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Preaching the Word in Good and True Words

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I. WORDS OF ELOQUENCE

> Those with acute and eager minds more readily learn eloquence by reading and hearing the eloquent than by following the rules of eloquence.
>
> —Saint Augustine[1]

When Augustine wrote these words he was thinking back on his early years as an instructor of rhetoric in pagan Rome. He had grown up in a world that lusted after eloquence, learned it in order to advance in society, and lived to hear it in their daily lives. He had imbibed Cicero from his early youth and through him the insights of ancient Greece on how to teach eloquence to young boys. All youths from aristocratic families needed to know eloquence in order to become the leaders they were expected to be in the ancient world. Eloquence was Augustine's profession. His conversion—by the grace of God—finally occurred, he says, after he went as a professional teacher of rhetoric to hear the eloquence of Ambrose of Milan. Though the words of Ambrose were sweet and Augustine marveled at the charm of Ambrose's style, he soon discovered that as he listened to "how *eloquently* he was speaking, it occurred to [him] at the same time [though this idea came gradually] how *truly* he was speaking."[2] Soon, Augustine was no longer marveling at Ambrose's eloquence; he was weeping for his sins.

This story tells us all we need to know about the language of preaching: it needs to be, if not eloquent, at least interesting enough to attract hearers; and then

[1]Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* (Indianapolis: The Library of Liberal Arts, 1959) 119.
[2]Augustine, *The Confessions* (New York: New American Library, 1963) 109. Italics added.

it needs to be true, in order to turn the attention of the hearer from the speaker to the Word and to his or her own heart—a tall order in these days when language is understood, before the fact, to be a debased and adulterate coin. How is the poor preacher, no longer steeped in rhetoric or public speaking, or even the great literature of all time, to compete in this stew of a market place?

The teacher of homiletics knowing what Augustine knew can blame his or her failures on the culture without being far wrong. One teaches eloquence when children are lisping nursery rhymes and fairy tales, stumbling over their memory work in Sunday school, learning Bible verses for later days. The trivium—the enabling arts of grammar, logic, and rhetoric—belongs in the first years of school, not the last. When those syntactic patterns and metaphors are burned into the early synapses of the child's brain, they will be there forever. Now that television is our

chief conveyer of eloquence and the language arts are neglected, we have a new teaching situation before us: how to teach eloquence to students whose education and experience has not given them even the rudiments of the art of eloquence, so that their sermons can be compelling to listen to.

This is Augustine's question: How can a student become an eloquent preacher if she has never heard one? The importance of models is never more clear than when one hears first sermons. The student rises to preach: She stands at the makeshift pulpit, takes a deep breath and suddenly someone, ineluctably herself, but also someone we have not seen before, begins to speak. There, before us, we see her acting out a deep imprint from her childhood. (For her especially we mark that she has not heard many women preachers before, one reason there are currently so many attempts to gather anthologies of women's sermons. All new preachers need models!)

It is from these first attempts that I get the best sense for what the language of preaching is like "out there." Students are the unwitting imitators of preaching today. To judge from this experience, it appears that the language of preaching in the mainline churches is typically not very eloquent, that sermons are rather like lectures, read from a manuscript, including some diffidently related interesting facts about the texts and some nice stories about one's own experience—but without much urgency to speak a word which will save. The idea that one could give life to someone in the pew by what one says goes against the grain of today's relativistic world. To say that Jesus gives life and that I am announcing to you today the forgiveness of sins is to make a claim which offends or shocks many, preachers and hearers alike. Who am I to speak such a word? Who are we to say this gospel is the only way? New preachers give evidence of this fear by lecturing on religion in general, spinning a web of ideas for our contemplation, rather than speaking the direct discourse of God's saving Word. If this is the most exciting thing in the world, it is hard to tell, since it is conveyed so dully.

Into this regrettable situation rushes the educational institution with its usual hubris that it can do what the culture is not doing simply by teaching a few courses in rhetoric, story telling, and mass media. Still, it is necessary to do something, and these are not bad solutions given the current state of education today. Colleges quit teaching public speaking in the '70s, substituting a vague course in communication where students talk about the rhetorical situations involved in public speaking, but rarely do any speaking. Not only do seminaries decide to make up for the failures

of the past with new courses, they frequently are requested to do so by a frustrated constituency. These courses are, however, frequently met by the students with the same disdain as Sally Poker Sash shows in Flannery O'Connor's story "A Late Encounter of the Enemy." When she returns every fall from the state teacher's college where she is required to go every summer to learn how to teach "she always taught in the exact way she had been taught not to teach."[3] It is very difficult to fight years of experience when one tries to teach a skill. People generally teach or preach the way they have seen it done, not the way they were taught to do it.

This is no new discovery. Students of any stripe, homiletics teachers soon discover, will suffer any number of schemes to get them to play with the language and be interesting and then stand up at the end of the course and preach exactly like their pastors preached to them for twenty

years. Augustine is right: you preach the way you were preached to, regardless of the rules you have learned to the contrary. Furthermore, Augustine was right when he noted that eloquent speakers intuitively fulfill the rules of eloquence without thinking at all of them.[4] These rules are habits best learned at an early age.

What then can be done to enrich and enliven the language of preaching? Obviously the first thing to do is to make sure students hear good sermons and understand why they are effective. Serious aspirants to the pulpit should be eager to hear preaching and talk about preaching. They should be given every opportunity to church hop and ingest gobs of sermons, in all kinds of styles, appropriate and inappropriate for their own development. They should be eager consumers of good preaching and speaking, listening even to the stemwinders out on the stump, simply because they can learn something from them. Though the content is frequently thin gruel, the future preacher could benefit by seeing how enthralled people are by good speakers.

Good preachers enjoy the play of language, the discovery of it, the way a toddler loves the discovery of sounds and words and burbles them night and day. The preacher I know best talks constantly to himself before a sermon, mumbling over words, working phrases over and over, almost humming them through the common chores of the day so he can hear how the words will sound when they are being proclaimed from the pulpit Sunday morning. An eloquent preacher is almost always one who chews on words and ideas the way some among us chew on chocolates—with delight and something of a compulsion.

Thus, the aspiring preacher must be a voracious consumer of language. This means that preachers are indeed working when they are reading novels, going to the theater or movies, watching TV, listening in the cafe for how people are constructing their lives out of words. The good preacher will always be fussing with language, listening to it, trying it out, reaching for expressions and metaphors which will get it just right. Without that curiosity about language and life, the preaching will not be *eloquent.* Even more surely, it will not be *true.*

[3]Flannery O'Connor, *The Complete Stories* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1971) 135.
[4]Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine,* 120.

II. WORDS OF TRUTH

> When I came to you, I did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God in lofty words, or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.
>
> —Saint Paul[5]

Though difficult, we know it is possible to instruct people in some techniques which will approach eloquence: sentences can be constructed so they are well made and memorable; students can learn to use images to teach the gospel; and they can tell stories. Learning how to speak "lofty words," as difficult as it seems, is rather technical and simple next to the difficult task of learning to speak the truth. Eloquence in the deep and orotund tones of the stained-glass voice is by itself persuasive, but the old saw about "empty barrels making the best sound" still rings true.

Like Paul, we want the preacher to preach the truth, to speak truly of human life, of the Scripture, of him or herself. Most of all we want the logos of the sermon to be Christ. Much can be forgiven, when the pastor's eloquence leaves something to be desired, if every Sunday we hear a clear word from the pulpit proclaiming Christ. If that clear word is not there, we tend to complain about the preacher's threadbare language or dull delivery. From a formal organizational point of view, if Christ is not at the center of the sermon, it will lack organization, illustration, and passion. Critics will be right to observe what is formally wrong, but will miss, perhaps, that the fundamental problem goes deeper than that. It may well be that the pastor, him or herself, is not able to share that which gives life because they are not clear on the life they have been called to proclaim. No amount of rhetorical facility will help the preacher whose focus on the cross is blurred.

This is self-evident, but it needs reiteration and further discussion and elucidation. It is easiest to think about the parts of a sermon in terms of ancient rhetoric, which divided all discourse into three parts: ethos, logos, and pathos. The ethos of a sermon is revealed by the attitude of the speaker to the subject and the audience. If she cares only about herself, and not the logos (which for Christians is Christ), her speech will be self-congratulatory and self-involved. If the speaker cares only about the logos and not that his congregation be saved by Christ, the sermon will be lost in abstractions. The speaker most interested in the audience (pathos) will neglect both the truth (logos) and the life of the congregation, simply to get the audience to respond. The preacher who is using the skills of eloquence simply to get his people to open their purses is not feeding them. People listening to sermons of this kind frequently become church tramps in search of eloquent thrills, unaware they are hungering for life.

The ancients held that the hearer of any spoken discourse would soon discover many things about the speaker simply by paying attention to these three parts of the speech. Paul, by suppressing his ego, and caring more for the hearer than himself (he decides to know nothing), is telling the Corinthians, who knew their rhetoric, that his logos—Christ—is the persuasive part of his speech. The tricky part is that he is indeed eloquent and passionate, despite his eschewal of such techniques—in fact, he uses rhetorical techniques to denounce rhetoric.

Still, what he tells us is fundamental. After hearing a sermon, we know many

[5]1 Corinthians 2:1-2.

things about the preacher, what she cares most about, and what she has not explicitly stated. All this is part of the event of preaching.

To communicate, however, the speaker needs language. How he chooses that language will have much to do with whether or not he is heard to be preaching truly. We believe one so passionate as Paul because he risks all (even his salvation, Rom 9:3) for the sake of Christ and his kin. How we believe or mistrust the preachers of today has much to do with whether or not it feels to us like they are preaching truly. Frances Christensen, a writing specialist, says somewhere that all communication involves three abilities: seeing, naming, comparing. How the speaker practices these three skills will have much to do with their ability to speak the truth. With these didactic categories in place, we can proceed to a better analysis of the language of the preacher.

A. Seeing

1. Logos. The preacher must learn to see what is there, to think theologically. Seminaries exist to teach students to do that. Martin Luther gives a clear statement of what it means to think theologically in his *Heidelberg Disputations.* A theologian is one "who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross."[6] Being able to see God in suffering, rather than in glory, is the task of the theologian. For this reason seminaries teach students what is at stake in the crucified and risen Lord Jesus. We force the tradition on them, fill them with history and Scripture, oodles of hours in pastoral care, so that they can be changed into theologians, if not by understanding, at least by osmosis. Students are apprentices to this long line of figures who teach them how to see "the visible and manifest things of God through suffering and the cross." What we are teaching is a habit of mind which can use Scripture and the tradition in specific places where they are needed.

Pity the poor student who thinks that she is going to have to preach the Confessions, or biblical criticism, when she gets to the pulpit! One sees this frustration in students of all ages when they, on their way to a pulpit somewhere, are stopped by a body of knowledge which seems to have nothing to do with life out there where the people live. Hence the incredulity of students who are forced to memorize Luther's Small Catechism or the dates and names of every preceding church body. These, among other subjects, are lenses to help the student understand what she is obligated to preach.

In classical terms, the preacher who cannot see as a theologian, whose grasp of the logos is unclear, will not be able to speak Christ to her congregation. She will reveal herself to be a preacher without faith.

2. Ethos. If the preacher cannot see clearly into his own life, or the life of the congregation, and cannot clearly confess Christ, his language will betray him. He could well preach as though it was his preaching that made the difference in the lives of his people. He could think that it is his work causing the congregation to grow and flourish. This preacher is in severe danger of burnout, because he is not feeding on the living water which Christ promises to those who follow.

3. Pathos. Each point of the triangle of rhetoric reveals more about the others. One knows most about a preacher by her care for getting the Word through to the

[6]*Luther's Works* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1957) 31.52.

people. Much in her seminary education can help her care for her people. It will help her to know if her congregation is Augustana Synod or Suomi when she begins her call; it will help her to know the classical topics of theology; it will help her to think back to things she learned about herself in pastoral care so that she can learn to be more assertive, or less domineering, as she does her work caring for the souls who have called her to speak the Word to them.

In addition to knowing the tradition for the sake of the congregation, she also will want to know the congregation itself. How does she imagine them when she prepares her sermon? What, in their time and place, do they need to hear from God' s Word ? If the preacher does not imagine them correctly, the two-edged sword of the Word will seem dull. I once endured a sermon on Easter Sunday in Norway where the preacher excoriated the people who were out skiing in the beautiful spring weather, instead of being in the church listening to him. As he spoke, their

choice seemed the wiser. While he was able to see the theological problem in the culture (people did not come to hear the Word), he quite missed the fact that I and some few others were not playing in the sunshine and that we needed to hear the Word applied to us.

Clarifying who the audience is, for the sake of speaking the gospel to it, is fundamental to good preaching. One Sunday morning last summer, as a preacher was preaching about something that had to do with a need far beyond the church walls, it occurred to me that the preacher, like Mrs. Jellyby in Dickens' novel *Bleak House,* could not see a "need closer than Africa." This preacher seemed not to think that anyone in the congregation she was speaking to had any needs. She gave me the feeling, as she spoke, that we had come to church because we were strong, as opposed to the needy "out there" who were weak. This is not to deny in any way that there are millions of people whose needs are crushing, but I have come to hear the Word spoken to me so I can receive strength to help in whatever way I can.

The sermon is for a specific group at a specific time and place. This is the chief objection a rhetorician would have to the use of an old sermon, or a sermon taken from some other source. It does not have that "for you" quality that pastors are called to pronounce tirelessly to their people. Thus "seeing" the one whom you are bound to proclaim, your own need for him, and the need of those to whom you are proclaiming him is fundamental to the language of the preacher.

B. Naming

1. Logos. Seeing, though good enough for the contemplative, is, however, not enough for the preacher. He needs "to name the name" and find names for what he sees. As Luther says, "A theologian of the cross calls the thing what it actually is."[7] How he names what he sees will also reveal much about his character, the nature of his faith, and his love for the congregation.

Naming needs to be particular and correct. I need to hear from my preacher how I have put other gods before the true God; I need to be told, as David was by the prophet Nathan, "You are the one." Hearing the commandments rarely, I am struck, when I do hear them, by how searching and how specific they are. It is not sin in general they name; it is the specific ways in which I disobey God's Word. I

[7]Ibid., 53.

need to hear my sins and my sin named. As Luther says, the one who does not know Christ does not know God in suffering. Theologians of glory

> prefer works to suffering, glory to the cross, strength to weakness, wisdom to folly, and, in general, good to evil. These are the people whom the apostle calls "enemies of the cross of Christ" (Phil 3:18) for they hate the cross and suffering and love works and the glory of works.[8]

I need the preacher to name my love of works and my hatred of the cross in language I can understand. My delusions need to be named, so I can die to them.

2. Ethos. There is a story about a pastor in the changing border area between Denmark and Germany who, not long after the Reformation, insisted that his congregation learn German in order to hear him preach. History does not record how many troubled themselves to learn the

language for his sake, or whether they thought it worth the effort. Nor does it reveal whether or not he was upbraided by his colleagues for failing to understand a fundamental tenet of the Reformation: that the plough boy and serving girl hear the gospel in their own language. Naming is for the sake of the congregation. Failure here shows one to be caught up in the kind of self-indulgence Emily Dickinson clearly names in her poem:

> He preached upon "breadth" till it argued him narrow,—
> The broad are too broad to define;
> And of "truth" until it proclaimed him a liar,—
> The truth never flaunted a sign.
>
> Simplicity fled from his counterfeit presence
> As gold the pyrites would shun.
> What confusion would cover the innocent Jesus
> To meet so enabled a man![9]

It is possible to determine, as Dickinson so shrewdly does, the preacher's character by the kind of naming she does. The preacher who uses bathroom humor from the pulpit tells far more about himself than the congregation cares to know. Once after a sermon in which we were forced, most unwillingly, to consider the preacher in bed, a colleague of mind noted that few speakers today seemed to realize how much they were revealing about themselves as they spoke. He did not mean that the preacher was ignorant of the fact that he was being revealing of his personal life. The more embarrassing revelation was that the preacher did not realize what a clear picture he gave of his own character when he succumbed to the temptation to speak of it. As Joseph Sittler once said, peering into an audience where a questioner was giving a lecture instead of asking a question, "What is the moral of this report?" Much is revealed about us when we speak, especially our attitude toward ourselves and our audience.

3. Pathos. It is for the congregation, the hearers, that the preacher stays up late at night, mumbles to herself as she drives from hospital to hospital. For their sakes she wants to use the language they can understand. One could accuse preachers of speaking a kind of "German" or Latin to their congregations, even if the pronunciation is in English. Preachers frequently ask me how they can get their congrega-

[8]Ibid.

[9]*Selected Poems and Letters of Emily Dickinson,* ed. Robert N. Linscott (New York: Anchor Books, 1959) 182-183.

tions to listen to their theology as willingly as they listen to their stories. From all we know about cognition, learning, and language, there is no way: people, both intellectuals and non-intellectuals, understand and remember language much longer when it is concrete and sensual. In order to communicate with his people, the preacher needs to be a student of their language for even more urgent reasons than the Japanese merchant has when he answers to the query, Which language is the best for business? "My customer's."

Jesus is our teacher at this point. He rarely used theological jargon in his teaching and

preaching and seemed to prefer images from the life around him to make his point: pearls, coins, seeds, families. So, too, the preacher must be intimately involved with the life of the people she is serving. One can hear in the preacher's choice of words whether or not she makes pastoral calls-whether she cares about her people. The preacher who asked to ride the combine during harvest with a member of her congregation will speak more clearly to her congregation on Sunday because she will have new treasures in her own word hoard that she now shares with her congregation.

C. Comparing

1. Logos. Finally, the preacher needs the poet's gift of comparison—metaphor and simile. This is not so she can reveal what Bishop Erich Pontoppidan, the Dano-Norwegian bishop of Bergen, called her "own heart's poetry,"[10] but so she can announce in clear illustrations how the kingdom of God is breaking in upon us. Her logos is the word and its work among us. Once again Jesus' example is helpful: he taught by showing how something unknown was like that which was known. The parables say very little about him as a person, except that he spoke with authority.

2. Ethos. The story sermon, when it holds up the preacher's family as the example of good Christian living or the pastor as paragon, may be teaching the wrong thing about the Christian life. People may pick up the unintended message that preachers are the ideal Christians, since all the stories are about her or her family. The preacher needs to guard against this carefully and always judge to see what the story is saying about her. On the other hand, those stories, when carefully chosen, might be just exactly right.

There are other very good stories which may be true, but not the gospel truth. The story the preacher tells may be entertaining and well told, but not the right story for that sermon. At this point the ability to see and judge the nature of the story and how it proclaims the gospel will be of great importance in helping the preacher understand how the story is working.

The kind of stories the pastor tells also reveals what kind of language she has been consuming. If all the stories are about sports or quilting, if God is *always* like a mother or father, a grandmother or grandfather, the preacher will show too much about his own experiences and fail to communicate with all of the congregation. The preacher is restless in his search for new and more precise ways of comparing the Kingdom of God, which we cannot see, to that which we can.

3. Pathos. The metaphorical habit of mind is at the heart of good preaching because it is done for the sake of preaching the gospel to the people. As one student

[10]Erich Pontoppidan, *Første Opvækkelig Hyrde-Breve aarlig forsendte til Præsteskabet i Bergens Stifti, 20 January 1749* (Christiania, 1827) 13.

remarked to me after his internship, "It was the weekly preparation of the sermon that made me into a preacher. I spent every waking hour trying to find comparisons in my daily life which I could use." Time was transformed as he ransacked his experience and brought the text to everything that happened during the week so he could use it to give life to his congregation, out of the parables of their lives as well as his. He was becoming the bard of the congregation, called to tell them how their stories were transformed and made new by God's story in their lives. It was

for the sake of the gospel and them that his entire life had been transformed into that of a preacher. To hear him talk was to listen to a good preacher being born.

III. CONCLUSION

A sermon differs from all other discourse because it is meant to save—not by virtue of its art or persuasive power, but by virtue of confronting people with the Word of God. These are words which do things, and they are meant specifically for me. There are few places in our lives where we are so clearly confronted with words spoken directly to us. Lovers rarely declare their love as forcefully as the preacher is called to declare God's Word to others. By the mercies of God, the preacher can proclaim that love Sunday after Sunday, even when she is perhaps for the moment doubtful of it. Preachers should not try to hide who they are when they preach; they should learn how naked they are, so they can get out of the way of the Word and not draw attention to themselves—only to Christ.

The preacher is called to speak the promises of God to us, to bind us to God forever through words. The odd thing about this is that when the preacher preaches with an eagerness to tell the truth because people need to hear it, eloquence seems to be a natural by-product of that passion. A sense of the urgency of this gospel gives the preacher the gift to see clearly, name accurately, and compare richly when she wants to speak life to the other.

Richard Weaver says that the eloquent man is the one who senses the poignancy of the moment and speaks to it.[11] We educate people in the tradition so they will have sentences, words, metaphors, ready to be spoken at the right occasion. When I am in the hospital waiting room, it is really immaterial to me how empathetic the chaplain is if he cannot speak the right word for that occasion. In fact, if he cannot pick the right word, he will not have sensed the poignancy of the moment. I may end up having to comfort him for not being able to find the right word, which is not exactly the way things should go. It takes time to learn enough words so the right words are there. Anyone who has stood at the bedside of a loved one, watching what happens when the practiced pastor does her work, knows what I am talking about. It is obvious that the good pastor has lived with the Word long enough to know it, to know how to get out of the way of it, and to know exactly what her parishioner needs.

This is a skill that takes a lifetime to develop (which makes our mothballing of retired pastors such a loss). Recently I heard a sermon which was about as eloquent as any I have heard because it was spoken from the heart of the gospel and years of experience. The text was the Beatitudes. The preacher knew the Bible well enough to speak from the entire corpus rightly and wisely. He knew the congrega-

[11]Richard Weaver, *The Ethics of Rhetoric* (Chicago: H. Regnery, 1953).

tion well enough to know what it needed. He knew the culture well enough to have a ready comparison about God's love for us. To conclude, he told a story told by Richard Selzer: The surgeon had to operate on a young woman for a cancerous growth in the cheek; in doing so he had to cut the nerve which controlled the muscles of her mouth. When she looked at her misshapen mouth in the mirror, she asked the doctor if it would always be so; he said yes. She began to weep, until her young husband knelt down beside her, looked at her, and said, "I like it"; he shaped his mouth to hers. "I felt as though I was in the presence of God," writes the surgeon.[12]

The preacher did not stop there; he went on to announce that so it is for us: God, in Christ, has come to us, conformed himself to our lives so we might find all the blessings he has to give. The comparison and the direct discourse worked on us and changed us. And when we marveled, we marveled at how truly he spoke. The eloquence went without saying.

[12]Richard Selzer, *Mortal Lessons: Notes on the Art of Surgery* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1976).