

Imaginative Preaching: Bent On Disrupting, Connecting and Transforming Congregational Lives

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The sermon as a normative aspect of religious services can transform the lived experiences of parishioners. In this article, the author discusses how relevant, imaginative, and spirit filled preaching can support congregants in leading moral and meaningful lives. The article proposes three major elements that all educative sermons should possess: 1) A disruptive element, 2) A connective element, and 3) A transformative element.

Recently the news has been punctuated by young people on both sides of the Atlantic that have packed their bags and slipped away from the serene and the familiar, across boundaries, and borders into Syria to join groups like ISIS and Al Qaeda. Much of this radicalization has been done through the use of sermons or preaching. The sermon remains a powerful influence on the lives of the listeners. Good and timely sermons can help people of faith reimagine and reshape their lives in ways that an academic lecture or the comforting words of the therapist couldn't. Here the author makes the case that more urgent conversations are needed not about techniques, structure or how to move towards climax, but rather how to use the sermon as a countercultural agent for change.

Brueggemann (1989) argues that daring speeches are bent on offering up a perspective "that destabilizes all our settled "facts"" (Brueggemann 1989, 5). Advocating for this kind of approach to preaching can seem radical by today's standard, but this is the core purpose of the sermon - to destabilize and upend the social, economical and political status quo, while audaciously presenting Christ to a broken world. In many quarters, the sermon portion of the liturgy has come to be understood as an entertainment hour. Listeners rate a preacher's effectiveness on his or her humor and storytelling capabilities. While inspiring laughter and tears in the hearts listeners is in and of itself not an indictment against the speaker, what is indeed an indictment is when the pulpit becomes just another forum to entertain, affirm and perpetuate the social, economical, political and personal status quo. Gabriel Moran argues that "a preacher who makes people feel complacent and self-satisfied" is essentially contributing to the maladies that plague our world. That preacher, Moran correctly notes, "is also acting immorally" (Moran 1989, 75).

If the sermon invites people to think and act in ways that move them away from their sectarian cloisters, then the sermon holds the potential of becoming life giving. Additionally, if the sermon calls listeners to deconstruct hierarchical, racial, and self-centered arrangements by pointing them to the person of Christ, then the sermon holds the potential of shaping and reshaping the life of the church.

The Sermon As A Disruptive Agent

The great Charles Hadden Spurgeon once recalled being late for a preaching engagement due to a train delay. Upon entering the church he was greeted with a

familiar voice coming from the pulpit - his grandfather. In seeing his grandson arriving for the event the older Spurgeon said, "Here comes my grandson! He may preach the gospel better than I can, but he cannot preach a better gospel; can you, Charles?" (Bacon 1996,154). The notion that we can "preach the gospel better" through life-giving and imaginative sermons is exactly what is needed in pulpits across the United States and indeed around the world.

Sermons that readily and out-rightly condemn people are problematic and sermons that make no demands on people are just as problematic. The work of the Holy Spirit in the sermon is to create discomfort and conviction of sins to the point that change is inspired. From the Old to the New Testament we see time and time again where when God's truth confronts people they are moved to live differently. It is said that the time spent in prayer, meditation, preparation and delivering a sermon can be equated to a 40-hour workweek – many weeks it feels that way to this preacher. At minimum, the sermon must create dissonance for the hearers and thus create a pathway for them to move closer to God and farther away from the world of sin.

The Sermon As A Connective Agent

Sermons should not only serve as a disruptive agent but should also serve as a connecting agent within congregational life. It was Karl Barth who argues for the need to hold in tension the Bible in one hand the newspaper in the next. Practical and theological sermons invite a dialogue between; (a) the word of God, (b) the lived experiences of the congregation and (c) the preacher serving as a conduit between the two. The preacher is always a historian of both ancient and contemporary history. He or she is an ethnographer who makes frequent travels between the past and the present in an effort to elucidate the will of God for His church and the people of the world. All preachers must argue that the sacred texts still have something to say about how we live and die in 2015. The Bible continues to be a guide to believers today and therefore the preacher must give those ancient voices fresh opportunities to connect with people today. Part of that connection is what the book of Hebrews (12:1) noted, "*seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us.*" The sermon sends the congregation back into history to see the grace and mercies of God. It invites time travel to Egypt and to Rome, to Palestine and the Greece in order to bring us back to our time and God's sustaining ability. The sermon connects us to God and to each other.

The Sermon As A Transformative Agent

Finally, the sermon must not only serve the dual role of disrupting and connecting, but it must also serve as a transformative agent in the life of the church. This transformation is marked by a shift from spiritual blindness to living in the light. It is punctuated by renewed way of looking at material things, our

relationships with God and each other as well as how we conduct ourselves on a daily basis.

Conclusion

Sermons are great not because they hold our attention, or because they inspire laughter and tears. Rather, sermons are great because they lead us to Christ, because they name our maladies and articulate the remedy - Christ! There is a place for move and structure and eloquence in sermons but none of that matters if sermons do not disrupt the disgusting. None of that matters if sermons do not trouble the heart of sinners and saints alike. The next time you sit in your local church to listen to a sermon, contemplate these questions: What is being disrupted in my life by the sermon? What connections am I making right now? To find the answers to these questions is to find transformation personally and collectively.

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