

Sowing Seeds in Difficult Soil: Preaching to Those Who Won't Listen

William G. Carter

First Presbyterian Church, Clarks Summit, Pennsylvania

Sooner or later, every preacher must realize there are a lot of people in the pews who will not or cannot listen. Resistance is a constant factor in preaching. Sometimes it is subtle, as in the young woman who tunes out before the first point is made. Other times it is painfully obvious, as in the man in my first church who clipped his fingernails during sermons he didn't like. When I was his pastor he gave himself a weekly manicure. "Don't take it personally," said some friends. "Many people think he is surly and difficult." Maybe that was true. And perhaps he might have become more pleasant if he paid attention to a sermon now and then. But for one reason or another, I was unable to speak a word that he was able to hear.

Let's admit, of course, that some sermons are not worth hearing. In 1741, when Jonathan Edwards preached his famous sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," Isaac Watts scribbled a note in the margin of his transcribed copy. "A most terrible sermon," he wrote, "which should have had a word of Gospel in it."¹ Watts had a point. Every Christian sermon should proclaim good news, as embodied in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the sermon worth hearing. The preacher who does not proclaim the Risen Christ is better off doing something else on Sunday mornings, like sleeping in, playing a round of golf, or going out to brunch.

Even so, there is no assurance we will be heard even if we do speak a clear and helpful word. Of the four Gospels, the Gospel of Mark most poignantly portrays resistance to the good news. The first time Jesus enters a synagogue to teach, he is met by a possessed person who confronts him with screams (1:21-28). By the third chapter, Jesus' enemies have begun to conspire against him (3:6). Shortly thereafter his own family comes to whisk him away to the asylum (3:21). The disciples, after four chapters of continual travel with Jesus, do not know who he is or what he has come to do (4:41). The classic rejection takes place in the hometown congregation where "many who heard him were astounded." (6:1-6) Apparently Jesus spoke with great wisdom and power which offended the locals. He came preaching God's kingdom, but many hearers disputed its sovereignty.

Perhaps that is simply how it is. Hearing the good news can be risky business. It may judge a person's commitments, undermine other allegiances, or rearrange one's emotional furniture. The gospel may raise questions about private and public habits, commission people to serve in dangerous places, or speak difficult words to the thrones of power. As a seminary professor once warned his students, "There are two kinds of sermons that people don't want to hear: bad sermons and good sermons."

In that light, listeners may have all sorts of reasons of familiarity why they will not listen. Perhaps they are familiar with the message, noting, "We've heard all of this before." Or like the Galilee congregation, they might recognize the messenger all too well: "Isn't this merely Jesus? We know his family" (Mark 6:3). Sometimes people have routinized expectations for Sunday worship. As a character in a play quipped, "Reverend, I didn't come to church to be preached to."

On the other hand, listeners may equally resist the gospel for reasons of unfamiliarity. They may claim to be unfamiliar with the message, musing out loud, "We never heard that before; is that in the Bible?" Or they may state their unfamiliarity with the messenger, saying, "She has a funny voice." Perhaps they will even blame an unfamiliar setting, noting, "Well, it was a strange worship service, after all." No wonder the Risen Lord cannot perform more deeds among his people. Nobody is listening.

Mark offers a theological diagnosis of resistance by way of the parable of the sower (4:3-8). According to the parable's interpretation (4:14-20), this parable summarizes three problematic human responses to the message of Jesus. It is no coincidence that these characterizations of resistance are personified in some characters of Mark's book.²

First, gospel seed thrown onto a hard path is prone to Satan's snatching away. Hearts can harden under the influence of evil powers that are threatened by God's rule. This is exemplified in the repeatedly antagonistic responses of Jesus' opponents who recognize that much is at stake in his preaching (2:6-7).

In a second case, rocky soil enables some seed to grow quickly, but the ground is shallow and the rootless seed withers. Such is the response of the disciples. They flee from Jesus when trouble is imminent (14:50), reflecting superficial faith and lukewarm commitment.

Third, the seed falls sometimes among thorns which threaten to choke away all life. For Mark, early growth looks possible for Herod (6:20), Pilate (15:14), and an anonymous rich person (10:17). But worldly cares and the lure of wealth inevitably poison the soil and kill the kingdom's crop.

In Mark's view, the parable of the sower is a picture of the preacher's plight. Before we quit from frustration, we should note and pray for the fourth response to the gospel seed. "Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold." (4:8) The yield far exceeds the sowing. A miracle harvest can happen when the Word is received in receptive, hospitable soil.

What can preachers do to facilitate such a hearing? Three well-known scholars have offered suggestions to help us sow the seed of the kingdom on difficult patches of soil.

1. Walter Brueggemann encourages us to pay attention to our language. That is, we must make sure the seeds of speech are healthy, fertilized, and prepared to grow. His 1989 Lyman Beecher lectures encourage preachers to be "poets that speak against a prose world."³ A poet speaks an imaginative yet tangible word that opens up new perspectives that previously seemed impossible. Before a poet worries about rhyming, she or he lives in metaphors, making odd comparisons between what is and what could be. As Brueggemann puts it,

The task and possibility of preaching is to open out the good news of the gospel with alternative modes of speech—speech that is dramatic, artistic, capable of inviting persons to join in another conversation, free of the reason of technique, unencumbered by ontologies that grow abstract, unembarrassed about concreteness. Such speech, when heard in freedom, assaults imagination and pushes out the presumed world in which most of us are

trapped. Reduced speech leads to reduced lives. Sunday morning is the practice of a counterlife through counterspeech. The church on Sunday morning, or whenever it engages in its odd speech, may be the last place left in our society for imaginative speech that permits people to enter into new worlds of faith and to participate in joyous obedient life.⁴

It is obviously difficult to speak as a poet. The media shape and reduce the ways that we speak and hear. The church attempts to communicate within a bumper sticker culture, where simple sound bytes are the new norm. If the gospel is to be heard in its power, we need to resist flattened, over-exposed, scientific speech. Let the words of our mouths speak ancient truths through new pictures. Let us speak as lovers of one another, using strong verbs and vivid images. Let us take time to craft our sentences well and speak with care and restraint.

2. David Buttrick suggests a way for sowers of God's Word to till up the field and pull out some obvious rocks. Buttrick tells us to expect resistance at each point (or "move") of our sermons. As a counterstrategy he recommends imagining the retort and speaking to it. This is the "counterpoint" of each block of material, drawing on a musical term for a secondary, background melody that interacts with the main theme.⁵ By voicing the counterpoint briefly, we can let potentially resistant listeners know that we acknowledge their point of view before we invite them to sing the words of a deeper tune. The key to this method is speaking sympathetically of the opposition and voicing its concerns fairly.

In one sermon, for instance, Buttrick imagines the counterpoint to Paul's call to "present your bodies as a living sacrifice" (Romans 12:1). Notice the preacher's empathy with his potential detractors. He sits with them in the pew, in a sense, before he gets down to his real business:

"Present our bodies" - No, we didn't come to church for such a message. Instead, give us sermons that kindle, and anthems that soar; give us lofty thoughts and lovely feelings and sweet visions of heavenly things. After all, Monday through Friday we have to put up with a world that's all too physical, with bills to pay and laundry to sort out. So on Sundays, we don't need a heavy dose of "physical religion." What's more, there are many of us who feel the church has been much too concerned with "bodily things" - housing, civil rights, poverty programs. So when Father Kinsolving writes in the papers that, "The church ought to be as much concerned with the saving of the soul as the care of the body," we applaud. For down deep in all of us, there's a craving for "spiritual things." No, we say, "Give us spiritual worship."⁶

The preacher, as we can sense, will now go on to redefine "spiritual worship" in Paul's bodily, incarnate terms. No frontal assault is made on the hearers. Instead the preacher defuses the opposition to the idea he is about to share, acknowledging its existence without reinforcing its intent. He pulls out the stumbling block. Then he plants the seed.

3. Fred Craddock may be the master of getting through to resistant listeners. His book, *Overhearing the Gospel*, is a rich reflection on how to preach and teach the faith

to persons who have already heard. He draws upon the works of Soren Kierkegaard to develop and recommend the dynamic of “overhearing.” Craddock suggests that sometimes we should not speak directly to the people in front of us. Rather, we might speak imaginatively to somebody else: to God, to ourselves, to an imaginary group, to no one in particular.⁷ The distance between speaker and congregation can allow the hearers to “listen in” and participate at a deeper level. By speaking indirectly during a portion of a sermon, we give people some room to draw in closer and overhear what is said to the “other” audience. Such is the *generosity* of a sower who indiscriminately casts the seed and lets it fall where it will.

Craddock uses this overhearing technique in a sermon on Matthew 16:13-17. He spends a few moments speaking to himself about his own self-centered requests of a Messiah. Rather than point the finger at “all of you,” he speaks in the first-person “I” and indirectly addresses the rest of us:

As long as life remains an image in the mind, then life can be shaped in the contours of desire. While I’m looking for a Messiah, I can make him what I want him to be. If I’m hungry, I can make him one who feeds. If I’m tired, he is one who gives rest. If I am at war, he gives peace. If I am poor, he gives prosperity. If I am alone, he brings fellowship. Because I have created him out of the emptiness of my life. When I think about the Messiah coming, I know what he’s going to be, and I know what he’s going to do for me. And I really do not want that dream exploded by anyone, not even a Messiah. I prefer the dream.⁸

Another way that Craddock confronts resistance is by using conversational material during a piece of a sermon, where he speaks aloud one or both parts of a conversation. Like a Socratic dialog, voice is given to contrasting viewpoints. This dialog is always fair but rarely neutral. Craddock usually stacks the conversation in a certain direction, nudging the listener to nod in agreement. Preaching on John 21:1-19, for example, he imagines how Simon Peter might respond to Christ’s question, “Simon, do you love me?” Simon says,

“Well, frankly, that question is embarrassing. It makes me uncomfortable. It isn’t that I’m unaccustomed to questions. I like questions. I like the three years we spent together with questions and answers. I like to discuss, and entertain ideas. There’s something about uncertainty that keeps my mind open. And I like the sophistication of considering various viewpoints on every issue. I like to be tolerant and open. That’s why your question is embarrassing, ‘Do you love me?’”

“Maybe if you would rephrase the question. Ask me, ‘Are we good friends?’ I can answer that. We’re good friends, yes. But I don’t like questions to be too certain, too absolute, too clear-cut, too either-or. Those bother me.”⁹

Craddock believes such preaching requires a certain kind of sacrifice. What’s at stake? Professional distance and the preacher’s ego. If one is willing to preach without undue pride, he notes, “some will say perhaps it was not as scholarly or as logical or

maybe as good as a speech. It may even happen that a student will complain that the form of it or the delivery of it made taking notes more difficult.”¹⁰ Yet the purpose of preaching is not the ecclesial advancement of the preacher; it is speaking the gospel to those who are given ears to hear.

Every preacher desires an attentive audience. However, when all is said and done, we must recognize it is a miracle that anyone ever hears the gospel. Conversion is God’s work. Beyond all sly homiletical techniques, we preachers must ultimately rely on the One who nourishes the field and gives us seed to sow. God will bring forth fruit in due season, regardless of whether or not we ever see the results.

When I served the same congregation where the man trimmed his nails every week, I once chatted with a part-time church attender after a communion service. “I don’t get here very much,” she said. “I don’t drive and I live about five miles away. But I want you to know that I heard one of your sermons once.”

She did? “Tell me more,” I replied.

She said, “One Sunday you spoke about the Christian responsibility to feed the hungry. Somehow it struck me and I took it to heart. I can’t get here for worship as much as I’d like, but there’s a food pantry down the block from my apartment. I can walk there. Every Thursday afternoon I walk to that pantry and hand out some groceries to the poor.”

I stood in shocked amazement. I had been prepared to criticize her inactivity. Now I was overwhelmed that she had actually taken one of my sermons seriously.

God willing, sometimes the seeds of the kingdom take root. God willing.

Notes

¹ Jonathan Edwards: *Basic Writings*, ed. Ola Elizabeth Winslow (New York: Meridian, 1966), 150.

² For a more complete discussion, see Mary Ann Tolbert, “How the Gospel of Mark Builds Character,” *Interpretation* 47, no. 4, (October 1993): 347-357.

³ Walter Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet: Daring Speech for Proclamation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989), 3

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ David Buttrick, *Homiletic: Moves and Structures* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 30-32, 47-48

⁶ Ibid., 201

⁷ Fred B. Craddock, *Overhearing the Gospel* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1978), 125.

⁸ Fred B. Craddock, “Hoping or Postponing?” *National Radio Pulpit*, (New York: NCC Cassettes, 1979).

⁹ Fred B. Craddock, “What To Do After Easter,” *National Radio Pulpit*, (New York: NCC Cassettes, 1979).

¹⁰ Craddock, *Overhearing the Gospel*, 132.