

Preaching as Spiritual Formation

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My office clock said 10:30: time for midmorning coffee break at the seminary cafeteria, a ritual I seldom missed. There was a crowd in the cafeteria on this particular day — a mix of students, faculty, staff, and pastors on campus to study. I found an empty chair with what appeared to be a group of mid-career Doctor of Ministry candidates. Quick introductions proved my hunch to be right; I explained that I was on campus as a visiting instructor in preaching and worship.

“I used to think that better preaching was the key to the future of the church,” one woman commented. “I signed up for every preaching seminar that came along. But experience taught me that what the church *really* needs is a stronger foundation in spiritual formation.” When I noted that I happened to be teaching a course called “Preaching and Spiritual Formation,” skepticism registered on several faces. It was a reaction I had learned to expect. There seems to be a suspicion abroad in the church that the formative spiritual disciplines of the Christian life somehow do not include preaching.

That assumption, if it is indeed widespread, needs to be challenged. The formative disciplines of the Christian life are, and always have been, irreducibly corporate as well as individual, communal as well as solitary. Participation in the preaching of the Word, whether we speak or listen, is an indispensable, formative discipline of Christian spirituality.

The past twenty years have seen a marked upsurge of interest among both clergy and laypersons in the study and practice of classical disciplines of spiritual formation. Turning to resources in the Roman Catholic, Quaker, and Anabaptist traditions, mainline Protestants have rediscovered ancient practices of spiritual discipline. These may include the cultivation of silence and solitude, various forms of contemplative prayer, *lectio divina* (disciplined meditation on brief portions of scripture), maintaining a spiritual journal, and fasting, among others. It is no longer terribly unusual to meet a Protestant clergy person or lay leader who meets regularly with a Catholic spiritual director, or to meet pastoral colleagues who have experienced a thirty-day Ignatian retreat of solitude and silence. There can be no doubt that individuals and, indeed, whole communities, have become more deeply responsive to God through disciplined use of these practices. However, if we think of Christian spiritual formation as a process reserved for a devoted few, or if we assume that we are only being “formed,” spiritually, when we engage in a narrow range of disciplines in relative isolation, we may be operating with an impoverished view of Christian spiritual formation and may overlook the importance of the gathered church to the formative process.

Christian Spiritual Formation: Its Ecclesial Context

What, exactly, is Christian spiritual formation? For that matter, what is spirituality? Suzanne Johnson sees human spirituality as “our self-transcendent capacity to recognize and to participate in God’s creative and redemptive activity in all of

creation.”¹ Distinctively *Christian* spirituality is participation in that divine activity specifically in and through Jesus Christ. We participate in divine creation and redemption as the *imago Dei* is formed and expressed in us, individually and corporately. Marjorie Thompson, whose widely acclaimed 1995 book, *Soul Feast*, names both corporate and individual practices among the formative disciplines of the Christian life, defines Christian spiritual formation as personal and corporate reshaping into the image of Christ.² My own working definition of Christian formation reflects my concern to emphasize the ethical horizon and ecclesial context of Christian formation: *Christian spiritual formation is the transformation, by means of disciplines both individual and corporate, of our imagination and life-practice, to the end that, in response to the Spirit of God, we become full participants in the ongoing, creative and redemptive praxis of God as expressed in Jesus Christ.* The formative practices of the Christian life include not only individual disciplines of contemplative prayer, silence, and the ancient examination of conscience, but also communal actions as diverse as sheltering the homeless, drawing up the annual church budget, celebrating the Eucharistic meal, and preparing or hearing a sermon.

We must not lose sight of the fact that Christian spiritual formation is an irreducibly *ecclesial* process. Christians are normally formed, spiritually, in the context of, and by means of, the practices of the gathered church. Not long ago, I met a Presbyterian elder who spoke with enthusiasm of his Roman Catholic spiritual director, a teacher at a nearby Catholic seminary. “In all my years in the church,” he exclaimed, “I never heard a thing about spiritual disciplines until I discovered Father Joe!” The statement struck me as rather sad, on two counts: first, that in his mainline Protestant congregation, he had not been taught disciplines of prayer and meditation; but also that he had never learned, and apparently still did not realize, that the weekly practices of Christian congregations, including Sunday morning worship and the Wednesday night soup kitchen, are means by which he is being formed, spiritually, and through which he participates in God’s reign.

Suzanne Johnson worries about patterns of Christian spiritual practice that are overly, or exclusively, individualistic. If the cultivation of spiritual disciplines is seen as a means to individual self-development, or when the obligations of church participation are regarded as troublesome impediments to our cultivation of the true “inner life,” we cannot be talking about fully Christian spirituality. “Through Christ and the Spirit,” Johnson writes, “we are given a new existence (new covenant) in the shape of the ecclesial community . . . When we construe spirituality as participation in God’s *oikonomia* . . . then a spirituality cultivated in the private retreat of the self is logically impossible.”³

Preaching as Formative Spiritual Discipline

If the congregation gathered in the sanctuary on a Sunday morning is in fact an essential formative context for Christian spirituality, then, without a doubt, preaching is one of that community’s most ancient and foundational formative practices. What might it mean, practically, for a preacher to recover the insight that preaching is a formative spiritual discipline, both for herself and for her congregation?

Preachers can integrate the process of sermon preparation more fully into a pattern of personal prayer, meditation, and journaling by approaching the preaching text through the ancient practice of *lectio divina*. Traditionally, *lectio divina*, or the

meditative reading of scripture, includes four stages. The first stage, *lectio*, is a repeated slow, oral reading of the text. Such reading alerts us as preachers to the fact that the Bible is first and foremost a text to be *heard*. It helps us to allow the text to sound in our ears, hearts, and minds. Some pastors choose to tape record a reading of the text, and then play it back to themselves so that they are completely free to listen, without worrying about oral interpretation. The initial period of oral reading is followed by *meditatio*, a deliberate dwelling with individual words, phrases, or images from the text that emerge with particular force. The goal of *meditatio* is not to grasp some preachable “nugget” from the text, nor (at this stage) to determine the message of the text for the congregation, but to let the text resonate in the life and consciousness of the preacher. A task-oriented approach is, in fact, likely to inhibit rather than support *meditatio*. Out of *meditatio*, one moves to *oratio*, “praying the text.” Such prayer is an unhurried conversation with God through the images or phrases of the text. Finally, one moves to *contemplatio*, allowing oneself to be receptive in the presence of the Spirit to the message of the text for oneself and for the community on whose behalf one “listens” to the preaching text.

Methodist pastor Clay Oglesbee suggests that, to these traditional four stages of the *lectio divina*, preachers may choose to add two more — *silencio*, a discipline of centering prayer before the actual *lectio* is begun; and *compassio*, the actual production of the sermon. As *compassio*, producing and preaching the sermon becomes a discipline of service in Christ’s name.⁴

Few preachers think of sermon preparation itself as a corporate spiritual discipline, but a rising chorus of voices in the homiletical literature urge just such a revision of preaching practice. An increasing number of pastors are finding shared preparation with a lectionary-based group of fellow preachers helpful; but recent homiletical thought urges shared, conversational approach to sermon preparation involving *potential listeners* themselves. The late Dr. Lucy Rose of Columbia Seminary encouraged her students to develop their sermons out of a conversation around the text between the preacher and those who would hear the sermon. Some students feared that such pre-sermon conversation with the text would somehow undercut the force of the preached message. They were amazed to discover that just the opposite was true. Even though listeners had already spent ample time wrestling with the text, the sermon always sounded a fresh word, a word particularly apt to the living questions of the community.⁵

For the practices of the gathered church to function fully as formative spiritual events, they need to be experienced with intention and understanding. Oddly, considering the high regard we have for preaching in the Reformed tradition, we do little to help listeners participate actively in the preaching of the Word. We devote considerable effort to helping confirmands participate intelligently in baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and corporate prayer, but when is the last time we taught them to listen well to sermons? In a book with the tongue-in-cheek title, *Surviving the Sermon: A Guide to Preaching for Those Who Have to Listen*, David Schlafer lets listeners in on the nuts and bolts of biblical interpretation and sermon construction. Schlafer helps the listener trace the journey the preacher has made from text to sermon. Map in hand, the listener is equipped to hear the sermon multidimensionally, recognizing the difference that different biblical genres make in sermon preparation and distinguishing the sermon’s overall form and rhetorical strategies.⁶ Trained, discerning listeners

are far more likely to experience the preaching of the Word as a spiritually formative event.

It is important for us, as preachers, to remember that those who sit in our pews do not come to us completely “unformed.” All of us are molded by powerful matrices of formation *outside* the sanctuary. In fact, writes religious educator Michael Warren, “formation . . . is a central and inevitable process in all of human life.”⁷ It is only when we understand exactly *how* deeply we are affected by formative cultural and social forces that we begin to understand fully the importance and urgency of Christian spiritual formation. Cultural expectations and norms, visual media images and messages, and stock “storylines” from the business, fashion, and entertainment worlds powerfully shape our aspirations and self-esteem. Additional expectations, along with patterns of behavior that reinforce them, are brought to bear on our lives by family or work settings. In addition, emotional legacies rooted in our family tree can affect us deeply — prejudices, fears, legacies of power or powerlessness, relationships characterized by either support or indifference.

Against this backdrop of powerful sociocultural formation, Warren suggests, Christian spiritual formation is actually a process of *counterformation*. Sermons are more likely to fulfill their potential as counterformative discourse if the preacher acquaints himself or herself with the sort of sociocultural formation that shapes the consciousness of those in the pews. What are the dominant corporate or other vocational cultures that affect this congregation? What self-images, aspirations, prejudices, and fears do these listeners bring to the experience of worship? What images of the church inhabit congregational imagination? For example, if congregational rhetoric in meetings and coffee hour conversation betrays a defensive “us-against-them” mentality toward newcomers in a brand new subdevelopment north of town, it may be time for a sermon that seeks to open up, through images of eucharistic hospitality, a new imagination of the congregation’s future.⁸

At its best, argues Suzanne Johnson, the local congregation can function as an alternative “ecology of formation” that reshapes life at the level of both imagination and practice, liberating participants to critically resist cultural norms, vocational pressures, and media messages that may be exclusive or oppressive.⁹ In the community called the church, we try out new patterns of thought and behavior through which we participate in God’s ongoing work of creation and redemption.

On the face of it, preaching may seem a feeble means to accomplish the radical reshaping of imagination and lifestyle that Christian formation requires. As religious educator Craig Dykstra notes, “there are so many socializing and enculturating forces working in people’s lives in our contemporary, highly mobile, and pluralistic culture that the formative power of faith communities, especially congregations, seems rather weak in comparison.”¹⁰ Preaching alone cannot be expected to transform the imagination and lifestyle of a congregation. Preaching must function as but one of a web of formative corporate and individual Christian practices that function together to shape the vision, habits, and lifestyle of Christians. But neither should preachers underestimate the formative potential of preaching. Sermon preparation itself can become a powerful spiritual practice, both for the individual preacher and for the community. Sermons can challenge reigning false images about what it is to be human, what it is to succeed, and what is the nature of power. The preacher can set before the congregation vivid alternate images out of the biblical tradition. The pulpit

can function to foster life-shaping practices of scripture reading, prayer, hospitality, justice, and service.

It is good for the whole church that pastors and others in the church are embracing ancient traditions of Christian spiritual formation. But this need not — indeed *should* not — mean that we take preaching any less seriously. Perhaps nowhere else can the pastor offer such effective spiritual guidance to so many. If we maintain a broad understanding of the church as ecology of Christian formation, and an understanding of preaching as one of the essential formative practices of the church, the preaching ministry will prove to have great formative power and potential. Preaching is a spiritual discipline, both for those who preach the Word and those who listen. It continues to be a crucial means by which the Spirit of God transforms us into communities that bear the *imago Christi*, embodying the way of Jesus Christ and working for the redemption of all things.

Notes

¹ Suzanne Johnson, *Christian Spiritual Formation in the Church and Classroom* (Abingdon, 1992), 22.

² Marjorie Thompson, *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 7.

³ Johnson, 26.

⁴ Clay Oglesbee, "From Praying to Proclaiming: The *Lectio Divina* in Sermon Formation," *Preaching* (November-December, 1989): 16-19.

⁵ The communal-conversational approach to preaching is developed in Rose's book, *Sharing the Word: Preaching as Roundtable Conversation* (Abingdon, 1997). A similar approach to sermon preparation, "collaborative preaching," is described by John McClure, *The Roundtable Pulpit: Where Preaching and Leadership Meet* (Abingdon Press, 1995).

⁶ David Schlafer, *Surviving the Sermon: A Guide to Preaching for Those Who Have to Listen* (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1992).

⁷ Michael Warren, "Religious Formation in the Context of Social Formation," *Religious Education* 82 (Fall 1987): 516.

⁸ For a thorough treatment of the congregation as "culture" and the significance for preaching of exegeting this congregational culture, see Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art* (Augsburg Fortress Press, 1997).

⁹ Johnson, 121ff.

¹⁰ Craig Dykstra, "The Formative Power of Congregations," *Religious Education* 82 (Fall 1987): 530.