

On Speaking What We Hear

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Not long ago, a neighboring colleague returned from a preaching workshop with Fred Craddock. "It was very helpful," she said, "but it was also disheartening." When I asked what she meant, my friend replied, "Fred's method and manner of preaching work well for him, but I could never preach like that!"

I understood her discouragement. As a young piano student, my parents once took me to hear a concert by the great jazz pianist Oscar Peterson. Peterson's talent was stunning. The music that poured from his piano sounded as if the man had twenty fingers, all working with precision and creativity that far surpassed my own abilities. After the concert, I gave up piano playing for weeks. "How can I dare play the piano?" I thought. "It's been done!"

In time, two convictions led me back to the piano, where I later spent many evenings as a pianist in smoky night clubs. Perhaps they were the same convictions that also returned my friend to her pulpit. First, however limited my abilities, I knew I had my own music to create and communicate. What's more, I knew I could never play like Oscar Peterson if I didn't start somewhere.

It is now some fifteen years since that awe-inspiring concert. I still can't play jazz like Oscar Peterson, especially since I have traded my nightly piano bench for a weekly pulpit. But thanks to the wisdom of one of my music teachers, I can play a little bit more like Peterson than I once could. My teacher's wisdom is worth sharing with preachers who wish to expand their abilities. Although we may never preach like our homiletical heroines and heroes, we could preach more like them than we do.

In this article, I want to suggest that preachers can improve their skills in much the same way that most jazz musicians hone their craft: by transcribing and studying the work of others.

I

"Working with Thelonious Monk brought me close to a musical architect of the highest order. I felt I learned from him in every way - through the senses, theoretically, and technically. I would talk to Monk about musical problems and he would sit at the piano and show me the answers by playing them."

John Coltrane, saxophonist

For a short time in high school, I took weekly piano lessons from a man named Lenny Corris, a legendary figure in our community. The word around town was that he had once traveled with a few big bands, but had now settled down to a regular cocktail piano gig in a local tavern. Even so, Lenny never

crawled out of bed before noon, and rarely left his darkened house before sunset. He had the complexion of a ghost and mumbled when he spoke. Lenny was the honest-to-goodness article, a real half-alive professional musician. I used to cling to his insights, partly because I paid him twenty dollars for a thirty minute lesson, a sum equivalent to my income from mowing four lawns.

Lenny taught me a great deal about the harmonies and rhythms of jazz. But most of all, he taught me that when it comes to art, one can only learn so much from books and teachers. I recall him sitting once in the shadows next to his piano. After sucking the life out of a Kool Menthol, he said, "You know, I can teach you how to swing melodies and lay down hip chords, but that won't make you a musician. If you want to play jazz, *you must study what you hear and then play it.*"

His wry wisdom has important implications for preaching. For one thing, he was noting that music's primary impact is located at the ear. The mood and feel of music cannot be duplicated by mechanically reproducing the notes from a written manuscript. This is especially true with jazz improvisation, which swings in a way that cannot be copied on paper. In jazz, as with other genres, "written music" is an oxymoron. To be effective, musical phrases must be lifted from the page and given a certain spin in the air. Music is similar to the spoken word in this respect. Ultimately, the presence (or absence) of a manuscript is of secondary importance to the listeners' experience. What matters most is what the listeners hear.

This is an important lesson, which some preachers, having spent years of academic training in script-oriented institutions, have yet to learn. As Tom Long notes,

A 'written sermon' is a contradiction in terms. Of course, many sermons are written down before they are preached, and some sermons are written up after they are preached, but a sermon itself occurs not in the writing but in the preaching. A sermon, by definition, is a spoken event. This is an important distinction, since speaking and writing are not merely two separate but equal channels of communication. The effects of the spoken word are markedly different from those of the written word.¹

As a spoken event, every sermon must be interpreted by the voice that speaks it. As with a solo by a jazz musician, articulation, phrasing, and the pitch of one's "instrument" are essential ingredients in the communication process.

Yet my teacher Lenny was doing more than describing the aural character of his art. He was recommending a method for continual growth, given that jazz music, like a sermon, is heard with the ear, not read with the eye. His proposal was that I listen to recordings of better musicians, write down what I hear, and learn to play along.

This concept is not new. Ever since Louis Armstrong, jazz musicians have recognized the value of transcribing, analyzing, and playing along with the recordings of other artists. As one music educator puts it,

The situation for the young (jazz) player is not unlike that of a student learning to speak a foreign language. While books, flash cards and

other visual aids are invaluable, they can never supplant hearing and imitating the spoken word. Even with our native language, the first and most lasting impressions are through imitation of those around us. For the jazz player, listening, analyzing, and transcribing are valuable if growth is to be continuous. Every good jazz player has a mandate to listen in a disciplined fashion to the music of (one's) contemporaries. How else to stay abreast of the myriad, sometimes violent, changes taking place in this continually evolving music?²

A similar mandate seems in order for preachers, especially as the sounds of contemporary homiletics keep changing. How can preachers grow in their craft? By studying what they hear and then speaking it.

II

After hearing my first record by Charlie Parker I was convinced that I finally heard a musician who had learned to make his instrument speak louder than any voice could. He delivered a message that even the human voice couldn't put over any better, or even as well. So I embarked on a journey of trying to make my instrument do what he did with his instrument.

George Benson, guitarist and singer

My musical assignment from Lenny was to listen, write out, and imitate jazz solos recorded by Miles Davis, Horace Silver, and Bud Powell. As my skills developed, he also encouraged me to study and play the music of Charlie Parker, John Coltrane, and of all people, Oscar Peterson. In listening, I began to identify the unique stylistic traits of these musicians. Each one leaves his fingerprints on his music. As I repeatedly listened to Oscar Peterson play the blues, for example, I noticed rhythmical phrases that he often used in similar chord progressions. Soon I could notate my observations on a manuscript. After that, I worked until I could play Peterson's notes with my fingers. Lenny said that this is the best way to learn jazz: to study what you hear and then play it. Likewise, the aural nature of sermons makes the same method possible for preachers. If it plays on a Steinway, it can preach in the sanctuary.

Please note that I am not suggesting that we baptize plagiarism, even though a number of ministers regularly do so in the privacy of their studies. Under the burden of weekly pulpit chores, some preachers become skilled thieves; perhaps you've heard of the noted church leader who was introduced at a clergy conference with the words, "And now, here's a person whose sermons we've all preached." Given the audience, it was an accurate introduction.

Neither do I suggest that we comb through other preachers' sermons to merely recycle their most effective material. While such utilitarian efforts might spice up an occasional sermon, they will not strengthen our method of preaching. As a friend on a pastoral nominating committee recently told me, "Fred Craddock's stories are told in pulpits throughout the East Coast, whether he knows it or not." Then she added, "Those stories are frequently

the only bright moments in some very dull sermons.”

My suggestion is not that we consume and rehash another’s words, but that we transcribe other preachers’ sermons from recordings as a way to grow in our ability as communicators. On one level, this demands careful attention to the precise content of another’s material. This practice will assure the average preacher that even “experts” use incomplete sentences and trip over their tongues. More importantly, it will also expand our vocabulary, offering new words and phrases for our expression. When jazz musicians improvise, sometimes they “quote” another musician’s material as a way of negotiating unfamiliar ground. If one trumpeter uses a certain musical phrase to get through a new chord progression or a tricky rhythm, then it makes good sense that another musician could occasionally take the same path.

Most of the time, however, jazz transcriptions are never intended to be heard outside the practice room, just as sermon transcriptions are best left for the pastor’s study. For the preacher, as for the musician, to transcribe is to exercise the ear as if it were a muscle. Whether preacher or pianist, an artist becomes an intentional listener in the service of becoming a better communicator to other listeners. The discipline of transcription reverses the practice of speaking or playing an instrument, for it pulls sounds from the air and translates them into written symbols on paper.

To transcribe is also to privately mimic another’s technique. On the piano, if my fingers can imitate Oscar Peterson’s fingers, then I can play as he plays. In the study, if we can imitate someone’s method to bring exegetical insights into a sermon, then we can use a similar method in designing and preaching a sermon. Imitation is a foundational step for artistic growth. It brings us into the presence of masters, inviting us not to plunder their treasures but to receive their gifts.

Finally, to transcribe is to gain a larger understanding of the particular nuances of someone else’s style, which, in turn, can enhance our technique in expressing ourselves. Jazz musicians commonly refer to this experience as “getting inside somebody’s head.” At this level, there is an obvious difference between simply borrowing someone’s material and discerning a master’s method. It is one thing to simply copy a line from John Coltrane’s improvisation on “Summertime”; it is another thing to understand the harmonic theory that informed his improvisation. It is one thing to swipe a story heard at a preaching conference; it is entirely another thing to tell your own stories in the subtle manner of someone like Fred Craddock.

If any preachers have ears to hear, let them listen, study what they hear, and then speak it!

III

A giant can be imposing; yet a midget standing upon the giant’s shoulders will see even further.”

Wayne Shorter, jazz saxophonist, describing the fruits of his tenure with legendary trumpeter Miles Davis.

Perhaps it might be helpful to offer an example of how a sermon transcription can help the preacher. For anybody who would like to preach like Fred Craddock, here is a transcribed passage from one of his sermons. It is followed by a few observations.

There is a new creation. Do I really want to live in such a world?

What was the first one like? What was Genesis 1 like? I have faint recollection of Eden, just as you do. But it is so messed up by Genesis 3, I can't recall Genesis 1. Genesis 3 is so much on my mind: the hiding, the blaming, the excusing, the hand raised in violence, the blood on the ground, the running away, trying to find a place east of Eden. I can't recall Genesis 1. So, to answer the question, "Do I want a new creation," I must know what creation was.

I went up into north Georgia, in the mountains, beyond Mineral Bluff, almost as you cross into Carolina, toward Murphy, to visit the oldest man in the world. He's the only man I know who's still alive who was there at Genesis 1. He's very old. He's a little hard of hearing. His wife has died. He lives simply in a little cottage there. I found it. I told him my problem. And I needed to know, "If we have a new creation, what does that mean?" What was the first one like?

And he said, "Well, it's not all it was cracked up to be, really."

I said, "What do you mean?"

He said, "Well, there was a lot of complaining."

"Complaining?"

"Oh yeah." He said, "You know, when God first made the world, there were only two seasons, winter and summer. They were long and boring. And winter and summer both went to the Creator and complained, and said, 'It's so long, and boring, and we're out here by ourselves.' So God said, 'OK.' So God made two more seasons so that winter and summer could play together. One is spring, and one is autumn."

I said, "I've noticed that."

He said, "Yeah, that's the way that started. A big complaint."

He said, "It snowed once in July. And the Almighty said, 'No, no. No, you don't snow in July! You take turns. We have hot sun in July.'"

"And the snow said, 'But the rain doesn't take turns!' And there was a lot of discontentment."

He said, "It was really comical. Everything new, and for the first time, and no practice, and no background, and no history. Adam and Eve, trying to name the animals. It was Adam's turn, and here came this big animal, and Adam said, 'I'm going to call that an elephant.'"

"And Eve said, 'Elephant?! Why are you calling it 'elephant?'"

"And he said, 'Well, look how big it is!'"

"And then it was her turn and she said, 'I'm going to name that a duck.'"

"And Adam said, 'Duck?! There's no such thing as 'duck.' Why are you calling it 'duck?'"

And she said, 'It's a duck!'"

"'Duck is not a name for something.'"

"And she said, 'If I called it a horse, who would believe it?'"

He said it was a strange time. It was a very awkward time. Turtles trying

to climb trees. He said the sun came up once in the west; it created a lot of confusion.

He said, "I recall once seeing a robin. She laid her eggs, and then started trying to build a nest around the eggs."

"And someone said, 'Why don't you build the nest, and then lay the eggs?'"

"And she said, 'Hey, cut me some slack. I've never done this before!'"

Paul says, "If anyone is in Christ, it's Genesis 1 again." Do you want that?

He said, "You've got to understand now. I'm not blaming anybody. It's just that they didn't have any history of things. There was no patterned behavior. There was no inherited prejudice. There was no agenda. There was no stereotype. Everything was new and fresh and somewhat awkward. But everything and everybody just met each other for the first time. You've got to live with that."

Do I want to live with that? I don't really have a choice. "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation."³

Comments on the Transcription

As is his custom, Fred Craddock relies on a lively use of dialogue, which sounds far better than it looks on paper. He also focuses the story's point of view by making it a quotation of quotes. The story is told through an absurd character ("the oldest man in the world") and disarms a sophisticated seminary congregation that instantly knows that his story is ridiculous. By sweeping the floor of all preconceptions, Craddock indirectly invites his congregation to listen.⁴

Told in an oral style with an economy of words, the episode is framed on both sides by a question which Craddock asks of himself ("Do I really want to live in a new creation?"). In doing this, he frees people to ponder the question for themselves. It is striking that Craddock himself never answers this question. This technique delays the sermon's resolution to a later moment when he will ask the question of the congregation.

Note the consonance between this preacher's content and method. Craddock is faithful to his biblical text. He says that Christ's new creation makes the awkward work of reconciliation possible, for it renews our capacity to take each other "as for the first time." Yet he says it through a story which invites his listeners to envision a new creation free of all selfishness and stereotypes. Craddock is doing much more than entertaining a congregation. Here is a preacher who disarms as he discloses.

Finally, preachers will find this material infinitely more helpful if they hear it spoken.⁵ Publication greatly reduces the power of Craddock's lively oral word. As with any preacher, the best introduction to Craddock is to sit before his pulpit.

IV

“Music can wash away the dust of everyday life.”

Art Blakey, jazz drummer

Transcribing sermons is hard work. Let me offer some tips on reaping the most benefits from this difficult yet rewarding task.

First, and most importantly, put yourself in a position where you regularly listen to other preachers' sermons, particularly those with a good oral style. This may be the greatest obstacle to overcome, since isolation is the trademark of most ministries. The best strategy may be to rely on cassette tapes, which are readily available to preachers at nominal prices.⁶

Do the transcription yourself! It may save time to ask the church secretary to type out somebody's sermon, but you lose the valuable benefit of writing down what *you* hear. Transcribing sermons slows down the listening process. If you write what you hear, you are already beginning to learn and internalize the material.

In transcribing somebody's work, start small. Eat the elephant one bite at a time.

Keep your equipment simple. I use a legal pad, a black Flair pen, and a Radio Shack cassette recorder with good pause and rewind buttons. These work fine. I once used an ancient dictating machine that I found in a church closet, but kept wasting time by transferring the sermon from a cassette to a mini-cassette.

Don't slow down for correct punctuation, quotation marks, and the like. These are conventions for the eye, not the ear. They are only necessary if you plan to publish your work, which is highly unlikely.

Preach along with the transcription. Put the tape in a Walkman or car stereo and speak along. As early as you're able, imitate the preacher's diction and phrasing. One advantage of mimicking another's speech patterns is that it broadens your own range.

Raise questions about the material as you go. Why does (or doesn't) this passage or story work? What makes it funny? What makes it touching? What turns you off? How does this preacher interact with the biblical text? How are stories used and “framed”? What propels the sermon toward a conclusion? What word combinations grab your attention?

Devise a shorthand system to annotate your transcriptions. My simple system consists of dashes and squiggles that note the speaker's pacing, tone, and vocal inflections. It's helpful for me, and perhaps incomprehensible to anybody else.

If you use transcribed material in a sermon, give credit where credit is due! Granted, it slows down the flow of the sermon to drop a verbal footnote whenever you use someone else's material. But make it clear in your manuscript (and at the sanctuary door) that the material is borrowed. The gospel may announce God's forgiveness of pirates; it also calls them to have good manners.

Finally, keep at it! Speed and accuracy increase with practice.

With some work, many preachers can learn and use the skills of better preachers in new and creative ways. If you want to improve your preaching,

study what you hear and then speak it!

NOTES

¹ Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), 181.

² David N. Baker, *A New Approach to Ear Training for Jazz Musicians* (Lebanon, Indiana: Studio P/R, Inc.), 71-2.

³ From "The New Has Come," preached on November 12, 1987 at Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, N.J. Used with permission of the preacher.

⁴ A less experiential introduction to some of Craddock's methods is available in *Overhearing the Gospel* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1978). See Part II, Chapter 3, "To a Proposal: The Method of the Teller."

⁵ Available on cassette for \$3.50 from the Director of Duplication Services, Templeton Hall, Princeton Theological Seminary, CN 821, Princeton, N.J. 08542. When ordering, include the name of the preacher, title of the sermon, and the date when the sermon was preached.

⁶ Two excellent sources of inexpensive sermon tapes are the Duplication Services of Princeton Seminary (above) and the Reigner Recording Library, Union Theological Seminary in Virginia, 3401 Brook Road, Richmond VA, 23227-4597. Each media center makes a moderately priced catalog available. Reigner Library loans most of their tapes for free, while the Princeton facility sells copies of their cassettes for \$3.50 each. Other seminaries may have similar media services. "Preaching Today," a tape subscription service of *Christianity Today*, is higher priced and showcases preachers who appeal to an evangelical "market." Unfortunately, it also includes well-manicured sermon transcriptions which do our work for us, thus encouraging plagiarism without effort. These transcriptions are not always helpful, as they trim the rough rhythms of human speech into complete sentences and paragraphs.