



From Text to Sermon: Confessions of a Parish Pastor

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I confess that I am still convinced that God's word works, that it does what it says. People have come to faith in conversation with that working word, and they continue to do so. Now this would seem to be a modest enough conviction for one called to the ministry of word and sacrament in the church. But I am afraid that I have also preached with a rather simple-minded notion about the working of God's word and the meaning of biblical texts. More particularly, I featured the exegetical moves that took me from text to sermon as directed in large measure toward the question, "What does this text mean?" My usual sermon preparations, which might have included textual analysis, translations, word studies, and the consulting of commentaries, were geared to finding the gospel truth of the texts. And saying what they meant, I probably thought of myself as somehow instrumental in the working of God's word. After all, "how can they hear without someone preaching to them?" (Romans 10:14 NIV). I assumed that if I could discover (perhaps uncover, or recover) enough clues as to a text's meaning, then a fairly good sermon might result. That is to say, I crafted sermons to convey meaning to those who heard them. I connected the meaningfulness of Scripture directly to the working of God's word. And I confess, without giving it that much thought, I saw biblical interpretation and preaching just this way, and prepared sermons accordingly. But it is precisely these, perhaps too poorly examined, connections between texts and meanings and God's working word that have been challenged by many segments of recent literary-critical scholarship. While I have

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not been persuaded to change my mind completely on all this, I most certainly have a better appreciation today for the decided narrowness of my earlier understanding. Looking back at some of my old three-point sermons, I recognize that in my earlier enthusiasm for found meanings I occasionally tried too hard to make texts mean a certain something.

I. THE PREACHING OF SCRIPTURE

A placard in my study now has this line from David Buttrick: "Not all Scripture may want to be preached!"¹ I believe his point is an important one about the homiletic availability of the Bible's language and stories—namely that preaching should be *of* and not *about* Scripture. This motto clearly warns against a common temptation of preachers—forcing a text to say something. And the urge to ferret out the text's meaning through exegetical maneuvering usually grows stronger as the week wears on, especially when next Sunday's sermon remains unfinished. Carol Bly, in her wonderful book, *The Passionate, Accurate Story*, says that "many of the ideas of literary critics are recklessly carried over into the field of writing literature."² That recklessness,

as many worshipers know only too well, could also apply to the undigested ideas of biblical scholars that occasionally show up in sermons. Now I am not about to espouse a deconstructionist position on the relation between texts and their meaning, i.e., to claim that there is none. I am saying, however, both because of my conviction about God's word working and in spite of my former method of preparing sermons, that biblical texts must be allowed "breathing space."³ Preachable Scriptures have spoken before to believers and unbelievers in remarkably different circumstances. And it would be difficult to argue, in any straightforward way at least, that those texts simply "meant" the same to all those different folks. Nevertheless, I am confident that God's word was also encountered in the hearing of those Scriptures, that people were indeed brought face to face with their sinfulness, were renewed in the gospel, and had the joy of salvation restored to them. In other words, God's word worked even where a host of meaningful questions remained. I know now that biblical preaching cannot be concerned only (perhaps not even firstly, or foremostly) with questions of what texts or sets of texts mean. And pastors who routinely lead Bible studies and teach confirmation classes most likely do not need to be lectured about polyvalence. Sermons, begun with conviction that the Holy Spirit makes God's word available for hearing, are clearly never designed to exhaust the meaning of any text. And I am sure I knew that before! But I have come to a new awareness of this as an important feature of God's working word. There are numerous meaningful connections between God's word and God's people that command the respect of preachers in making the move from text to sermon.

¹David G. Buttrick, "Interpretation and Preaching," *Interpretation* 35 (1981) 46-58.

²Carol Bly, *The Passionate, Accurate Story* (Minneapolis: Milkweed, 1980) 18.

³This phrase is borrowed from Hans W. Frei, "Conflicts in Interpretation," *Theology Today* 49 (1992) 344-356.

In recent lectures, Don Browning has articulated some of these bonds, suggesting that preaching involves at least three conversations: a conversation between preacher and text, a conversation between preacher and congregation, and a conversation between congregation and text.⁴ These are ongoing dialogues, and proper attention to each makes clear that getting into pulpits raises questions for preachers of how God's word comes to have meaning in the church, not only of what texts mean. While an overarching theology of the word might inform a preacher's view of biblical authority and the like, this expanded, more nuanced view of God's working word dictates a certain purposefulness in carrying out these varied conversations from week to week. Sermons prepared in the context of the Spirit's work, of God's word at work, call for critical reflection on how these texts actually work. Recently, I have given more thought, and assigned more importance to how God's word comes to have meaning in the community of faith. In order to illustrate these adjustments in my approach to preaching, I would like to focus on two of the "participants" in the homiletical conversations noted above, namely text and congregation. My broadened understanding of how God's word works has taken two directions—a new appreciation for the textuality of texts and a better sense of the communality of a congregation.

II. THE PREACHER AND THE TEXT

Reading Thomas Long's *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible* some years ago, I was struck by his insight that the shape a sermon takes ought to be related to the form of the text

itself. Now this may not represent much of a novelty in scholarly opinion, but it was new to me. I am sure that I never made this connection consciously in my first several years of preaching. Of course, I was familiar from seminary days with form-critical studies. But in my mind such efforts were still guided primarily by questions of a text's meaning; the form of the text being one more clue to its significance. But Long's idea was something essentially different than that. He called attention to the oft neglected textuality of the text, saying:

An unfortunate result of overlooking the literary properties of biblical texts is the tendency to view those texts by default as inert containers for theological concepts. The preacher's task then becomes simply throwing the text into an exegetical winepress, squeezing out the ideational matter, and then figuring out homiletical ways to make those ideas attractive to contemporary listeners.⁵

But what if the form of the text is itself expressive (even reflective of the biblical writer's/redactor's intent)? Then, he suggested, there must needs be a fit between that Scripture and any sermon based on it. If a text confronts, challenges, and shocks into awareness of God's presence, our own sin, God's command, and/or the gift of

⁴Don Browning, "Can Pastoral Care and Theology Be Reconciled? Immanence and Transcendence in Pastoral Care and Preaching" (1992 Disciples Lecture in Preaching and Pastoral Care, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee).

⁵Thomas Long, *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989) 12.

grace, then the sermon under preparation will also need some shock value. On the other hand, if the Bible's text leads more gently along a path to insight, as many reflective ones do, then an approach to the sermon's form is already implicit in the way the text is "meant" to be heard. Even though this would appear to make common sense, it is a rather complex matter, attempting to relate the rhetorical devices and linguistic peculiarities of a text's genre to preacherly intentions and to the actual shape of sermons. Such awareness of what a text is doing linguistically is very much related to David Buttrick's way of structuring/plotting sermons.⁶ I have preached long enough to have made my way through the lectionary several times. A number of the texts now have a familiar homiletical ring to them, and sometimes the rough outline of a sermon suggests itself at "first" hearing. At the same time, however, these Scriptures continue to speak afresh, and very often strike me quite differently with each new encounter, and I do mean new. We are never the same persons or preachers the next time around. To be sure, we are still sinners in need of forgiveness, of new life, of spiritual renewal and repair, but the novelty of the world does indeed serve to let the text speak anew. The gospel is never just an old, old story. As Ernst Troeltsch reminded us: "When we are certain that the spirit of Christ, through history, is speaking a new *word* to us, we do not need to be ashamed to admit that it is a *new* word."⁷ Texts, even the same old texts, do speak anew to us—we hear a new word. A word we may never have heard before, and one no less God's word than those which we have come to cherish. Does this mean then that God's word changes its meaning? I think not. But, it does imply that more is going on than first meets the exegetical eye when God's word comes to have meaning in the community of faith. God's word works, means what it says. Proper attentiveness to the definite

linguistical character of narrative texts, psalms, parables and so forth, has refreshed me in the preparation of sermons, and provided deeper insight into the actual (and in this sense, quite literal) speaking of the word. And I find all this to be wonderfully consistent with the reformers' move from the four-fold method of interpretation to one which gave more place to Scripture's plain meaning—one that was held to be available to all. This brings into focus the next moment of homiletical conversation.

III. THE PREACHER AND THE CONGREGATION

It might seem odd that preachers would need to be reminded that sermons are conversations with texts; surely having to keep in mind that sermons are preached to congregations is no less so. But I have found attentiveness to the *communality* among the hearers of God's word to be especially helpful in moving from text to sermon of late. Perhaps this is because human community seems to be so much threatened nowadays. Bernard Cooke, in his massive *Ministry to Word and Sacraments*, sets this matter beautifully before us. He writes:

⁶See part 2 of his *Homiletic* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987).

⁷Ernst Troeltsch, "What Does 'Essence of Christianity' Mean?" in *Ernst Troeltsch: Writings on Theology and Religion*, ed. Robert Morgan and Michael Pye (Atlanta: John Knox, 1977) 168.

In the Christian community the mystery of Jesus as sacrament of the divine saving presence is taken a step further, because this community of believers is the body of Christ. Just as for each of us, the bodily aspect of our humanness situates us in space, provides organs of communication, gives externalization and expression to our personal conscious existing, and thus makes presence to one another and human community possible, so in analogous fashion the church provides that location in space and time, that external manifestation, those organs of communication, which enable the risen Christ to be present to men and to fashion with them a unique divine-human community.

It is the entire being of the Christian community which is, then, a word of witness to the presence of Christ and of the Father in their Spirit.⁸

With respect to this entire community, then, the church is not only the hearer, but is also the bearer of the word. As such, sermons are not preached to individuals, or even to many believers taken together. The conversation between congregation and text is one which goes to congregational consciousness. A text's intention is always to make the church, to form Christian community. And sermons that allow texts to speak move toward developing the congregation in the mind of Christ. This is the mind we are to have among ourselves, and the one sinners so desperately need—not just personal opinions, no matter how strongly held, no matter how right and true they might happen to be. And the formation of congregational consciousness that comes through the proclamation of the gospel and the working of God's word again suggests that the parables, psalms, and narratives of the texts themselves hold strategies for this vital work. The church is formed by that word, given shape in the hearing of it. The community of faith is ever being built into the body of Christ and thereby called to the saving tasks that belong to the being-saved-in-the-world community.

This ongoing and powerful shaping of community is the true setting for every sermon, even the ones still in preparation. That point along the hermeneutical circle at which sermons begin is ever located amid the calling, gathering, and enlightening of the whole Christian church on earth. In homiletical conversation we are joined together as the church. Since preachers too are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses, sermons always have their setting in the faith-world. The church is already there in the world before the first exegetical steps are taken for any sermon. I would like to think that I have always prepared sermons that have allowed the Bible to speak in such way that the community of faith was formed. But I am today much more convinced of the importance of being aware that that is precisely what a sermon is designed to do. Sermons always have intentions aimed at the congregation. Doubtless, some part of every sermon is directed to removing congregational blocks to the gospel and to encouraging fuller participation in the community that God's word calls into being. I am newly attentive to the social dimensions of these obstacles. And I find this gives a more realistic appraisal of, for example, the sedimented racisms and sexism that continue to plague our hearing of God's word in community. These barriers are not reducible to individual prejudices, bad habits of thought, or personal conditionings of one sort or another. And

⁸Bernard Cooke, *Ministry to Word and Sacraments* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976) 322.

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they can be addressed Christianly only in challenges to our congregational consciousness—and to such awareness that we may together come to have of ourselves as or in the community of Christ. Therefore, I do not understand the preacherly task to be simply the recitation of what or how a text might have spoken to me, but the implementation of homiletic strategies intent on allowing the text to do the same for the sermon's hearers. Scripture's potential to shape human community in the image of Christ now invigorates my study and exegesis of the texts. And the critical analysis of Scripture serves to test one's own hearing in the community of faith. Have others heard the same? Would the first congregation to hear that particular text have shared a like response? Could they have? Have the same spiritual nerves been touched? I am increasingly aware that the technicality of these exegetical jobs, no matter how skillfully handled, tends to have a deadening effect on me without benefit of this communal perspective. I think the danger is always to forget that the community of faith is party to sermon preparation too, and, searching for meaning, to isolate oneself in conversation with the text. That is why these simple reminders of the fuller dynamics of God's working word continue to renew my sermon preparation, and my preaching as well.

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