



Must Every Christian Sermon Name the Name of Jesus? Yes!

GRACIA GRINDAL

First of all, rules are made to be broken. I can imagine that it would be possible for a faithful preacher to preach a very fine Christian sermon without naming the name. On the other hand, it might be possible to name the name often and clearly and not preach anything like a Christian sermon, using the name as a blunt instrument that thinks it gets the job done merely by following the rules. Then we could just as well e-mail our people a sentence with Jesus' name and forget about the whole difficult and mysterious business of crafting a sermon.

To the argument: Must a sermon always name the name? I would, ultimately, have to say yes, with the above caveats in place. I base this on several experiences that have seared themselves into my conscience.

Some time ago, I translated three stanzas of a hymn by the great Danish hymn writer Thomas Kingo (1634–1703), “Sorrow and Gladness” (*Sorgen og gleden de vandre til hope*). The hymn has been criticized for being something of a stoic contemplation of the weal and woe of life. In contrast to the wheel of fortune of the Middle Ages, Kingo asserts that all these ups and downs will finally end in heaven where the rose will have no thorn. It is, in fact, a rejection of fate in favor of faith. But the name of Jesus is not there in the stanzas I translated. The hymn, however, has had long purchase in the hymnody of Denmark and Norway. My father quoted the hymn to me when I was in a difficult place in my life. “Sorrows and gladness are sisters and brothers, we meet them coming and going.” When he, a pious Lutheran pastor, used the phrase, I knew it to be a truth about the Christian life. The immigrant pastors’ wives Elisabeth Koren and Linka Preus used the hymn to describe their own lives here in America. It’s a Lutheran hymn.

Later, however, I published the text along with other translations. To my surprise, the hymn received attention from composers who used it, I am sure, because it had a “wider” appeal than something including the name of Jesus. In other words, it would sell more. The composers were no doubt thinking of public school choirs who could sing the piece with little or no opposition from the ACLU or others. Something similar happened to another text I had written, and while I understand the desire to make more money, it has bothered me ever since. I know the truths of the Christian life can be accepted as true by those who do not believe in

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It's a no-win argument to take the negative here. Who wants to be against Jesus? And, of course, most—virtually all—Christian sermons, mine included, will name the name of Jesus. Clearly, there is no virtue in trying to see how many times one can *not* do that—especially for those of us who believe that “pushing” Christ (*was Christum treibet*) is what gives Scripture its authority and that preaching Christ is at the heart of what we do.

Though, having said that, simply to say “Jesus” is not yet preaching Christ. Many a sermon that speaks much of Jesus falls short of a faithful and robust proclamation of biblical faith. To preach Christ is to proclaim the gospel in such a way that, through the power of the Spirit, the living word is made present, that two-edged sword that kills and makes alive.

Which makes the question all the more radical: Must every sermon do that? If sermons are to be truly Christian and truly biblical, then the answer has to be both yes and no. Yes, to be sure, every sermon must proclaim the living word—nothing else makes a sermon a sermon. But, no, not every sermon must talk about Jesus *per se*. In Trinitarian faith, to proclaim Christ is not confined to speaking of Jesus of Nazareth and certainly not to a simplistic “me and Jesus” piety. The Christ that the Scriptures “push” is the second person of the Trinity, the incarnate Word of God that has enlivened and saved since God's first revelation to our ancestors of old—whether or not they yet knew the name of Jesus. Faithfully to proclaim the God of Scripture will always be to proclaim Christ because, unless we are altogether wrong (in which case, none of our preaching matters anyway), God is, was, and always will be Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Thus, faithfully to proclaim God the Creator, for example, will always include also the incarnate Logos, who was with God in the beginning, and the Creator Spirit, who remains the creative energy of God, because this is who the Creator God is. Whether or not I name this in every instance, it will be inherently and substantially present in a faithful word about creation. Similarly, faithfully to proclaim the law will always evoke Christ the judge, the challenger of the status quo, because, again, this *is* the God of both Sinai and the Sermon on the Mount.

God is up to all kinds of things in biblical texts: creating, healing, redeeming,

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Jesus Christ as their Savior. But these uses make me uneasy. One feels the encroachment of the secular into the church. The context no longer allows us the assumption that, of course, this is a Christian hymn because it's about God.

One could say the same about "Amazing Grace," which serious critics on the *Lutheran Book of Worship* Text Committee opposed because it did not name the name. At the time I thought it was a niggling criticism, but the hymn is now used by any and all comers as a kind of statement of general grace, not the grace of Jesus Christ, which John Newton clearly intended. Once again, one could hear the hymn, wonder to whose grace the hymn refers, and in searching, discover Jesus, but that's a stretch.

Perhaps I'm more fussy about this than most because of an event long ago in my life: In 1961, at my high school graduation dinner in Salem, Oregon—not exactly the center of Christendom—I was asked to pray, since I was known to be one of the "smart" Christians in my class of 850. I was, however, directed not to mention Jesus. Later, when I told my mild-mannered father about this, he expressed dismay: "This is a free country, no one can tell you how to pray!"

Later, when he led the invocation at my graduation ceremony, I was in the orchestra pit just below him where I was playing the organ. I had given him a red carnation to thank him for being a wonderful father, and as I stood there looking up at him in the packed auditorium, waiting to see how he would end his prayer, I felt the blood of Jesus pouring out of the flower down into the pit, covering me. I've never quite decided which of us made the right decision concerning the name and civic ceremonies. What I worry about, however, is the way in which our rightful concern about whether or not to use the name hasn't been stealthily encroaching on our own Christian preaching. If we preach as though the name is not necessary, soon it will not be. Because of what's happening in the public square, we should be all the more vigilant about making sure that we preach Jesus—the name above all others. ⊕

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forgiving, sanctifying, transforming, renewing, enlightening, opening up, and, alas, sometimes closing down. The truly biblical sermon will ask what God is doing in the text in question and will seek to find ways to do just that in and for the present. Sometimes that will mean proclaiming justification and redemption; sometimes it will mean proclaiming creation; sometimes it will bring the warning and challenge of the law; sometimes it will point to the work of God among the nations and the creatures, quite apart from the confines of the believing community or even apart from human beings. Often the sermon will relate this verbally to the radical Christian claim that all of God's work finally finds its Yes in Jesus—but this remains true whether I say it or not.

Why would I not? On the one hand, I *need* not do so precisely because we are speaking here of a Christian sermon—that is, one delivered in the context of a Christian liturgy that will have its beginning and end “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” and that will have announced and done God's saving work of forgiveness and regeneration many times. The sermon need not do everything in the service. The person in the pew who needs the gospel because of personal distress will find it in many places in the service. The person who doesn't know Jesus or has little sense of the Christian message will hear the name and the heart of the faith many times in a liturgy that does what liturgies should.

Another reason for not always bringing in Jesus by name will simply be to help people hear texts as they stand; to hear the broader work of God that the Bible proclaims; to appreciate the real presence of God in Old Testament texts, without any need to fix them; to help stretch their imaginations about what God is up to in the Bible and in the world. People regularly, no doubt, need to hear the “pure milk” of the word; but in order to grow, they sometimes will need meat and potatoes—and sometimes to delight in a rich chocolate mousse. People, of course, need to be brought to the saving work of God in Christ; but those who have been bored or jaundiced or alienated by sermons that seem always to say the same thing might hear anew if they hear something different.

And difference is precisely what the Bible offers: rich, radical, wonderful, audacious, delicious difference. To preach biblical texts is to open that difference to parishioners so they may be truly and regularly surprised by the God who is always doing something new. ⊕

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