

Sacred Speech and Children: The Relationship of the Children's Sermon and Liturgy

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Most discussions of children's sermons begin at the visceral level ("I hate them/ I love them"). Those who love children's sermons look for resources to expand their repertoire. Those who hate such sermons simply refuse to read, talk, or engage the subject meaningfully. So instead of integrating children more fully in the worship experience, the gap has widened. Christian educators provide most of the resources for those who incorporate these sermons in the liturgy, while the field of homiletics is virtually silent on the topic. Children's sermons proliferate the Sunday morning landscape and preachers pretend not to notice. It seems significant that when Presbyterians completed a radical revision of their *Directory for Worship* three years ago, there was no mention of children's sermons to be found in this seventy page document.

In fact, Protestant worship has been transformed in the past thirty years. Our cultural interest in intimacy and informality has given new shape and form to the worship practices of many congregations. There are fewer prayers, less silence, little time for reflection and introspection in the order of worship. Thirty years ago, Protestant worship was identified by the somber tone of worship. Today, that tone is more often casual, warm, and chatty. Children's sermons may not be the cause of such changes, but it is an act of worship which reflects these changes. Today's worshipping community has come to expect preachers who imitate entertainers like Mr. Rogers, Bill Cosby, Art Linkletter, and Rosie O'Donnell. This art of imitation is never more evident than during a children's sermon. Often, one-sixth of the liturgy has been handed over to the purpose of presenting a "lesson" — object or moral — by means of preaching to the congregation through children. In other words, children are being used as the unwitting props of a preacher proclaiming a simplified gospel.

In his book, *The Witness of Preaching*, Dr. Tom Long approaches the subject in just two provocative paragraphs. He doesn't say much, but what he does say may provide a clue for preachers who desire the children's sermon to be an authentic act of proclamation. Long says such sermons should be "real sermons."¹ That phrase is an invitation to preachers to return to basics; to look at some of the classic understandings of our preaching and apply them to children's sermons.

Phillips Brooks provided a memorable definition of the preacher's craft: a sermon is an exercise of communicating "the truth through personality."² Many sermons are preached in ways that reveal characteristics of the preacher more than the truth of the gospel. This performance aspect of proclamation is more pronounced among those who preach to children and is subject to more abuse (or at least less subtlety) in a children's sermon. In elaborating on his definition of preaching, Brooks stresses that there should be congruity between speaker and message, and this is especially true in a children's sermon. Many preachers believe that when addressing children, they should use childish language, a patronizing tone of voice, and perhaps even dress in a childish way. (Some "canned" children's sermons suggest the preacher wear a t-shirt

or even put on an alligator costume as part of the presentation). When the preacher contrives some of the environmental factors in ways that are less than authentic, the message preached is likely to seem contrived and untrue, because the preacher is being untrue.

Richard Ward distinguishes for the preacher between what he calls “day talk” and “night talk.”³ “Day talk” is concerned mostly with gathering data, drawing conclusions, and sharing ideas. Many children’s sermons use this sort of language because it is concrete and resembles the didactic language of the classroom. “Night talk” is the sort of language inspired by twilight and an open fire; the kind of talk that happens when time is suspended, the busy rush of day is over, and there is a moment of leisure between table and bed. It is the kind of talk for which humans hunger, and that hunger is experienced among adults and children. It is a hunger for the reassurance of human voices sharing stories, images, and dreams that help us imagine a new and transformed world. Even though most preachers work at high noon, we are charged with the task of speaking as if it is twilight. A children’s sermon and the language of story which attends this Word-event is an opportunity for using night talk and creating a mood for the entire congregation that may provide an arena for self-discovery.

Robert Shelton defines a sermon as, “an oral discourse... intended to make the gospel available to all present, with both its claim and scandal.”⁴ Some of the discomfort associated with children’s sermons stems from the bland nature of the proclamation. Even preachers who like the form may have to admit they like the way a pastor looks when surrounded by children. It is an image which may overshadow any other message. As proclamation, however, a children’s sermon often remains superficial because the scandal of the cross is ignored for the sake of the children. A “chestnut” among children’s sermons compares Jesus to a pencil and makes an analogy between forgiving sin and erasing words on paper. “Just like this pencil, Jesus erases our sin,” is the core of this proclamation. Is not the gospel horribly diluted when Jesus’ death on the cross is compared to erasing some scribbles on a piece of paper? Children’s sermons can and should proclaim Christ and Christ crucified. Traditional folk stories and fairy tales, for instance, often address difficult subjects: the death of a sibling, the arrival of a step-parent, the fears of abandonment and economic ruin, loneliness, and violence. These narratives approach difficult subjects and help children (and adults) imagine ways to confront and overcome life’s difficulties. Proclamation of the gospel may be as simple and powerful as interpreting such a story in the light of Christ with just a few additional lines. Should a children’s sermon aspire to anything less?

When Martin Luther wrote his *Commentary on the Ten Commandments*, he wrote it in a plain form so that the head of the family could teach it to his or her household. Luther believed that children should learn to love and fear God. He understood that the claim and scandal of the gospel is available to children, too. He had no desire to shelter children from the difficult aspects of faith. Luther understood that if we have not stood in silence and terror before the Almighty, we need not seek refuge in the wounds of Christ. Luther’s language may strike us as harsh, yet if our faith is too comfortable, it has not yet met God. Children see the same fears and anxieties as adults see, but they lack a depth of experience and a language to understand and confront those fears. Sacred speech has been the traditional antidote proposed by the church. It is a language that enables us all to know ourselves as God’s creatures, recognize divine grace, and

respond to God with love and gratitude. That is an important part of proclaiming “real sermons” in an age that has reduced love — even the agape of the gospel — to mere sentiment and would feed our children on sentiment alone.

Finally, those who preach to children would do well to remember Frederick Buechner’s description of preaching.⁵ Buechner likens preaching to a satiric understatement attributed to the sportswriter, Red Smith. “Writing is really quite simple,” Smith said. “All you have to do is sit down at your typewriter and open up a vein.” So it is for preachers; we just open up a vein in order to find the language for preaching. The preacher speaks from the heart in order that words may become flesh and blood. Buechner describes a passion and intimacy between text and preacher and congregation that is decidedly absent in most children’s sermons. Preachers who buy the pre-packaged children’s sermons “in a bag,” or who use a text prepared by a denominational agency, or any other source are preaching a lie. A “real sermon” requires real preparation. The traditional formula of one hour of preparation for every minute in the pulpit probably applies to the chancel steps as well. One who would preach to children should be familiar with children’s literature and children’s culture; should know the children of the congregation as he or she knows the adults; and should be familiar with the programmatic aspects of the church’s life that impact children. The preparation and delivery of children’s sermons is no simpler, nor easier than preaching to adults. There are no authentic short cuts; just open up a vein and preach.

Notes

¹ Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1989), 194.

² Brooks is cited by Richard Ward, *Speaking from the Heart: Preaching with Passion* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992), 83.

³ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁴ This definition is quoted from a class worksheet that Dr. Shelton distributes to his preaching students at Austin Theological Seminary. It is not available from any other published source.

⁵ Frederick Buechner, *The Clown in the Belfry: Writings on Faith and Fiction* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 77.