

Preaching to the Exiles Who Live at Home: Youth, Testimony, and a Homiletic of “True Speech”

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Last year, I taught a course at Columbia Theological Seminary entitled, “Preaching and Youth.” The students were clamoring for something having to do with youth ministry, and my own years of youth work had piqued my interest in the possibilities for such a class. Being fairly new to homiletics, but remembering the mountains of youth ministry resources that had regularly crossed my desk in the parish, I headed to the library in search of texts, confident that with a little digging, the right books would surface. Hours later, to my chagrin, I realized that “Preaching and Youth” was going to have to be a communal work in progress—which is a nice way of saying that due to lack of homiletical resources, we would be improvising the course with a mishmash of materials as we went along.

Sometimes, the absence of a thing can be an opportunity. In the case of the “Preaching and Youth” course, the silence surrounding the topic became a gift to read widely, think broadly, reimagine boldly, and, in the process, ask questions that we as a class might not have asked otherwise. Prodded by that experience, and in the spirit of initiating conversation (rather than delivering finished proposals), I offer here some of my own reflections on a homiletic for preaching and youth from my perspective as a faculty member of a mainline Protestant seminary. I take the “work in progress” description seriously; this is a conversation that needs to be extended beyond mainline borders into evangelical circles, where a distinct homiletic about preaching and youth already exists and flourishes. There is still much to learn and much to talk about.

Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell: How the Church Keeps Its Youth From Its Preaching

One of the first assignments in the “Preaching and Youth” class was a worship survey, which the students gave to teenagers in their congregational settings. We asked things like: What do you think is the most important part of the worship service for adults in your church? What is the most important part for youth? If you and your friends could change some things in worship, what would they be, and how do you think adults would react? How would you describe the preaching in your church? If your pastor ever came to you for advice about preaching, what would you say? What advice about youth would you give a minister just starting out? Would you or your friends like to preach in your church? What would you say?

The results were both predictable and surprising. Overwhelmingly, the youth told us that while the adults in their congregations considered preaching the most important part of the worship service, the youth found it boring and irrelevant. Preaching was for adults, they said; it didn’t speak to youth. While we had expected answers along these lines, we *hadn’t* expected what came next. When asked for advice about preaching, or to rethink their worship services and preaching ministries, or to tell us what they would say in a sermon, the youth were filled with ideas—and almost to a

person, said that *no one had ever asked their opinions about anything having to do with preaching and worship before*. Once we opened the door, they were bursting to talk. And their ideas were good ones; after all, many of them had been sitting through worship services (and sermons) since early childhood, and had logged hundreds of preaching hours. Even though they had absorbed the message that preaching is primarily for adults, they were listening—or rather, listening in.

Our class learned that the church has a serious problem. We have managed to communicate to our youth that preaching isn't really for them. It hasn't been difficult to do: we don't ask them anything, and we don't tell them anything. Our silence about preaching, and their exclusion from any conversations about preaching, send the message that preaching is an adults-only activity, with its own inscrutable (and perhaps unspeakable) initiation rights: one day, our youth imagine, they will somehow "get" the sermon, and the church will include them in the inner circle. But how and when this happens, they have no idea, because no one is talking about it. No one is discussing what it means to listen to a sermon, or what the point of listening might be (is it to understand? to be entertained? to be inspired? - and what happens if you aren't any of these?). No one ever asks them what they think. They can only assume that (1) they are deficient in some way, for not understanding their role in the preaching event, since everyone around them appears to "get it"; (2) as long as they don't "get it," they will be marginal members of the community—literally, exiles who live at home; and (3) the road out of exile isn't entirely clear, since conversation about preaching appears to be forbidden in the church. Don't ask, don't tell.

To be sure, this is hardly what the church *wants* to communicate to its youth. Many congregations would describe themselves as valuing both a vital youth ministry and a vital preaching ministry; they labor long and hard at each. But as our class survey indicated, the problem is not a lack of good intentions. The problem is *separation*. A congregation's youth ministry and preaching ministry are rarely seen as having anything to do with one another; they are envisioned and enacted often with separate theologies, separate goals, separate staff. To begin a conversation about preaching and youth challenges our assumptions about what constitutes effectiveness and faithfulness in each of these ministries; separation and silence undermine our best efforts in *both*, and ultimately perpetuate the maintenance of a mute, marginal caste of Christians in our own churches.¹ What is the theological message in a youth ministry that seeks to offer soul-tending, Godbearing worship experiences for its youth, yet must create alternative worship services in order to do so?² What is the theological message in a preaching ministry that targets particular age groups or stages of development, yet professes to preach a gospel of grace and shalom for all God's people?

Youth interpret these theological disconnects as evidence of their own exile, and they don't need our help to do it. As one survey respondent told us: "In our congregation, there's a children's sermon and an adults' sermon. But there isn't anything for us."

The Church's Big Enabler: A Silent Academy

The church is not alone in perpetuating silence. In the academy, too, silence reigns: only a very few scholars are writing about youth and preaching, and virtually none of them are homileticians. The message to our seminarians and churches is clear: *this is not an issue worth serious time and study*. Seminary students quickly learn that

if they want to engage in a sustained academic study about youth and preaching, they should look to Christian Education, Pastoral Care, and the social sciences—in short, any place but homiletics. Furthermore, the silence in the field reinforces the notion that youth ministry is not a *preaching* ministry, and (conversely) that a “real” preaching ministry has very little to do with youth. Preaching and youth, if the academy is to be believed, simply don’t go together; as a result, seminarians think that youth ministers don’t preach, and preaching ministers don’t do youth. In the introductory preaching classes at Columbia, for example, I routinely encounter students who have only reluctantly registered for this required course, because (as they describe it) they see their vocation in terms of youth ministry—*not preaching*. Often, these students are bewildered and disoriented when they discover that they *do*, in fact, feel a call to preach. Unable to envision how these two calls might possibly overlap, they feel compelled to choose one at the expense of the other. They have learned the lesson well: preaching and youth don’t go together.

One of the most surprising things about the silence in homiletics vis-à-vis preaching and youth is that historically, these two things have always been seen as a powerful, revitalizing combination. In eighteenth-century New England, Jonathan Edwards preached a series of sermons aimed at the young “night-walkers” in his congregation (whose revels were producing babies in unprecedented numbers), starting a wave of revivalism that swept colonial America.³ In the First and Second Awakenings, youth were the primary target, prompting evangelical preachers to try new homiletical methods, communication strategies, rhetorical idioms, and theologies of proclamation; a similar ingenuity and prioritizing has filtered down to many evangelical congregations to this day.⁴ Contemporary scholars of all stripes are mining these historical resources for clues about the relationship between youth, religion, and popular culture; mainline homiletics, meanwhile, appears to think of youth as future GenX types who will need to be attracted through means so unsavory that we can only hope the church’s preaching will survive the onslaught. “Youth” signals alternative worship, power point, and on-line sermons—in other words, everything that threatens mainline preaching as we know it. Yet in its anxiety to survive the future, homiletics has forgotten the lessons of the past, which compel us to deeper theological questions about evangelical revival, the nature of the church’s speech, and who gets to participate.⁵

When homiletics keeps silent about a significant portion of the body of Christ—namely, its youth—then church professionals and lay people will look elsewhere for guidance about preaching and youth, and the conversation will go on without preaching scholars. Or, as one of my students put it, upon learning that there were dozens of homiletical texts about form and narrative but *none* about his particular interest (preaching and youth): “Well, I guess Rodger can write that one.” I have no doubt that my colleague Rodger Nishioka can and will write insightfully and eloquently about preaching and youth from his perspective as a church educator, as indeed he *has*, for this journal among others. But will any homileticians rise to the challenge? And if not: will homiletics have any serious claim to be the study of the church’s distinctive speech?

Roads Out of Exile: Subversive Countertestimony and a Youth-full Homiletic

The landscape is not altogether bleak. Seeds of hope take root in backwater places, and suddenly a dead end becomes a blue highway out of Dodge. For preaching and youth, one of these hopeful seeds is the recent work of Walter Brueggemann, whose *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* examines the rhetorical situation of the Old Testament with an eye toward the contemporary preaching context. In Brueggemann's work, I detect a nascent homiletic for preaching and youth—a *youth-full* homiletic.

Brueggemann argues that the rubric of testimony best reflects both the process and shape of theological utterance given us in the biblical text *as well as* the pluralism of interpretive methods and communities. In legal language, testimony is the public presentation of one version of reality offered by a witness for the decision of the court; theologically, it is the process by which Israel's speech about God becomes revelatory.⁶ In the Old Testament, Israel offers testimony to the character of a sovereign and compassionate God, but sometimes Israel's life experience flies in the face of that core testimony; sometimes, Israel knows, God is simply absent and unknowable. Because Israel favors honesty over closure and particularity over systemic coherence, it offers a countertestimony (*God may be great and God may be good, but God doesn't always stay in character!*) that actually prevents the core testimony about God from becoming an unassailable idol. Ultimately, Israel's core testimony and countertestimony belong together; to ignore one at the expense of the other is to deny the integrity of the biblical text.

If our Old Testament canon is, as Brueggemann believes, not only remarkably pluralistic (that is, containing many voices) but also exilic (that is, written for exiles), then his rubric of testimony and countertestimony as a way to understand biblical speech does a number of things. First, it allows us to make an epistemological break with hegemonic knowledge: there is not one way of knowing, but many alternate and even subversive ways of understanding—an important feature for exiles. Second, it affords us a distinctive dialectical pattern for our own speech and postures in the faith community: lived faith requires both centrist and marginal interpreters, those who affirm the core testimony ("self-abandoning praise") as well as those who affirm the countertestimony ("self-regarding complaint").⁷ One is not allowed to dominate the other—again, a critical point for exiles. And third, this distinctive, albeit peculiar pattern of biblical speech—Brueggemann calls it the church's mother tongue—offers us an alternative identity and imagination: in the hearing, hosting, and living of undomesticated testimony, the faith community practices "true speech" for life and hope in exile.⁸

Brueggemann calls for contemporary preaching to recover the distinctive idiom of testimony and countertestimony, if it is to remain a "true speech" practice of the church. As true speech, preaching must confess faith even as it narrates experience.⁹ It must learn to live outside the hegemonic empire of certitude, making its way in a de-centered territory of disestablishment and exile.¹⁰ It must practice the dialectical pattern of testimony and countertestimony, allowing for a plurality of voices and interpretations. And most important, preaching must claim this pattern as its own mother tongue, its own peculiar, distinctive, exilic speech.

Brueggemann's proposal spurs me to ask how a *youth-full* homiletic might grow from the seeds of his work. Given the current silence about the relationship between

preaching and youth, and given that youth interpret that silence as evidence of their own exile in the church, could the recovery of the peculiar, distinctive biblical idiom of testimony and countertestimony nurture “true speech” among exiles? What do we need to consider in order to imagine and construct a *youth-full* homiletic of true speech in the church?

Although I envision the construction of a *youth-full* homiletic to be an intergenerational project, my comments in this section are directed primarily to adults. It seems to me that before the conversation can proceed, we preachers and teachers need to remember a few things.

Remember where we are. “Exile” is a potent metaphor these days. We preach to youth in exile from the church, and a church in exile from the culture. Everyone is disoriented; no one feels at home. But as Brueggemann’s work shows, de-centered youth in a de-centered church *and* centrist adults in a de-centered church are perfect candidates for the peculiar biblical idiom of testimony and countertestimony: in these two subgroups of the congregation, we have two distinct experiences of exile, two interpretive bodies vasculating between the center and the margins. We have pluralism, and we have exile. What better setting for practicing the biblical pattern of testimony and countertestimony? If youth and adults in a congregation can find commonality in the theme of exile, perhaps the mother tongue of the church can lead them toward true speech about what it means to live in exile as people of faith. Begin with exile; begin where we are.

Remember who we are. It is imperative that we know the people with whom we share this preaching ministry, and a large portion of those are youth. Even those of us with teenagers in the house may not be fully aware of the paradoxical complexities of their lives in this society. So do the obvious: read up on youth culture. Spend time with youth. Talk to them about their lives. Find out what exile is, from their perspective. The bibliography here is extensive; local youth workers and other professionals can suggest further titles beyond those I note.¹¹ But no reading can replace time spent with the young people in our congregations.

Remember our mother tongue. Exilic speech is subversive speech. It has to be: it offers an alternative identity, an alternative vision to life in the world as we know it. Too often, however, the church domesticates its mother tongue into submissive tones of conformity; we forget the true speech practices of exiles. Who better to remind us about subversive speech than the youth in our congregations? The dialectical pattern of testimony and countertestimony blesses the gifts of both youth and adults, encouraging each to engage in true speech about lived faith in exile, and holding each perspective in tension with the other. And, as we have noted, it is a pattern that must be learned and practiced; it is peculiar, *alternative* speech. Adults cannot simply assume that youth will “get it.” The church’s mother tongue must be spoken, modeled, and taught in all of its true speech practices. In addition, the church needs to think about ways to initiate youth into fuller, adult participation in those practices, perhaps through invitations to public testimony and countertestimony. Youth can help adults think through the forms those testimonies might take; there is a strong call for creativity, here. But the biblical pattern itself must be lived and learned through the community’s engagement of life and text.

Invite “true speech” about preaching. Talk to youth. Talk to them about

preaching. Listen to what they have to say. This is not simply a job for the youth pastor; it is a profound opportunity for the preacher(s) in our congregations, and can be a learning experience on both ends. When pastors invite discussion about preaching in general and their sermons in particular, *they de-center themselves*, breaking open epistemological assumptions about preaching (e.g., there is only one way to interpret a text) and responses to preaching (e.g., you either praise the sermon or complain about it) in favor of new true speech practices (e.g., what does this preacher's testimony lead you to testify about, in your lived experience of exile?). Such true speech practices help the preacher and congregation to articulate their roles and responsibilities in the preaching event, but they also keep the sermon from becoming something beyond criticism: an idol.

Invite "true speech" about Scripture. Serious preaching demands serious Bible study on the part of pastor and congregation, and youth deserve serious Bible study as much as adults do. They deserve time with pastors and other leaders to read Scripture in a collaborative, roundtable setting, such as that described by John S. McClure in *The Roundtable Pulpit*; persons are most empowered by preaching, McClure argues, when they are engaged in a collaborative model of revolving, ongoing discussion of Word and life.¹² They deserve to learn about hermeneutics, and to see how interpretations can change when we read Scripture through the lens of other perspectives, including the perspective of youth; one accessible book on the subject is Justo L. and Catherine G. González's classic text, *The Liberating Pulpit*.¹³ Beyond these, however, youth deserve the chance to fall in love with Scripture. And until they are passionately interested in Scripture, they will not be passionately interested—or invested—in the church's preaching.

Invite "true speech" from youth—in the pulpit. Forget an annual "Youth Sunday"; it smacks of inclusionary politics. Teach youth (and others, for that matter) to preach. One of the most compelling studies our "Preaching and Youth" class read was a book by William R. Myers called, *Black and White Styles of Youth Ministry: Two Congregations in America*.¹⁴ Myers' study of youth ministry in two large, middle-class congregations—one white, one African-American—shows that the theological and cultural assumptions underlying each lead one (the white congregation) to confirm culture and the other (the African-American congregation) to question it. In the African-American congregation, where the model is an explicit rejection of the dominant American culture and ethos, youth, through the direct support and training of the senior pastor, preach an average of once every five weeks; "Youth Sunday" happens *every month*. This congregation recognizes the importance of moving its youth beyond "systemic inarticulateness" (as Michael Warren puts it) into critical reflection on the socio-political culture through the eyes of faith and the grounding of life in the church. The pastors work with the youth preachers ahead of time to help them through all aspects of the sermon; they have also made clear to less-than-enthusiastic adults (who come to hear the senior pastor preach) that the church's responsibility to its youth—as well as its own ticket to survival—is to teach them to speak in the church's own distinctive idiom, its own mother tongue. It is a decision that comes with some risk; the pastors can't control everything the youth will say. But the congregation has learned to take the longer view: for the faith community to survive and thrive, its marginalized young must practice speak in exile.

What is most striking to me in Myers' study is not simply the fact that youth are actually *preaching* in this large congregation (although that may be challenge enough

for some of us!), but that the congregation's theology of youth ministry and preaching ministry are in conversation with one another, and even integrated into one another through the metaphor of "exilic speech." Through the leadership of the senior pastor—who has primary responsibility for the preaching ministry, but understands the de-centered nature of exilic speech—the congregation is free to imagine its youth ministry in partnership with its preaching ministry. Theologically, there is no disconnect for the youth: they see the church as offering an alternative identity in exile through distinctive, peculiar patterns of true speech; their pastors help them to "get it" and proclaim it. And as the senior pastor notes, it is a spiritually powerful experience for both youth and adults.

I wonder what a youth-full homiletic of true speech might look like in other congregations. I wonder whether the exiled church and its academic partners are bold enough, brave enough, and—let's face it—scared enough to ask.

Notes

¹Michael Warren, in *Youth, Gospel, Liberation* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), argues that the "systematic inarticulateness" threatening teenagers pushes them to a place beyond silence: "they are mute," he writes (14). Empowering youth to articulate their life experience is imperative if we are to break the cycle of silence and nurture "their capacity for a public life" (12).

²For a powerful new theological appraisal of youth ministry as "soul tending" and youth ministers as "Godbearers" who nurture Godbearing practices in others, see Kenda Creasy Dean and Ron Foster, *The Godbearing Life: The Art of Soul Tending for Youth Ministry* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1998).

³Quentin J. Schultze, Roy M. Anker, James D. Bratt, William D. Romanowski, John William Worst, and Lambert Zuidervart, *Dancing in the Dark: Youth, Popular Culture, and the Electronic Media* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 19.

⁴*Ibid.*, 18-24. Some of these included new exhortation styles aimed at the hear rather than the head, and calling for an immediate and spontaneous response of faith; new strategies such as itinerant preaching, print media, and camp meetings; and new anti-patriarchal, youthful rhetorical idioms of populist protest and challenge. See Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 1-46.

⁵For more on the history of youth in relation to preaching and conversion, see Joseph F. Kett, *Rites of Passage: Adolescence in America 1790 to the Present* (New York: Harper Colophon Books; Basic Books, Inc., 1977), 62-85.

⁶Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 120, 121.

⁷*Ibid.*, 400-1.

⁸*Ibid.*, 746-7, 744.

⁹See Paul Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutics of Testimony," in *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Lewis S. Mudge (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980).

¹⁰Brueggemann, *Cadences of Home: Preaching Among Exiles* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 40-1.

¹¹For a fascinating and disturbing entrée into contemporary youth culture, see Patricia Hersch, *A Tribe Apart: A Journey Into the Heart of American Adolescence* (New York: The Ballantine Publishing Group; a Fawcett Columbine Book; 1998). For a discussion of the acute stress on adolescents, see David Elkind, *The Hurried Child: Growing Up Too Fast Too Soon* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1981). For more on adolescent and young adult spirituality and faith development, see Tom Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998); and Sharon Parks, *The Critical Years: The Young Adult Search for a Faith to Live By* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986).

¹²John S. McClure, *The Roundtable Pulpit: Where Leadership and Preaching Meet* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995).

¹³Justo L. and Catherine G. González, *The Living Pulpit* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994).

¹⁴William R. Myers, *Black and White Styles of Youth Ministry: Two Congregations in America* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1991).