

# *Only Hens Lay in Ditches*

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Mr. Chairman, Mr. President, Faculty Colleagues, Members of the Class of 2001, Ladies and Gentlemen:

Almost seventy of you are about to receive Master's degrees of one type or another. This means that your mastery of one thing or another is being certified by your school. Whatever else the Master's degree means, it ought above all to mean that you are masters of the word: the Word of God. It should also mean that you are masters of the written word, and especially the spoken word. Educators or preachers—it is the same. We are designated custodians of our language, be it English or Korean, Thai, or Twi.

Speaking of using language, President Bush got back at the critics of his tendency to mangle the English language in his May 2001 commencement address at Yale when he said, "Everything I know about the spoken word, I learned right here at Yale." Well, we faculty members don't want to claim that you learned everything you know about teaching or preaching here at Union-PSCE, but we hope you have learned a whole lot. Here is a smidgen more on the subject of mastery of the spoken word.

All of us American Protestants, especially those in the Calvinist stream, are heirs of the Puritan tradition. For the New England Puritans, the sermon was a wonderfully successful medium of public discourse. It aimed to bring right doctrine to bear on people's lives in an everyday, practical way. It was the beginning of the great flood of spoken words that have always washed over American public life, the forerunner of the typical genres of public speech today: the contemporary sermon, the political speech on the stump, the commencement address. Puritan sermons were not elegant, literary works. The Puritans developed a "plain style" of preaching, so that the sermon might persuade even the simplest sinner to apply scripture to life. John Cotton defended this style in 1642: "Swelling words of humane wisdom make mens preaching seeme to Christ (as it were) a blubber-lipt ministry." He referred preachers to Jesus' own way of speaking to people. He had spoken "in their own English as we say. . . . He lets fly poynt blank."<sup>1</sup>

The American sermon, as given shape in New England, was a central medium for community building. As the former Librarian of Congress, Daniel J. Boorstin, says in his book, *The Americans: The Colonial Experience*, "It was. . . the orthodox manifesto and self-criticism of the community as a whole, a kind of reiterated declaration of independence, a continual rediscovery of purposes." It took place in a meetinghouse that, like the synagogue upon which it was modeled, was seen primarily as a place of instruction. Teaching and preaching belonged together there, just as they continue to do here at Union-PSCE. Attendance at meeting was required by law in Puritan New England—and that meant two sermons on Sunday and one on Thursday, in unheated meetinghouses with hard benches. Attendance was often compulsory in early Anglican Virginia, as well. At Christ Church parish in Lancaster County, the person who cut church too often could be fined five shillings or fifty pounds of tobacco. Non-payment

was punishable by up to ten lashes.

Sermons were taken on the road, too. Public events almost always included a sermon that commented upon the occasion and provided it with religious meaning—much in the way the prophets of the Old Testament disclosed the meaning of events like conquest, exile, and restoration. There were Thanksgiving Day sermons, artillery sermons, delivered when the militia was mustered, election day sermons, and—continuing an old English custom—sermons delivered at hangings. Boorstin recounts the eyewitness record of the execution of murderer James Morgan in Boston in 1686. Such care was taken for his soul that before the event three sermons were preached: two hour-long ones on the Sabbath by Cotton Mather and Joshua Moody respectively, and one at the gallows itself by Increase Mather. Then Morgan played his own part in the public ritual. Standing before the gallows and looking at his own coffin, the sinner himself preached a short sermon that began: “I beg of God, as I am a dying man, and to appear before the Lord in a few minutes, that you take notice of what I say to you. Have a care of drunkenness, and ill company, and mind all good instruction; and don’t turn your back on the word of God, as I have done.”<sup>2</sup>

Enough history. Let’s have no nostalgia for those good old days. They weren’t all that good, even for teachers and preachers. Fashions change. Hour long sermons, jeremiads, and other such tirades, are out—gone the way of frilly clerical collars and the shaking of jowls. Secularization of public life, new forms of pedagogy, liturgical renewal, women preachers, and other such excellent innovations have swept over us. But the spoken word remains central in both church and state. Absolutely central. And you preachers and teachers are professionally charged to be masters and doctors of it!

God has put an incredibly powerful thing in our mouths. Here’s what the spoken word can do. With exquisite precision it can inform people of the facts of a case, that is, the truth. With deep and moving pathos, it can bring people face-to-face with their deepest emotions, even their own mortality. Language can guide and nurture, ennoble and persuade. These powers can be abused of course. We all know about demagoguery and disinformation, inflammatory rhetoric, oratorical puffery, and thespian bombast. (You know it when you hear it, right?) But the possibility that the spoken word might be used illegitimately is no reason not to cultivate its power for good.

Rich, evocative language is a way you can show both respect and humility in your classroom and in your congregation. People are looking for inspiration rooted both in beauty and in ideas. What great ideas we have to talk about, too—the ideas of the Bible and of theology: God, Incarnation, resurrection, justice, loyalty, and care for the wretched of the earth. Language that satisfies both of these needs for beauty and for ideas is language spoken in love. The medium of a message that is both beautiful and humane ought to be winsome, humane language. That doesn’t mean monosyllables, either, though I suspect its basic platform will be our core Germanic English rather than the Latinate overlay bequeathed to us by William the Conqueror and company. That is the legacy of the “plain style” of our Calvinistic ancestors. As the preface to the first book ever printed in America, *The Bay Psalm Book* of 1640, put it, “God’s Altar needs not our pollishings.”<sup>3</sup>

Now here are three things that can get in our way when we try to exercise our custodianship of language to the fullest. First, we can fail to use the full canon. I mean the canon of scripture, of course, for starters. “Opening” the scriptures doesn’t mean opening just John 3:16, 1 Corinthians 13, Genesis 1, the Ten Commandments, the

Beatitudes, or a short list of other favorite passages. It means using all of scripture, not one word of which is devoid of meaning and power. At the heart of winsome, humane use of language is an abhorrence of cliché, that repetition of tired slogans. Using the full canon of scripture helps a person move away from repeating what everyone expected to hear from us toward the fresh light and truth that await their release from the Word of God.

And I also mean the full canon of our literature, be it Western or Eastern, African or Korean. None of us knows it all, of course, but constant omnivorous reading is our job and our joy. If you never could get through *Moby Dick* in school, try listening to it on tape when you are driving. That's what I finally did. (Of course I was driving all the way to Chicago. Don't get too absorbed in it, by the way—you'll get a ticket!)

And I also mean the full canon of natural science and nature itself, learnings about the evolution of fish, the behavior of bees, the songs of birds, learnings you get from the writings of Stephen Jay Gould or Holmes Rolston III, or that you get on your own as you hike along the Blue Ridge. TV is *not* the full canon, my friends, nor is your domestic life. When I heard a chapel speaker at another seminary say, "And then I rolled over in bed and said to Ashley. . .," I knew I didn't want to go there with him. Surely he could have carried us farther afield in life and in imagination than that!

So, use the full canon of scripture, culture, and nature.

A second threat to our faithful stewardship of the spoken word is pomposity. One generation's idea about this differs from another's. The classic Southern Orators now sound a bit stuffy to our ears. Even in his own day the quintessential American orator, William Jennings Bryan, was faulted for phrases more ringing than right. They called him "the Boy Orator of the Platte," and in Nebraska they added, "Like the Platte, a mile wide and an inch deep at the mouth." Of course, pompous prolixity can be used to good effect. Spiro Agnew famously used it that way when he spoke of "nattering nabobs of negativity." I once heard William Sloane Coffin use it in a Parents' Day sermon at the Yale chapel. He took as his text a long Old Testament genealogy, reading from the King James Version. After an interminable list of "Begats," he shut the book and said to the parents words to this effect: "And you begat these hairy men." These examples of stuffy language intentionally used compare very favorably with the unintentional but nevertheless pathetic piece of pomposity I once heard at a British college chapel. A young theological student said, "As our Lord and Savior was trying to say, and I partially agree . . ."

So, avoid pomposity. Try not to shake your jowls.

A third challenge to our mastery of the spoken word comes from the realm of plain old grammar. A recent issue of *Harper's Magazine* contains a delightful article called, "Tense Present. Democracy, English, and the Wars over Usage," by the novelist David Foster Wallace.<sup>4</sup> Wallace makes clear that a lot of grammar is up for grabs these days. He divides current guides to English usage into the works of Prescriptionists and Descriptionists. The former have prescriptions for bad English; you know, grammatical rules! Grammatical errors in lectures and sermons strike the ears of Prescriptionists like someone pounding nails with a Stradivarius. Descriptionists, on the other hand, go with the flow, very democratically. Hey, they say, *whatsoever* is right. Our job is to describe what people do, not tell them what to do. When a famous and rich athlete said to a flight attendant who tried to get him to buckle up, "Superman don't need no seatbelt," he was right, according to a Descriptionist. That is the way he would say it.

In that context she was also right to say, “Superman don’t need no airplane, either.” (That is a true story, by the way. He buckled up.) Say the Descriptionists, “Spoken language is the language. . . correctness rests on usage. . . all usage is relative.”<sup>5</sup>

I wouldn’t push my luck on that one in classroom or pulpit. Too many old English teachers are hanging around, and other similar sticklers. Fashions of grammar change, I know. I hear that split infinitives are okay now, and ending a sentence with a preposition is increasingly acceptable. It’s where it’s at! But for pity’s sake, remember that the man the Good Samaritan found was lying in the ditch, not laying in it. Only hens lay in ditches, and what they lay there is eggs. You don’t want to do that, do you?

So, get it right grammatically.

Here is how it ought to go, then. Have fun with your language and with your class or your congregation. With discretion use alliteration, rhyme, and cadence. Pick your words for their vividness and emotive impact. Make it sing. That doesn’t mean that you overload your rhetoric with frills and filigrees. Just freight the phrases—think of Abraham Lincoln. Better yet, think of scripture. Think of the powerful, emotive, spare, utterly sincere, and truthful words of the Prophet Micah that you picked for this commencement program. These words are rightly called the Golden Text of the Old Testament: “He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8).

Engage yourselves fully with words like that. You’ve a story to tell to the nations! It has form, it has style, above all, it has content, and it is spoken out in plain, passionate words like these: “At the name of Jesus every knee should bend . . . and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord” (Phil. 2:10-11). As custodians of the language that will best convey God’s truth, plainly and rightly opened in the church, our job is to be not hearers of the word only, but also speakers of it. To the extent that we speak it so clearly and so beautifully and so vividly that people are moved to belief and praise, then may God Almighty also deem us doers of it (James 1:22)!

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Quoted by Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Americans: The Colonial Experience* (New York: Random House, 1958), 11.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 14.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 11.

<sup>4</sup> David Foster Wallace, “Tense Present. Democracy, English, and the Wars over Usage,” *Harper’s Magazine* 302/1811 (April, 2001) 39-58.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 45.