

Protagonist Corner

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What do people remember about your sermons? Now, be honest. Is it the careful and methodical laying out of theology and logical argumentation? Or, by chance, do you frequently hear someone say, “I loved that story you told about...” OK. Maybe, you have had brilliant moments in which you made the doctrine of The Trinity understandable. Or, your persuasive invitations to observe Lent brought about enthusiastic expressions of gratitude for your oratory. But, really, on an ongoing basis, what do people tell you they remember?

My father was a Presbyterian minister, and I remember hearing frequent compliments on the “illustrations” he would include in his sermons. My preaching professors in seminary, Wade Huie and Harry Beverly, reminded us regularly of the power of a good illustration to bring a message home. That’s what we called them then: illustrations.

What is it about an illustration, or story, that holds people’s attention and remains in their memory? Well, there seem to be several factors. As our first linguistic experiences took shape, we (most of us) had the privilege of hearing stories “told” or read to us. Stories expanded our horizons. Some of them puzzled us. Some of them amused us. Some of them frightened us. Some of them gave us cautionary wisdom about how to survive in the wider world. They educated us, gave us principles to live by. In short, they were our first introduction to extended (and organized) thought and the development of character. Logical argumentation came later—much later. So, when we tell a story in a sermon, we are tapping into the earliest, and probably most influential, forms of learning that our listeners (and we, ourselves) experienced.

Our first “learnings,” then, usually came to us by way of our ears. And here is the obvious connection with sermons. Sermons, like many stories, also are aimed first at the ears, not the eyes. And, we would do well to remember what helped us retain what we heard. If we are reading something and lose track, we can look back. Not so when we are listening. The “art” of communicating well to the ears involves the use of the same techniques that made stories we heard as children memorable. Notice the words attributed to Jesus. They are usually short, often a story or parable, and to the point, with simple language structure. By way of comparison, look at the words attributed to the apostle Paul. His discourses are often drawn out, carefully argued, and can be complicated. But remember, Paul’s words, for the most part, are letters—for the eyes, to be read! If you want better odds on holding your listeners’ attention when preaching, go for the Jesus approach rather than the Pauline one! Or, if going for the Pauline approach, carefully construct what you say! So, aim at the ears; keep things simple in terms of linguistic structure (not simplistic in terms of thought). And remember your own earliest sense of being captivated by what was being said to you.

Now, mind you, even though I consider myself a storyteller, this does not mean I am recommending that sermons primarily should become stories. But the structure of stories is something for us to keep in mind when we are “building” a sermon. In

addition to Jesus' obvious appreciation for the power of story, there is further scriptural warrant for it. As Agnes Norfleet observed in a sermon on "David and Nathan," when Nathan confronted David with his sin(s), he did not choose direct accusation or argument. Rather, he told a story. Why? Because, as Norfleet observes, when listening to a story, we often are prone to become intrigued enough to drop our defenses. Thus, the story "gets through" in a way that more direct language might not.¹

There is a whole body of literature out there on the art of storytelling. The work of Robert Bela Wilhelm² is an excellent example. Here are a couple of hints. When a story is being told, seldom are there more than two characters "on stage" at a time. The structure is such that we are, in effect, looking back and forth between them, like watching a tennis match. When one character leaves the stage, another can come on. The same can be said of ideas being presented. Don't confuse the listener by having more than two perspectives or arguments "up front" at a time. Others can be introduced, but when doing so, have one "character" "exit" before the other "enters."

A second thing to keep in mind is the importance of repetition. When we read, as noted earlier, if we get a bit lost or can't remember something, we thumb back (or, in our day, click back) and re-read. There's no chance for that when listening. So it becomes the responsibility of the speaker/preacher (or, in storytelling, the teller) to use devices/reminders of where we have been so that the listener can stay with us instead of trying to remember how we got there.

Certainly, many people have been trained to listen to the development of an argument or a presentation. That's what we were trained to do in seminary and other forms of higher education. But it's important for us to remember that not everyone in the pews has had to learn that discipline. Sometimes, when we don't see action or response to our sermons, it isn't because we failed in terms of our intent or even our persuasive vocabulary. Rather it may just be that we failed to use age-old means to keep our listeners listening!

It's not crucial to always have a good story or illustration somewhere in our sermons, although that does improve the odds of holding on to those folks in the pews. It is important, however, in our "non-illustrative" preaching to keep the principles of storytelling in mind to make our thinking more accessible to our hearers.

Of course, I should tell you a story now to bring my point home, but alas, my editor hasn't allowed me enough space to do so. Besides, you're not listening to me. You're reading, right?

Notes

1 Agnes Norfleet, "David and Nathan," preached at Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church, July 19, 2015.

2 Robert Bela Wilhelm, *How to Tell Sacred Stories*, e-book, www.sacredstorytelling.org.