

One New Book for the Preacher

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Ann Morisy, *Journeying Out*. London/New York:Continuum, 2004.

“There is nothing new under the sun,” the author of Ecclesiastes says (Ecc. 1:9). However, I always find it refreshing to encounter new descriptive language for enduring concepts. Spring-boarding from David Bosch’s 1991 *Transforming Mission*, Ann Morisy gives new urgency and fresh language to the church’s need for an engaged holistic spirituality that includes social action as an essential component of mission. Perhaps it is because she is a Brit that I found her prophetic pounding and prodding so refreshing and not directly threatening (After all, she’s probably talking to her people, not to us); or perhaps it is because she uses jargon either specific to sociology or to Great Britain that makes her points intriguing. (She includes a glossary at the back of the book to help the reader stay in the conversation.) At any rate, I’ve already quoted her twice in sermons and feel a good retreat topic could be eliciting from another point she makes in her book.

Morisy notes early on:

We (Christians) have been seduced into believing that we can organize our lives around the pursuit of pleasure and leisure. We are the first generation in human history where this fantasy dominates to the extent that we assume that easy living is the norm. Thus we fail to recognize that for 99 percent of human history, and for two-thirds of the world’s population, *struggle* is an essential motif. Yet the very notion of discipleship implies struggle; the notion that the world is in travail as it reaches for the fulfillment that God has promised also implies struggle. The avoidance of struggle has profound repercussions for our spirituality and theological understanding, for the hope of the Kingdom of God on this earth.... Given this centrality of struggle, our churches have a pastoral responsibility to provide structures that enable people to engage the struggle, or to use another code, to express the *venturesome love* that Karl Rahner suggests is at the heart of discipleship. (p. 37)

This is Morisy at her prophetic apogee, calling the church to task for opting for pleasure and leisure instead of entering the struggle of the people around us.

Her chapter on “The Suburban Challenge” is a stinging critique of suburban Christianity which has established its daily agendas around “undisturbed convenience,” as if living in a “play-pen,” where life is safe, secure, and pleasurable. Suggesting that the suburban church has taken “the Cross” out of life, she challenges suburban Christians to step out in venturesome love and risk being without power and becoming overwhelmed as we make ourselves open to the helplessness and failure of the other’s struggle. She suggests doing this by reaching out to *the other* in ways of concern and kindness, but also by opening ourselves to *the other* in ways of radical

hospitality. And while I might find this offensive as I work in the “bull’s eye of poverty” in downtown Durham, NC, but live in the relative security of the suburbs, I found Morisy’s critique and exhortation to mission as convicting and as motivating as any of William Wallace’s clarion calls to action in *Braveheart*.

A second point she makes with equally passionate conviction concerns what she calls the explicit domain of the church, the power of our worship, churchmanship (her word) and denominational culture. She makes a stunning observation about our use of *high symbols*, words, metaphors, and depictions that “allude to the sacred, and signify *the more* in life that is only partially knowable and point to the mystery of life” (p. 145). For those of us who are daily surrounded by crosses, alpha and omegas, grapes and chalices, loaves and fishes, beehives and harps, we overlook sometimes the power of those symbols to transport people to another realm. Morisy alerts us to the latent power within these symbols to “lift our eyes and sense the holy or to recognize the felt presence of God that is potentially ours.” She encourages believers to “attend to the challenge of helping people to have confidence in their *inkling* (another great British term; think C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkein, *The Eagle and Child*) that we do not live by bread alone and that there is more to life than meets the eye” (p. 145).

Another source of venturesome love Morisy encourages the church to consider is through “apt liturgy.” She defines apt liturgy as “including people with little faith and Christian knowledge and often focusing upon a particular distress that has arisen within a community” (glossary). It is liturgy that “does not require people to cross the threshold of the church,” she explains. It is liturgy that is specifically “about wide accessibility, usually engaging with people who are having to deal with hard emotions” (p. 156). I understood this to mean taking liturgy to the people and meeting them where they are, instead of requiring that they become theologically savvy and come to the church.

We clergy participate in apt liturgy most frequently when conducting weddings or funerals, although those events may take place in the church. But churches might make inroads into the wider culture with apt liturgy at the site of a tragic fire or upon the occasion of an unnecessary death or while waiting for words of rescue of survivors from an accident. These are times when the church could be building bridges to link people with abiding or eternal constructs, Morisy says.

“When the going gets tough people know their need for God” (p. 159), she notes. Using apt liturgy, the church is able to identify occasions where Jesus and His stories meet our stories and resonate with the people’s struggles.

All of these topics will preach—and there are more. A good retreat topic could be fashioned from her characterization of the “third age” of life: the time after age one, socialization, and age two, household generativity (p. 79). This third age is comprised of the healthy years between child-rearing and physical decline, the wonderfully productive age where many of our church members find themselves. The church needs to help them find *telos*/purpose beyond pleasure seeking and taking it easy, she says. Great book! Nothing new – but newly engaging!