

What Makes a “Good Sermon” Good? A Perspective from a Presbyterian Pew

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I’ve been thinking about how the experience of listening to a sermon is like listening to commentary of a tour leader. Let’s imagine that a group of people is traveling together and that you are leading our tour, sitting at the front of the bus talking to the rest of us. Your fellow travelers may be in a place we’ve never been before. Perhaps some came with friends who invited them to come. Perhaps some were traveling rather aimlessly and just ended up here. Perhaps some had heard about this place and were curious about coming here. For whatever reasons we’ve come, we are expectant about knowing more about this place and experiencing it for ourselves.

On the other hand, some may be travelers already familiar with the place, wishing to experience it with new eyes. Once when my children were younger, my husband and I pretended with our children that we were visitors to our own city for a weekend, staying in a hotel downtown and taking a city tour. We had a delightful time, and by the time the weekend ended, we had gained a broader understanding of our city because we had experienced it with new eyes.

As travelers we can see new things. We can see old things in new ways, and we can see new things in old ways. We can see new things in new ways, or we can see hardly anything at all. Many of us will be together for quite a while; others of us will be on the bus only for the day or for a few days. The tour leader isn’t the bus driver, and sometimes is challenged to respond to unexpected developments.

What makes the difference in how we experience travel? Certainly the traveler contributes some to the equation, but a tour leader can make a great deal of difference. If a tour leader is skilled, the place will come alive in new ways. When I travel, I want to have an excellent tour leader to help me get the most out of my trip. I want a leader who wants the travelers to experience the locale as fully as possible. I want a leader who will explain the background and history as it pertains to what we are experiencing. I want a leader to share with us a deep love of this place, some personal experiences of living here, and a delight in sharing all of it with us.

Where are we? Where is this place? It has gone by many names over the centuries. Jesus called it the Kingdom of God or the Kingdom of Heaven or just the Kingdom. Recently some prefer to call it the Realm of God or the Place Where God Reigns. For now let’s just call it the Kingdom.

Knowing your territory is your first qualification as a tour leader. This knowledge falls in several categories. There is knowledge about the territory, its history, its contours, its characteristics that can be learned by reading and engagement with the research of others. There is also knowledge of the territory that is gained only by experiencing it personally and directly over time. Neither of these kinds of knowledge can substitute for the other. ‘Knowledge about’ without ‘knowledge of’ is sterile. ‘Knowledge of’ without ‘knowledge about’ is unreliable. A tour leader’s experience of living in the place is invaluable for making commentary credible. It may be a cliché, but I think it is true that one cannot lead others to where one has not been personally.

Behind your leadership is your experience of the Kingdom, augmented by your study about the Kingdom. A good sermon reflects knowledge that is growing, deepening, and expanding on both fronts.

Like a tour leader's commentary, a sermon is oral. Although you may write out your sermons in advance and pour thoughtfully over every word, what we hear is what you say at the speed at which you say it. Some of us can't listen very fast. This means that ideas can't be too dense, but need to be explored in ways that allow hearers enough time to grasp the concepts. While readers of a scholarly paper can pause and ponder one idea before going on to the next, hearers don't have that luxury. Some of us don't remember very well either. A good sermon provides memory hooks that help us remember and uses a structure that is easy to follow and understand. It uses stories effectively to illustrate key ideas and give hearers time to absorb the concepts being shared; it will be rich in imagery, painting verbal pictures that will come alive in the hearer's imagination. It will have one or two key ideas that linger because they are imbedded in enough context to make them come alive and stick around: one preacher I know has a personal goal of being able to state in one sentence his objectives for any given sermon. Key ideas may be explored from different perspectives; they may be repeated; they may be restated as part of the closing. A good sermon may be, for instance, one extended story that unpacks and explains a biblical story along the way.

A good leader tells the truth. Commentary is credible only when it rings true. The truth spoken must be the truth lived. If there is a discontinuity between what is proclaimed in public and what is lived in private, the message will lack power and will fall flat. I understand that Corrie Ten Boom, as she traveled worldwide, always insisted that her translators be Christians. She believed it was more than a matter of words, that only another Christian could convey her meaning. I experienced this for myself once when I was traveling in Europe. Our guide, who was not a Christian, essentially read to us out of a guidebook about the churches we visited. We learned about art and architecture, but nothing about the passionate faith that had inspired them. The places I visited remain museums to me, the information I learned is trivial in nature; it did not point to a reality beyond itself. This was so, at least in part, because it did not point to anything meaningful in the life of our guide.

It isn't enough just to say something is true. In our complex, multi-cultural environment there are many voices making all sorts of claims. We are bombarded with advertisements clamoring for our attention. There are talk shows galore; our culture is saturated with media messages of all kinds. We encounter noisy voices, quiet voices, calm voices, angry voices, and even violent voices. There are voices that seem reasonable and ones that seem unreasonable. How do we decide which voices to believe? We are more likely to believe what is said when we sense a congruity between what is being said and what is lived. It is the truth lived that will draw others to Christ. Thus I believe that the incarnation will be a key concept for evangelism in the twenty-first century.

The message must be honest about ambiguity and mystery as well. I am suspicious of those who either claim or infer that they have all the answers. I want to listen to those who will share with me their honest struggles to live a faithful, biblically informed life. I believe God's truth is singular, but our best efforts to understand that truth are always limited. It is important to me that truth be shared both with authority and with humility. The history of travelers in the Kingdom shows that our understanding of the Kingdom

has varied over the centuries, from place to place and from culture to culture. In every generation and in every place, God's truth is experienced incarnationally because we only experience life in our own time and in our own place. We might wish we could transcend our finiteness, we might ignore our finiteness, but it does not change the fact that we are limited. We are in fact human, and humility serves us well.

Spiritual truth is also full of paradox. A good sermon tells us it is "okay" if we don't know all about God and how the Kingdom works; it invites us to know and experience God directly, to trust and explore mystery. What begins in the sermon may lead to further reflection and an openness to the transformational work of the Spirit. A good sermon encourages Kingdom travelers not to be passive, but to get off the bus, get out of the pew, during the week to explore and live in the Kingdom for themselves. A good sermon invites us to explore mystery, to grow into God, and to embark upon or continue the spiritual journey.

As we journey together and you are our leader, please share with us the old, old stories. Help us understand the context of these stories. Help us get the lay of the land and see how what *was* can shed light on what *is*. I want to see through your eyes and learn from you how things work in the Kingdom, this place of the Spirit. As we look out of the window we need your help to understand what we're seeing. For example, we might journey through the Exodus where you would draw parallels between this biblical journey and our current journeys. In the Exodus, people were learning about who God is, what God values, and what God expects of us. They were stiff-necked people, yet they were slowly learning to obey and to trust. We too are still learning those lessons for ourselves in our own journeys.

I would ask you to think about your goals for your commentary. Do you want to keep your travelers entertained? Do you want to give them useful information? Are you giving them tools and insights to transform their lives? Do you want to equip them for independent travel? Is it a combination of these? Does it vary from sermon to sermon? As a traveler, I want you to help us get the most out of our traveling experience, enabling us to understand our experience in the context of the Kingdom. I want you to draw us in so that we will want to spend more time there, to learn more, to experience more, and even to live there permanently. If you draw us in, we will absorb the ethos of the place and heighten our attentiveness to the ways of the Spirit.

Over and over again Jesus told stories beginning with "the kingdom is like..." He was trying to get his listeners to understand something about an invisible reality. The Gospel of John begins, "In the beginning was the Word..." As I have pondered the meaning of this beginning, I have sensed that "Word" implies relationship, for what is a word without a speaker and hearer? Since the Word was with God before creation, I conclude that relationships also existed with God before creation. I used to think, without really thinking, that the visible world was a given with the invisible world somehow overlaying it. Considering the invisible world was like moving from a three dimensional space of length, width, and height to a four dimensional space of the first three plus time. I've come to believe that this understanding is completely upside down, that the fundamental reality is the invisible, spiritual, relational one. You, our preacher as tour leader, can be a facilitator helping us see with the eyes of the heart the contours of this invisible world. I invite you to share your own insights, what you have learned, how you understand what others have learned.

You will have different strategies at different times. Sometimes your message will

be challenging, other times comforting. You will help us face a truth or reveal a truth. You will help us let go of things that hinder. You will ask thoughtful questions. You will present ideas that will take on a life of their own in our thinking. We will find that as we sit under your tutelage we are increasingly sensitive to the nudgings of the Spirit. We will cultivate attentiveness and discernment. We will become more and more knowledgeable about the Kingdom. You will encourage us to work for the Kingdom, and in doing that work, perhaps some of us will be guided to become tour leaders ourselves.