

Baptism: The Pervasive Sacrament

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We have heard so frequently in recent years that preaching and sacraments must be balanced in their importance in the worship of the church. Clearly this is true, and the added stress on the sacraments has helped to overcome the overemphasis on preaching that was characteristic of Protestant churches in the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries. Yet often this “balancing” is thought of as equal weighting to two disparate and unrelated elements: the sacraments on the one side and preaching on the other. What needs to be explored much further is the integral connection between preaching and sacraments, which accounts for the necessary balancing.

Granted some of this has been done. We know that preaching proclaims the promises of God that are brought to us in a physical way in the sacraments—to use the classic Calvinist emphasis. This is clear in the celebration of the Lord’s Supper where we could scarcely imagine preaching without any mention of the sacrament about to be received. This was a major issue at the Reformation, and it is a lesson well learned.

We are even beginning to see that the baptismal event ought not to be a parenthesis near the beginning of a worship service that goes on as though the sacrament had not been celebrated. Baptismal sermons—following the pattern of Communion sermons—are more frequently to be heard in our churches.

All of this is true. But there is another dimension that needs to be seen.

The Hearers of Preaching

Our word “to preach” covers a multitude of meanings. One need only look in Morrison’s *Analytical Concordance* under the word “Preach” to see the many Greek words for which it can be used (Morrison, p. 453). The term preaching is used in our language both for evangelization—bringing the good news of the gospel to those who are outside of the community of faith, and for the preaching for which the faithful have gathered. But are these the same thing?

To put it more bluntly, does it matter at all if those who hear preaching are baptized? Is the preaching of the church, in the midst of the congregation gathered for worship on Sunday morning, an evangelistic message that could just as readily be given to those who are not part of the church? What difference does it make that those to whom our preaching is addressed are baptized? There is a certain vagueness in this question. Not all who are in a congregation are baptized, and not all the baptized are actually “faithful” and present at worship. But with a promise that these issues will be looked at later, let us deal directly with the question of what difference it makes to preaching that the hearers of preaching are baptized.

Within the United States Protestant tradition we have two elements that point in contrary directions. The first is our clear appropriation of Israel's scriptures as our own. We understand ourselves as the church to be linked to God's Israel, God's covenant people. The preaching that is emphasized in that Scripture is the preaching to God's People—to the circumcised and their children. It is a call to faithfulness to those on whom God has a claim because they are part of the covenant people. The prophets may speak in both warning and promise to all of the nations, but their words center on Israel, even in the warnings and promises. With this as a model, it does make a difference whether our words are addressed to those who bear the sign of being God's People.

Yet there is a second strain which has had as much if not more influence on our concept of preaching: our revivalist history with its emphasis on evangelization. The revivalist thrust made little distinction between those in the covenant community and those outside. Both needed the same message of repentance and renewal. As the "born again" experience became more central, the significance of baptism—especially of infant baptism—receded. Preaching had the purpose of calling for this renewal, this repentance. Essentially, it was what we would now call evangelistic preaching whether within the church or to those outside. What was lost in the midst of the revival was preaching that built on being part of the People of God rather than calling for entrance into that group.

These are two somewhat antithetical trends that have an impact on our present preaching. Our task is to realize their influence and see the theological implications of what we are doing. Could someone in our congregations know that their baptism was of significance—that they were being addressed as a baptized person, not as someone who could as easily be outside of the church as within it?

The Difference it Makes

First, let us look at a biblical passage that deals specifically with preaching—Romans 10:14:

How are they to call upon him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher?

We are accustomed to hearing this read in the ordination service. Clearly there are good reasons for this placement. However, the vast majority of those whom we ordain are not sent to preach to those who have never heard, nor are they sent to unbelievers. Do we increase the strain of our tradition that comes from the revival movement by indicating, however subtly, that those in the congregations to whom the ordained ministry is sent are unbelievers? Instead, could this passage be understood as calling the whole congregation to its task in the world around it? In fact, with this in mind it becomes easier to see the text in its context. This passage is part of the larger argument of Paul concerning the salvation of the Jews, and, in fact, he concludes that they should have known

from the witness of scripture, because from that scripture they had already heard.

But the passage does raise the question of how those who have no knowledge of God will be able to come to faith. Whom does God call in our day to witness to those who have no knowledge of the work of salvation? That is a theological issue of major dimensions. To decide it is the clergy is a short-sighted answer.

What difference does the remembrance of baptism make in the interpretation of passages that do not deal directly with preaching or with baptism? Let us look at the lectionary selections for a Sunday that has no great liturgical significance, one in the long Pentecost season. The lessons for a Sunday in mid-October in year B are: Isaiah 53:7-12, Psalm 35:17-28, Hebrews 4:14-16, Mark 10:35-45. These are too long to print here, so the passages need to be read before the following comments will be clear.

Let us begin with the gospel text. The passage speaks of the service rather than power that should characterize the leadership within the community of faith. This is in contrast to the power over others that is typical of the Gentile societies. If this is preached to the baptized, are they being asked which society they wish to belong to? Or are they being reminded of the strange society in which they already are? Are they not being reminded of the significance of their baptism, which made them part of a community that is to be unlike the world around it? What is the congregation being called to do or to be? Is there not already a claim upon them to be what their baptism called them to be? How does this differ from preaching the same text to those who are not baptized? Are their choices different?

When we turn from the gospel text to the passage from Isaiah, we can see the connections fairly readily. The passage is familiar. Usually we understand that the reference is to Jesus as the Suffering Servant and let it go at that. However, when it is read in conjunction with the gospel lesson, it points to the fact that God's People have long been called to such sacrificial service and love, rather than gaining power over others. Israel was called to this; Jesus actually lived this out to the utmost; we, as the community of Jesus, are also called to live this strange life. To the baptized it represents a claim already on us because we are God's People. Our choice is not whether or not to be part of that people, but rather whether we will be faithful or unfaithful members of that people.

This passage from Isaiah also points to the fruitfulness of such suffering servanthood. This theme is picked up in the epistle lesson. Because Jesus was indeed the suffering servant, his role as our high priest is far more valuable, since he is able to be sympathetic to our needs. This is a statement about Jesus, but can it also, in the light of these other passages, be a statement about us? Would we as the church, the priestly people, be more useful to the rest of the world as a priestly people if we lived out our role as suffering servants in this world?

The psalm is a cry from one who is suffering unjustly and who hopes for ultimate vindication. In the context of the other passages, the character of that vindication is made clear.

In a sermon using these passages, it would make a great deal of difference if the preacher remembered that the hearers were baptized. The Word addresses them; it has a claim upon them even before the preacher begins. In fact, a major task of preaching is to clarify that claim. Baptism gives the preacher the right to say, "This means *you*, whether you or I like it or not." God has called this person to be part of the covenant community. This preacher is not doing that—it is already done.

Some Further Conclusions

Three things remain to be said. First, if there are those in the congregation who are not baptized, they presumably are there in order to understand what it would be like to be part of such a community. They are welcome to "overhear" what the text has to say to the community. Following this, they may even be invited to become a part of it. But the major address is to those who already belong. It is for their growth and development.

Second, there are many who are baptized who are not in any congregation. This situation can never be totally overcome, but clearer guidelines for who can be baptized—guidelines all churches seem to be putting into place—should reduce this. Even in our present situation, however, evangelism can call on the sign that these people bear as those whom God has already called to faith. They, too, stand in a different relationship to the biblical message than those who have not received that sacrament. There is, obviously, preaching to those who are not baptized, and which leads to the sacrament rather than from it.

Third, all preaching within the church has a connection to baptism. It is addressed to the baptized. Therefore, any sermon can make this connection clear and assist the members of the congregation to understand the meaning of their own baptism. This need not be confined to a worship service in which there is an actual baptism but, rather, can occur in any worship. For the preacher to keep this in mind is a very important hermeneutical tool. It gives the preacher a link between the text and the people that is a given. Its elucidation can help the sermon to relate to the people's lives in direct and natural ways. Renewal in the church may lie in a deeper understanding of our baptism rather than in ignoring it. Realizing the connection between baptism and preaching can help in this renewal.