

Protagonist Corner

On Ethics and the Internet: The Brewing Crisis in Pulpit Ministry¹

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I am sitting at my computer wondering. Eighty-six hours remain between now and my next sermon. What shall I preach? Actually, on this day I know, more or less, what I will say this Sunday. But what about the next Sunday and the Sunday after that? What new twist can I give Palm Sunday? What old twist can I rework in a new way? What depth and meaning can I add to the resurrection narratives? I know my congregation would find my efforts lacking if all I said was, “Amen,” and, truth be told, so, probably, would I. Yet I am tempted.

I am sitting at my computer wondering. I am on the Internet. I have access to the Netscape Navigator. I search for “homiletics.” The Sermon Mall flashes across my screen: Sunday Selections, Sermon Accessories, The Novelty Shop. I did not know about the Sermon Mall. I knew about the sermons preached at Duke University Chapel (William Willimon!). I knew about Worship That Works (better if you are an Episcopalian than for a Presbyterian). I knew about the Guide to Christian Literature on the Internet (and all those church home pages whose pastors have posted their sermons past, present, and, in some cases, future). But I did not know about the Sermon Mall.

I am sitting at my computer wondering. Should I download from the Sermon Mall? I can get so many ideas for Palm Sunday and Easter. I might find a good illustration or two. Maybe I will finally hear a convincing explanation for why the folks who shout “Hosanna!” on Palm Sunday shout “Crucify him!” on Good Friday; after all, I forget if they were the same people or a different group. Perhaps the Easter story will be retold in a way I have never before heard nor considered. It won’t hurt just to take a look. Did God really say I must not read any sermon from the Internet? Yes, I tell myself, download.

I am sitting at my computer wondering. Do I use the sermon? Can I use it as is, or do I have to modify it “some” so I can take credit for it? If I do modify it, how much is “enough” so that I’m not plagiarizing? Oh, there’s that word! Damn that homiletics professor of mine! Why didn’t he tell us about the ethics of “adapting” material downloaded from the Internet? Sure, he told us we didn’t need to cite chapter and verse from every author, that the spoken word has different needs and, therefore, different requirements than the written word, but I just know I am pressing my luck. What if my parishioners find out that my sermon isn’t truly “my” sermon? Will I get into trouble? Lose my job? Or worse, will they tease me even more about only working one day a week? What should I do?

I am sitting at my computer. I have stopped wondering. I am now trying to get a grip on myself. O.K., let’s think this through (I have begun to talk to myself as if there were more than one of me present, a bad sign). On the one hand, I once heard Scott Black-Johnston from Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary tell a group of clergy about the tradition from the early and medieval Church in which ministers would preach the sermons of the saints. On the other hand, that’s plagiarism. I have heard

that Luther or Calvin or one of those reformer guys would tell the clergy in his area what they were to preach. Then again, that's plagiarism too, only in reverse. I know that current homiletical conversation emphasizes contextual preaching; that is, knowing one's audience so well that we can not only exegete the scripture but also exegete the congregation and apply the Word to the lives before us. Sure, but at least two of the seven sermons I downloaded would speak to my congregation.

I am sitting at my computer. I am back to wondering. Perhaps I am being much too negative about the possibilities for good and way too cautious about petty moral hindrances to good preaching. Imagine the possibilities: through the Internet good sermons could be universally available to every minister in the technologically advanced world. The "demise" in modern preaching could be "cured" overnight. My limited vocabulary and lack of theological insight would no longer hinder my congregation from growing into the likeness of Jesus Christ. Bible reading would return! Mission would explode! Maybe even evangelism would happen! Oh, it is too wondrous to think. I am giddy. All we would need is for the real preachers, the really good preachers, to post their sermons on a home page. Then, once we local preachers found a style with which we were comfortable and content that addressed our congregation's spiritual needs, we could download the sermon each Monday, write up a bulletin and, voila, we are through with Sunday preparation by 11:00 A.M. and can get about the work of being pastors to our congregations. Imagine: we would have schools of preaching disciples. "I am of Long." "I am of Craddock." "I am of Lowry." It would be beautiful.

I am still sitting at my computer. Reality has set in. I am blue. The euphoria of a postmodern homiletical world is but mist; the grass withers, the flowers fade...but the Word of our God will stand forever. Hey, that'll preach. Maybe...yeah...could be...I have an idea. An idea has come to me! Oh, praise the Lord! Let us praise his name together in the sanctuary...say, this Sunday?

I am standing in the pulpit. I wrote my own sermon. The sermon I preach is fully and faithfully *my* sermon. At least this time. Then again, Sunday's a comin'.

Did God really say that I must not preach any sermon from the Internet?

Notes

¹ The author welcomes any input, insight, opinions and/or guidelines regarding the issues raised in this essay. A thorough conversation is needed between academics, pastors and parishioners regarding the ethical and practical uses of the Internet. Correspondence can be sent to bmunroe@phoenix.net.