

## Preaching as a Spiritual Discipline

### INTRODUCTION

The temptation exists for preachers to view preaching as merely a rhetorical, technical task instead of what it is ultimately intended to be—a spiritual, devotional journey into the Christ whom the preacher proclaims. This trend in homiletic practice can detract from the preacher's Christian *ethos* (love for God and love for people) and preaching joy. The result is often homiletic fatigue, pastoral burnout, or, worse, moral failure.

Preachers can benefit significantly from a guide to developing and delivering sermons that fosters and maintains both spiritual intensity and homiletic integrity. The *task of preaching* does not have to be separated from the *spirituality of the preacher*. Many pastors feel guilty about not having time for their “personal devotions” because they are too busy preparing sermons. What if pastors could tackle the weekly homiletic task as a devotional journey? What if the many hours spent on developing sermons could serve another purpose, that of developing preachers?

I have created a process for the development and delivery of sermons that not only has the potential to foster good sermons but also to form godly pastors. This devotional homiletic process is shared at the end of this article, after stating the contemporary case for such a process.

### PROBLEM

When I began to preach as a local church pastor on a weekly basis, I was twenty-three years old and in awe of both the wonderful privilege and daunting responsibility of proclaiming the good news. Simply put, I was overwhelmed. The feeling of being overwhelmed with the call to preach had a purifying effect upon my soul for it caused me to rely more heavily upon God throughout the homiletic process than upon my own limited experience and abilities. I prayed and, quite often, even fasted as I wrestled with God for insight into the coming Sunday's text, insight that was theologically informed and spiritually formative. I needed God and I knew it. Preaching was for me, in the earliest days of my pastoral ministry, a spiritual discipline that formed the character of Christ in me as I sought his guiding and anointing. The homiletic process of my early days in ministry was more of a devotional journey that shaped me than a rhetorical task to be checked off my weekly to-do list.

The more I preached, however, the more confident I became with my increasing skills and the less overwhelmed I felt. A peculiar thing happened. I began to pray less. Sermon development and delivery became much easier as it was reduced from a spiritual discipline to a technical task. I found my homiletic rhythm by learning *how* to preach. Preaching, admittedly, became for me a rhetorical technique that overshadowed the spiritual discipline it once was. What I once viewed as an opportunity to engage and be engaged by God became a task to be completed. This change in perspective eventually diminished for me the joy of preaching and its spiritually formative nature.

My preaching crisis, and the broader contemporary crisis in preaching, is described and lamented by Michael Pasquarello:

[T]he most unquestioned homiletic assumption of our time: that the primary task of preaching is a matter of finding the right rhetorical technique, homiletic style, and evangelistic strategy to translate and make Christianity useful, appealing, relevant and entertaining on terms dictated by a consumerist culture. This understanding of preaching

... in practice, shifts the weight of dependence from the efficacy of the Spirit to an almost exclusive dependence on human personality, ingenuity, method, and skill. (*Christian Preaching* 166)

Pasquarello is not denying the importance of skill, style, or technique. He is, however, rightfully concerned with the shifting “weight of dependence” from the Spirit to technique. This shift of dependence eventually leads to a divorce between preacher and preaching, witness and words. André Resner notes the divorce when he writes, “To preach the cross of Christ and not to live out the cross for others effects a separation of witness: one’s lived witness is separated from one’s verbal witness” (149).

The different approaches to preaching (i.e., rhetorical technique versus spiritual discipline) can be evidenced by the focal points of the preacher in the homiletic process. My homiletic process, over time, became consumed with matters such as putting together a clever and relevant sermon, finding a biblical text that would fit somehow with a captivating story I heard, or utilizing props and multi-media images that would help me to communicate the message most effectively. While these concerns are not necessarily wrong and should be considered, they are not the first and primary focal points for the Christian preacher. These matters focus exclusively on rhetorical technique and can be addressed without any relational connection to the Christ whom the preacher is called to proclaim.

When preaching is viewed primarily as a spiritual discipline and not merely a rhetorical technique, the preacher begins with a different set of focal concerns that drive the homiletic process. Preaching as a spiritual discipline causes the preacher to be consumed with what God is saying through the text to the preacher and his or her church, as well as with how God is seeking to conform both the preacher and the church to the pattern of Christ through the text. The process of developing and delivering Sunday’s sermon can and should maintain congruence between the message (Christ) and the messenger (preacher) so that the theological wisdom proclaimed shapes the people of God to live into the story of God revealed in Scripture. These primary issues cannot be addressed unless the preacher has an intimate relationship with the Triune God, the One who must drive the homiletic process for preaching to have a power beyond the scope of human rhetorical ability (See 1 Cor. 2:1-5).

The spirituality of the preacher, what I define as a deep identification with and abiding in Christ, adds something to a sermon that mere technique cannot. Throughout the history of the Church, many Christians have written about this *something*, though the literature over the past several decades seems scant at best. These historic thinkers and writers suggest that the *something* that draws listeners into the preaching event beyond the eloquence of the sermon is the *ethos* of the preacher. Richard Baxter affirms this reality:

All work must be done spiritually, as by one who is possessed by the Holy Ghost...  
There is in some men’s preaching a spiritual strain which spiritual hearers can discern and relish; and in some men this sacred tincture is so wanting that, even when they speak of spiritual things, the manner is such as if they were common matters. (138)

While rhetorical eloquence can most certainly assist the preacher in the homiletic process, the *ethos* of the preacher is a greater, or at least equal, factor in the power of Christian proclamation. Christian *ethos* can be defined as faithful obedience to the Great Commandment, which is to love God and love people (Luke 10:27). This love is not only taught, but modeled, by Christ and

incarnated in the life of the preacher through the consistent and authentic practice of spiritual disciplines that promote these two loves (Westerhoff 1). Genuine spirituality will heighten one's capacity to love God and others (Bugg 12-18).

Love for God and for others, as embodied by Jesus, demanded extreme self-sacrifice. This love goes well beyond surface sentimentality. That is, Jesus' love for the Father was evidenced by the cruciformity of his will to the Father's will, and Jesus' love for others was evidenced by the cruciformity of his well-being for the needs of others. Cruciformity demands the subordination of personal ego, ambition, will, and desire in favor of God's glory and the well-being of people. The preacher's love for God and others, which heightens *ethos*, will demand no less a sacrificial subordination. Resner describes this costly love when he writes, "The preacher's life is to be a cruciform life, consonant with the message of the cross" (130).

Marva Dawn alludes to the practical self-sacrifice entailed by a preacher's cruciformity, writing, "Unless I die to myself and my pride, I have nothing to give those who hear my sermons" (79). Self-sacrificial cruciformity, loving like Jesus loved, is quite a challenge. This kind of love cannot ultimately be developed by trying harder or being nicer. Nor is the cultivation of this love simply a matter of trying to imitate Christ. The only way for the preacher to love like Christ is to abide in Christ so that the actual love of Christ itself flows through the preacher's life and preaching.

As stated in John 15:1-15, Jesus called his followers to "abide" in him and then immediately followed this call with a challenge to love as he loved. Jesus clearly recognized and taught his disciples that the only way for them to love as he did was for them to remain as intimately connected to him as possible. Spiritual disciplines are one of the main ways of developing and maintaining this intimate connection to Christ so that "the mind of Christ" (1 Cor. 2:16) develops in those who follow Christ. Authentic engagement with God through disciplines that incorporate Scripture, prayer, and Christian fellowship enable this abiding with Christ that fosters the development of these two loves in the life of the preacher. The love of Christ cultivated through the preacher's engagement in spiritual disciplines enhances the kind of preaching *ethos* that gets a hearing and is the basis for the homiletic process shared below.

Based upon my own observations, countless conversations with people who listen to preaching today, and the opinions of homileticians and theologians, this Christian *ethos* is lacking on the preaching landscape. Several factors may contribute to the problem. For one thing, pastoral ministry can become so demanding of one's time and energy that so little of both are leftover for the cultivation of Christian *ethos* through spiritual disciplines. Another factor is the ease with which preachers become infatuated with acquiring better technique to enhance their eloquence. The development of rhetorical skills, of course, is not, in and of itself, a hazard. A problem only exists when the preacher is more concerned about becoming a better orator than becoming a better lover of Christ and others, in other words more concerned with technique than spirituality. This proclivity can lead to what John Wesley calls *practical atheism*. Although most preachers would profess their deep dependence upon God, in the practice of developing and delivering sermons they can potentially become atheistic in their overreliance upon technical methodology and their under-reliance upon revelation, wisdom, and power from God.

Dawn alludes to the problem of "practical atheism" in preaching today:

Our society so much values credentials, expertise, savvy, technique—but these can so easily be used to manipulate and deceive.... The question, instead, is whether my

preaching will spur them more to love God and their neighbors.... I am the problem with my preaching when I don't rely on the Holy Spirit to produce the results of my sermons. (82)

Dawn's comments challenge me and all preachers who have a tendency to tackle the preaching task with more self-reliance than Spirit-dependence. Spirit-driven preaching, not technique-driven preaching, is what enhances the Christian *ethos* of the preacher and the impact of the preaching event because it draws attention and bears witness to the triune God. Oden writes bluntly, "No amount of technical instruction or objective data gathering can finally call preaching into being. It cannot be reduced to an art or natural talent" (129). Preaching is, fundamentally, a spiritual discipline.

The problem is that many preachers today are like the artist ghost in C. S. Lewis' *The Great Divorce* (83). The artist ghost focuses more on the craft of art than what the art is intended to convey. In a similar manner, preachers often become more enamored with the technicality of the craft than the Christ the homiletic craft is intended to reveal. The craft (the how) is important and should be carefully approached and developed. However, Christ (the who) must have the more prominent place in the heart, mind, and soul of the preacher. This Christocentric prioritization is essential because the ultimate goal of preaching is not merely to communicate good rhetorical messages but to witness to Christ in such a way that reflects the holy wisdom and love that invites people deeper into Christ. This goal cannot be achieved with better skill or technique alone. It can be facilitated through the preacher's authentic Christian *ethos*, which is fostered through spiritual disciplines and evidenced by a cruciform love for God and others.

## REMEDY

Who the preacher is deep down inside can add more power to the preached message than a great illustration, eloquence of phraseology, or en vogue style. "The congregation's perception of the character of the preacher contributes directly to the congregation's willingness to attend to the sermon" (Allen 28). "No matter how eloquent the preacher is, the words are 'sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal' (1 Cor. 13:1) if we do not sense that the preacher is genuine and authentic" (Bugg 25-26).

This emphasis on the *ethos* of the preacher is not to suggest that the power of preaching somehow resides in the preacher; that suggestion might lead toward homiletic donatism. However, the preacher who submits to, and abides in, Christ will experience a heightened flow of God's Spirit and power through his or her life and preaching.

The homiletic process I share below is, in reality, a journey guided by spiritual disciplines but sensitive to rhetorical techniques and sound exegesis. This journey puts the pastor's relationship with God and spiritual formation where it belongs—at the center of the homiletic process. Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch affirm a spiritual solution to the present preaching crisis: "It won't be good enough to merely get better techniques and methods. Even incarnation and contextualization won't suffice unless we can find the spiritual framework and resources for real and lasting engagement (111)." This "real and lasting engagement" within preaching will not be enabled through more technique, but through a spiritual homiletic that invites "God's own Spirit [to work] cooperatively with our intelligence and attentiveness" (Oden 132). Preachers who engage preaching as attentiveness to God through spiritual disciplines will have something more spiritually profound to say than they would if they were trying to drum up something rhetorically eloquent, entertaining, relevant, or clever.

These convictions are central to the model below for developing and delivering sermons called A Journey in Preaching as a Spiritual Discipline. The goal of this journey is to foster a more intimate connection between Christ and preachers throughout the homiletic process in a manner that would increase the Christian *ethos* and the preaching joy of the latter.

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## A JOURNEY IN PREACHING AS A SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE

### Helpful Guidelines

- While the model does not describe the spiritual formation of the preacher outside of the homiletic process, it is assumed. In other words, this spiritual homiletic is not a magic formula that negates the importance of the preacher's formation outside of the preaching event. The preacher's accumulated thoughts, habits, influences, and experiences will shape the preacher in profound ways, in ways that move well beyond the weekly routine of preaching.
- It will be nearly impossible to preach a topical sermon with this model because in a topical sermon the preacher has already decided in advance what the text says and how he/she will use it. In the topical sermon the preacher is not typically led by God through the text but actually controls and, if not careful, distorts the text to fit his/her topic.
- Refrain from running to book or website illustrations until you have spent adequate time prayerfully reflecting upon the text and your personal experiences that surface from it. Try your best to let illustrative material come from your rich life, ministry experiences, and observations.
- A good commentary or two should be consulted but only later in the process to check the exegetical credibility of what you sense God is saying to you through the text.
- Enjoy the homiletic process and try your best to see it as a devotional opportunity to be with the God who called you to preach the Gospel.

### **Movement 1: What is God saying to the original audience through the text? (Scripture)**

- A. Prayerful Preparation:** Pray a small portion of Psalm 119 slowly and reflectively. Ask God for revelation and insight into His word. Quiet your soul by sitting before the Lord and allowing him to remind you of his love for you and the important calling he has placed upon your life to preach Christ. Ask God to purify your preaching motives and to spiritually form you through the homiletic process to be the "fragrance of Christ."
- B. Text Selection:** Prayerfully select the biblical text to be preached. Be careful to avoid assuming that you already know what God is saying through this text, even if you have preached it before. If you assume the meaning of the text and sermon point at the outset, it will stifle the process of allowing God to speak and it will remove the element of delightful surprise from the homiletic process.
- C. Exegetical Insights:** Read the preaching text several times, praying for God's guidance, and record your reflections on the following questions that may apply:
- What do you observe about the text as you read it through several times?
  - What questions surface regarding the meaning of the text?
  - Who is the author and what do you know about him?
  - Who is being addressed and what do you know about them?
  - What is the historical context (time and place)?

- What light does the literary context (genre, immediate context, book context, canonical context) shed on the text?
- What important words or phrases appear in the text? What do they mean and how are they used (feel free to consult dictionaries at this point)?

**D. Playful Imagination:** Fast a meal and pray at least 30 minutes for imaginative insight into the text. Read the text slowly verse by verse trying to imagine yourself as an observer of the original scene. Try to see, hear, smell, touch, and taste the original scene. In other words, try to prayerfully and even playfully imagine yourself in the original context of the passage through the eyes of the author/main characters of the biblical text.

**E. Theological Reflection:** Reflect theologically about the text. How does this text intersect with a Wesleyan theological foundation? How does the text relate to important Christian doctrines like the Trinity, Incarnation, Christology, Pneumatology, Ecclesiology, Creation, etc.? How might events from Church History and the writings/lives of significant theologians (Athanasius, Augustine, Gregory, Luther, Calvin, Wesley, etc.) inform your reading of this text?

**F. Text Focus:** In no more than one paragraph, record what God is saying through the text to the people who originally received it. This is not the sermon point or sermon idea, which would take into account both the text of Scripture and the context of your congregation. This is simply a summary of the passage's meaning in its original setting (i.e., Paul is telling the Galatians that it is foolish to look to the law for what only faith can provide.)

**G. Commentaries:** Read 2-3 reputable commentaries on your passage. How do these commentaries confirm or challenge your reflections? What do they add to what you already observed about the text?

**H. Internalize the Word:** Memorize the preaching text (or at least a main portion of it).

### **Movement 2: What is God saying to me through the text? (Prayer)**

**A. Lectio Divina:** Prayerfully read the text using *lectio divina*. As you do, consider the personal implications of the text for your own life. Consider what God is saying to you through the text. How does the text apply to your relationships with Christ and others? How does it confirm, challenge, or comfort you? What does it reveal about who Christ is and who you are?

- *Lectio:* Read the text slowly several times inviting God to impress upon you the word, phrase, or sentence from the text that he most wants to speak to you. Record these words.
- *Meditatio:* Reflect on this word or phrase from the text and consider its intersection with your life and with other passages of Scripture. What do you sense God saying to you through this text? Give God some time to speak this word of truth into your life. Be still and let the words from Scripture fill your heart and mind.
- *Oratio:* Write a prayer of response to God in light of what He has spoken to you. This prayer can be one of thanksgiving, confession, or intercession, to name a few. Note any changes or commitments you will make to God as a result of being confronted, convicted, comforted, challenged or confirmed by this biblical text.
- *Contemplatio:* This final step takes one beyond words and into intimacy with God that allows the person to actually experience the grace of the Scripture reality being studied. Don't focus on words or even the sermon, but simply enjoy intimacy with God, resting in His presence as

you reflect and worship in images and not words. What do you picture? What images is God allowing to surface?

**B. Prayer Walk:** Take a prayer walk around the church campus, your neighborhood, or in a nearby park or woods looking and praying for God's glory and for His kingdom to come "on earth as it is in heaven" through the sermon. Also, keep an eye out for physical illustrations that highlight the main thrust of the biblical text.

**C. Retro Reflection:** Prayerfully and honestly reflect upon why and how you chose this text to preach. What is behind your choosing of it? Are your motives for choosing this text pure? Is there some past, present, or future concern that preconditions you to choose this text and/or skews or enhances your reading of this text? What part did God play in your choosing of this passage? In what ways did the meaning of the text surprise you?

### **Movement 3: What is God saying to the congregation through the text? (Fellowship)**

**A. Intercessory Reflections and Applications:** Spend at least 30-60 minutes praying through the church directory and any special congregational prayer requests, incorporating the preaching text into the prayer time as often as possible. Reflect on how the text might address the joys, sorrows, hopes, hurts, sins, and dreams of people in your congregation, in particular, and of humanity, in general, and pray accordingly. Prayerfully consider how God wants to guide, comfort, or confront the church through this text. What changes might God want to initiate in your church through this text? Be careful to let God's desires for the church, and not merely your own desires and ambitions, determine the application of the text to the congregation you serve. Don't force the text to say more or less than it really says. List the possible sermon applications that result from this intercessory prayer time.

**B. Initiate Contact:** Initiate contact, by phone call or visit, with 2-3 congregants for spiritual care and directing. If possible, select congregants whose lives may be profoundly addressed by the biblical text and sermon for the coming Sunday. Depending on the circumstances, you may not want them to know that the coming sermon applies to them. This, however, does not prevent you from offering spiritual care to them.

**C. Human Feedback (optional):** In staff meeting, read the text and ask staff members to reflect upon how the text might intersect with their lives. Ask them to express how the text challenges, comforts, and/or convicts them. (If you don't have a staff, you can do this with a group of pastors, your family, or your friends). Record their reflections, but ensure anonymity. If you want to share one of their reflections, get their permission first.

**D. Sermon Focus:** You have already written out the focus of the biblical text, answering the question "*What did God say to them* (the original recipients)." You also reflected on the question "*What is God saying to me.*" Now, prayerfully consider and write out, in one sentence, the main function of the sermon that will connect the meaning of the text with the context of your congregation. Reflect on the question "*What is God saying to us* (the congregation)." This is a crucial step in the homiletic process that will hold all the parts together as one whole.

**E. Illustrations:** What stories, images, analogies, people, current events, songs, movies, TV shows, statistics, sports, jobs, animals, etc. might illuminate the sermon focus? Have fun brainstorming and listing everything that comes to your mind, even if it seems a bit odd at first. Some of the best illustrations come from our past experiences or from the stories of people in our lives. Make sure the story does not detract from but works to illumine the Word of God.

#### **Movement 4: Prayerfully Put It All Together**

- A. The Big Picture:** Prayerfully go back through all your notes and list the most significant reflections that answer the following questions: What is the main sermon focus around which everything else will revolve? What are the most significant exegetical insights that highlight the text focus? What other significant theological or personal reflections have surfaced? What illustrations illumine the sermon focus? What applications accurately flow out of the text and sermon focus that challenge the congregation to embody the reality of the text through their lives and community?
- B. Prayerful Pause:** Spend 15-30 minutes prayerfully asking God to guide you in ordering the parts of the sermon so that it will most glorify Him, clearly communicate the sermon focus, and spiritually form believers. This is where preachers tend to rush things. We have all the parts we want to throw in the sermon, but we must remain prayerful as we consider whether or not all the parts really fit and how they should be ordered into a seamless flow. Think of the parts of the sermon as a recipe in which some ingredients must come first to prepare the way for later ingredients. Pray for guidance and wisdom on this often overlooked, but extremely important element in the homiletic process.
- C. Outline It:** Since the hard work has been done, it's time to have fun with the sermon parts, putting them together in a seamless flow. You should have more than enough spiritual sermon fodder than you will actually need. Develop an outline of the parts (i.e., exegetical insights, illustrations, applications, personal and theological reflections), including a one sentence idea for both your introduction and conclusion. Try to maintain conversation with God and keep in focus the intersection of the biblical text with its original audience, your life and your congregants' lives throughout the process.
- D. Title It:** While the title should have attention-grabbing appeal, it is even more important for the title to be a memorable reminder of the main thrust of the sermon, its focus.
- E. Manuscript It (optional):** Fill in the outline with a word for word manuscript, allowing your language to paint a picture of the Kingdom of God embodied by the people of God. Do it as if every word choice was a devotional act of worship that comes from a heart of deep love for God and for people.

#### **Movement 5: The Main Event**

- A. Prayerful Practice:** Prayerfully meditate on and practice the sermon in your study or home, not for eloquence but to spiritually reflect upon the message to be shared. Speak it aloud 1-2 times, as if you were preaching it to yourself (since the sermon should impact you before it impacts anyone else).
- B. Personal Prayer:** Pray at the sanctuary altar for personal purity, love, humility, and the ability to incarnate and communicate the sermon through your own life.
- C. Intercessory Prayer:** Do a prayer walk around the sanctuary, praying for the congregation's receptivity to God's Word and spiritual formation through it.
- D. Develop Prayer Teams (2 or more people):** Maybe you can delegate the recruiting of these prayer times to someone in your church who is passionate about prayer and its importance. The following teams of people should be recruited and empowered to pray:

- *Pre-Sermon Prayer Team*: to pray with the preacher before the sermon
- *Sermon Event Prayer Team*: to pray during the sermon
- *Post-Sermon Prayer Team*: to be available for prayer with people after the sermon (if no one needs prayer, this team can pray for the impact of God's Word)

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