

*The Character of the Preacher**

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Part One: The Character of the Preacher: The Preacher as Subversive Sage

Issues with controversial implications crowd around our pulpits, clamoring to be addressed. They include genetic testing, gun violence, hate crimes, racism, the Christian's attitude toward other religions, and toward the reality of same sex sexual expression in human life. In the clamor of information and indoctrination, it is easy for the preacher to forget to ask a crucial question: What is the character of the preacher who preaches on complex issues?

When I was a child in a little town in central Pennsylvania, I used to spend most of the worship service standing on the pew looking at the back of the church. On the back wall were two huge stained glass windows. One depicted Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, drops of blood glistening on his brow. The other depicted Jesus ascending, his feet a few inches off the ground, moving up, up and away. When it came time for the sermon, my mother would whisper, "Turn around now and sit down. The lights are going down." In that church in that magic moment when the preacher got into the pulpit all the lights in the sanctuary would dim and the spotlight above the pulpit would gradually brighten. I still get chills from the memory of that thrill, that expectation, that got stronger and stronger as the preacher got brighter and brighter.

I can't speak for your call, but mine was a mix of all kinds of motives and emotions, both holy and unholy. But *one* of them was the desire to be someday the one who got to be lit up. Sometimes having our prayers answered is a dangerous thing!

The unspoken question of the congregation on any given Sunday is: "What is your character, preacher?" A growing number of homiletics are shining their scholarly spotlights on this question. Says Richard Lischer, homiletics professor at the Divinity School of Duke University,

The person of the preacher is a good example of a topic that was of great importance to the medieval church but is now seldom discussed in homiletics. Despite the wave of interest in spirituality in the church today, one discerns no revival of the classical concern for the holiness of the preacher. The recent discovery of "my story" as a major element in what is sometimes called autobiographical preaching is not a substitute for Christian character without which the sermon is only words.¹

Christian preaching has some of its roots in ancient rhetoric, the art of persuasive public speech. This tradition goes back to at least 500 BC, and Aristotle's *Rhetoric* was written in 330 BC. The rhetorical tradition is rooted in the public speaker's need to speak persuasively in a public forum like a trial or a legislative debate to persuade listeners of the truth of his or her position. This remains some preachers' habitual mode

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of preaching on a complex social issue. They put their own position forward as powerfully as possible over against the weaknesses of alternative positions.

For the Greek rhetoricians, speaker character was key to hearer receptivity. Aristotle believed that intelligence is important but that character and goodwill are just as important. Demosthenes put it this way: "The good speaker is the good man (sic) speaking well."²

The Greek teachers of rhetoric influenced Augustine, who wrote the first homiletical textbook, *On Christian Doctrine* in 427. Augustine believed that while God's message in preaching certainly does not depend for its power on the character of the speaker, it is a tool we can use for God's purposes. The Christian tradition that followed Augustine accented the integrity, sincerity, and moral behavior of the preacher.

There is no place that speaker character is more crucial than when we preach on controversial issues. But whose character? We preachers are accustomed to being told what character we are to play by trends in our culture. Play the prophet, shouted the sixties. Speak out against injustice in no uncertain terms! Play the therapist, intoned the seventies. Affirm our worth. Play church growth consultant, advised the eighties. Go easy on the cross. Play the CEO, insisted the nineties, or at least be a player-coach.

Now we face into the clamor of complex, often controversial issues, and I sometimes feel like I've stumbled onto the stage in the midst of a play in progress and I don't know which character I'm supposed to be playing. I'm not Martin Luther King, Jr. And I'm not Sam Walton! And even though I'm from Pennsylvania, I'm not Joe Paterno! And where are the women in this play? What character is a poor, confused preacher to play?

André Resner, in his *Preacher and Cross*, a study of the identity of the preacher, expresses the danger in allowing cultural definitions of character to shape our pastoral identity:

With Jesus as C.E.O. as the dominant christological orientation for our time, what is to prevent the consumer-driven church from selecting a minister to function partly as buoyant master of ceremonies and entertainer and partly as a Wal-Mart-style manager and motivator, with the goal of happier, greater, bigger, and more?³

What is the substance of the character of the preacher who preaches on controversial issues? Maybe it all boils down to personality. We live amid a culture that mistakes personality for character. And what is the personality of choice? For that I turn to a man who has been called "the prophet of a uniquely American philosophy of achievement," Napoleon Hill, author of *Think and Grow Rich* (1937). Hill, a boy from backwoods Virginia, was sent by Andrew Carnegie to interview influential men in America with the question, "What is the key to your influence and success?" The answer given by Henry Ford, Thomas Edison, Woodrow Wilson, and Franklin Roosevelt was the same: assemble an attractive constellation of personality traits.

It reminds me of online shopping. Give us our shopping lists and send us down the online aisles with our cart icon. What did the titans of industry and politics recommend that we buy? Flexibility, sincerity of purpose, promptness of decision, tact, the habit of smiling, tolerance, frankness of manner and speech, a keen sense of humor, faith in infinite intelligence, a keen sense of justice, emotional control, alertness of interest,

versatility and a fondness for people, humility, effective showmanship, clean sportsmanship, a good handshake, and personal magnetism.⁴

Napoleon Hill is more helpful than the Bible with our personality-enhancing project. In the Bible we meet King Saul, whose craving to please displeased God. We meet Rahab and Tamar, whose deviation from their society's notion of gender propriety got them included in the genealogy of salvation in the first chapter of Matthew. We meet Paul, not much of a public speaker, but waving his list of the fruits of the Spirit in our faces (Galatians 5:22,23).

Character talks! And what does it say? Be decisive and single minded. Be charming. Influence others. Define success in our preaching on tough issues as having others assent to our position and settle this thing once and for all. Bring the force and appeal of our personalities to bear on others' views.

For the Christian preacher, however, character does not boil down to personal magnetism. Possessing personal magnetism, and the confidence it brings, does not equip you or me to guide others in complex matters of faith and practice. Lacking personal magnetism and the confidence it brings does not disqualify you or me from guiding others in complex matters of faith and practice. Personal magnetism is not the same as character.

If the preacher's character doesn't boil down to personality, then maybe it is a matter of virtue. We twenty-first century folk define virtue as sexual purity and abstinence from alcoholic beverages. The Greeks had a deeper view. For them, character was a constellation of persistent habits of the heart and mind that made for personal and social harmony. The Greek word originally meant an "engraving tool." In their view, the four virtues to be engraved in the human heart were prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance. They grew. They were not static. Their reward was intrinsic, and they did not necessarily lead to wealth.

Prudence, the lead virtue that helps integrate the others, does not mean prudery. It is the practical wisdom (*phronesis*) to know what combination of the other three virtues to use in real life situations. Justice is a concern for fairness, honesty, and keeping promises. Fortitude is courage in battle and debate, and the stamina to keep on pressing for justice against all odds. Temperance is not just abstaining from alcoholic beverages. It is the impulse-control necessary to accomplish any worthwhile end.⁵

We preachers could no doubt benefit from a dose of all four virtues in preaching on complex issues. But we need something else as well. Thomas Aquinas sought a theological context for the formation of character. Not prudence, but charity (love) took the lead. Faith and hope were close behind. "Charity is the mother and root of all virtues..."⁶

I was once talking about the virtues in a workshop with pastors, when one blurted out, "I'm tired of all this talk about virtue—character formation is not the same thing as justification and sanctification!" And he is right. The virtues offer us a litany of helpful whats, but we need a why and a how.

If character for Christian preaching doesn't come from personality and it doesn't come from the virtues, let's turn to scripture. Our character is informed by a constellation of theological virtues that flow from the Wisdom of God at work in the world and our lives. We are called to be sages: seekers of wisdom, teachers of wisdom, and sometimes challengers of unjust conventional wisdom.

The wisdom literature of the Hebrew Scriptures, consisting of the Book of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Job, focuses on the formation of human character in response to the revealed and sometimes the concealed character of God.⁷ Scholars have tended to ignore the wisdom literature, accusing it of being too much about human life skills and not enough about God. Yet, looking more deeply, how foolish for us preachers to ignore a genre that specializes in our problem: facing complexity. Here is how one Old Testament wisdom scholar describes wisdom's specialty: "wisdom focuses on the self as a discerning moral agent in a world filled with choices, ambiguity, threat and grace..."Doesn't that sound a lot like our role as preachers on controversial issues?⁸

The sages of Israel occupied many positions throughout Israel's changing history. There were sages who taught diplomacy at court, wisdom to the young in schools, and to their children by their own hearth. The Book of Proverbs reflects the family sage, probably in the era after the exile when social institutions like temple and monarchy were in shambles. Mother and father sages sought to stabilize their youth, to protect them from themselves and thereby to preserve the order, justice, and peace (the *shalom*) of the buffeted community. Biblical Wisdom in the Book of Proverbs inculcates behavior that leads to community stability: self-control of appetites for food, drink, and sex, fidelity in relationships, respect for elders, charity to the poor, and industrious habits.

The Four Wisdom Virtues

There is at the same time a subversive function for Israelite sages. Job and Qohelet highlighted unjust suffering and the gap between poor and rich. The job description of Israel's sages was both to teach traditional wisdom and, when needed, to subvert wisdom that had become stale and unjust. That sounds a lot like our role as preachers on complex issues! In fulfilling this role, the sages drew on four wisdom virtues that can be derived from the Bible's wisdom literature and its depiction of the sage.

The Fear of the Lord

"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge" (Proverbs 1:7; 9:10; 15:33). The fear of the Lord is not the fear of imminent punishment. In Deuteronomy, the phrase refers to covenant piety. In Isaiah 6, it refers to the humble recognition of the otherness of God. In Proverbs, fear of the Lord is acknowledging that our human wisdom is limited and that God is the source of all moral insights that guide the community.

Wisdom is not just precepts but is the gift of a presence, portrayed by the image of Woman Wisdom who calls, chastises, teaches, and promises life to those wise enough to choose her path (Proverbs 1:20-33; 8:22-36). In the tumultuous postexilic period, when male run institutions like monarchy and temple were in shambles, the Book of Proverbs gathers together memories of important roles of women in Israelite life—as counselors, homemakers, and sages. They gel in the figure of Woman Wisdom, a metaphor for God's presence and guidance in the particulars of daily life. She demands our respect and our attention.⁹

It is folly to preach on anything without a prerequisite fear of the Lord. It is especially foolish to preach on a controversial issue without acknowledging God as the source of wisdom's moral insights for living. "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and

do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge God, and God will make straight your paths. Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord, and turn away from evil. It will be healing for your flesh and a refreshment for your body" (Proverbs 3:5-8).

Recognizing the Limits of our Human Wisdom

The second wisdom virtue is the admission of the limits of our human wisdom. Throughout Proverbs there are several proverbs that scholars have baptized the "limit proverbs" (16:1,2,9; 19:21; 20:24; 21:30-31). They are based on the sages' observations that a shadow of the unknown hovered over their clearest certainties. The best-laid human plans can founder on the rocks of life. Playing by the rules does not always win the game. Human existence contains a degree of unpredictability and ambiguity that cannot be reduced to a formula.

Says wisdom scholar John Collins, "No degree of mastery of the rules and maxims of wisdom can confer absolute certainty. Life retains a mysterious and incalculable element, and it is precisely in this incalculable area that Yahweh is encountered."¹⁰ It is folly to preach on controversial issues without recognizing the limitations of our human wisdom. We would prefer oracular experiences and infallible formulas. Instead, we preachers live in the tension between fearing the Lord and acknowledging our limitations.

Acceptance of Diversity of Interpretation

That tension causes us to press on to the third wisdom virtue: the acceptance of diversity of interpretation in the community. A wisdom community centuries old produced Proverbs. A careful reading reveals seemingly contradictory proverbs side by side (Proverbs 26:4,5). It also reveals clusters of proverbs that represent different perspectives on various topics such as speech and silence and wealth and poverty.

It is important to avoid unnecessary conflict by giving a soft answer (15:1), but there are times when the wise person rebukes or accepts rebuke (10:10; 25:12; 28:23). Laziness can lead to poverty, but to mistreat the poor is to oppose the cause of God (22:22-23; 23:10-11).

It is folly to preach on a controversial issue without acknowledging diversity of interpretation among well-intentioned people of faith. The relationship among the wisdom books of Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes is evidence of the theological richness of acknowledging diverse interpretations. We too often picture Old Testament wisdom as divided into two parties: the optimistic sages of the Book of Proverbs and those pessimists responsible for the Books of Ecclesiastes and Job. Here we are having a nice Proverbs party and giving each other brightly colored Hallmark cards with perky sayings on them congratulating each other because our foresight has brought us good reputations and security in life. And outside these spoilers are wrapping nasty reminders around rocks and throwing them through the plate glass windows. With each one we hear the tinkle of breaking glass. (Life is unpredictable; death is inevitable; you can't know everything about God; life is fragile and fleeting, the best you can do is to enjoy your portion. "If you want to save your life, lose it." Blessed are you when you are persecuted." "Consider the lilies of the field....")

One of the strengths of Israelite wisdom was that it invited all the sages to the wisdom party. It realized that diversity of opinion enriches the wisdom community.

We twenty-first century preachers need to attend the party too to learn an important lesson. It is that we are called on at different times to fulfill both of the functions of wisdom: sometimes to stabilize the community, sometimes to subvert comfortable wisdom in the cause of justice.

There are plenty of preachers who are willing to preach Divine Wisdom for living without acknowledging the limitations of their human wisdom and without respecting the perspectives of others. There are also plenty of preachers who avoid controversial issues altogether because they are overwhelmed by a sense of their own limited knowledge and the fear of reprisal from those who disagree with them.

The Listening Heart

The wise preacher struggles with both temptations—and avoids them both. Amid this struggle we need to be reminded of our fourth wisdom virtue: the listening heart. The young king Solomon, suspecting that he would be called upon to offer wisdom in all kinds of controversial issues, made a request to God. “Give your servant a listening heart” (*leb shomea*) 1 Kings 3:9.

Our Sovereign, concealing God, has sprinkled clues to God’s wisdom all throughout Creation. It’s like the “Can You Find?” page in *Highlights Magazine*. The picture promises that if you look hard enough you’ll find the apple, the bat, the cupcake, and the bear. What do you have to do to find them? You have to look carefully.

In lifting up the virtue of the listening heart, the wisdom literature challenges us to listen to contemporary life and the human sciences as well as scriptures. Choon-Leong Seow, Old Testament wisdom scholar, puts it well. “The way of human discernment as we face complexity is not something scripture disdains, saying to us, do a simple reading of texts. Scripture itself teaches us the importance of new knowledge, of the investigation of science, of the proven wisdom that comes from experience and is a part of our fear of the Lord.”¹¹

Because we fear the Lord we commit ourselves to a lifelong alertness to the created world. Job, Qohelet, and Jesus listened with their hearts, and heard that their more traditional colleagues were attending to a part of reality - the part that confirmed their orderly patterns of good actions, good luck. The sage who preaches on controversial issues needs to look at the situations that seem to contradict her own views. He needs to allow the life experience of others to contradict his wishful thinking about how life should be. The sage looks at the pain his formulas do not factor in. The sage doesn’t rush to talk, but first listens with her heart.

A constellation of four virtues gleaned from biblical wisdom is crucial to our character as preachers on difficult issues: the fear of the Lord that is the beginning of wisdom; the acknowledgement of our human limitations and those of others; the respect for diversity of interpretations, including our own; and the listening heart. “A listening ear and a seeing eye- the Lord indeed has made them both” (Prov 20:12).

The Sermon as Subversive Wisdom: The Character of the Sermon On a Public Issue

Now and then I watch the Martha Stewart show. Martha has a beautiful home somewhere in New England, I think, and she spends her time making items that either nobody told me I needed or I’ve already bought at Wal-Mart. In December I watched, mesmerized, as Martha made a Christmas wreath out of cockleburs dipped in colored glue. In January I watched her make a knickknack shelf from scratch with a jigsaw. In

February, I watched her make her own wallpaper. I find it comforting that she's out there somewhere in a parallel universe making all that stuff so I don't have to.

I would be surprised if Martha Stewart invited you and me to lunch at her house and served us canned soup. You and I would both be surprised if we learned that Howard Stern had enrolled in rabbinical school. When people act out of character, it always surprises us. And when they act *in* character, whether good or bad, we nod and say, "Yes, that's so and so to a 't'." And we feel strangely comforted by the reliability and consistency of it all.

What does it sound like when the sage preaches in character? It sounds public. The sage is one whose goal is the *shalom* of the person in community. The sage will choose not address public concerns now and then, but public concerns will be present to some degree in every sermon. But the sage will not be satisfied to act out some caricature of a prophet, once or twice a year coming out wearing a hair shirt and chomping locusts and the other fifty weeks reverting to "I come to the garden alone." The sages, Jesus included, did not know the modernist distinction between private and public spheres of life.

What kinds of sermons on public issues does the sage preach? Given the sage's skill at reading various situations, that all depends. It depends on whether the congregation is shell shocked, apathetic, or polarized in a given situation, regarding a given issue.

Shell Shocked: Preaching in Times of Crisis

Sometimes the sage will preach in response to a crisis when her congregation is shell-shocked. Crises may be public, congregational, or personal.¹²

If we aspire to be sages, we cannot practice avoidance. "I'm going to focus on Mother's Day, as I had planned, and just deal with the school shootings in my pastoral prayer." Then people will stand in clumps in the parking lot trying to muster the wisdom we have failed to provide.

For a sage to avoid addressing a crisis would be to betray the very nature of wisdom as God involved in everyday experience. Such avoidance would be a betrayal of the listening heart that is a sage's hallmark. The sage is not afraid to face into the unknown about God and life armed with the wisdom she does know, about God, about life.

Public Crises

Public crises include, among other events, war, assassination, riot, hate crimes, domestic and school violence. A black man is tied to a truck by two white men and dragged to his death. A gay man is tied to a post and left to die. Two youth go on a shooting spree at their school and gun down several classmates and teachers. Leaving a note revealing her homosexuality, a teen in our city commits suicide.

An African American student in one of my preaching classes told me her mother read the paper every morning, and as she read headline after headline, she would shake her head and say, "The preacher won't like this. I can't wait to hear what the preacher will have to say about that. The preacher won't be happy about this!"

Congregational Crises

Sometimes we preach in the context of a congregational crisis. Congregational crises hit the moment statistics take on human faces that are right before our eyes on

the front row as we stand up to preach. Perhaps several high school students coming home from a ski trip are killed in a bus accident. Maybe a beloved, respected pastor is accused of fiscal or sexual impropriety. Perhaps members of a rival gang beat a young church member. Maybe the plant is closing and moving to another country.

Personal Crises

Sometimes we preach in the context of a personal crisis. Sometimes we have to pick our way through the wreckage of our own bereavement, divorce, health challenges, faith crisis, or addictions, to speak a word, not just to ourselves, but to our people. At such times we need wisdom to acknowledge our own limitations and others' reactions to them. At such times we need wisdom to listen with our heart to our own pain and God's presence so that our lives can be, not obstacles to others' faith, but prisms for God's illuminating grace.

The Life of the Sage as Preparation for Social Crisis Preaching

The trouble with crises is that we are never prepared for them. What we say at such times is crucial, and yet crisis sermons often need to be prepared in a matter of two or three hours. Sometimes we may even have to compose and deliver them extemporaneously!

Despite the number of times we've seen crises strike others, we never expect them to visit us. And when they do, we are usually faster to cry "Why me?" than to shrug, "Why not me?" We are quick to blame ourselves or, preferably others, often God for them. At the very least we want an explanation. And then we want to recover from them quickly and fix the damage, and then move on quickly into that golden moment when time has healed all.

Talking Head Sermons or Listening Heart Sermons?

The sage preaches listening heart sermons rather than talking head sermons. She has the wisdom to refrain from greeting aching hearts and tear-stained faces with abstract generalizations and premature prescriptions for action. Joseph Jeter, author of *Crisis Preaching: Personal and Public*, suggests that in times of crisis, we need to begin with the particulars of experience. Journalist Katie Sherrod calls this "speaking the truth that is in the room." To begin with abstractions denies the truth that is in the room.¹³ The sage listens with her heart and helps the grieving and the confused verbalize and focus their feelings. "Given all the feelings about the school violence that are swirling around the room, let us focus for a few minutes on two of them: our sense of sadness and our question how could this happen?" The preacher then brings the Gospel to bear on the focused responses of the congregation and finally suggests the various consequences of that engagement in the situation.

Another effective way a sage can preach on a social crisis is to preach a bipolar sermon. This is the bad news of our situation. This is the good news of the gospel. Neither can be ignored. In the tension between the two can we catch a glimpse of God's promised outcome and the way for us to get there? This form appeals to the sage because it does not oversimplify the situation or offer easy resolution. It acknowledges and lives in the tension. It affirms the already and the not yet. It is realistic and yet hopeful.¹⁴

Cultivation of the four wisdom virtues is the best preparation for life's unexpected

crises. When the crisis hits, we will be in the habit of turning to a gracious, yet mysterious God with appropriate reverence, understanding the limitations of our own knowledge, and being attentive to and respecting others' responses. And we will have helped our people cultivate these same good habits.

Crises of Understanding

In *Preaching the Topical Sermon*, Ron Allen suggests that traumas bring crises of understanding and decision, or crises of theology and ethics. In a crisis of understanding, people struggle to know what is happening and why. In a crisis of decision, they struggle to know what to do in response.¹⁵

Crises of understanding often revolve around sticky issues of theodicy. The wisdom literature faces into this issue more honestly than any other genre of Scripture. Job's witness, though it doesn't answer the nagging why question, is that the presence of tragedy doesn't mean the absence of God. In fact, as Jesus is our witness, it can mean resurrection. Many people feel it is somehow their fault when tragedies hit them. And the Book of Proverbs in some places feeds this error by holding up the connection between good living and good luck. But Job and Jesus counter our tendencies to blame God or ourselves when crises strike. Those who suffer are not worse than those who don't. We all need to repent! Luke (13:1-5) In the crucifixion and resurrection, we see how stubbornly God refuses to abandon the righteous sufferer.

The sage has a wealth of themes to work with, and preaching on them helps cultivate wisdom virtues in the congregation that can strengthen them in between crises. The theme of God as concealed as well as revealed probably won't bring much comfort in time of trauma. But it's a good dose of reality to preach between crises. Job's cautionary tale about how not to treat others in extreme suffering is a helpful message for congregations.

In times of crisis our people need a sage. They need sermons from us that well up from our lifelong search for wisdom, a profound piety that engraves upon our hearts the qualities of fear of the Lord, recognition of our limitations, respect for diverse views, and a tender, listening heart.

Crises of Decision

Some of you may be wishing I'd talk about how to be a prophet in a crisis rather than a sage. Some crises call for our condemning injustice. Maybe you think the prophet is the only one who can do that. Our minds leap to the prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures and to their 'thus says the Lord' messages in which they pronounced in no uncertain terms God's displeasure, God's will, and a call for repentance.¹⁶

The prophet is not the only one who can bring themes of social challenge to bear in situations of crisis. The sages of Proverbs had a degree of empathy for the hard lot of the poor. Again and again they admonished the young to respect the poor and to offer them charity out of reverence for their common Creator—God. Qohelet, while he was probably comfortably off himself, lost sleep over the plight of the oppressed (Ecclesiastes 4:1,2,3). Jesus did more than lament the lot of the poor. He called his disciples to lives of service and sacrifice pointing to a social order in which complacent, status quo wisdom would be revealed as folly.

The sages used both indirection and direction in their teachings. The sages' favorite genre, the proverb is the master of indirection. Using these anonymous

nuggets of collective wisdom, we can give people directions without their ever being the wiser! “Can one walk on hot coals without scorching one’s feet?” (6:28). “Those who are kind reward themselves, but the cruel do themselves harm” (Proverbs 11:17). “If the shoe fits, wear it.” “The higher the ape climbs the more he shows his tail” (African proverb). “He who hesitates is lost.”

The proverb (as well as the aphorism, a proverb whose author we know) can be used to undermine injustice by indirection in specific situations. “If slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong.” “Money can’t buy happiness.” “Man does not live by bread alone...” “It’s not what goes in the mouth but what comes out that defiles.”

The sage can also be direct and outspoken, using admonitions, direct dos and don’ts. Their context was a specific teaching moment, not a national prophetic pronouncement, but the bite is still there. “Do not envy the wicked, for the evil have no future. The lamp of the wicked will go out” (24:19b-20a). “Do not rob the poor because they are poor; or crush the afflicted at the gate; for the Lord pleads their cause and despoils of life those who despoil them (22:22). This suggests to the contemporary sage that there is a time to be directive in our sermons. But we must do so with humility and wisdom.

The sage can be urgent. “Remember your Creator in the days of your youth” (Ecclesiastes 12:1). “How long O simple ones will you love being simple?” (Proverbs 1:22). Woman Wisdom’s emphasis is not so much on punishments, but on the consequences of not responding. She doesn’t have to punish us. We punish ourselves. “Those who are kind reward themselves, but the cruel do themselves harm (Proverbs 11:17). “Waywardness kills the simple and the complacency of fools destroys them...” (Proverbs 1:32).

Sermons on Chronic Social Problems and Controversial Issues

Most of our sermons may not be dramatic crisis sermons. Many may be the kind of sermons that nobody will complain about if we don’t preach: sermons on ongoing social concerns about which people may be apathetic and sermons on controversial issues that polarize our congregations. Understanding ourselves as sages can be instructive for these occasions.

The chronic social problem is not a controversial issue on the surface. No one is in favor of hunger, violence against children, or poor public education. But when we begin to discuss causes and appropriate responses, controversy looms. Well, if the poor would stop having so many children and take advantage of all the jobs that are out there, the tax base would be able to support better schools. Well, if the rich hadn’t yanked the social programs that used to feed the poor out from under them.... Of course children will get guns. At gun shows, people can buy guns without undergoing a background check! School violence is due to negligent parents, not the rights of law-abiding citizens to own guns for self-defense and sport.

And then there are the homiletical hot potatoes or controversial issues on which people are sharply polarized. These include ordination of homosexuals, capital punishment, the Christian’s attitude toward other religions, gun control, genetic testing, environmental issues, and abortion as well as many others. Many controversial issues are variations on themes related to sex, money, and power.

The goals of the sermon on a chronic social problem as well as a sermon on a controversial issue are fourfold.

Implicate: “This is not a relevant issue for us. We have very few homeless people here. We have no problem with racism. We’re all white!” As preachers we need to show our people that it is their issue, too. It is not necessarily their fault, but it is their responsibility to address it by the grace of God.

Educate. We need to bring our people’s attention to the human pain that throbs behind the statistics. This is what Qohelet and Job, listening to their hearts, did for their listeners. They bring onto their radar screens the people that traditional wisdom’s categories do not account for. The Book of Proverbs says that if you live by wisdom you will prosper. But look, there are some righteous poor. There are some wise who seem to have nothing to show for it. There are righteous sufferers. There are people with dirty hands and clean hearts. There are people who don’t fit our contemporary stereotypes. There is someone who works hard and is still poor. Here is someone with a same sex preference who is not promiscuous. And over there is a wealthy person who is not superficial and selfish.

We need to educate ourselves and our congregations about the dynamics and causes beneath the surface of chronic social concerns. In this activity, we honor a basic premise of the wisdom literature. That is a respect for the realm of everyday human knowledge and skills as arenas of God’s revelation. In dealing with issues whose complexities are not anticipated in Scripture, the sage respects the human sciences and their creative voice in the dialogue with scripture.

In preaching on controversial matters, preachers need to follow the lead of biblical wisdom and acknowledge the diversity of interpretation of issues, honoring the positive intentions of both sides.

Radiate hope. We preachers need to radiate the hope of the Gospel to those affected by the issue. What is God doing in this issue? Who is God calling us to be?

Motivate to long-term study and action. The preacher seeks to motivate the congregation to action driven not by what divides them but by what unites them: their common motivation and goal as a community of faith.

A prayer that originated in China, “For the Unity of Christ’s Body,” eloquently expresses this goal of unity.

Help each of us, gracious God,
To live in such magnanimity and restraint
that the Head of the church may never have cause
to say to any one of us,
This is my body broken by you.¹⁷

Sermons in times of crisis, controversy, and complexity will be wiser and more effective when the preacher remembers to preach in character, evincing the qualities of the sage: respect for a diversity of interpretations, willingness to be urgent and direct, and possession of a listening heart.

Notes

¹ Richard Lischer, *Theories of Preaching: Selected Readings in the Homiletical Tradition* (Durham, N.C.: The Labyrinth Press, 1987), 3. *Theories of Preaching* is a helpful anthology of readings from homiletical theorists from Augustine to the present.

² Ralph L. Lewis with Gregg Lewis, *Inductive Preaching: Helping People Listen* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1983), 23-24.

³ André Resner, *Preacher and Cross: Person and Message in Theology and Rhetoric* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 6.

⁴ *Napoleon Hill's Keys to Success: The 17 Principles of Personal Achievement* edited by Matthew Sartwell (New York: Penguin Group: 1994). From the Introduction, vii – x.

⁵ See the discussion of the virtues by William P. Brown in *Character in Crisis: A Fresh Approach to the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 11-12.

⁶ *Summa Theologiae* I-II, q. 62, a.1, quoted on p. 12 of Brown.

⁷ The label Wisdom literature also includes two apocryphal works, the *Wisdom of Solomon* and *The Wisdom of Jesus Ben Sira* as well as a number of Psalms. *The Wisdom of Jesus Ben Sira* is from early second century BCE and has a traditional notion of retribution, places wisdom in the context of Israel's election and covenant tradition, and emphasizes fear of the Lord (*The Tree of Life*, 65f.). *The Wisdom of Solomon* is from the Diaspora, probably Alexandria, in the late first century BCE and shows a Greek concern with immortality (*The Tree of Life*, 83). Wisdom psalms include 1,32,34,37,49,112, and 128 (Roland Murphy, *The Tree of Life: An Exploration of Biblical Wisdom Literature* (New York: Doubleday, 1990).

⁸ Brown, 4.

⁹ Claudia V. Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of Proverbs* (London: The Almond Press, 1985).

¹⁰ John Collins, "Proverbial Wisdom and the Yahwist Vision," *Semeia* 17 (1980): 10.

¹¹ Choon-Leong Seow, ed., *Homosexuality and Christian Community* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 60.

¹² This typology comes from Joseph R. Jeter Jr.'s book *Crisis Preaching: Personal and Public* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 13-14.

¹³ Jeter, *Crisis Preaching*, 101-102.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 103f.

¹⁵ Ronald J. Allen, *Preaching the Topical Sermon* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1992), 21-22.

¹⁶ The roles of prophet and sage are not at odds. It is true that the prophets often denounce the court sages, but only as they forgot the human limits of wisdom and defy the word of Yahweh's messengers. The prophets in fact pray for the day that the King and his counselors will be true sages, shepherds who will rule wisely (Isaiah 9 and 11; Jeremiah 3:15; 10:21; 23:5). See Raymond Van Leeuwen, "The Sage in the Prophetic Literature," in *The Sage in Israel and the Ancient Near East*, ed. John C. Gammie and Leo G. Perdue (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 295-306.

¹⁷ *The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville, Tennessee: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), 564.