

Preaching and Youth in a Media Culture

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“Boring.”

“Yeah, pretty much boring.”

“Yeah, I usually don’t listen.”

Outwardly I try to look intently interested but inwardly I am rolling my eyes. I am talking with three high school young people at a conference in St. Louis. They are from three different congregations, and I have just asked them to describe the sermons they hear when they’re in worship. “Boring” is not an original answer. It’s the number one response I’ve heard from many young people at this conference. I decide these three won’t get off that easily. I follow up with a question asking why they think the sermons they hear are boring.

“I don’t know. They just are,” says the first one.

“Not much help there,” I think to myself.

“Yeah, they just are,” chimes in the second young person.

“And you’ll get the award for the most original thinker of your generation,” I think facetiously.

And then the gem comes when I least expect it.

“Nothing he talks about has anything to do with me and my life,” says the third young man.

I perk up.

“Nothing? Really?” I ask.

“Yeah. I mean I hear what he’s saying but nothing relates to me,” says the third young person again. “That’s what is so cool about coming to these conferences. I mean the speakers here talk right to me. I wish my pastor did that at home.”

“I really think your pastor wants to include you in his sermons,” I tell the young man. Immediately I regret my weak attempt at trying to defend preachers. I know too many who could care less about preaching to young people.

“Yeah,” says the high schooler. “Maybe. But he doesn’t even know me. How can he talk about my life when he doesn’t even know me?”

“And how can your pastor best get to know you?” I ask.

He thinks for a few minutes and then lights up with an idea.

“He could listen to my music,” he says earnestly. “Then he would know who I am and what I’m like.”

“There it is,” I think to myself. “That’s what it’s all about.”¹

More than ever, music and the larger media culture are answering the crucial question of “Who am I?” for this generation of youth and young adults. In their report, America’s Youth in the 1990’s, the Gallup organization, when it surveyed early adolescents and adolescents about their viewing and listening habits, found young people viewing television longer and more often and listening to the radio and using the computer more frequently than ever.²

For preachers who are hopeful of reaching out to this generation, the implications are great. First, preachers today must understand that for many youth and young

adults, the media culture provides more of a compelling message about God than the church does.

For instance, the band Creed began in 1997 and struck its first big hit this spring with this song, titled “Higher.” “Higher” was the first of several hit songs off their new CD titled *Human Clay*. Many of the eleven tracks on the CD are filled with biblical imagery. Scott Stapp, the lead vocalist and writer for the group grew up in a “religious home” and knows the Bible well. On their website, the band refuses to be labeled a “Christian band” but says they are all searching for how their faith fits into their lives; a quest shared by many youth and young adults today.³ Read through a selection of the lyrics to “Higher”:

Can you take me higher?
To the place where blind men see
Can you take me higher?
To the place with golden streets
Although I would like our world to change
It helps me to appreciate
Those nights and those dreams
But, my friend, I’d sacrifice all those nights
If I could make the Earth and my dreams the same
The only difference is
To let love replace all our hate
Up high I feel like I’m alive for the very first time
Up high I’m strong enough to take these dreams
And make them mine⁴

The references to heaven and to a better life are clear and compelling and seem to resonate with many youth and young adults. Tom Beaudoin, in his book *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X* says the culture is so important that it has become “surrogate clergy” for a generation of young people who have basically abandoned the churches where they grew up.⁵ The problem: we don’t know them enough to be able to preach to them.

The most powerful theme for this generation seems to be one of searching and seeking how their spirituality fits in with their lives. Obviously, this theme of searching and seeking coherence is not new. Indeed, to one degree or another, every generation of young people has been on a similar journey. What is new for today’s young people is the scope of their search and the length of time they’re spending searching. Previous generations had clear boundaries to their searching and for the most part, settled into a life pattern by their mid-twenties. For this generation, the boundaries for their search have disappeared and everything and anything is possible. Beaudoin uses the French term “bricolage” (meaning an improvised, rough assemblage of whatever tools are at hand to solve a problem) to explain how youth and young adults are creating their own belief systems.

Singer-songwriter Sarah McLachlan has a large following, especially among young women. Her song “Building a Mystery” was a hit this year both with youth and many young adults. In it, she describes how one goes about creating a belief system or as Beaudoin would name it, “bricolating”:

You come out at night
 That's when the energy comes and the dark side's light and the vampires
 roam
 You strut your rasta wear and your suicide poem
 And a cross from a faith that died before Jesus came
 You're building a mystery
 You live in a church where you sleep with voodoo dolls
 And you won't give up the search
 For the ghosts in the halls
 You wear sandals in the snow wear and a smile that won't wash away
 Can you look out the window without your shadow getting in the way
 Oh You're so beautiful with an edge and a charm
 But so careful when I'm in your arms
 Cause your working building a mystery
 Holding on and holding it in
 Yeah you're working building a mystery
 And choosing so carefully⁶

While young people are choosing carefully, all boundaries are off, as McLachlan's song illustrates. Everything is available and everything is all up for grabs. The bumper sticker philosophy for the generation is "Do whatever you want as long as it doesn't hurt anybody." Such a tragic and shallow mantra has led to a generation of youth and young adults who feel more isolated than ever. Further, incidences of depression among youth and young adults are at an all time high with more youth and young adults taking medication to help them cope day to day.⁷

So how do you preach to these youth and young adults? The first answer has already been mentioned—get to know them. You can't preach to them unless you spend time with them. It's easier (or perhaps harder?) if you have adolescents in your home. Even so, practice listening to young people. Be intentional. Once a quarter, invite five or six youth and young adults to your home for pizza (what else?). While you're together, spend some time talking about the themes and texts you'll be using as the basis for your preaching in the next few months. Play these themes out with the group and see what stories emerge. Ask permission to use these stories (with names changed) when you're preaching. This process of "harvesting illustrations" does more than give you relevant stories that relate to the text. This process also builds your relationship with these youth and young adults and their relationships with each other. There are some other hints I've gleaned from conversations with youth and young adults.

Hone Your Storytelling Skills

Several years ago while with a delegation of Presbyterians visiting Russian Orthodox churches in the Ukraine, I asked a priest how he had learned to preach. "For Russians," he responded, "good singing is good preaching." Thankfully, most of us don't have to sing our sermons (talk about a membership loss!) but if I could modify his response, I would say today that "good storytelling is good preaching." Good stories hold young people's attention and they remember them. But be careful. Even with the success of *Saving Private Ryan*, as soon as youth and young adults hear the

phrase “back in WWII,” they’re gone. Remember that college freshman today were born in 1981. Most of them don’t even remember the Gulf War. Keep your illustrations current. That’s what the gathering at your home once a quarter is for.

Some Self-Disclosure is Crucial

This is a change for many of us. In seminary, many of us were taught not to preach the “first person singular pronoun.” That won’t fly with youth and young adults today. Many want to hear about your thoughts and ideas and even your struggles and questions. They want to hear about your life and your experiences of God and your relationship to Jesus Christ and your sense of the Holy Spirit. No one is asking for the sermon to be your personal therapy time with the congregation. But if you never reveal who you are and what is happening with you, then after awhile, youth and young adults say they’ll start wondering if you actually believe what you’re preaching. Tell us about yourself but be careful. It can’t always be about you or we’ll become weary of your ego. There’s a balance. Find it and preach it.

Spontaneity Equals Authenticity

For this generation of youth and young adults, there’s nothing worse than everything being planned out to the point of being rigid. Leave room for spontaneity. This, too, is a major challenge for most pastors who at heart are control freaks (oh come on, own it!). It’s true that your major task is to prepare a worship experience that flows well and enables us to worship but does everything have to be written out and printed in the bulletin? Are there moments built into the worship experience for silence and contemplation and for sharing concerns and joys? Youth and young adults resonate with the spontaneous moment. For many, it’s the most authentic part of the worship experience. Nurture spontaneity and enjoy the moment. Learn how to pray without choosing a prayer from some wonderful printed resource.

Make Room for Mystery, Awe, Wonder

Youth and young adults today are as skeptical of science and technology as they are of religion. For a time, science and technology were going to solve all our problems. No one thinks that way anymore. Part of the growing spirituality movement in the country is a yearning for mystery, awe, and wonder. Many of the praise songs that are gaining in popularity sing of the wonder, awe, and mystery of God. This is no time for God in a box. This is a time to preach about the wonder, awe, and *mysterium tremendum* that is the God who calls us to worship. Are you preaching sitcom sermons? Are you preaching nice, neat sermons that have an opening story to engage us and come to a nice, neat conclusion about Jesus Christ? Or are you preaching sermons that send our hearts soaring with a sense of the awesomeness of God and the wonder of the Holy Spirit?

Engage the Senses

Remember the teacher figure in the animated Peanuts specials? Whenever she talked to Charlie Brown or Linus or Peppermint Patty, all we heard was “blah, blah, blah, blah.” Sadly, that’s how much of our preaching sounds to young people today. This is a generation that sees more than it hears. From music videos to web sites to MTV’s *Real World* to video games, youth and young adults are more visually oriented

than auditory. This poses a huge challenge for the Church. How do we reorient our worship experiences so they engage more than one sense at a time? Even when we give youth and young adults something to look at (the typical worship bulletin), it's more blah, blah, blah, blah – all words and no images. The sense of smell is the most powerful remembering sense among the five senses. When do we engage the sense of smell in our worship? What about the sense of taste?

Preach Jesus Christ, Preach Hope

Finally, preach a compelling message of hope. Most youth and young adults are struggling to find reasons for and sources of hope in their lives. I daresay that is probably true for everyone today but it's especially true for youth and young adults. The person of Jesus Christ is an intriguing figure for youth and young adults. And Jesus Christ is the reason for our hope. Whenever I've encountered a skeptical young adult who asks, "Why should I bother to go to church?" I respond with a simple answer. "Because you need hope in your life and the church is a community of hope." R.E.M., one of the more popular and longer lasting bands today, wrote a song about hope on their last album titled *Up*. Here is an excerpt from the song:

You want to trust religion
And you know it's allegory
But the people who are followers
Have written their own story
So you look up to the heavens
And you hope that it's a spaceship
And it's something from your childhood
You're thinking don't be frightened
You want to climb the ladder
You want to see forever
You want to go out Friday
And you want to go forever.
And you're questioning the sciences
And questioning religion
You're looking like an idiot
And you no longer care.
And you want to bridge the schism,
And you're looking for salvation
And you're looking for deliverance
You're looking like an idiot
And you no longer care.
You want to climb the ladder
You want to see forever
You want to go out Friday
You want to go forever.⁸

A narrative theology, self-disclosure, spontaneity, mystery, engaging the senses, and preaching hope. Without wanting to be too formulaic, these seem to be key characteristics of preachers who are reaching youth and young adults. What is the

good news? More than you can possibly imagine, today's young people are yearning for the Word to grab hold of them and transform them. And they don't care if they look foolish to others. They yearn for the hope of the Gospel. They yearn for the Truth of Jesus Christ. They want to climb the ladder. They want to see forever!

Notes

¹Interview with Scott Simonson, Andrew Slater, and Brandon Knutson at the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America Youth Gathering in St. Louis, Missouri, July 7, 2000.

²Robert Bezilla, ed. *America's Youth in the 1990s* (Princeton, N. J.: George Gallup Institute, 1993), 231-260.

³Scott Stapp, "Frequently Asked Questions." www.creednet.com.

⁴"Higher" written by Scott Stapp and Mark Tremonti © 1999 Wind-up Entertainment, Inc., on Creed, *Human Clay*, Digital Stereo CD 60150-13053-2.

⁵Tom Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 31.

⁶"Building a Mystery" written by Sarah McLachlan and Pierre Marchand ©1997 Arista Records, Inc., on Sarah McLachlan, *Surfacing*, Digital Stereo CD 07822 18970 2.

⁷*The Adolescent and Young Adult Fact Book* (Washington, D. C.: Children's Defense Fund, 1991), 33.

⁸"Hope," written by Peter Buck, Leonard Cohen, Mike Mills, and Michael Stipe ©1998 Sony/ATV Songs LLC/Temporary Songs (BMI), on R. E. M., *Up*, Digital Stereo CD 9 47112-2.