

“The Word Is Near You”: Homiletics as a Vocation

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The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart
(that is, the word of faith which we preach) (Romans 10:8).

When I resigned my parish eighteen years ago to become a teacher of homiletics, I couldn't escape the feeling that I was resigning my vocation in order to join a discipline. Although well-meaning parishioners and family members assured me that a career in academe would prove to be a wider field of service, I was haunted by what I perceived as a move away from the call that had shaped my entire adult life. Everyone knows that the preacher, if he or she has nothing else, has a call. And everyone knows that teachers have a vocation. But teachers of preachers? I was not sure.

My uncertainty deepened as I settled into my office located, quite literally, at the corner of Science and Research Drives in the middle of a university that, when it received mail addressed only to “Professor of Homiletics,” routinely routed it to the Medical Center. There it would shuttle from Orthopedics to Pediatrics to Obstetrics until some wit would write on the envelope, “Try Anesthesiology,” and then it would find me. If I *had* joined a discipline, it was certainly one the other disciplines hadn't heard about.

Then, at professional meetings I made the acquaintance of full professors of homiletics who after a few drinks in dimly-lighted cocktail lounges would break down (some sobbed quietly) and admit that they'd never had a course in homiletics or perhaps only one—they weren't sure. What kind of discipline was this, whose leaders had not studied its first principles, that had no academic journal, whose research was often swallowed up by other disciplines, whose currency was stories and exhortations, whose authenticity, unlike the other disciplines, derived from a supernatural mission?

Well, of course, it is the *vocation* of homiletics. What we cobble together as a discipline has a calling at its center. And at the center of the center lies the word of God.

The word has always shadowed the people of God. It was a sign of God's grace that Moses could say of the law, It is not out of reach in heaven or beyond the sea in some unattainable place, “But the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it” (Deut. 30:12). Didn't Ezekiel eat the scroll (which tasted sweeter than honey) in order to become one with the will of God, and didn't Jeremiah compare the word of God to a fire smoldering in his bones?

At the climax of the bat mitzvah the rabbi places the torah scroll into the child's hands. She wraps it in her prayer shawl, and as the rabbi leads her around the synagogue and down its center aisle, the congregation sings *Shema Israel, Yahweh elohenou, Yahweh echod*. You can see the children of Moses, Ezekiel, and Jeremiah—people who have been formed by the word and trained to love it—sliding down to the end of the pew or stepping reverently into the aisle to touch the scroll. “The word is near you.”

In the Shona liturgy of the Zimbabwean Lutheran church the high point of the ritual is the reading of the Gospel. Just before it is read, a woman's voice materializes out of the congregation, and sings a hauntingly beautiful melody. The people surge in response in a divine undulation, back and forth, back and forth, until, when the Gospel is finally read from the midst of the congregation, it has become a physical presence. "The word is near you."

In an academic environment, the word is near us also, on our lips and in our heart, but often as a chronic problem to be solved. Whereas in the church, it seems that God's people can't get close enough to the word, we have been trained to step back from it in order to appraise it with the normative gaze of history or philosophy.

Although it is our vocation to love the word, we spend an inordinate amount of time doubting the word, debating it, dissecting or deconstructing it. The church assumes that the word of God will heal; the academy knows that it can hurt and sometimes begins from that assumption. How weary we can become with wrestling this *problem* called the word of God. How weary we can become with the heart of our own vocation. The theologian Karl Rahner wrote, The word *is* a burden, but a light one! The more you bear it, the more you are borne by it.

Why do homileticians need this assurance? Because no other academic discipline relies more on the *church's* way of trusting the word than we do.

Somewhere Karl Barth says that the preacher stands between two advents, the first and second coming of our Lord. He means that the preacher is not condemned forever to making relevant a figure from the past. Can you imagine any greater burden than always having to conjure a meaningful Christ from the past? To make him *real*? That's why preachers burn out or run amok—because they actually think they have to produce God for an expectant audience.

Standing between two advents means that the subject matter of our speech is not always receding into the murky past but is waiting to meet up with our words. And not an exhausted Christ who must be recreated by busy and exhausted preachers but, as T.S. Eliot called him, "Christ the tiger," ready to ambush our words and take possession of them. Which means that homiletics' job description does not include bringing Jesus down from his throne in religious idealism or digging him up from his *Sitz im Leben* but forming students in order to prepare them to meet Christ out ahead in their ministry of preaching. When the risen Christ is coming toward you from the Second Advent, as it were, preaching is the sheer gift of getting ambushed in the midst of the people of God.

We had a young man named Jonny who was really struggling with preaching in divinity school. He wasn't slow of mind but he was slow of speech. He lacked fluency and confidence. One day in class he was about halfway through his sermon when a violent thunderstorm knocked out electric power. There we were in a lab without windows in the basement of the building. No lights by which he could read his sermon notes; no lights by which to fill out our precious critique sheets; no video; no recording. Air conditioning gone. All the accouterments necessary to the proclamation of the word had been eliminated! When the power went out, members of the class grouched and groaned as if to say, "We've invested ten minutes of our precious time in this session—what a waste." Several got up to leave.

Out of the darkness we heard this voice coming from the pulpit, "Professor, I believe I can continue." We settled back in the dark, and Jonny plunged forward. After

a minute or two, someone, emboldened by darkness no doubt, said, "I agree with you, Jonny." Someone else said, "Good, Jonny, that's all right," followed by our first tentative "Amen," followed by another stronger one, and then a thunderous "AMEN!" and Jonny began to pick up steam.

The second advent that Barth talked about had kicked in, and suddenly we had the word, with noise and sweat and body odor, like a real church. Jesus had ambushed us. We were looking one way for him (at the camera?) but he came from the other direction to meet a struggling preacher and a bored class. And something like the word of God drew near.

Homiletics is a strange vocation. It emerges from a mystery. The first mystery is how a little twenty-minute speech (and its reception) participates in the coming of God. The second mystery, and the one that occupies Paul in Romans 9-11, is why anyone would reject the message. Why, Paul asks, would his own kin, to whom has been given the sonship, the glory, the covenants, the law, and the promises, turn away from the final gift? "The word is near you," Paul pleads with Israel, "it's as close to you as God's gracious law; it is the word of faith that we preach."

Paul does not solve the dilemma but frames it in doxology and states as his key signature, "The gifts and the call of God are irrevocable" (Romans 11:29). The chosen people looked one way for the messiah, but they can count on meeting him from another direction.

You cannot teach out of such a mystery and remain unaffected by it. When undersea explorer Jacques Cousteau died this summer, one of his associates said, "He had a very different view of the world. For him the real world existed beneath the surface. His genius was that he enabled us to see this other world." Although homileticsians are members of a professional guild, we will never *be* professionals, nor will we train students to talk like other professionals—lawyers, doctors, or engineers. They are all required to keep to the surface. We are required to plumb the depths in order to impart a different view of the world. And this has consequences for our place in this world.

Someone has said of the characters in Flannery O'Connor's stories, "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you *odd*." We preachers can't help but envy other users of words in our culture. They are *so* smooth. They have only to move their lips and out flows the spirit of the age. Bearers of the word, on the other hand often seem out of place or distracted, as if fighting off a swarm of bees. Commenting on St. Paul's style of speech, Joseph Sittler observed, "Where grammar cracks, grace erupts," and then sternly warns, "What God has riven asunder let no preacher too suavely join together."

If we preach between two advents, we never know how or in whom the Lord will meet us, or how we ourselves may be "riven asunder."

When I read Paul's text in Romans, I immediately reread a letter from Lucy Rose in which she confessed, "I have my whole life long believed in the sovereign transcendence of God. Now I am experiencing the deep immanence of God within me, the incarnation in me of God's life so that in terms of *that* life it is no longer I who live but Christ within me."

A sea change had begun in her—from the good Calvinist God who rules over us all to the One who dampens your forehead in the night, dries your tears, calms your anxieties, surrounds you with friends, and takes you home.

Lucy exemplified the life lived in nearness to the divine word in all its forms. Long before she got sick she had made the word of God her vocation. She was already meeting Christ out ahead, as it were, in those who are poor and vulnerable. After she got sick, she merely joined them in a deeper way.

Whenever you are tempted to think of yourself as just another academic, reread Paul's letter—and Lucy's.

Whenever you say, "homiletics is my discipline," hear again its call.

Whenever you say, this word is too heavy to bear, let it bear you up, as it did Lucy.

By the time she was borne away, her cancer and death were not a theological problem but part of our community's doxology. By that time, she was not a burden, but light as a feather, for the word had borne her to the end.

"For the word is near you, on your lips and in your heart (that is, the word of faith which we preach)."

Teach that.

This sermon was preached at the annual meeting of the Academy of Homiletics in Oakland, California.