



Texts in Context

Preaching to Shape Congregational Identity

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It has been suggested that the gospels are “sermons to sustain the church.”¹ Reading the gospels with an understanding of when they were written certainly supports this view. Members of the early Christian communities to which the gospels were directed—living not only some forty to seventy years after the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus of Nazareth but also after the destruction of the temple—did indeed need sustaining. They needed strengthening for living in a Greco-Roman world, often alongside some of the Jewish communities that did not accept Jesus as Messiah.

Warren Carter has called the Gospel of Matthew an “identity-forming, life-style-shaping narrative.”² This crucial factor for early faith communities—trying to shape their identity and outlook on who they were in light of God’s work in Jesus Christ—is as relevant today as it was then. Preaching on the gospels provides opportunity to shape congregational identity. It offers an occasion to address congregations as collective disciples—to preach in a way that seeks to aid in the formation and transformation of the congregation’s distinctive identity.

¹Willi Marxsen, *The Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970) 165.

²Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins: A Socio-political and Religious Reading* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000) 8.

The gospels served to shape the identity of early Christian hearers. Preaching on the gospels provides opportunity today to shape congregational identity. It offers an occasion to address congregations as collective disciples—to preach in a way that seeks to aid in the formation and transformation of the congregation’s distinctive identity.

VISTAS ON MATTHEW AS SEEKING TO SHAPE COMMUNITY IDENTITY

Matthew's second-generation Christians, living around the year 90 C.E., were "facing a crisis of identity."³ His Jewish Christian communities were in the process of differentiating themselves from Jewish communities that were not following Jesus as Messiah. The Gospel presents Jesus as an authorized, skilled, and reliable interpreter of Torah. The evangelist wants his community to realize that by following the commands of Jesus they are fulfilling the Torah and finding their identity as a community. Their commitment as disciples of this Jesus Messiah—disciples who do the will of God and who themselves make disciples—is what shapes their identity as a community.⁴ Preaching that addresses the church as collective disciples will shape the congregational identity.⁵

VOICES ON PREACHING AS SHAPING CONGREGATIONAL IDENTITY

"The practice of preaching constitutes a people with a distinctive identity in the world," writes Edwin Searcy.⁶ The "central concern" with such preaching, he maintains, "is how Scripture intends to shape the people of God."⁷ The congregation in such preaching is placed between the text and the interpreter, where the text addresses the congregation's struggle to believe and to hear the call to serve. Searcy hastens to emphasize that the vocation of the preacher is "the building up of the body of Christ"—that is, as a congregation.

Searcy is just one of various voices who have spoken to the identity-shaping role of preaching. Bob Larochelle based his Doctor of Ministry thesis (Chicago Theological Seminary) on his work at Congregational Union (Connecticut) to intentionally create, through preaching, a congregational identity of a welcoming community.⁸ Feeling it was crucial to "preach welcoming with our own lives, extending kindness and hospitality to those within the church community, including those who may not agree with us on a particular issue," Larochelle set about developing differing preaching approaches to challenge his hearers to consider the full implications of a welcoming identity.⁹ Reflecting on the undertaking, he concluded that indeed "the act of preaching makes a significant contribution to the development" of the congregation's identity.¹⁰

³Edgar Krentz, "Identity Formation: Matthew as Resource and Guide," *Word & World* 18/4 (1998) 411.

⁴G. D. Kirkpatrick, *The Origins of the Gospel according to St. Matthew* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1946) 59–100.

⁵A resource this writer looks forward to using as an aid in proclaiming the Gospel of Matthew and its shaping of congregational identity is the new seven-volume series *Feasting on the Gospels*, ed. Cynthia A. Jarvis and E. Elizabeth Johnson (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2013). Volume 1, Matthew, Chapters 1–13, is available.

⁶Edwin Searcy, "Shaping Congregational Identity," in *The New Interpreter's Handbook of Preaching*, ed. Paul Scott Wilson (Nashville: Abingdon, 2008) 418.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Bob Larochelle, "All Are Welcome: Preaching and the Development of Church Identity," *Congregations* (Winter 2009) 17–21.

⁹Ibid., 18.

¹⁰Ibid., 20

Laying out the parameters of addressing identity formation according to the Gospel of Matthew, Edgar Krentz, writing for this journal some fifteen years ago, concluded that “anyone preaching from Matthew must stress the identity of Jesus in seeking to shape the identity of the preacher’s congregation in Matthean terms.”¹¹

When I mentioned my research into this topic to Pat Keifert, professor of systematic theology at Luther Seminary, his response was “we Lutherans aren’t very good at that. Our Roman Catholic sisters and brothers are.”¹² So I specifically sought out several persons with longtime experience teaching and writing about Christian identity or spiritual direction. Joyce Rupp, O.S.M., spiritual director and author of twenty-eight books on both individually and communally conceived spiritual growth, noted that priests attempt to form and shape the community’s spiritual life through the homily. Thus what she hears in the homily is seldom an exegetical understanding of a text of Scripture. Rather the priest attempts to apply the message to the community’s spiritual formation.¹³ Gregory Heille, O.P., professor of homiletics at Aquinas Institute of Theology in St. Louis, spoke about the need for priests to preach toward the goal of creating an awareness of an individual but also a communal sense of formation for the practice of discipleship.¹⁴

“As the church preaches, so the church believes”

Kay L. Northcutt, an ordained minister of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), also relates spiritual direction and preaching; she states, “Viewed from the lens of spiritual direction, the sermon becomes an occasion that not only orients us to God and to biblical stories of God’s activity, but also to...practices of being formed as a people of God.”¹⁵

Many others agree. Susan Bond says of preaching that it “forms a community’s shared way of knowing.”¹⁶ Bond continues, “We do, through preaching, structure a communally shared understanding of dynamic faith that is related to the tradition, to the daily life of decision making of believers, and to the ethical projects of the church.”¹⁷

David Buttrick proposes, “As the church preaches, so the church believes”—asserting that “obviously preaching shapes our common faith.”¹⁸ The four au-

¹¹Krentz, “Identity Formation,” 416.

¹²Personal conversation, October 8, 2013.

¹³Personal correspondence, November 2013. Joyce Rupp is well known for her work as a writer, a spiritual “midwife,” and retreat and conference speaker. She has led retreats throughout North America, as well as in Europe, Asia, Africa, Australia, and New Zealand.

¹⁴Phone conversation, November 1, 2013.

¹⁵Kay L. Northcutt, *Kindling Desire for God: Preaching as Spiritual Direction* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009) 7.

¹⁶L. Susan Bond, *Trouble with Jesus: Women, Christology, and Preaching* (St. Louis: Chalice, 1999) 16.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸David G. Buttrick, *Preaching Jesus Christ: An Exercise in Homiletic Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988) 69.

thors of the book *Believing in Preaching* have served as pastors of churches and have done extensive interviewing of pastors on the topic of preaching. From this background these authors argue, “In that preaching moment something is happening to who we are as individuals and a community of faith”; indeed, “we are convinced that week by week [preachers] are helping to shape the people with whom [they] minister.”¹⁹

VENUES WHERE PREACHING SHAPED COMMUNITY IDENTITY

Where do we see preaching shaping communal identity? We’ll take a look at an extensive survey of churchgoers that explored how interviewees saw preaching shaping their communities of faith. Then I will share a specific example, based particularly on preaching on texts from the Gospel of Matthew.

Survey results

One hundred and twenty-eight churchgoers were interviewed first by means of a paper questionnaire and then in an hour-long interview. Among the questions posed was, “How does preaching shape your community?” Persons from the twenty-eight congregations, representing a wide range of denominations in the Midwest and South, affirmed that preaching, in their view, helped “form the congregation’s identity.”²⁰

The interviewers received a wide range of responses to their questions. Diverse though the replies were, the respondents were able to “articulate a distinct understanding about what goes on in the congregation as a result of the sermon.”²¹ It was easiest for most of the persons who listened to sermons to talk easily about how they appropriated those sermons personally. Yet even those responses shed light on how the preaching they heard shaped their congregation into a community. Preachers did this, they said, by the frequent use of “us” in their statements. “It instructs us. It guides us.”²² The homily “certainly does kind of affect our vision as a congregation.”²³ Thus, while many listeners’ experiences were individual, the study revealed a significant number of occasions when a “corporate identity” resulted.

The authors who compiled the survey results spoke of a cluster of persons who understood “the sermon as addressing the congregation as an aggregate of individual listeners.”²⁴ These respondents shared how preaching shapes that congregational aggregate. Their answers, although not very developed, revealed their belief about congregation-shaping sermons. While some of these interviewees

¹⁹Mary Alice Mulligan, Diane Turner-Sharazz, Dawn Ottoni Wilhelm, and Ronald J. Allen, *Believing in Preaching: What Listeners Hear in Sermons* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2005) 150.

²⁰Ibid., 128.

²¹Ibid.

²²Ibid., 130.

²³Ibid., 132.

²⁴Ibid., 133.

were not always able to describe exactly how preaching was “doing something in congregational formation,”²⁵ they were convinced sermons were functioning in this capacity. They shared these convictions by giving concrete examples of how their congregations had changed as a result of preaching. Given the diversity of these men and women, representing four decades of life, different ethnic groups, and a variety of denominations, the conviction that the preaching event helps shape the congregation’s identity is clearly held by a wide variety of sermon listeners.

The authors of the book *Believing in Preaching* found many of the respondents in their survey to affirm personal benefits from listening to sermons. Yet they discovered that “the greater sense is that the sermon is doing something in the congregation as a communal entity” and thus they “were able to discuss...the congregational shaping” that was taking place as a result of the preaching in which they participated.²⁶ One interviewee, remembering a sermon preached ten years earlier (!), told how that sermon shaped and changed the congregation by unifying the congregants on aspects of their “belief systems” and their “steps of faith” as far as goals for the Christian life were concerned.²⁷ Other examples of community identity, while reflecting diversity in the expression of their ideas, revealed “the communal aspect of their listening” that was “striking.”²⁸

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A strength of the extensive survey work that resulted in the chapter “How Preaching Shapes the Faith Community” was its interviews of preachers. They were asked what they thought should shape the faith of their listeners. But the main question addressed to these preachers was “what do you hope will happen to the congregation as a result of their listening to the sermon?”

One pastor responded, “I’m a vision painter again and again and again, pointing ‘Here’s where the gospel is leading us.’”²⁹ All the responses received from preachers indicated their sense that during their preaching something was going on in the life not only of individuals, but among the people whom they believed were being shaped into a congregation. A very insightful response by a number of preachers was that they saw their sermons as “shaping the congregation into a communal identity listener.”³⁰

One minister interviewed gave an example of preaching a sermon when he

²⁵Ibid., 136.

²⁶Ibid., 141.

²⁷Ibid., 142.

²⁸Ibid., 143.

²⁹Ibid., 146.

³⁰Ibid., 147.

experienced the individuals becoming a single unit. Dietrich Bonhoeffer called this “the spiritual unity of the church—the collective person.”³¹ This minister described his experience in terms of entertainers who talk about the moment in their concerts when they sense that they and the audience become one. Likewise, in the sermon the minister preached, he also felt that he experienced a spiritual connectedness when the speaking and hearing began to be done together as a congregation.³² Preachers who preach with a sense of community identity are most likely to help shape congregational identity.

Another preacher who spoke of addressing the congregation as communal-identity listeners put it this way: “For me, the primary goal is for people to be spiritually transformed by encountering God for themselves.”³³ “I want wholeness for people and a wholeness that’s going to bring wholeness to the rest of society. So, it’s pretty big. Without the sermon you do not have a group of people being nurtured in a shared vision of the Christian experience.”³⁴

In sum, the survey respondents would agree that “the sermon really plays a crucial role in keeping a congregation focused, in giving it a focal point, in giving it an identity.”³⁵

Results from preaching week in and week out

The congregation where I served as a pastor formed an identity as a mission-minded community. It is my belief that this identity was shaped in large part by many of the sermons that were preached by my co-pastor of twenty-one years and me. Specifically, we sensed this “mission identity” was beginning to be formed with our sermons on Matthew in Year A of the Revised Common Lectionary.

In our semiannual retreats to plan the preaching schedule, we felt preaching from the lectionary served us well in our attempt to mold, educate, inspire, and shape the identity of the congregation. We didn’t even have a special stewardship sermon, let alone a series of sermons at the time of year when congregational members were being asked to consider their annual commitment of time, talents, and money. Because the topic of money appears quite frequently throughout the lectionary readings each year, we would address the topic of stewardship at those times. (As has been noted for a long time, almost half of Jesus’ teachings address the topic of money.) This also held true for such topics as hospitality, forgiveness, discipleship, the inbreaking of the reign of God, and the embodiment of “that reign in our common life so that the rest of the world may be able to imagine it and enter it.”³⁶ Rather than preaching a series of sermons on each of these or other top-

³¹Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Communion of Saints: A Dogmatic Inquiry into the Sociology of the Church* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963) 137.

³²Mulligan et al., 147.

³³Ibid., 147–148.

³⁴Ibid., 148.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Mary Hinkle Shore, “Preaching Mission: Call and Promise in Matthew 28:16–20,” *Word & World* 26/3 (2006) 328.

ics, we saw an advantage of focusing on various topics as they repeatedly appeared on a regular basis in the lectionary. In this way we felt our fellow congregational members could engage a specific aspect of the gospel message throughout the year instead of only during a six- or eight-week sermon series. (Now with the Narrative Lectionary, hearers of sermons will engage even more challenging and empowering topics set in longer readings at worship.)³⁷

Thus our fellow congregational members, together with us in our sermons, could wrestle with the role of discipleship, the commission to make disciples, the mandate for mission on six weekends during the year of Matthew from Matt 9:35–10:23, 10:24–39, 15:21–28, 16:21–18, and 28:16–20 (which appears twice in the lectionary). Congregants engaged with sermons on these and other texts could see what Arland Hultgren calls the “symmetry of mission and ministry in the first gospel.”³⁸

Several weeks after three sermons were preached on the lectionary texts from Matt 25, a member of the congregation came to visit us. He related how the three sermons had kept him thinking, day after day. He had also remembered parts of sermons that year about the harvest being plentiful but the laborers few; the parable of the sower flinging seed on all kinds of soil; Jesus’ commission to go “to the lost sheep of the house of Israel”—those taxed by religious authorities to the point of extreme poverty; and he remembered a specific quote in a sermon that year on the Beatitudes that “the scandal of the gospel is that God gives a future to those in the grip of despair.”³⁹ (This member was faithful in worship, in weekly Bible study, and always eager to discuss the sermon after worship or during the week.) He came up with this idea, based on his continued wrestling with the three texts and the sermons he heard us preach on those and other texts: “Why don’t we challenge the congregation to add \$10,000 to the budget for the purpose of adding new areas of outreach and care for those in the grip of despair?” He would invite four other persons in the congregation to join him in visiting service agencies in the community. They would ask to see printed material on how the monies the agencies received were spent and how many persons were involved in the ministry of these agencies. These persons and he would then suggest to the congregational leadership five agencies to receive the money from this special “Community Concerns Fund.” And more. These persons would ask if several members of our congregation could help the agencies with “hands-on ministry” and whether or not one of our congregational members could serve on their board.

When the proposal for this added outreach ministry of dollars and personal commitment was presented to the leadership and then to the congregation as a

³⁷For more information on the Narrative Lectionary, see WorkingPreacher.org, a website sponsored by the Center for Biblical Preaching at Luther Seminary, that offers information on both the Narrative Lectionary and the RCL. See http://www.workingpreacher.org/narrative_faqs.aspx (accessed January 23, 2013). See also Steve Thorne-gate, “What’s the Text? Alternatives to the Common Lectionary,” *The Christian Century* 130/22 (2013) 22–27.

³⁸Arland J. Hultgren, “Mission and Ministry in Matthew,” *Word & World* 18/4 (1998) 341.

³⁹A claim I had heard in several lectures over the years by Walter Brueggemann.

whole, it was enthusiastically received and adopted. (Looking back on the response of that envisioning member to our sermons, I believe it was similar to what Stanley Hauerwas hopes will happen to those who read his commentary on Matthew. States Hauerwas, “I have tried to write in a manner that the reader is encouraged to discover and make connections.”⁴⁰) For more than fifteen years, an additional ten percent growth in the amount of money for this local benevolence fund was committed. These decisions made by the congregation were rooted in their sense of identity as rooted in the gospel. Our confirmation-age youth spent one Saturday a year visiting these agencies, talking to the people who helped run the programs and often those who were being served by the agencies. The result? Some of these middle-school youth, often asking a parent to join them, became part of the weekly ministry teams at these agencies and didn’t just serve people at shelters but sat and ate with them.

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When lectionary texts appeared on the topic of outreach, mission, caring, and sharing, it was natural for us to use personal stories from the youth and adults involved in these ministries as illustrative material in our sermons. The gospels had helped shape an identity that in turn was able to further support that continued identity development.

New ministries and missions began some years after this additional outreach ministry was initiated. Members became involved in a variety of ways: as a director of a Churches United Food Pantry; as weekly workers in helping mothers who were single and living in the inner city learn to sew, prepare healthy meals, and learn about basic health care for infants; as persons inspiring congregational members to provide clothing all year long at a clothes closet where some of our members worked each week. This involvement in outreach ministry got underway shortly after a sermon on “the Great Commission” in Matt 28, the lectionary text prescribed for Trinity Sunday and for All Saints Sunday in Year A of the RCL.

Because I had been invited to participate in a weeklong pilgrimage to and with the Lutheran Center in Mexico City several weeks prior to a sermon, I was able to describe how moved I was to “walk with” some of the people of Mexico City and its surrounding territory. As our group accompanied these people in their daily life, in their Base Christian Communities, in their community center where they made stationery from trash paper picked up on the street, and where they began a daycare center, and where they began to engage mothers as well as fathers (most of whom had fallen away from the church) in Bible study and worship and in taking the first steps of discipleship, I could then describe this “accompaniment” in that sermon. Afterwards, several persons during the coffee hour were asking

⁴⁰Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2006) 19.

each other if they too would like to make such a pilgrimage. By the following spring break, a group of fifteen adults and high school youth left for a week of immersion into the lives of children, youth, and adults in Mexico. Members of this group stayed for a night in the homes of persons who often spoke no English. The next morning they gathered, some literally arm-in-arm with their hosts, at the community center in an impoverished valley of nearly eight million people. Upon their return to the congregation in Iowa, money was raised to expand the fledgling daycare center and for mothers there to be trained as daycare teachers in the center. This money was given to the center via a third party so the people in that community did not know where it came from. For the next fourteen years, high school youth together with adults made the annual pilgrimage with me over spring break. During the first pilgrimage, our group of fifteen persons ate some meals at the center with another group of pilgrims from a Presbyterian church in Los Angeles under the guidance of former Iranian hostage Terri Waite. When several of those pilgrims asked where our group was from and learned the name of our church in Iowa, they responded, “We’ve heard of you and your commitment to mission.” (They had heard that our congregation set aside thirty percent of its annual budget for benevolence.)⁴¹ It was then that some of us began to realize that our congregational identity was indeed that of a mission-minded and mission-directed community.

Members of our congregation would tell coworkers, fellow students, neighbors, and visitors after worship who we were and what we were about in that place, in that community, in Mexico and through our global missionaries in Japan and Ethiopia. It is my conviction that preaching the Gospel of Matthew helped shape that specific identity of the congregation. When the topics of outreach, of caring, of healing, of feeding and clothing, of teaching, of compassionate listening appeared in lectionary texts, it was natural to give witness in sermons to how our congregation was involved in specific ministries. Small wonder such a large number of our members were enthusiastic about sharing who we were as a congregation with others.

Shaped by the gospel, the congregation came to see their identity in that gospel, to listen for it in the preaching of that gospel, and to respond as disciples sharing an identity as a congregation. 

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⁴¹It has been suggested that Matthew’s may have been “a relatively wealthy urban community,” and so was the suburban congregation described here. M. Eugene Boring, “The Gospel of Matthew: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, ed. Leander E. Keck, 12 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995) 8:104.