In another way of putting it, to make less of preaching in order to make it more, we live life as deeply as we can and then make something of it in the gathered community. So we bring on Sunday our joys and sorrows into holy time and space; that is prayer. We bring our offerings, the fruit of our own bodies and blood poured out in work, and meld them with the bread and wine that Jesus shares with sinners; that is eucharist. And right there, where we pray and make eucharist, we bring our words, the images and stories of our life together and connect them with the gospel story; that is preaching, both less and more, for many of us, than it has been.

As close as I have come to this was in the small Xhosa villages near the seminary where I taught in South Africa, at the southernmost tip of the continent. My duties at the Federal Theological Seminary included driving seminar-ians to their Sunday charges in the remote bush. There were few church buildings, and most often a dining table would be set up in the courtyard which linked a family's rondavels. We took bread and wine, just in case. From somewhere would come a white cloth, always immaculate, and they would lay it out. Someone would read the Bible, and I would stand at the table, almost in the same motion to preach and to break the bread. Afterwards, the deacons, my students, and I would take the leftover bread and walk through the village to those unable to leave their huts. We would, in the same motion, give them communion and leave bread for the midday meal: "The body of Christ, and here is lunch." It was as difficult on those days to distinguish word and sacrament as to separate daily bread from bread of heaven.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Garrison Keillor, *The Wittenburg Door* (San Diego: Dec/Jan, 1984/85).

<sup>2</sup>Vatican II, *Constitution on the Liturgy*, #7.

<sup>3</sup>William Skudlarek, *The Word in Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981), p. 88.

<sup>4</sup>Charles Rice, *Liturgical Springtime: a Visit to Taizé* (Drew: Gateway, fall, 1984).

<sup>5</sup>Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 1, 1 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1936), p. 89.

<sup>6</sup>Dietrich Ritschl, *A Theology of Proclamation* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1960), p. 104.

<sup>7</sup>P.T. Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind* (New York: Hodder and Stoughton, 1907).

<sup>8</sup>Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 1,2 (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1956), p. 230.

<sup>9</sup>Skudlarek, p. 69.

<sup>10</sup>Geoffrey Wainwright, *Doxology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980).