

Preaching Partners

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When I was a child, I offered my Presbyterian preacher/ father a bit of advice each Sunday morning. “Remember Dad,” I admonished, “don’t make your sermon last more than ten minutes! It gets boring.” Each Sunday, my father merely shook his head and told me that he would see what he could do about my request. For my elementary school ears, ten minutes of my father’s talking from a pulpit was all I could handle.

As a teenager, however, something changed. I wish I could remember when it happened. One Sunday morning, in the middle of church, I discovered I was really listening and paying attention not only to my father’s sermon, but to the entire worship service. Before I knew it, worship became more than my family’s routine, or a way to pass the time. It held deep meaning for my adolescent life.

I imagine that most of us, when we think about preaching and youth ministry, often assume that youth respond to our sermons the way I did as a child. “Keep them short. We don’t listen anyway!” When we make that assumption, however, we are usually mistaken. Youth *will* listen closely in worship because, like adults, youth are hungry to catch glimpses of God’s promises and vision of hope. They want a vibrant faith. They want to see and imagine how faith impacts and illumines their lives. Kenda Creasy Dean and Ron Foster claim “. . . developmentally, adolescents need a transcendent God worthy of their fidelity, a God who can transport them beyond the limitations of self. Millennial youth have cut their teeth on special effects and simulations of transcendence and are in search of the life-shaking, real article.”¹ I am convinced that through preaching, we can become their partners on this search, and in my experience preaching with youth, I am discovering some helpful techniques. When I am able to keep these techniques in mind, this search for “the real transcendent article” is more meaningful for both of us.

Authentic Relationship

If we want youth to be fully present in the preaching experience, then we must be fully present in their lives. They have to know that we care about them. In my ministry, I am quickly discovering that if I have a strong, healthy relationship with the youth, then regardless of the quality of my sermon on any Sunday, they will listen because they know they are important to me. If youth feel like they know the preacher and the preacher knows them, then the preaching experience carries much more power for all involved. No longer is the preacher a stranger, telling them the way things are and how they should act. Instead, the preacher is their partner, discovering a meaning of the biblical text with them. Together, they use their imaginations to open up God’s new possibilities for their lives and for the world.

For this strong, healthy relationship to form, youth need to know the playful side of their preacher. They need to know who their preacher is without the robe and microphones. They also need to know their preacher’s doubts and fears, joys and celebrations. In other words, youth need to know their pastor is a real, vulnerable, imperfect person! Youth can see straight through a plastic, shiny veneer. They know

when someone is being authentic with them or not. Creasy Dean writes, “Youth are skilled eavesdroppers; they listen to our lives far more carefully than to our words.”²

Last summer I was honored to be the preacher for a week-long Synod Senior High conference at Mo Ranch in Texas. From the very beginning of the conference, I tried to be present at all events, from the morning energizers to the 1980’s dance. I enjoyed playing with the senior high youth, eating with them, laughing with them, and worshipping with them. I believe that my availability helped these youth to feel as if they really knew me. So, when it was time for the nightly sermon, the barriers dropped and the sermon became a group event. We were open to learning from and with each other. Their attentive energy inspired me as I preached. After each sermon, several youth approached me with a variety of comments and questions. They shared with me their interpretations of the Scripture passages and how they saw God at work in their lives. If I had not participated in the whole conference, only showing up to preach each evening, the sermons could have become monologues instead of conversations.

Conversation and Testimony

When we have healthy pastoral relationships with youth, we will learn from their lives. Therefore, when writing sermons, it is important for us to bring their young voices into the text. Lucy Rose calls this homiletical approach “conversational preaching.” She states that conversational preaching “grows out of and reflects the ongoing conversations between the preacher and members of the congregation in which the preacher is not the one-in-the-know but an equal colleague in matters of living and believing.”³ Youth listen closely when the preacher uses illustrations that reflect their experiences. They want to know how the Scripture breathes new life into their lives. So, as preachers, we make it a priority to talk with youth, to listen closely to how they feel, to learn what brings them joy and what terrifies them. For the youth conference, many of my sermon illustrations were composites of previous conversations with youth. When preaching in my home congregation, I always try to include an illustration to which the youth can relate. I have also experimented with emailing the biblical text and questions to members of the youth group and asking them to respond. When we bring the voices of youth into the text, the sermon becomes “our” sermon. Together, as colleagues, we explore God’s strange and mysterious Word and seek out God’s vision.

For the youth and the preacher to be colleagues, however, youth need to hear the preacher’s testimony. They need to know what makes us struggle with a certain text. They want to hear how our lives intersect with the biblical story. They long to know if we have ever felt like an outsider, or a prom queen, or a nerd. They desire to hear how we lose and recover our faith on a daily basis. If conversational preaching is going to happen, the preachers have to contribute themselves to the conversation! Sterile and borrowed illustrations do not have the same impact with youth as first-person testimony.

Affirmation and Invitation

Finally, it is important for us to expect something from our youth. We must not only get to know who they are, but invite them to become even more. With the vision of faith, we know our youth have been created for amazing things! “God has utmost confidence in young people’s ability to change the world, not to mention the church, and not only invites them but expects them to do so.”⁴ We must affirm our youth, but

we cannot separate that affirmation from an invitation. At the Mo Ranch conference, a youth acting team served as worship leaders. Each night, they presented a Psalm. One night, they embodied Psalm 139 in liturgical dance. Another night, they wove together stories from their lives with Psalm 22. For me, the amazing thing was that the youth were the creators. Their acting team coach gave them assignments, trusting something beautiful would happen. It did! Each night, they were ministers of grace for all of us. I believe if I had merely given them a script of what to say and do, we would have missed out on the joy of their faithfulness and creativity. Youth are extremely capable. Therefore, our youth must be reminded they are participants in God's mission just like the adults who surround them. Youth are not the future of the church. They are the church, *here and now*.

As preachers, pastors, and teachers, we are called to walk with youth on their journeys of faith. Whether we serve as the Head of Staff, an Associate for Youth, or a Director of Christian Education, whatever our ecclesiastical position, we cannot take this calling lightly. It requires our commitment, our honesty, our energy, and our imagination. But it is a journey that will bless us. We will learn as much as we teach. After all, God knows the passion of a young person's faith. Remember Mary?

Sermon from Mo Ranch Senior High Youth Celebration, June 2000

Theme for the week "Sound of Sheer Silence"

Scriptures: Psalm 139 and John 15:9-17

I hope you really listened to the words of Psalm 139. I hope you let them wash over you and fill you. That Psalm is one of my favorites. It is the first one that comes into my head when I am scared or lonely. I have thought a lot about why this Psalm speaks so loudly to me. I think it is because it reminds me that I am known and claimed by God.

This feeling of being claimed and known by God has been a central piece of my theology for as long as I can remember, certainly long before I knew what the word "theology" meant. It is why I have always been stunned and unnerved by a very popular question. Maybe you have heard it before. It usually goes like this: "Are you saved?" I don't know if you have ever asked it, or if someone has asked you. The first time I heard it was when I was ten years old. The girl who asked me was one of my playmates from down the street. One afternoon, we were in her backyard. Suddenly, she tipped her head over to the side, looked at me intensely and asked, "Are you saved?" I did not know what to say. "Am I saved?" I thought. As a child, that question had never occurred to me before. After a few moments, I think I managed to utter a pathetic "yes," with as much attitude as my ten-year-old soul could muster. I then went home to tell my parents.

My childhood playmate was not the last person to ask me that question. Maybe it is because I grew up in Waco, a town with a definite religious flavor, but that question came up a lot. Are you saved? Have you chosen Jesus yet? Or, you could phrase it the way I once saw it on a T-shirt in seminary: "Eternity, smoking or non-smoking - your choice." As I said a few minutes ago, this language of choice does not really register with me. I think it is because if I am really completely honest, then I have to confess that I know I will never be able to be one hundred percent committed to God. I hope this doesn't make you nervous. Maybe some of you know what I mean. When I really think about it, and pray about it, I know that I have not completely abandoned my need

for success, or affirmation, or nice things. I know that I will never do anything that is completely void of self-interest. Our Reformed tradition calls this total depravity. So if God's love and choosing of me depends on my love and choice for God, well, I should just head home now!

But, before I pack my bags, let us look together at our other Scripture for tonight. It is from the Gospel of John. When I first read it, I exhaled deeply. First of all, Jesus is calling the disciples "friends." That is enough right there to make you want to dance. This one who knows us better than we know ourselves is calling us "friends." Then, Jesus delivers the kicker: verse 16a. "You did not choose me but I chose you." Did you hear that? Did you hear what Jesus said to this raggedy, outcast, group of disciples who were always missing Jesus' point? Did you hear what he said to the people who would not only betray him, but also deny him, running scared? "You did not choose me, but I chose you."

Jesus switches my friend's popular question around. Instead of asking "Are you saved?" or "Have you made your choice for God?" Jesus says, "You did not choose me, I chose you." Period. My seminary professor, Dr. Shirley Guthrie, puts it this way: "God does not say 'I will love you *if* you are good, *if* you prove yourself worthy, *if* you do so and so, *if* you first love me.' God does not even say, 'I will love you *if* you first have faith in me.'"⁵ I believe God also does not say "I will love you if you excel in sports, or get all A's in school, or are popular and good-looking." No. "God says simply, 'I love you just as you are - *you*; not your righteousness, your humility, your faith, or your accomplishments of one kind or another.'"⁶ Guthrie claims this does not mean that God's love is blind. However, being chosen by God is a big "nevertheless." God sees us more clearly than we see ourselves, but nevertheless, God loves us and accepts us for exactly who we are.⁷

It is not our choice for Jesus that saves us. It is not some decision we make that forces God to love us. God's choice for us does not depend on how well we listen for God's voice. The Gospel is about God's decision for humanity. God's decision for us is always going to be more important than our small decisions for Jesus. The gospel is not about our goodness or badness. It is about God disclosing who God is in Jesus Christ.

Now, I know what some of you might be thinking. "Shannon, come on, this sounds too easy. We don't have to do anything?" I understand why you might have this response. I have wondered the same thing. It does sound easy, doesn't it? God has chosen us. God has claimed us, so we can just go on about our days, sitting at the same tables in the cafeteria with people who are just like we are, watching out for number one. It sounds like pretty easy discipleship. But if we take our Gospel text seriously, then I believe we can't come to that conclusion. Jesus does not say to his disciples or to us, "You are chosen, so continue to live the way you have always lived." No. Jesus says, "You are chosen and appointed to go and bear lasting fruit. You are chosen and commanded, therefore, to love one another as I have loved you. You are chosen, so love one another with all the depth and commitment that you can muster, resting in the assurance that you are loved."

If we can begin to trust the words of the Psalmist and Jesus, we will begin to let go of the need to prove to God we are chosen and worthy of love. Then, we will be free to really live the life of discipleship and commitment that Jesus offers. When we begin to realize how much we have been given, then, as the poet Ann Weems says,

“...we are free to live in the kingdom of God. We are free to praise God for the grace bestowed on us. We are so free, we can love one another in the beautiful loving spirit of Christ.”⁸

Sisters and brothers, we are invited into this freedom of trusting that God has already claimed and chosen us. But, a word of caution, so we don't get puffed up: God has not chosen *only* us. We do not know who God has chosen, but as theologian Karl Barth said, “In Jesus Christ we have good hope for all people.” This good hope is why our deep commitment of love cannot just stop here at Mo-Ranch, or with people we like. We cannot just decide to love only each other. On the contrary, if we believe that it is God's decision for humanity that forms our faith, then we are called to have that same vision of grace for others. If we will live out our chosenness, then we will try to see all people we encounter as chosen, too. I believe if we consciously tried to see all people as children of God, then your schools, our churches, and our world would change. We would change.

Imagine the possibilities. Let's start with the school cafeteria. If we all practice this vision of chosenness and call to love, maybe the groups who gather at the different tables will get all mixed up. Maybe suddenly all the stereotypes will not carry the same impact. If we all see everyone in that cafeteria as a child of God, loved and claimed by God, then geeks, jocks, cheerleaders, outcasts, you and I will all sit at table together. Sounds like communion doesn't it! No longer will some people be in and others be out. Can you imagine it?

Now, go with me to a street corner. If you practice this vision of chosenness and call to love, then maybe the next time you see a homeless person, you first see a person, child of God, who is loved and claimed. If this is your vision, I bet you will look him or her in the eye and figure out how you might be able to help. Can you imagine it?

Now, come with me into your church. If your church is like every other church, you have controversy and disagreements. Sometimes the fighting gets ugly. If we in the church practice our vision of chosenness and call to love, maybe we can really learn to disagree and hold hands at the same time. Can you imagine it?

Jesus does not say, “You have chosen me, so I will choose you.” Jesus says, “You did not choose me, but I chose you.” Our Psalmist does not pray, “O Lord, I am looking for you so find me.” The Psalmist says, “O Lord, you have searched me and known me.” May God give us the grace to really believe this reality. Then, may God give us the courage to practice our vision of chosenness and call to love. Imagine the possibilities!

Notes

¹Kenda Creasy Dean and Ron Foster, *The Godbearing Life: The Art of Soul Tending for Youth Ministry* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1998), 120.

²*The Godbearing Life: The Art of Soul Tending for Youth Ministry*, 79.

³Lucy Atkinson Rose, *Sharing the Word: Preaching in the Roundtable Church* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1997), 96.

⁴*The Godbearing Life- The Art of Soul Tending for Youth Ministry*, 64.

⁵Shirley C. Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine*, rev. ed. (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994), 319.

⁶*Ibid.*

⁷*Ibid.*

⁸Ann B. Weems, *Putting the Amazing Back in Grace* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1999), xi.