

Preaching with an Affluent and Anxious Urban Congregation

Martha P. Sterne

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

Unhelpful Preaching Habits

I have always heard that everybody has one sermon. I am not sure about that, but I do take old, familiar paths through the pastures. For instance I want to say, in any and all occasions, peace. Peace to the near and peace to the far. Peace when there is no peace. Here is a memory that still makes me cringe.

AIDS. Sixty people have been buried from All Saints' over the past decade, about half the deaths in our parish for the last few years. Here we are again in the middle of a burial service for another young man cut down, and I want to let the liturgy carry the pain and comfort us. I had scribbled down a little order of service with page numbers. Only this time I flipped around looking for Psalm 139 and found it in the Psalter rather than the abbreviated version in the rite one burial service. You can get in deep trouble real quickly with the psalms. The Prayer Book has that big blank space between verse seventeen and eighteen for a reason. So we cruised on through the part of the psalm I knew and was counting on to soothe and comfort. And then it doesn't stop, and we don't stop. We are in the blood and loathing our enemies and asking God to slay them, and telling God how we hate those who hate the Lord, hate them with a perfect hatred. And I am thinking how do I get us out of this; some of these people are in agony and we're reading this.

Later I thought, but some of this fury was the truth of the man's life, the truth of rejection and fury, and illness and fury. His hatred was some of the truth of him. He was furious and that psalm has a movement of fury. I still want to say peace when there is no peace.

I want to say peace to the dead and to the living. People in our parish are beat up on all week long. They are edgy. They are looking over their shoulders. They will tell you they are worried about crime, but then in a little while it comes out that robbers are not the only people they worry about stabbing them in the back. They work seventy, eighty hours a week at the law firm, and lots of them hate it, but they make buckets of money, and they have bought the big house, and they are trapped. Or they are at the bank or the hospital and the bottom line is there, crowding every decision, in a way they have never known. If they are married, usually both of them are working hard. It almost seems like their kids are working. They have to make it into a good kindergarten, then lessons for everything make education an incredibly expensive ordeal. And then lots of the older kids move back home because they cannot find a job. Maybe we want to say peace when there is not peace.

Which brings me to my second habit. I gravitate toward the interiority of an experience like being hungry and getting fed, or in bondage and getting freed, or being

lost or afraid and then getting saved. I look for those experiences in the text, in the lives of the disciples or the children of Israel or sometimes one of the congregations in Paul's letters, and try to connect those memories of fear and pain and grace with what is fearful and painful and graceful in the lives of the people of All Saints'. And most of the current connections, for my affluent congregation, are about our secret lives, interior lives, spiritual lives. Valid connections, I believe, and yet so much of the reality of Atlanta gets left out, such as physical hunger, the crowded county and city jails, and the terror of living with gunfire every night.

Surely human pain is human pain and a hierarchy of pain or a rating system for human suffering doesn't seem helpful. And yet there is a great gulf between the fed and housed and clothed and educated and medically serviced crowd that I am part of and the people whose apartments are in a war zone 200 yards down the street or the loners who sleep in the parish garden. Such a chasm, such a fear-filled abyss yawns between us and them. What word can have authority or reality when spoken into that abyss?

Third habit, which is really the same old peace habit. I have a tendency to preach why don't we "behold that which is springing forth" and let's "look for the new heaven, the new earth" without having done the hermeneutical work that put Isaiah and them, as we say in Georgia, in the position of bad needing new life, new heaven, new earth. I want to cherry pick the prophets and the gospels because they say such beautiful hopeful things. But hope without memory, and without a clear-eyed look at what is, risks hope for the wrong things. Such as preaching that tries to fix us to go out and fix poor people. Sometimes I don't want to do the remembering work. A lot of us want to come back from exile without having to go into exile.

Then, too, we twentieth-century mainstream clergy don't stand where those prophets stood. Carlyle Marney said this and I believe it. Most of us are not Jeremiah or Isaiah. Most of us clergy are not prophets standing outside the walls. Most of us have a mortgage, too, and a job to lose and when a couple of black kids come up fast behind us we are afraid just like Jesse Jackson and everybody else. We are not Moses. We are Aaron. We are chaplain. We stand with the folks. And we know we have it in us to make a golden calf or two. Now what could Aaron have to say to stressed, anxious people in a wilderness that used to look like home?

So those are my habits of preaching which I fear may mute or blunt or pretty-up the gospel and therefore get in the way.

Counting Our Losses and the Mercy of God

The rest of what I would like to do falls under one rubric. It is, I believe, the overarching pastoral task with people where I live. Talking with Atlanta clergy about the task of the pastor-preacher in the late twentieth-century mainline church (of which I don't think you can get much main-er than us), Walter Brueggemann fed us a line to preach over and over: "The world, for which you have so carefully prepared, is being taken away, by the mercy of God."

Now we know the loss part. We privileged ones know that we are losing. That is not news. We talk a lot about the loss of a sense of security in our homes or moving around the city. We worry a lot about our personal safety and the safety of our possessions. But we also mourn other losses: the loss of simple courtesy among strangers; the loss of ease in moving through a day with practiced phrases and little

rituals of civility. On another level, we have lost a sense of certainty about what is important to know and to pass down. Without knowing what the canon is, what is important to know and to pass on, we have lost a picture of the future for us, for our kids. And lots of us are anxious because what we trust is being taken away. What we do not see is God's mercy in the taking.

I want to suggest three deep losses, sort of black holes that our other losses get sucked down into. I would like to offer a picture that I might preach to get at each loss, and then to wonder if such losses could be God's gifts of mercy for us.

Missing in Action: Our Picture of God

First, old news. We are losing our picture of God. The almighty and powerful one that looks a lot like Granddaddy is being taken away. You know the one—white-haired, older man, dignified—the granddaddy that lives in your old hometown or in Florida. Or the doctor who used to care for you before you changed to an HMO. Or the bank president, the civic booster, civic cheerleader, who used to run the Chamber of Commerce or the United Way campaign; well, the bank president lives in Charlotte or New York now. Or the bishop; turns out he or maybe she is worrying a lot about money just like the rest of us. The illusion of people who looked like they would hold things together is being taken away. And is God's mercy in the taking?

I would like to give you a picture that tries to get at some angles of that loss for me.

On a recent visit to Mississippi, I walk with my father around their block after supper. We walk slowly. He is unsteady, although nobody has gotten up the nerve yet to talk about a cane. We amble through the dark streets, and he jabs his flashlight around in the night, pointing here at a corner where he wants the city to put in a streetlight and there at a house where a car was recently stolen. We walk and the flashlight waves. Another car theft at the Brocks, a break-in at the Morgans. Once or twice my father interrupts the crime report to fill me in on the ordinary doings of old friends and their children and pets. But mostly he talks around the crime.

I believe he is furious.

My parents have been in the town for forty-three years. He practiced medicine until six or seven years ago. He knew a lot of people and their broken bones and their ulcers and their cancer. He loved the patients' stories; he could talk to a wall, as they say in Mississippi, and the wall would talk back. When we were children, he often came home with tomatoes, butterbeans, blackberries, and always the stories. I do not think he was a model of confidentiality, but he never remembered anybody's name, so it worked out.

After he retired, he found some ways to keep helping people. He joined a group called the Gleaners who deliver food to shut-ins and poor people. He spent Wednesday nights as a telephone contact on a helpline. He talked to the depressed and the suicidal and those in financial crisis. I told him, "Daddy, don't call the women, 'honey.'" Nobody much likes that." But he probably still did.

Looking at his life, as objectively as any child can look at her father's life, I think he has been a good man and a good citizen. He made money, and

he and my mother used money well. Nothing flashy, just a pretty home and nice trips and good educations for the children. He gave away money. He went to church. He voted and supported progressive politicians who usually lost. He kept his children in the schools as they integrated. He tried to help race relations at the hospital where he practiced. He wrote letters to the editor. I believe that in small quiet ways throughout his life, he worked for the peace of the city.

And there is not peace in his city. There is murder, often of children, and rape and robbery and daily friction and disrespect.

So my father got an alarm system that talks back to him when he comes through the kitchen door. And he has had someone put in bright lights that flash on if someone nears the garage or runs through the backyard. And with other neighbors he pays a security company to drive through the streets to watch for intruders.

And in the evening he walks, stooped and fragile, around the block, pointing his flashlight like a weapon at the shadows in the bushes.

And I believe he is furious.

Our pictures of a god who is, fortunately, most deeply concerned for the welfare of the educated, affluent people, that very seductive idol is being taken away. As Tillich says, we don't have to worry about breaking idols. God who loves us will smash our idols for us. To be replaced by? What pictures of God might we offer? How do you picture God with people?

The little bit I know attracts me to the new physics and especially chaos theory, ideas that Anglicans really thought of a long time ago. Richard Hooker said, "There is nothing in all of creation that can say to anything else in all of creation, I need thee not." That's the new physics as far as I can tell. And, on my clearer days, whoever spoke that word of mutuality into the fabric of creation is my God.

Lost: The Power of Nice

Second loss: a false image of self. I often experience our crowd as sort of bringing to church false nice selves, sort of Sunday selves that are not integrated into the Monday-Friday self. And the Sunday self is immature, fragile, kind of useless in a desperate world that cries out for whole people who get angry and sin and forgive and are forgiven and love one another in circles that expand and expand rather than contract.

Here is a picture of my Sunday self on a Thursday morning.

I get on the bus. This is my first venture into the city, and I am pleased that the fare machine ate my dollar because the possibility of rejection always makes me nervous. I seem to be heading in the right direction. We ride three, four blocks, six blocks, people getting on, getting off, reading the paper, looking at their shoes. There is conversation in the back; politics, I guess. The engine groans and hisses and squeals. We sway. Light flashes; stop requested. Getting on, getting off.

"Bastard." The word ricochets around the bus. I think, uh oh. A woman's voice. Muttering, mutter, mutter, mutter. Rising and falling, I can't catch the words. I realize the conversation is a monologue. "Taking

over, think you're taking over." "Black bastard." I think, oh God. I hunch over, slide my eyes around. Everybody is sort of taking the position. Hunch a little, pretend you're in a bubble. Mutter, mutter. "Something for nothing. Dumb ass. Stop it. Taking, taking." I make a surreptitious census. Black man two seats over, impassive eyes in space. Also bus driver, black, driving, can't see his face. For no reason, nobody gets on and nobody gets off. We are spellbound, each frozen alone in a bubble. I think, does she have a gun.

"Stop the bus, you stupid son of a bitch." Oh, okay, that's what she wants, let's do it. He doesn't. Nobody's pulled the stop requested. We ride on in the spell, groaning and hissing and squealing. She raises the volume. Crescendo. "Can't even do your job, you kinky idiot. Nigger." I am aware my jaw is clenched, oh Jesus, come on. Make this over. We go through a riff on the welfare system. I cannot believe this continues. Why doesn't somebody get on so maybe she'd get off. Why doesn't he just stop and make her get off. Mutter, mutter. Then a miracle. She's on the Irish. "Red-faced mothers, drunks, skunks. Taking over. Potato faces." I think, thank you Jesus. We don't know whose Irish. Hell, I'm Irish. We don't have to worry that they think that we think. I shift my eyes around. We are still in our bubbles but some others are shifting their eyes around too. Not the black guy.

Another miracle. Someone requests a stop. She gets off with her bag. Muttering threats and murder. Shoulders straighten slightly. Somebody gets on. Somebody gets off. Thank you very much to the driver. He says, "You're very welcome." I hang on the word very. Are we trying to say I'm sorry. Is he trying to say it's okay. What has happened here. This blousy old de-institutionalized lost soul. All of us in our bubbles. The driver, too, doing his job. Who did she speak for? What was our silence? Why did not some voices of sanity and compassion and community engage with her?

It comes time for me to get off the bus. I thank the bus driver very much. And he tells me to have a very nice day.

I recently saw a cartoon—a preacher standing in front of a big flowery sheet which is strung in front of a crucifix. He leads the people, "Deliver us from unpleasantness." Really. This is a problem. The nice people syndrome. The first commandment: Be nice. In the South this comes out in all kinds of strange ways—we've got nasty-nice into a science; we're good at it. So nice at the Chamber of Commerce and the Rotary and then the other things are "bidness" decisions. I believe the church tends to collude in this nice thing, from Sunday school on. The American church that is consigning to outer darkness gays and welfare cheats and child/criminals is very full of nice people. In the suburbs of Atlanta, we had a resolution declaring the "gay lifestyle" to be incompatible with the county mores. Thirty-five churches signed a protest of the resolution. Two hundred seventy churches signed a petition supporting it. Nice people is not deep enough to make an identity for us now. And scared nice people are dangerous. Listen to the radio for a day.

So we try to get rid of the nice people mirage. We try to be straighter with our anger, our rage, instead of projecting it onto our neighbor or the people in the housing

project who swallow our rage, internalize it, and are full of rage themselves. Maybe a way to start would be to preach with some pictures of us that are not so nice.

This is a cakewalk, finding and mining these not-nice stories in scripture although we may have to stretch the boundaries of the lectionary. (Remember the psalm syndrome of including the nice verses and skipping the rest.) Just begin at the beginning. Turn to Genesis and move on through Cain and Abel. Noah. The wives of Abraham. Jacob and Esau. Jacob period. The Joseph stories. All the violence of brother against brother — happening in the best of families. Then the exodus story that I love and so many of us use as the paradigm for our times. We are not nice in that story, nor is God. A murderous leader. Blood on the doors, the screaming of the Egyptians - from the pharaoh, to the prisoner in the dungeon. Read the gospel with an eye for the faithful, not-nice person. Read the letters and imagine Paul.

Also the birth of any human being is not nice. Nor death.

The fear of a parent for a child is not nice. I believe parents in our parishes are deeply threatened by the possibilities from the stranger. We are scared beyond niceness for our children. And I wonder if fear may be a door leading beyond our own very small and walled and fragile worlds. Will fear keep reminding us that children who are not nurtured and educated and housed will become more than isolated tragedies in their own lives, that they will be actors in tragedies in our lives, our children's lives? Maybe our fear for our children can be a door into a much richer than nice world that God has given us to love and share with the others.

Angels and Demons in the Architecture

I've tried to look at our loss of the idols in which we have placed much trust and our loss of the power of nice, shadowless selves. And finally, and for me the most distressing and puzzling and strangely hopeful loss, the loss of confidence in the fixability of the ways we gather ourselves for business and prayer and politics. Children of the enlightenment all, many of us really think we can get it right. We think that the schools and the medical industry, city hall, the church, money markets, the entertainment industry, all those powers and principalities are one day going to hold still and let good-hearted, energetic folks get in there and fix them. And that they will stay fixed.

And what I am struggling to understand is that all of those structures and their processes are so much more willful and hungry and conflicted and alive than most of us have known. Perhaps a loss of confidence in our abilities to fix would have some grace. Perhaps a loss of a bloated sense of confidence in the power of our own common sense and goodwill would make room for a savior.

Here I am trying to learn from Walter Wink.. He addresses, in his trilogy on power, the part of us that has figured out that things don't fix easily in the city. He speaks to that part of us which has run into the reality of powers and principalities. We know more than we want to about the negative structures and processes which chew people up and spit them out in our corporate life. We have been listening to folks for a long time — parishioners and other priests — talk about the restless, destructive energies in organizations that slam us around or the black holes that suck us down. Those energies and vacuums are found everywhere in our corporate lives: in parishes or advertising agencies or the social security office or zoning boards or a widget company or the Junior League or a bank.

As priests and pastors we often hear hints of the assumptions and fears and expectations that might live and work inside a person depending on the structures that he or she lives and works in. For instance, depending on the walls around you, what kind of answers might you learn and teach about who you see as your neighbor? What does it do to the sense of neighbor in some of us who spend our days in a corporate tower? What can one see with that kind of tower vision when one looks down on the streets? Or what happens when I connect my worth as a human being to a list of promotions in the tower? Or what does it do to people to leave their little or big boxes in the tower and go home to their most intimate communion which is to lie on a couch in front of a big, blinking box and be told every fifteen minutes that what matters is how she smells or what he drives.

I often see the walls that surround us and the processes that engage us as negative. I have not seen the angels in the architecture of our lives; I have seen the demons and tried not to think about them. Moreover, I have pretended and preached as if we still wandered in the wilderness in great simplicity, with just the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount for process and a couple of tents for communal structure. And it ain't so. Of all people, we know that. We have more process and structure and complicated stuff — more architecture — than we know what to do with. We have career ladders and the house and the vineyard and the two cows in the garage. We have our alarm systems on and security guards driving the neighborhood. We are not just innocent souls struggling with mighty and evil systems. In our churches are the people who own the systems or maybe the systems own us. We operate the processes or maybe the processes operate us. We are part of the architecture of the powers and the principalities. We need ways to pray and preach that ambiguous truth.

Here is a way that I am learning. Dr. Wink takes the powers and principalities where we live and move and have our being and he says yes, the school does have a spirit; the nation does have a spirit; the Department of Family and Children's Services does have a spirit; the church has a spirit, a powerful and live interiority that is ignored at great risk. And, yes, there is the potential for profound violence in the lives of persons in these structures. There is deep reality in structural violence. We understand the capacity for evil hidden within these powers and principalities from the base communities and from Paul before them and Jesus before him and Moses and the prophets before him.

Dr. Wink brings systems and structures themselves, not just the people trapped within them, into the realm of God and into the possibility of salvation. So here is new possibility. What if like all the rest of creation:

The Powers/Systems are good.

The Powers are fallen.

The Powers will be redeemed.

What if, instead of looking for the compartment that hides the boogeyman in the system, the grace of God could give us the eyes and the will to look into the whole of the university, the military, the cathedral, the parish, the election process and see the spirit of those structures and processes with critical and hopeful eyes? What if we preach a refusal to either despair of or worship the structures we live in? What if we refuse to be polarized? What if we could teach each other to see into the powers and principalities of our lives and see, all at the same time, the creativity *and* the fallen-ness *and* the redemptive possibilities in each structure and process of the city for all the

people of the city.

Here is something I did to try to get a picture of one of the ways that structures live in us and through us.

When I was a child I loved the fair. Every year in October, the Mississippi State Fair came to Jackson. This was the second most eagerly awaited event on our town's fairly sparse calendar. We saved our money for months and we staunchly refused to be bribed not to go.

Parents hated the fair almost without exception. Now that I am a parent I understand. It was loud and smelled of livestock and dime-store perfume all mixed up with sweat and cotton candy. There was an amazing amount of goo to eat. There were also fast rides that would sling us around on rickety equipment and gross sideshows in smoky tents. The parents probably drew lots to see which ones would get stuck chaperoning all of us. We of course pleaded each October that we were old enough to go by ourselves although I think we secretly liked watching our parents watch us.

One of the tents that we usually visited was the House of Mirrors. It did not cost very much and it was kind of fun. You entered one at a time through a narrow hallway so that the group became a single file. The hallway was lined with mirrors that reflected and refracted back strange metamorphoses of me and my friends. Sometimes I would see a huge head with bug eyes and gaping mouth and no chin. Sometimes all of me was in the mirror but very tiny and far away. Next I would be all thick arms and giant trunk and then all long skinny legs.

We would scream with laughter and yell "look at me, look at me" although I don't think anybody could see what anybody else was seeing exactly.

At the end of the hall we found ourselves in a large room encased in the mirrors. We turned round and round and everywhere we turned we were, in some version or another. Giants and dwarfs and goony faces and ghouls, battalions of us, distorted and most familiar like our good dreams and our nightmares. We turned and turned and soon couldn't figure out which was illusion and which was Martha or Patsy or Nan or Kyle. We'd run up to who we thought was our friend only to find a mirror reflecting, hinting at somebody somewhere else. We would turn and turn until we were dizzy and ready to leave. Then feeling along the walls we would find an opening there among the mirrors and we would stumble out the back and say "that was great!"

The House of Mirrors was fun, sort of. It is very hard to live there, but sometimes I think we do. Giants and dwarfs and goony faces and ghouls and all. It is hard to see through all the glass darkly to catch a hint of your own face or the face of the friend and even harder to see the real face of the stranger. When you live in a House of Mirrors, seeing through the glass even darkly is a miracle and always the gift of the Holy Spirit. Perhaps the work of the church is to be a house of true mirrors.

What if the grace of God could be a mirror for us, a mirror of truth and mercy to

see each other clearly and still hope for each other. Although we see the *imago dei*, bloated out or shrunk up or twisted, nevertheless we have the eyes to see the image of God in each other and the will to hope for each other that we become what we see.

What if we could see that some of us are not gods and the others, dependent children, but that all of us really are made in the image of God?

What if we could see a deeper, holier faith than sweetness and light and niceness have room for?

What if we could see the possibility of redemption and wholeness, in all our ways of gathering for prayer and business and politics?

What if we could preach into the deep mystery of what it means to be just a little human being and yet also made in the image of God which is to be of a mysterious living whole, as mundane as a parish, as full of possibilities for communion as the Trinity?

. . . . These are only hints and guesses,
Hints followed by guesses; and the rest
Is prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action.
The hint half guessed, the gift half understood
is the gift of the Incarnation.

(T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*)