



Plain Talk from the Pew*

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As a lay person I have no authority to tell anyone how to preach. But I can say that there is a singular correspondence between the word spoken from the pulpit and my need. I can speak of what I need to hear from the pulpit. What *I* need to hear. I shall not use the royal “We.” Someone has said that only a king and a queen or a tapeworm can legitimately use the royal “We.”

In an amazing little book, *The Message in the Bottle*, the contemporary novelist Walker Percy writes: “There must be someone who delivers the message and speaks with authority.” Mr. Percy points out that nowadays there are so many competing voices saying “Come”—asking us to believe this and do that. “And what if the news the newsbearer bears,” he says—and for our purposes that is you in the pulpit delivering the news with authority—“is the very news the castaway”—and for our purposes that is I in the pew—“has been waiting for, news of where he came from and who he is and what he must do, and what if the newsbearer brought with him the means by which the castaway may do what he must do. Well, then the castaway will, by the grace of God, believe him.”

When a messenger comes to me from God bearing a message of utmost importance to me, the externalities of the messenger do not concern me in the least—not any more than I, had I been listening to the Apostle Paul, would have cared if he had been Gamaliel’s top-ranking student, whether or not he was a marvellous word-spinner, or a good tentmaker and had a corner on the tent market whether or not he had charm as well as charisma—indeed, would have made a hit as a Sunday morning TV preacher. So I don’t much care how many degrees or titles you have, how well or ill-read you are, how much you have or have not traveled, how much you have or have not published. I don’t care if you were born with a golden throat and have a deep organ or a lovely soprano voice that can bring tears to the eyes of your hearers simply by reciting the multiplication table.

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George Whitefield is said to have been the greatest open air preacher of all time, and the actor David Garrick envied him his power of awakening the emotions of his audience merely by the way he pronounced “Mesopotamia.”

No, I do not care about the externalities of you or your presentation. Like the poet George Herbert, I do not mind picking out treasures from an earthen pot. For all I down there in the pew

care, you can split infinitives and dangle participles. What I want, what I need, is that you speak as one authorized by Christ and commanded by God. Talk as if you are his messenger. Talk as one whose head and heart is brimful of your message. Talk as one who feels the urgency of the news you are bringing to me down there in the pew.

And if you feel the urgency of the message you are bringing me—and the urgency of my need for that message—you will not give a thought to the externalities of me. Indeed, you do not need to, for when I sit down there in the pew I have left all my externalities at home—all my roles—wife, mother, grandmother, translator, breadmaker. You are not preaching to my college degree, to my presumed competence, or to the culture I am presumed to have. Down there in the pew I have divested myself of every externality. I am all internality. I am heart. Yes, I have even placed my mind into my heart. My heart leans toward you, God's messenger with a message for my heart. The ears of my heart, which are ever so much more flexible than the ears attached to my head, are erect, pricked like a dog's, to hear your message to my heart. The externalities do not matter, neither yours nor mine. The message is all-important: more important than your self; more important than my self; more important than your selfish or unselfish causes—or mine; more important than your successes—or mine; more important than your failures—or mine.

In the play *The Marriage of St. Francis* by the French writer Henry Ghe'ron, St. Francis experiences a period when he doubts his calling, as I suspect most messengers of God do at some time. Francis is experiencing such a spectacular response to his preaching that he fears the temptation to vain glory.

Modern preachers, I suspect, are tempted instead to despondency, a loss of faith in the usefulness of their toils, a sense of failure, sickness of heart. But both temptations inevitably lead to a loss of a sense of true purpose. The messenger's feelings become more important than the message.

Francis says to his co-laborer Brother Masseo:

“Because Brother Ass lives ever within me and is not well enough shod yet, and saddled and bridled, and because he might wax vain in the rays of this glory that only my demerit sanctions—therefore I wish to return to my first plan to bury myself in some rocky cave like Brother Silvester and like Brother Bernard, and I have decided to preach no more, so as no more to risk yielding to the temptation to vain glory. But since I have lost all confidence in my own judgment, I beg you to go to that same Brother Silvester and to our Sister Clare.

(St. Francis imitated his Christ even to that holy virtue of making absolutely no sexual distinctions. If he had become pope, women would without question have been ordained as priests.)

Brother Masseo returns from visiting Brother Silvester and Sister Clare. “Tell me, Brother Masseo,” asks Francis, “what does our Lord Jesus Christ bid

me do?” Masseo answers: “I began by asking Brother Silvester in his cave, and then Sister Clare in her convent. Without saying anything to one another, they answered me alike—the same words exactly.”

Francis kneels to receive the word of God, his head bared and his arms stretched out like a cross. Maseo continues:

The Lord wills that Brother Francis should be told that it is not for his salvation alone that he has been called, but that he may reap an abundant harvest of souls by prayer, and by example, by his presence and his voice.

Francis, after remaining bowed for a moment, rises, and says:

God be praised, who has need of no more than a bird that sings or a sinner like me to convert a soul. Let us go and preach the Cross of Christ.

The message to modern messengers of God might well be: The Lord wills that the Brothers and Sisters be told that it is not for their organizational effectiveness or professional successes or personal self-esteem that they have been called, but that they may reap an abundant harvest of souls by prayer, by example, by their presence, by their voices.

The message you are authorized to bring—and I in the pew urgently need to hear—is timeless. Therefore do not succumb to the temptation or listen to the voices that clamor for you to tailor the message to the times and insist that the times demand that you preach a different message. It is true that we get brand new systems of morality or immorality, brand new modes of injustice, brand new arts of warfare. We invent brand new hypocrisies and gluttonies. But sin is never brand new. Our forbears were no less sinful and posterity will be no more sinful than we are now.

Again and again we are told that we live in a basically de-sacralized world. I have even heard preachers and the church blamed for the world being so fiercely secular and materialistic; for the fact that people prefer to go to the movies rather than to church, for if the movie is boring they at least can eat popcorn and drink coke. And if they stay home from church Sunday morning they have the Sunday paper and beer in the refrigerator.

Was there ever a golden age when the world was fundamentally spiritual? Yes, you say, in days of yore watchmen walked the streets of towns and villages and every hour on the hour from 9 P.M. until 4 A.M., when good decent people should be getting up, the watchmen sang a Christian admonition or prayer. In the mid-19th century the watchmen in Copenhagen sang at 1 A.M.:

Help us, dear Jesus
To bear our cross in the world
patiently. There is not much
help. The clock is striking one.
Reach us your hand, O Savior,
and then our burden will be light.

But the fact that watchmen sang godly songs every hour on the hour through the night did not signify a highly spiritual age any more than the Moslem call to prayer on loudspeakers in the city of Cairo today sends throngs into the mosques to pray. It did send Sadat, and in Carter's memoirs Carter mentions the unmistakable signs of worn knees on Sadat's trousers.

So I become dismayed with you preachers when you attribute the existing state of the world to the evils of the age. There are no evils of the age. There are only evils of the human heart. There in the heart the same old evils are constantly repeated.

I am dismayed with you when you stand in the pulpit and declare that every day in every way the world is becoming more sinful, but I am even more dismayed when I hear some of you preach as if all were well and will get weller—as if the cannibalism that has nibbled away at the stamp of God in human beings ever since humankind began has been eradicated—just as gladiators and infanticide were eradicated in the Christian world by the early church, although even that triumph has been disproved in the 20th century by abortion and the boxing ring. The cannibalism—the favorite food of which is the image of God in me—has not been eradicated in me. So we are not the church triumphant, and the theology I need to hear from you is not *theologia beatorum* but *theologia viatorum*, the theology of wayfarers, of pilgrims on the way. I come to church every Sunday not to attend an academy of the fine arts, not to hear positive preaching. I come to the most important way-station on the rough road of my life.

I come to church every Sunday not to hear about the loss of transcendence in this troubled age, about the hungering for God being replaced by hungering for a Jaguar, a stereo, a color TV. I come not to hear about the universality of sin. I come not to hear a denunciation of the times. I come to hear the annunciation of the message you are authorized to bring to me, the gospel that is a transcendent judgment upon my own heart. I come to hear the Word of God “which is alive and active and cuts like any double-edged sword, but more finely; it can slip through the place where the soul is divided from the spirit or joints from the marrow; it can judge the secret emotions and thoughts” (Heb 4:12-13).

The message is timeless, so preach to me as you would have preached to Mr. and Mrs. Adam the Sunday after their son Cain murdered his brother Abel. If you do so, you will be preaching both to parents of the victim and parents of the criminal. You will be preaching to parents of victims of cancer, alcohol, drugs, depression, meaninglessness, despair.

Incidentally, have you ever wished that you had a sample sermon to preach to the parents of prodigals? Kierkegaard left the outlines for several sermons he never preached or never finished. The rough draft for a sermon on the parable of the Prodigal Son is a rough diamond. Even if I do a *Reader's Digest* gobbling of paragraphs, I think you will get the idea, or, better yet, your own creative ideas will be stimulated:

Usually all the attention is concentrated on the prodigal son, and the father is almost forgotten. But this is unfair, for the father is truly a remarkable man. The remarkable thing is that when he got himself a prodigal son, precisely then he became a father in earnest.

Other fathers want to be fathers all right—when the son is a well-behaved child, but when one's own son is the prodigal son, then the father says, “I do not want to be a father any longer, let him paddle his own canoe.” No one wants to be the father of the prodigal son—but this father—this remarkable man—he really wanted to be the father of the prodigal son.

This father has no limits to what he will put up with, and he still continues to be a father. Fatherhood does not hang loosely on him as a title. The

son wants to go away—he is the father. The son wants him to divide the estate with him—he is the father. The son leaves—he is the father. Everything is lost—the son is lost—he is the father.

Preaching like that does more than enter the ears that God planted in me. Preaching like that unlocks the door of my heart. My mind, my imagination, enter into my heart, and images leap into life. A lively dialogue begins between you in the pulpit and me in the pew. My intellect, my feelings, and my will all become involved in the lively dialogue there in my heart, there where your message touches me. Anything I do not feel in my heart does not touch me. There in my heart—not in my mind—starts that dynamism that turns insight into action. Thought enters the heart—there is the manufacturing place for act—there thought is manufactured into will—and if it is not, then it becomes a non-act and is recorded in the Book of the Non-Acts of Edna Hong.

So you do not need to make the text a weapon to clobber me. You do not need to tell me how sinful I am and put me on the defensive. The gospel you preach to my heart tells me. You do not have to attack my sinful attitudes and knock them down. The gospel you preach to my heart knocks them down.

Nor do you need clumsily to translate the imagery of Scripture from masculine to feminine. My heart may lie behind breasts, but my heart does not have breasts. Nor does it have a beard. My heart is neither male nor female, neither black nor white nor green nor purple. With my mind in my heart I am perfectly capable of translating Scriptural images if need be.

My heart is the ultimate destination of the message you as God's messenger are authorized to bring, and the ultimate purpose of that message is to change my heart. When you entered the ministry was it your dream, your ideal, your goal, your burning ambition to change your congregation? You did not aim so high as to change the world. But you cannot change the world or your congregation if you cannot change me. And if you cannot change me—if Christianity cannot change me, then Christianity's claims are a total swindle, and you and I are involved in a colossal hoax.

Do you still have any expectancy of changing your congregation—or even just me? Have you taken to heart Jehovah's words to Ezekiel?

Son of man...my people sit down in front of you and listen to your words, but they do not act on them....As far as they are concerned, you are like a love song beautifully set to music. They listen to your words, but no one puts them into practice. (33:30-33)

Has your hope of changing me burned out? You are absolutely right if you believe that I do not want to change. Indeed, I do not. I love my rut. It is cozy and comfortable. I like my way of life. I like my community the way it is. I like my local church the way it is. I like my everything the way it is. I don't want my life to change. I don't want my community to change. I don't want my church to change. I don't want anything to change—except, of course, the evils out there in the world. In short, I'm a Christian, a good Christian, and I don't want to become a better Christian—to say nothing of a perfect Christian.

You are right in your perception that in so many ways I reject the Christian gospel—or pick what I choose and reject the rest—accept the forgiveness of sins

and refuse to forgive, accept redemption and ignore sanctification, accept the event of reconciliation and refuse the ministry of reconciliation. You are right if you style my kind of Christianity, my not wanting to change, as pious atheism—a practical disbelief, unbelief in your message. But if you allow me to rest smugly in my pious practical atheism, if you have no faith, hope, and expectancy that anything at all is going to change in me, or in your congregation, then you too are guilty of unbelief, of practical atheism, and you can be pretty sure that nothing will change.

The crisis in preaching, it seems to me, is twofold. It is my practical pious atheism, my wanting the sweet gospel of salvation without any involvement in the pain of the world, and your practical atheism, your unbelief that I am capable of changing, your expectancy that after all is said and done by you and your ministry to me, I will not change. But this also means, ultimately, when all is said and done, that neither you nor I believe in the power of the Holy Spirit, and without the Holy Spirit the gospel is dead letter; the church is just another organization; your authority is domination; mission work is propaganda; Christian ethics is slave morality; Christ belongs to the past; and God is far, far away.

But you and I do believe in the Holy Spirit and in the power of the Holy Spirit. Were there no Holy Spirit, you would not be sitting there, God's ordained messengers, proclaimers of Christ's gospel. You would not be here in the coldest state in the U.S. outside of Alaska, in the coldest month of the year for the purpose of seeking to make your Sunday sermon the greatest event in the week.

The greatest event in the week! Are you thinking that is a little farfetched? You can't imagine John saying to his wife Jane—or Jane to her husband John—on Saturday night: "I can hardly wait until tomorrow morning and pastor's sermon!" But it is the greatest event in the week for me if you, the authorized messenger of God, let yourself be spoken to by the text for the day and speak it from your heart to my heart and my heart is touched and tilted toward change—if only one degree. It is the greatest event in the week for me if I go home from church a different person than I was when I came.

So what do I in the pew need to hear from you in the pulpit? I need to hear the message preached that will unlock the all-pervasive biases locked in my heart, will dishabituate me of ancient habits of bigotry and intolerance, will lead me out of my wilderness wandering and bring me into the state of forgiveness, there to become a permanent resident.

Are you perhaps thinking, "Oh, come now, Mrs. Hong, you are not guilty of racist, sadistic attitudes. If you have intolerances they surely are little ones, not worthy of mention or feeling guilty about. Your distastes and biases are perhaps more laughable than lamentable."

Maybe so. In a way it is amusing that I like people to have wit and humor, but I hate them to be jolly jokers and brightly cheerful optimists. I am uncomfortable with people whose life has no religious depth, but I am just as uncomfortable with people whose life is all religious depth. But is it really so amusing? What are my amusing intolerances but the roots of civil war in families, neighborhoods, congregations, and nations. They are the roots of despising, scorning, and hatred.

I heard recently from a reliable source of a church council member who hates the pastor so vehemently that she brings the Sunday paper to church and sits reading it during the sermon. From another reliable source—indeed, the victim—I heard of a pastor’s wife who was shoved out the door at an ALCW Circle meeting and told that she was not welcome there.

My laughable intolerances, my paltry peevishness, can turn to rancor, bitterness, hatred, pure venom.

Have you ever wondered whether the course of history might not have been changed if you could have preached to Sarah and Abraham the Sunday immediately after the great weaning party they gave for Isaac? I myself have wondered why I have never encountered the story of that party in any Sunday School curriculum, for it so vividly portrays the human condition. Sarah surveys the party at its peak, feeling the immense satisfaction of a hostess who sees that everything—absolutely everything—is going superbly. The lambs are roasted golden brown, dripping with fat. The dates are plump and tender. “This will go down in the social records as *the* party of the year.” And then, remember, she sees Ishmael, the son Hagar the Egyptian maid had borne to Abraham. She sees Ishmael playing with her son Isaac, and Sarah says to Abraham, “This slavegirl’s son is not to share the inheritance with my son Isaac.” If you could have preached to Sarah and Abraham, preached Christ’s gospel to them—if that had been possible—would the descendants of Abraham and Hagar be living peacefully with the descendants of Abraham and Sarah today? Would Sarah have been healed of hatred; would she have repented of her jealousy and hatred; would she have forgiven?

I need to hear the message of forgiveness as much as did Sarah. I need God’s forgiveness, and forgiveness is not possible if I am not conscious of what needs to be forgiven. I need to be healed, and if I do not realize my need to be healed, I will be forever unhealed. I need to hear the message that God does have the power to forgive my sins and untie the knots in me that I am unable to untie—nor could my psychiatrist, if I had one. Preach me to the point of crisis and confrontation with my sins. Preach repentance to me, not as despair, but as eager expectancy of God’s grace and forgiveness. Preach repentance to me, not as an emotional crisis, but as a fundamental transformation in my attitudes. Preach repentance—not to make me see how I have failed—but to make me see what I can become by the grace of God. Preach repentance, not as self-loathing, but as a new way of looking at myself and my fellow beings. Preach repentance, not as a once and for all event, but as a continuing experience.

I don’t need positive preaching. I don’t need challenging preaching. I need preaching that will bring about a change in me and my life. I cannot continue to live in my nice sterile respectability—a respectability that in its self-satisfaction refuses to look at the reality of people being exploited to make my nice life possible. I cannot remain what I am. I cannot exist without being transformed. I am confronted with only two directions—upward or downward. There is no standing still in the life of the spirit. To stand still is merely to descend.

Are you beginning to think that I am concentrating too much on the personal aspect of salvation, that I have reverted to a narcissistic salvation for my separate-involved-self-religion? Do I want to be a solo dancer in the temple of

saved souls? Am I concerned only with the very private issue of God and me—and not at all with the great public issues—poverty, unemployment, nuclear war, world hunger, racism, the failure of Christians to love—not just do good to—but to *love* minority groups, the handicapped?

Ah, but these public issues are rooted in what issues from my very private heart. The struggles in the world without are linked to the struggles within my inner being. And that is what you are called to change by your preaching in the pulpit. If your sermon has a social function, it is to awaken what sleeps in me—by the gospel preached in its truth and fullness, preached so that it comes to me as a blinding revelation that there is no dividing line between the forgiveness of sins and the ethical life—and that justification is indissolubly linked with sanctification.

This blinding vision is not going to come to me if you beat your breast and tear your hair and describe horrifically the evils of the age. Nor is it likely to come from a new catechism, a new hymn book, a new liturgy, a new translation of the Bible, the latest How To Cope With My Problems books from the church publishing house, or from a new resolution on pressing social issues passed by the church in convention. Nor will it come from a union of large church bodies into one mighty and mammoth church body.

That blinding vision—that all my pious talk about God without any involvement in the pain of the world is a pious atheism—is most likely to come to me as I sit in the pew on Sunday morning listening to a preacher who has become subject to the same Word proclaimed to me, a preacher who feels the ethical urgency of the gospel of grace, a preacher whose own heart has been invaded by the dialectic of the message he or she has been authorized to bring to me.

Thomas Kelly described that dialectical process in *A Testament of Devotion*:

A Christian is torn loose from earthly attachments and ambitions—*Contemptus mundi*. But a Christian is also quickened to a divine concern for the world—*Amor mundi*. God plucks the world out of our hearts, loosening the chain of attachment. And he hurls the world into our hearts, where we and he together carry it in infinite love.

In conclusion, may I plead that every time you step into the pulpit you remember me. Please see me in that sea of faces. I will be there, down there in the pew. Not by force of habit, not against my will, but eagerly, joyfully, the ears of my heart pricked to hear the message of the text that has already spoken to you so personally and deeply that it becomes a divine message to me.

Please don't let me down. Don't let me go home the same person I was when I came. Send me home with a new vision of the possibilities of the life lived in Christ.

You can be sure that I will botch up the vision during the week. I'll need to come back every Sunday to have the vision renewed. In fact, that's why I *do* come back.

Please make Sunday for me what it became after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ—the beginning-again-day, the Queen of the week. In collaboration with the Holy Spirit, make each Sunday a fresh new conversion experience, for somehow two births are not enough for me. I need a rebirth every Sunday. I need the midwifery of the message you are authorized by God to bring me every Sunday morning.