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Learning the Human Heart: Reading for Preaching

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Everybody needs to be fed. We all need food that nourishes our bodies. Christians need to be fed with the Lord's supper and with God's word as it is proclaimed. Preachers need to feast upon that same word, and upon *other* words in order to feed their hearers with sturdy sermons that bring to bear the life-giving gospel of Jesus. The questions to be asked in this essay are these: How does literature teach us about the human heart? What is there to be learned through the reading of literature that can feed the art of proclamation?

The literary critic Northrop Frye noted that the "story of the loss and regaining of identity is...the framework of all literature."[1] Laying this framework over our own biblical tradition yields a smooth fit. Beginning with those earliest stories of our origins and ending with the ecstasies of John's vision on the island of Patmos, we can see movement from a loss of identity (in stories of sin and fall) to the regaining of identity (most profoundly in the death and resurrection of Jesus). This is not the *only* thing going on in the biblical witness of both testaments, but it can be seen there. Certainly it is the case that we regard the Bible as a far more precious volume—the giver of God's word and the bearer of its truth—than other literature. Nevertheless, the Bible is a collection of literary work as well, and so can be viewed with the framework Frye suggests.

I. LEARNING THE HUMAN HEART

One of the things literature does is to provide well-drawn portraits of the human situation and the human heart. Good literature works to let us identify

[1]Northrop Frye, *The Educated Imagination* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1971) 55.

something of ourselves in most any story—whether it be about someone quite similar to ourselves, or about a person and culture quite different. We hear, read, and learn about the human community, the "congregation." In our day we are subject to what a colleague refers to as the "tyranny of the particular." The notion is commonly held that we can only identify with, understand, or have compassion for another if we have been through their precise experience. Note the myriad specializations available, for instance, in the twelve-step family of groups. There are groups for alcoholics, gamblers, relatives of alcoholics, adult children of alcoholics, narcotic addicts, emotional addicts, and sexual addicts. All find their terribly particular niche in which to do their group work, and we begin to believe there are no broad strokes of commonality among us at all.

But literature would teach us otherwise. Literature paints the human heart for all to see, and beckons us inside another's mind, another's world, another's anguish, another's

delight—even though it may not be the precise reflection of our own individual experience. That point became clear this past year when I saw the ancient Greek plays *Agamemnon* and *Electra* performed at the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis. There on the stage were people and stories whose tragic notes were utterly familiar. Pride and ambition, family deceit and distortion have not changed in these 2000 years. Even the overwrought grieving of a seventeen-year-old Electra was carried out with the same passion we see in our own teenagers now. The plays were as contemporary as the day they were written. Seeing them made me think that what Dr. John Bale of Luther College used to tell us during in our Shakespeare class was not far from the truth: "Literature has been in steady decline since the Greek tragedies, with the exception of a slight bump for Shakespeare." One has only to think of Shakespeare's Lear in his dark night, raging in his heart as the storm raged around him on the heath, to know that his story has been lived out countless times in human history.

Literature, then, provides a view of the human heart each of us can recognize. Literature provides us with a wide sense of community, or congregation, and takes us both inside and outside of ourselves. Northrop Frye says about that journey: "Literature not only leads us toward the regaining of identity, but it also separates this state from its opposite, the world we don't like and want to get away from."[2] When I am sick to death of hearing my own voice in preaching, teaching, or conversation, there is nothing better than escaping into a book and traveling far into someone else's world. Going into that other world refreshes and renews me so that I can find my own voice once again, enriched by having read. Far from being "extracurricular," as it is so frequently regarded, fiction reading takes us as close to the heart of preparing for preaching as most any theological reading we might do.

A well-told story, for example, helps us learn about human motives. What is it that moves and propels the actions of a character in a novel? What prompts the thought and the actions of Father Frank Healy, for instance, when he returns to his northern Minnesota home and encounters there a long-lost love in Jon Hassler's

[2]Ibid., 55.

novel *North of Hope*? Or what does the unnamed whiskey-priest in Graham Greene's classic *The Power and the Glory* teach us about the heart of a sinner? How do the writings of Louise Erdrich and Will Weaver speak to life in the northern stretches of sugar-beet country, and to the tug of native American and Anglo cultures where red earth and white earth meet? How does Jane Smiley's Pulitzer-prizewinning *A Thousand Acres* help us see that the wealth provided by farming huge sections of land cannot stay the hand of tragedy for this family in Iowa? What was the cost, the human cost, of seeking to farm a thousand acres and more? How do the old Ojibwe or other tribal stories teach us about the places in this country where we live and work, preach and teach?

When I am led to look at the motives of characters in the fiction that I read, then I am also led to think through the motives that might be hidden in the biblical stories I preach: What, for instance, lay behind the story of Jephthah and his daughter recorded in Judges 11? You will recall that Jephthah made a vow to the Lord, promising that if God would give him victory over the Ammonite army, he would sacrifice whoever was the first to greet him upon his victorious homecoming. When he won the battle and arrived home, who should be the first out the door,

dancing to timbrel and drum, but Jephthah's own daughter, his only child? Is it possible, when we are led to think about motive and such seldom-acknowledged attributes in our day as honor and nobility, that this young woman might be viewed with praise in spite of the tragedy of it all? Might we read this story differently than some feminist scholars have done, as a text of terror indicative only of a society that had no regard for women? Could it even be possible that the daughter of Jephthah, in her willingness to keep her father's deep-sworn vow, bears some resemblance to Jesus himself, praying in Gethsemane that the cup of suffering be passed from him, yet nevertheless willing to keep his father's promise?[3]

This is only one example—there are plenty of others. What were Sarah's motives with Hagar? What about Jacob and Esau and their reunion? What about the way Ruth and Naomi so wonderfully plotted the salvation they needed through Boaz? Reading for preaching helps us bring basic but vital literary questions to the biblical texts, and in turn we come to learn the human heart in keener ways.

II. LEARNING A SENSE OF PLACE

In her collection of essays on *Mystery and Manners*, Flannery O'Connor, one of the great American writers of this century, reflects on what it means to be a regional writer.[4] What she says can be applied to the preacher's sense of country or region as well, and the need for a preacher to be a good observer of life in his or her community and congregation. The country O'Connor speaks of exists *inside* as well

[3]This is the interpretation offered by Walter Sundberg, "Jephthah's Daughter: An Invitation to Non-Lectionary Preaching," Word & World 13/1 (1993) 85-90.

[4]Flannery O'Connor, Mystery and Manners (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1957).

as *outside* of us. We know ourselves by knowing our region. It is, she believes, a matter of knowing the world, and paradoxically, knowing a form of exile from that world. It is the losing and regaining of identity of which Northrop Frye speaks.

Flannery O'Connor understood that fiction ought to be written so that the reader gains a sense of the story unfolding around him or her. The preacher's task is so to enliven the biblical text that people hear it as their own story alongside God's story, and that it indeed unfolds around them as it is being preached.

I live on the eastern edge of the great prairies of this country, and in a county where the soil is regarded as the best in the world. It is blue-black and shines when it is turned by the blade of the plow. Living where I do, it is important for me to read writers like Ole Rolvaag and come to hear the unrelenting prairie wind that sent the pioneering Berit into the blackest depths of depression. In doing so, I begin to know something about how the same wind that blows unceasingly around my town shapes me and the people with whom I work and live.

Living where I do asks that I reread the most beloved books of my childhood—Laura Ingalls Wilder's series—and see now through adult eyes the hardships of life on Plum Creek, a creek I cross whenever I drive Highway 14 west through Walnut Grove. I need also to read the fictionalized stories of the Sioux uprising and the Sioux culture through the writings of Frederick Manfred from Luverne, Minnesota—or the rambunctious essays and poetry of Bill Holm, a writer steeped in Icelandic Lutheran heritage but who views the church as something of an

outsider.

It isn't only fiction that is important. Poetry and essays, diaries and memoirs feed us too. Reading the *Diary of Elisabeth Koren* opens up the experience of a pioneer pastor's wife, who came as a young bride with her husband Ulrich Wilhelm Koren to the rolling countryside around Decorah, Iowa. The Korens had to make their home with parishioners for a number of years before being able to settle into their own parsonage at Washington Prairie. Elisabeth's frustrations and joys are told in great detail, with disarming charm.

Fiction and other writings that come from the places where we live and work help teach us the history of the people we serve. We learn how the land and its particular history have shaped our region. Yet, we read more broadly, too. For us as Americans, Twain's The Adventures of broadly, too. For us as Americans, Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* unfolds the nature of friendship between the races as Huck discovers that the runaway slave Jim with whom he shares a raft has come to care about him and worry for him. In one episode Huck is changed by seeing Jim's tears when Jim discovers that Huck was not lost as he feared. In that moment, Huck swore he'd never again play a mean trick on Jim as he had done before. Huck learns humanity, responsibility, and freedom along with the runaway slave. When you and I float down the mighty Mississippi with Huck and Jim, we too learn about a bigger world of human relationships. Those who read this work and see it as a racist story have not read well.

III. LEARNING CHRISTIAN IMAGINATION

Flannery O'Connor has this to say about writing as a Christian:

> I have heard it said that belief in Christian dogma is a hindrance to the writer, but I myself have found nothing further from the truth. Actually, it frees the storyteller to observe. It is not a set of rules which fixes what he sees in the world. It affects his writing primarily by guaranteeing his respect for mystery.[5]

When we read Flannery O'Connor's short stories we know that her grotesque characters and the places they inhabit are "Christ- haunted" as she has said. When Mrs. Turpin, in O'Connor's story "Revelation," experiences a vision in which she sees the reversal of her own beliefs about who is really righteous in this world and who will be first in line to enter into the kingdom of God, you and I come to know the reversal we will encounter. The text about being washed in the blood of the Lamb takes on depth and dimension and a rootedness in our own experience that we might not otherwise have understood.

O'Connor believed that the "novelist with Christian concerns will find in modern life distortions which are repugnant."[6] So also the preacher. The writer's task was to make these occurrences appear as distortions to an audience which has come to believe they are merely natural. So also the preacher, who must make what may seem altogether natural to the hearers be seen as the sin that it is or, in reverse, as the blessing or grace that it is. The preacher must have skills of observation followed by interpretation. Such a skill can be learned or sharpened by reading fiction and discovering there the nuances of motive, ambition, desire, and human need. As the plot thickens in any work, so does the business it does with us. As the plot thickens in the way a sermon unfolds a biblical text, so does the business that is being done among the hearers.

The reading of literature does other things for us. From literature we learn both the limits and the possibilities of words, and respect for them. Literature teaches us, even unconsciously, about the power of visual imagery and the force of description. Because the task of preaching has been so dramatically changed by this media age, preachers must learn the ability to create strong visual images so hearers can "see" while they listen—in the absence of the screen they are so accustomed to viewing.

A farm woman who lives in my community once remarked that her dearest wish as a parent of six children was to give them rich imaginations. Keeping that imagination fed over the course of a lifetime is a challenge, and just as the foods we put into our mouths determine the general health of our bodies, so the way we feed the imagination either sustains or shuts down its health.

Looking back at the sermons from the earliest years of our ministries is a sobering task for most any of us. One thing I remember whenever I look back at old writings is the compunction I always felt to make sure that my exegesis and

[5]Ibid., 31.
[6]Ibid., 33.

interpretation of the text was really *right* according to the historical-critical method in which I had been trained. Such knowledge and confidence was impossible to attain. Ten years' worth of sermons later, I now wonder whether that method, for all of its benefits, also may have served to stifle the imaginations of preachers, out of worry over getting it "right." It is not the case that just any old interpretation of a biblical text is true to the gospel. Surely we can go astray, and certainly we are capable of heresy. Nevertheless, people long to hear preaching that lets the imagination run free with the biblical story and with the words and images use as the preacher works to make the text come off the printed page for the hearer.

Several years ago James Forbes preached at Luther Northwestern Seminary's midwinter convocation. True to form for black preachers, Forbes spent a good 20 minutes just warming up, but then went on for another 20-25 minutes unfolding the old stories of Hannah, Samuel, and aging Eli so as to make his hearers know Hannah's deep longing for a child, hear her murmuring prayers at temple, smell the candles in that place, feel the mat on which little Samuel lay, hear the voice of the Lord calling in the night, and hear old Eli as helped the boy discern who it was that was calling him.

It is likely that not everything Forbes said was absolutely accurate according to the historical-critical method. Yet he moved us as hearers, the biblical story unfolded anew around us as he spoke, and the gospel was preached. As the old prayer of the church puts it, "the Word was not bound, but had free course, having been preached to the joy and edifying of Christ's holy people.

Some of the disciplines of our biblical study and training *can* hinder the imagination, make timid our willingness or courage to take a text and run with it or to push a particular interpretation and see how it sails. But we learn well from people like the seventh-grade English teacher who always told her young student writers, "Show, don't tell." Flannery O'Connor advises the same in an essay on writing short stories. "Fiction writing is very seldom a matter of saying things; it is a matter of showing things."[7] A good writer is selective in determining what

details to include, and which to put aside. A good preacher makes decisions, selecting and putting aside as he or she works to give focus to a particular angle of the biblical story. A good fiction or essay writer is concrete in describing people or scenes. A good preacher is concrete, too, in retelling the story, in recounting a contemporary example, in proclaiming the gospel.

Reading broadly in the world of literature feeds preaching by drawing us into stories that are not our own—if we are looking for an identical match in terms of everyday experience, but which *are* our own in the sense that they touch upon the very core of human life. Through literature we are anchored in the concrete and visual, and we come to know the rich fabric of life shown to us in the characters we meet. We see with new eyes the motives of the human heart and thereby gain a breadth and depth of insight into the ways of the world that serves our proclama-

[7]Ibid., 93.

tion of the gospel. Literature does indeed have to do with the loss and regaining of identity. That loss and regaining of identity is being lived out in the lives of those hearers who listen to our preaching. The manner in which preachers help hearers recognize themselves in the unfolding of the biblical story is at the heart of the preacher's task. In meeting that task, preachers are the richer for having read widely, feasting upon the written word in service to the proclamation of God's word.