

The Gospel According to TED: Preaching after “Ideas Worth Spreading”

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I am a glutton for the spoken word. My cravings are satisfied best by news, lectures, talk shows, storytelling, poetry, and sermons, all prepared medium well to well done. In the pulpit I try to manage my habit, although stories from “The Moth” and “This American Life,” and now TED, inevitably sneak up.

A few years ago, a friend sent me a link to Brené Brown’s TED talk on vulnerability,¹ introducing me to the cross-disciplinary cuisine of speakers with “ideas worth spreading,” and I’ve been feasting ever since. Recorded talks before live audience from poets, presidents, a sociologist who accompanied sanitation workers, a photographer who depicted a repentant warlord, a brain scientist describing her own stroke, a lawyer advocating for social justice in Alabama criminal courts, a fashion model explaining why looks aren’t everything—all are available for free on the TED website or as podcasts. I can watch at my desk or on television or listen in my car or at my kitchen sink. While I began watching TED talks for personal enjoyment, the approach to speaking began to infiltrate my preaching, to the point that for me TED has become a new pantry of resources for my approach to homiletics.

TED began in 1984 as a conference featuring innovations in technology, entertainment, and design (TED) but has grown into a series of filmed lectures, a platform for a wide array of thinkers and activists to share their most innovative ideas worth spreading. Speakers have around eighteen minutes to combine stories, experiences, images, facts, insight, and humor and thus persuade their audience. Talks appeared online for free in 2006, and a November 12, 2014 TEDBlog post announced one billion views, at a rate of potentially 1.5 million times a day. Many videos are available in more than forty languages. These statistics suggest not that TED is the sliced bread of spoken word nor a preacher’s panacea, but that people are hungry for words that speak to their minds and hearts, and they will keep watching and listening if they are fed. In other words, pay attention, preacher!

While they feature Billy Graham, Rick Warren, and James Forbes, as well as a host of other religious scholars and philosophers, TED talks are not sermons *per se*. More often, speakers function as secular evangelists for a particular cause or community, blending personal testimony, persuasion, and expertise for the sake of individual and social transformation. Despite critique that the TED format is too controlled or the audience too elite, the web site provides access to diverse speakers and topics and elicits comments from around the world, including developing nations. Talks are packaged for easy online streaming, podcasting, linking, and sharing, as their voices go into the world and make followers of all kinds of people.

While they have neither central texts nor a focused faith community, effective TED speakers blend ideas and lived experience, research with testimony, spoken words with an embodied word, all for the sake of hope, change, or a call to action. They pay careful attention to their choice of words and images as well as to how they speak and move, all for the sake of calling the audience to act or hope anew. I

find the rhetorical approaches in the TED examples to be effective yet distinct from the homiletical approaches I learned, nevertheless offering practical application for preaching. Given the breadth of TED material, however, this article is simply a teaser, ending in a list of a few talks for starters. Like a restaurant review, may it whet preachers' appetites enough that they have to taste it for themselves.

Preachers' most significant learning from TED will come with attention to how speakers craft, embody, and visually reinforce their words and stories. The most powerful TED speakers assume directness. The tone of the talk is informal but polished, and the choice of content assumes the audience has critical thinking skills and knowledge of social issues. Despite the range and depth of their expertise, speakers choose words assuming a lay audience. They use jargon sparingly, and if so, only for the sake of moving the audience in a desired direction. Amy Cuddy, a business school psychologist, describes the effect of "power positions," or the body postures and movements that give a person confidence and authority in a stressful situation. She explains the academic phrase "non-verbals" in a simple, unthreatening manner, noting that in her profession, that's the term for unspoken communication.² Another well watched speaker, Simon Sinek, uses "limbic system" to describe why the message of influential leaders connects with a deeper, non-linguistic level in human brains. He also uses a simple diagram and translates it into everyday terms, describing the limbic system as how people know what feels right, even when they can't explain it in words.³ These two speakers, among many others, model how to use words that may at first seem foreign or off-putting to sermon listeners, particularly those new to faith (think *repentance* or *salvation*). Recognizing potential lingo, or "churchy words" as one of my congregants calls them, preachers may observe as others translate without insulting a hearer's intelligence or choosing to forgo a crucial term.

Other than word selection, the craft grows out of how speakers give testimony. The most effective talks provide data, whether in the form of statistics, facts, research, or anecdotes, but for the persons speaking, the data is so compelling that they must tell how it has affected them, almost always for the sake of hope for the future, growth of mind or spirit, or a call to action. In her first TED talk, referenced above and as of the date of this writing viewed over sixteen million times, researcher/storyteller Brené Brown combines insight and humor to show how her study of what helps people live with a sense of worthiness, love, and belonging revealed the significance of personal vulnerability. This finding sends her into a personal breakdown as she realizes that research, all for the sake of controlling and predicting, points to the importance of giving up the need to control. The point of her talk moves to "this is what I learned." Some preachers may hear Brown interjecting too much of her own story, but in fact, as she tells her story, she enacts the vulnerability that is her idea worth spreading. In fact, her message is not too far from a Christian teaching, that choosing to be appropriately vulnerable, real, and human leads to fullness of life.

Another of my favorite TED talkers, Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, tells of the danger of a single story when it comes to a particular people or culture by telling significant parts of her own story.⁴ She demonstrates the effects of a dearth of Nigerian stories, describing how she wrote childhood stories based on British literature full of people talking about the weather and eating apples, although in her culture people rarely discussed the weather and ate mangoes. Also with humor and insight, she relays both the misguided assumptions of her American college roommate about

people from Africa as well as her own suppositions about natives of Mexico, based on the monolithic stories of poverty and need told in the media. With her signature bent and sensitivity, Adichie weaves her own multiple stories, such as describing a young man who worked in her childhood home, whom she knew only as poor until she visited him in his own home and saw the beauty of the baskets made by his hardworking family. Telling her own stories, she demonstrates not only the danger of a single story, but the beauty that emerges in a multiplicity of stories, some still waiting to be told. Although she tells her own stories, she is never the heroine, but rather a vessel for the transformation of the audience as she describes her own transformation.

TED speakers remain vessels in the ways they move on stage and project their personae. On stage, they are generally bathed by spotlights and clothed in neat but understated street clothes, while the floor around them is dark and spare, a simple curtain or projection screen or a few well-placed props in the background. Although the format is clearly a lecture, speakers rarely use podiums or lecterns, and most speak without notes. Effective speakers move naturally and with intention. Some remain still, as Adichie does, but others use their body movement to express their message. Fashion model Cameron Russell arrives on camera in a slinky black dress and heels but wraps a skirt around and steps into comfortable shoes to make her point that how we look makes a difference in how we are perceived, and so much of how models look is pure artifice.⁵

My favorite example of the power of a speaker's embodying his words comes from conductor Benjamin Zander, who persuades his audience that everyone can love and understand classical music.⁶ Playing the piano, he demonstrates the evolution of a person's musicianship from hesitant choppiness to nuanced phrases, as he ends leaning on his right side. He calls this "one buttock" playing. "The music pushed me over," he says, as the audience has clearly seen and heard. Zander's personal excitement about his music and message pours out into the pacing and intonation of his speech. His facial expressions and energetic movement at the piano and among the audience communicate his good news. Classical music is simply exciting, even when he plays Chopin's poignant "Prelude in E Minor." The conductor's entire persona stems from his own belief in his message, and the camera panning faces in the audience reveals that his belief becomes contagious. One wonders how preachers might be so infectious.

Many speakers infect their audience with more than words. TED talks also model effective use of images. Visual presentations, called "slide decks" in the tech world, use simple photographs, charts, or mini videos and tend to be short on words and long on impact. More than a PowerPoint outline of a lecture, a powerful slide deck uses a few clear pictures or graphics. The best slides show no more than one sentence or statistic. Social psychologist Jonathan Haidt's lecture describing the different moral roots of liberals and conservatives exemplifies how a few faces or logos can make a point.⁷ Whether or not his premises and conclusions are correct, his slides of Michelangelo's *David* or the blue pill or red pill example from *The Matrix* clarify and reinforce his words on the evolution of moral minds.

In contrast, and deviating from the norm in some terms, Ryan Lobo's photographs enhance the audience's emotional connection to his subjects.⁸ He tells his story using images of a repentant former warlord in Liberia, described as a prolific mass murderer, who now seeks forgiveness from his victims and their relatives. Lobo helps the

audience both to bear the unbearable and to wonder at the possibility of forgiveness in images of a man asking to be pardoned by the surrounding people whose lives he scarred or ruined. Although not intentionally religious, his photographs capture far better than words alone the theological dilemma of asking for mercy.

Watching each of these talks and noting the speakers' relative approaches to storytelling, embodying their messages, and using images, preachers gain a new resource for growing their own styles. Allowing that TED speakers prepare for a single talk rather than a weekly sermon or that they stand on a stage rather than in a chancel or pulpit, preachers may still experience and reflect critically on others who believe they share good news. Those who communicate the Christian gospel may also explore the magnified influence of the social medium in spreading a powerful spoken word, given the number of ways one lecture may be shared. While many individual preachers currently use podcasting, and a few preach weekly on the audio version Day One, imagine what might happen through a web site with links to TED quality preaching videos. Those interested in TED as a preaching resource may set a few guidelines for themselves, including not watching more than two talks in a sitting, ending early if a talk is not interesting after three minutes, and maintaining healthy skepticism regarding any speaker's claim or method of communication. Preachers may then reflect on what was effective about the talk and consider one approach they will incorporate in conveying the Word they preach.

This Advent, or any season in traditional church or beyond, people remain hungry for good news, for good words, for ideas worth spreading. We all crave something more than ideas for words like peace, hope, joy, and love to come to life, for the Word to be made flesh once again. With apologies to the recent lectionary commentary series, we all want to "feast on the Word." As you prepare to feed others with your words, what testimony might you share out of your own experience of light coming into darkness? What will you do to embody the good news of Christ coming, a message so wonderful that it pours forth from your preaching persona? What images or phrases will clarify that message for you and for your hearers? As you prepare, may you be fed by the Spirit at work in all kinds of people with ideas worth sharing. May the Word leave you wanting more.

Notes

1 Brown, Brené, "The Power of Vulnerability," Filmed June 2010, TEDxHouston, 20:19, http://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability.

2 Cuddy, Amy, "Your body language shapes who you are," filmed June 2012, TEDGlobal 2012, 21:02, http://www.ted.com/talks/amy_cuddy_your_body_language_shapes_who_you_are.

3 Sinek, Simon, "How great leaders inspire action," filmed September 2009, TEDxPuget Sound, 18:04, http://www.ted.com/talks/simon_sinek_how_great_leaders_inspire_action.

4 Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi, "The danger of a single story," filmed July 2009, TEDGlobal 2009, 18:49, http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story.

5 Russell, Cameron, "Looks aren't everything, Believe me, I'm a model," filmed October 2012, TEDxMidAtlantic, 9:37, http://www.ted.com/talks/cameron_russell_looks_aren_t_everything_believe_me_i_m_a_model.

6 Zander, Benjamin, "The transformative power of classical music," filmed February 2008, TED2008, 20:43, http://www.ted.com/talks/benjamin_zander_on_music_and_passion.

7 Haidt, Jonathan, "The moral roots of liberals and conservatives," filmed March 2008, TED2008, 18:42, http://www.ted.com/talks/jonathan_haidt_on_the_moral_mind.

8 Lobo, Ryan, "Photographing the hidden story," filmed November 2009, TEDIndia 2009, 11:20, http://www.ted.com/talks/ryan_lobo_through_the_lens_of_compassion.