



## *Texts in Context*

# Love, Call, and Coming Home: Preaching the Word to the Very Old

JANET RAMSEY

On a winter's afternoon, in a secluded chapel / History is now and England. /  
With the drawing of this Love and the voice of this Calling / We shall not cease  
from exploration / And the end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we  
started / And know the place for the first time.

—T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*

### IN A SECLUDED CHAPEL

When I was asked to write an article on preaching in a long-term care facility, I could easily picture the setting—the quiet afternoons, a group of frail adults, a devoted pianist, the wheelchairs—all suggesting a space for worship apart from the busy world. What I did not image were the intriguing conversations I would have with four of my colleagues, Fred Gaiser, Craig Koester, Roy Harrisville, and Wendell Frerichs,<sup>1</sup> who have for many years taken time from their personal and academic lives to lead worship for the vulnerable elders who live in St. Anthony Park Home in Saint Paul, Minnesota. I conducted semi-structured interviews with these

<sup>1</sup>I wish to thank my colleagues for the time, care, and energy they spent speaking to me about their experiences: Fred Gaiser, professor of Old Testament; Craig Koester, Asher O. and Carrie Nasby Professor of New Testament; Wendell Frerichs, professor emeritus, Old Testament; and Roy Harrisville, professor emeritus, New Testament. All are faculty at Luther Seminary in Saint Paul, Minnesota.

*It is a special privilege to preach to the very old, but the task is not easy. Here, interviews with four seminary professors who regularly preach to these people, coupled with the reflection of an author well versed in working with the aged, might provide helpful background and stimulus for the many who are and will be called to this ministry.*

volunteer chaplains, all of whom were eager to share their thoughts on a special form of ministry.

Later, as I reflected on the themes that emerged from our conversations, I began to hear echoes of a favorite poet and playwright, T. S. Eliot. During a time of war (the London bomb raids of World War II), he wrote poignantly of time and eternity: time—the decay, decline, and good-byes that are inescapable; and eternity—the endless love and calling we recognize more clearly after a lifetime of spiritual exploration.<sup>2</sup> Eliot had an expansive vision of the tidal waves of birth and death; he pictured life as a circular journey leading us home (“to make an end is to make a beginning”), a place we come to know for the first time. He used images from the elements, particularly fire and water, to point to the spiritual shifts in the seasons of our lives (“In the dark time of year / Between melting and freezing / The soul’s sap quivers”<sup>3</sup>), and he suggested that human memories are, in the last years, “ash on an old man’s sleeve.”<sup>4</sup> After combining timeless symbols (borrowed from Dante and others) and personal contemplations (of his own fears and struggles), Eliot concluded his masterpiece with an in-spite-of-it-all affirmation that “all manner of thing shall be well.”<sup>5</sup>

I heard similar combinations and a parallel ending in conversations with my colleagues who minister to the very old. They spoke of the timeless, universal realities of growing old and infirm, and they grounded these reflections in timeless biblical narratives. They also shared some of their personal reactions on caregiving and aging and, like the poet, returned in the end to their faith that God will make all things well, bringing new life out of dead ashes.

The volunteer chaplains spoke openly and often of recent changes in the population in nursing homes. Today, institutional demographics have shifted, and for a positive reason—more and more older people are able to stay home longer and longer, supported by improved community services.<sup>6</sup> But this shift has impacted life in long-term care institutions in less positive ways, for it means that residents are older and weaker, both physically and cognitively, and that there is a more subdued atmosphere, even in a facility such as St. Anthony Park Home, where devoted family members visit often and staff is highly involved. Moving into such an environment is a huge adjustment for the frail elderly—their world suddenly shrinks, their dependency on the care of others increases, and their interest in the evening news disappears. Their own losses (for example, “I still miss my wife every day”) and their present circumstances (“I wonder which nurse is on duty today?”) tend to dominate their thoughts. These residents have lived long, suffered much, and

<sup>2</sup>T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1943).

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>6</sup>Per 10,000 persons age 65 and over, 363 are nursing home residents. See U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *The National Nursing Home Survey: 2004 Overview*, series 13, no. 167 (Hyattsville, MD: DHHS Publications, 2009) 10, at [http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/series/sr\\_13/sr13\\_167.pdf](http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/series/sr_13/sr13_167.pdf). (accessed November 23, 2012).

are now doing the best they can to get through another challenging day. In a nursing home, the hard realities of surviving to a very old age and losing one's health are impossible to ignore.

Why would anyone want to preach in such a setting? Why would anyone return year after year to lead worship? I believe the answer lies in a second reality, in a spiritual vision that something else is happening in the room, something less obvious. Even in the minds and spirits of residents with severe cognitive impairments, there is, as Gaiser put it, "more going on than you think." The chaplains know this because of what they hear and see. On the one hand, most of the residents can no longer converse with mental agility, but, on the other, when they do respond, they say something out of the very depth of their souls. Facial expressions do change, even if they are typically what Eliot called "only a flicker / over the strained time-ridden faces."<sup>7</sup>

The residents' responses, arising out of immediate spiritual hunger and expressed in unpretentious, direct words, mean a great deal to their volunteer chaplains—perhaps more so than the comments of a colleague after seminary chapel. All four spoke repeatedly of the honesty and depth in the responses by residents, labeling them as "testimonial" (Gaiser), "respectful" (Frerichs), and "straight" (Harrisville). Spiritual memories in the very old may look like ashes to the casual observer, but worship brings them alive. As Koester observed, even a resident who doesn't remember a chaplain's name "still knows who God is—and that's what counts."

#### THE DRAWING OF THIS LOVE

Human love is crucially important in the last days of our lives, just as it is after birth. Love is the foundation for trust in a context of great dependency. It is something to cling to, more than ever, when we must move out of our homes and communities to receive care from strangers. But love is a two-edged sword that brings both joy and grief for those who grow very old. As Frerichs put it, "These folks don't have long to live and they must hold on to those they love!" For that reason, he visits residents before the service begins and greets them again afterwards. Even before he begins to preach, a chaplain can be a vehicle for divine care, a reminder to the old that they are not forgotten by God or by God's people.

Eliot believed that faith opens the soul to divine love, and the love I heard in these interviews is creative, incarnational, and redemptive. Creative pastoral love for the old stands in sharp contrast to the cultural values around us, and to the impulses of our own primitive defenses. I have heard pastors and seminarians confess that they find elders' physical infirmities off-putting. Some admit that they are frightened of their own increased vulnerability in the latter years and find it difficult to visit nursing home residents. Perhaps confessing one's own ageism is a good

<sup>7</sup>Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 5.

way to begin to transcend it, but it was refreshing to listen to colleagues who are at a very different place. Their ministry experiences and their theological grounding enable them to see beyond old bodies and love each person as the unique individual she is and has been. They see the embodiment of long histories and recognize strong personalities. Each chaplain spoke, at some point, of the monumental events (including two world wars!) and the great cultural changes these elders have experienced.

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A creative vision calls for a creative response. The residents’ historical location, together with their longevity, complicates the task of preaching to the very old. These chaplains have found that it is not easy to prepare a homily that invites each elder into the current life of the larger church and yet is relevant to his cohort experiences. They ponder what is “relevant” when preaching to the very old and have learned that what is most relevant may not be what is most recent. Rather, relevance can be accomplished by drawing on long-term memories, including those formative experiences that occurred many years ago. In Koester’s wise words, a preacher must achieve “broad abiding within a memory spectrum.”

Active, creative love, furthermore, is not simply the result of having a good imagination, helpful as that may be. It also reflects sound biblical theology—namely, the belief that people of any age are created in God’s image and have roles to play in the kingdom. Because of the incarnation, and because all suffering has been redeemed through the work of Christ, all human experiences are precious. The result for biblical preaching is that the particularity of each person’s life has value, as it intersects meaningfully with God’s story. This is precisely what my colleagues struggle to do in their preaching, in spite of any experiential differences.

The interviews reminded me, too, of how intricately creative love for older adults is woven into respect. I recall a cognitively impaired man in his early 80s whose wife brought him to me for psychotherapy many years ago. After several sessions, he confided, “Love is good, but it’s respect I really want.” His honest words have been for me a constant reminder of the ageism that surrounds us and of how desperately older persons wish to be loved and honored, even after they are no longer productive in the eyes of an industrialist society. Happily, respect was present, explicitly and implicitly, in these four interviews. I heard it in both tone of voice and in content. For example, I asked how these veteran chaplains might advise inexperienced seminarians who are conducting worship with the vulnerable old for the first time. “Don’t talk down to these folks. Don’t shout at them!” said Harrisville. “They deserve the same attention and richness of worship as any congrega-

tion,” insisted Gaiser. My colleagues have affection for the residents they serve, but they also give them what they desire most—respect.

Respectful love in nursing home chaplaincy is also exhibited through paying attention to detail in planning, so that worship is genuinely incarnational. It must bring together, over and over, the most mundane of human concerns with the strongest of divine promises. The physical, social, and emotional struggles of each resident cannot be implicitly denied through some sort of jolly, patronizing attitude; rather, hard-won Christian joy must be evident. Even if nursing home preachers cannot know the changing medical status of every person, on every visit, they can try, as Koester notes, to find ways to address these realities with as much specificity, sensitivity, and courage as possible.

Simultaneously, the hope we have in Christ remains a central theme, precisely in light of the many losses in the room, both present and anticipated. Nothing can separate us from the love of Christ, Frerichs affirms. For nursing home chaplains, the list of maladies and disasters in Rom 8:38 serves as a powerful model for preaching that does not ignore present realities and become “pie in the sky” (Gaiser), but that confidently proclaims “our eternal destiny—over and over again” (Frerichs). Harrisville told me, “They want Jesus! I preach Jesus!” Older Christians want the truth, and they want it straight. They want to be assured that, after so many good-byes, there is one Face that will never go away.

Telling the truth leads ultimately to preaching that is redemptive. This ministry calls for a faithful stillness that is focused on the cross of Christ. Only there do the pain and joy of love meet in a symbol of great hope. I believe that the faith of a chaplain, his determination to live out a theology of the cross, is the greatest resource he has for ministry with the sickly old, whose life has become much like sitting in a waiting room. Is the chaplain’s own devotional life such that her eyes are focused daily on Christ’s cross? Can she peacefully wait for God with faith and love, even in the midst of difficult present days? Only then can she preach powerfully of the redemptive possibilities in waiting itself. Eliot writes, “I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope / For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love / For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith / But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.”<sup>8</sup>

## THE VOICE OF THIS CALLING

A sense of a vocation that is both challenging and rewarding was noticeable in these interviews. All four chaplains used decidedly vocational language to describe their work at St. Anthony Park Home. Frerichs, who has been preaching there for over fifty years, told me his call began as a young child, preaching “to the birds and squirrels.” He has always found it easier to preach to older persons: “They are more respectful, more willing to listen.” Recently, in the face of some of Frerichs’s own

<sup>8</sup>Ibid, 15.

health issues, a friend suggested he discontinue leading worship. “Why would I do that?” he responded. “This is my calling!”

Having a lifelong call to preach does not mean, however, that the task becomes simple. Against the idea that seminary professors would consider it easy to preach in a nursing home, I heard humility, self-doubt, and a “beginner’s mind.”<sup>9</sup> These chaplains have a constant sense of wanting to learn something new, of trying to become better at what they do. Gaiser spoke of his initial reactions to being asked to volunteer—“How the heck would you do that!”—and his continuing assumption—“Maybe if I do this long enough, I’ll figure out how to do it!” Koester continues to evaluate his effectiveness: “I can do the high-end academic stuff, but can I articulate the gospel and be a catalyst to help people, even in their last years, express their faith?” He also mentioned running into an acquaintance who seemed surprised to find him doing this work: “I was surprised at her surprise!”

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A primary struggle for all four men is finding fresh ways to communicate familiar Bible stories, particularly in light of cognitive impairments.<sup>10</sup> Koester wonders, “What responses am I getting, and if I can’t discern a response, where do I go? How do I know that I am being a helpful communicator of the gospel when I can’t see a response?” Harrisville confesses, “Sometimes I wonder if I’m doing any good,” and Gaiser admits that he finds the ministry both frustrating and rewarding: “At times I feel that nothing is happening, and this is so different from the feedback we are used to.” Perhaps this is why those moments when a resident simply nods her head, or makes a quiet comment, are so important. This subtle but sincere feedback helps the chaplains trust that the Spirit is at work. “It’s all about trusting the word. Trust the word!” (Gaiser); “They want to hear the gospel, and they light up when they do—even say, ‘Amen!’” (Harrisville). In the end, and in spite of any lingering doubts, the balance tips decidedly towards vocational meaningfulness. “Even if the preaching must be done on a different level, the gospel isn’t different, just its articulation” (Gaiser). Harrisville expressed his trust in the Spirit’s ability to work with typical directness: “In the end, I don’t have any questions about the usefulness of this worship. They need it!”

<sup>9</sup>“In the beginner’s mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert’s there are few.” Shunryu Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind* (Halifax, Nova Scotia: Shambhala, 2011) 2.

<sup>10</sup>Even though they appreciate the presence of visiting family members and friends, as well as staff (or, as Gaiser calls them, “the over-hearers”), these chaplains clearly see their primary task as preaching to the residents themselves.

But these chaplains did not speak solely of the challenges of their own calling—more often they spoke of the vocations of the residents themselves, and they wondered how to address this in their sermons. Most folks in a nursing home will no longer be serving on social ministry committees, advocating for justice in the public arena, or fulfilling a vocation in a lifelong profession. But, as Luther taught, God calls each person to live out his beliefs, even in a small, quiet setting. This vocation, for Frerichs, includes a call to mission. “I want to help these people pass on the faith to the next generation, just as I do in my own family. They can share with visitors, ‘I went to church this morning, and this is what I heard.’ They have friends in the nursing home, and they can share what God has done for them today, not just keep the faith to comfort themselves.”

It also includes intentional prayer, both for others as well as self. Harrisville noted, “They can still pray for their neighbors and friends, even though they can’t move about.” Ultimately, prayer benefits both petitioner and recipient. Centered more on being than doing, prayer as vocation during the latter years is, paradoxically, a way to do something for those we love and worry about, including children and grandchildren. It is also an important way to remain involved with a broken world and to work for justice, albeit invisibly. Prayer brings the peace of God that “is no peace,”<sup>11</sup> since it does not take away all fears and concerns; but it is hope-filled, since it occurs precisely at the intersection of present needs and the timeless moment. It is the only peace we need, in our later years, as we begin to think more and more about coming home to God.<sup>12</sup>

#### ARRIVING WHERE WE STARTED

It is beyond the scope of this article to explore the complex psychological aspects of what it might mean to arrive back home at the end of life, but a brief disclaimer of what this does not mean is in order. To arrive back home is not (as we too often hear in popular language) to become a child again. Older adults—no matter how frail and dependent they have become—are not, and should never be referred to as, children.<sup>13</sup> Each elder has lived through plenteous experiences, grown in personal maturity, and perhaps become wiser. She is not having a “second childhood” merely because she is now very old.

As a Christian convert, Eliot’s focus was on spiritual aspects of coming home. He envisioned life as traveling out after birth, exploring and loving, and then arriving back to a familiar place at the end. Aging is often described as a journey,<sup>14</sup> and,

<sup>11</sup>William A. Percy, “They Cast Their Nets,” in *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1978) #449, stanza 4.

<sup>12</sup>I was very moved, during our interview, to discover that my colleague Wendell Frerichs prays daily for me and for his other colleagues at Luther Seminary.

<sup>13</sup>Other than, of course, as children of the Heavenly Father, as are we all.

<sup>14</sup>See, for example, Cole Thomas’s 1842 painting, *The Voyage of Life: Old Age*. Available at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Cole\\_Thomas\\_The\\_Voyage\\_of\\_Life\\_Old\\_Age\\_1842.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Cole_Thomas_The_Voyage_of_Life_Old_Age_1842.jpg) (accessed September 28, 2012).

for old Christians, coming home has rich spiritual implications. Often a relationship with God is now in the foreground and relationships with the world have receded into the background. Frerichs, who is in his eighties, described this frankly: “I guess I find myself both more out of tune with the present world, and more in tune with what I hope will be our eternal destiny. I’m not as much in love with this present world, except for my wife and family.”

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Coming home is one bookend for each life story, as Eliot suggested, and these chaplains are convinced that preaching in a nursing home is best done in narrative form. Perhaps because storytelling here is not so much an intellectual exercise as an opportunity to speak from the heart, it has the potential to help both preacher and hearer “arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time.”<sup>15</sup> Typically, many of the residents already know Bible stories well, but they love to hear them over and over again, just as a good preacher loves to tell them. But their deeper knowledge and understanding comes because the old story of God’s love is being told in a new life context, at a new point in time, closer to the journey’s end. Many, even those with mild cognitive impairments, are now actively engaged in what gerontologists call “life review.” This is a time for going back over your life to consider where you have been, whom you have loved, and the self you have become. To hear the old, old story during life review can surely mean knowing and being known more deeply than ever before.

Of course, deeper knowing does not always occur during the sermon, as these chaplains all acknowledged. Rather, the Lord’s Prayer, Holy Communion, and hymn singing can be powerful vehicles for the Spirit’s work. Something unique happens when the word is heard in hymns, linked to musical memories long gone from the conscious mind. An entirely different part of the human brain responds. Several chaplains mentioned watching expressions on the old faces during hymns, and Frerichs recalled a woman, now deceased, who was no longer able to sing because of a stroke. “She would beam during the singing. She was singing in her heart and mind, even without her voice.”

Music, preaching, and liturgy all have the capacity to break down barriers to spiritual closeness in old age,<sup>16</sup> and, for many Christians, coming home means a closer knowing that helps us comprehend what it means to have been held, all through life, in God’s strong arms. Chaplains, as well as seniors, need this divine care, and these interviews suggest that one of the most rewarding aspects of minis-

<sup>15</sup>Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 47.

<sup>16</sup>See Janet L. Ramsey and Rosemary Blieszner, *Spiritual Resiliency and Aging: Hope, Relationality, and the Creative Self* (Amityville, NY: Baywood, 2012).



try in a nursing home is the spiritual intimacy available. With the old, intimacy and hope appear to intermingle in ways that transcend pastoral closeness with the young and active. Commented Gaiser, “They are, all of them, within a few years of death, and so the proclamation of the promise of resurrection is closer to me, too, in this setting.” “Their faith holds up my faith,” shared Harrisville. Near the end of his interview, Koester reflected quietly on his the importance of spiritual intimacy during times of personal transition. “At the time of my mother’s death, I was privileged to be able to sing her home into the arms of Jesus.” Later he spoke of the residents’ relationships with God, and his desire to experience a similar relational faith at the end of his own life: “This is such an intimate thing, this knowing and being known.”

When first asked to lead worship at St. Anthony Park Home, none of these four professor/chaplains could foresee the many years they would participate nor the importance this ministry would come to have in their lives. At first, they accepted because leadership was so urgently needed and because they had the required gifts and experience. “They were persistent. I had to say yes,” Harrisville confessed. Koester replied, “Not everyone can do this, and that’s why I said yes.” But what they ultimately discovered went beyond a meeting of their own gifts and the world’s great needs.<sup>17</sup> They found that preaching in a nursing home can be a path to deeper knowledge, a new way to know and to be known. They rediscovered that powerful something that occurs when the word meets the world.

In the coming years, many of us who are pastors will be asked to preach in a nursing home. Hopefully, the honest and wise reflections shared here will be an encouragement to approach this special ministry as a path worthy of our time and talent. It is a privilege, always and in all places, to embody the love and to answer the call to preach creatively, incarnational, and redemptively. And it is a special privilege to preach to the very old, who have a “strange sense of vitality that transcends their physical vulnerabilities” (Koester). To share in their daily lives and to offer the healing word is not something “ephemeral,” adds Koester: “This transcends the decades!” ⊕

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<sup>17</sup>Frederick Buechner spoke of this meeting of one’s passions and the world’s needs in *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (New York: Harper One, 1993).