

Preaching the Cross: A Confessional Pilgrimage

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Introduction

Several years ago I was “talking preaching” with a man who was the first significantly different voice I heard from the pulpit in my teens and early twenties. I don’t remember how we got around to the question, but at one point he asked me: “What is preaching’s message?” I answered quickly: “The cross.” Not wanting an answer to his next question, he asked with frustration, “What does *that* mean?”

His concern, with sensitivities nurtured by Tillich, was the *meaning*, or lack thereof, that “the cross” has to hearers. My initial, though unspoken response, nurtured by Barthian impulses, was “If the cross’s significance consists in what God does apart from human initiative or understanding, what does ‘meaning’ matter?” Beneath both our theological inclinations, though, was the fear that “the word of the cross” had become a mere code word for insiders and as such was as meaningless to us as it was to outsiders.

Using the right code words within a particular community’s own language game can be reassuring to those inside. But such words and phrases can be nothing more than “comfort words,” words that make insiders feel safe. Comfort words are those which have lost both their referential character and their point of contact with hearers not familiar with the game we are playing. As such, they function in a purely intramural way within the community. The “word of the cross” is such a word. Like Woody Allen’s chameleon character, “Leonard Zelig,” the word of the cross has morphed into the shape, size, color, and accent of various groups throughout time. Such morphing has not always led to comfort.

The First Naïveté

I grew up in an iconoclastic church. Great care was taken to insure that the worship space was void of any religious symbols. That meant no crosses, no stained glass, no saints, no banners, no vestments or colors—nothing that might misguide the imagination into idolatry. Of course, my ecclesiastical interior designers did not take into account that the human imagination cannot *not* produce images. So, by default, my imagination had what appeared to be a blank canvas upon which to paint. But I say “appeared to be” because the canvas was still there, as were the tubes of paint and the brushes. All the art supplies were in stock. The icons of religious symbolism that were trying hard not to be such took on great power in their denial.

I remember in the church of my youth a spare pulpit, oak with a light stain and a glossy finish. A microphone jutted out of the middle and back to the mouth of the preacher. It was up four steps and to the left side, in balance with a reading lectern on the right. Such a declaration of space required the preacher—always a man—to stand and speak continuously for thirty to forty-five minutes while the congregation sat still and quiet in long, thinly cushioned, oak pews. The scene looked strikingly similar to the authoritarian situation of discipline (“lecturing”) in my social framework where those who were “in trouble” because of wrongdoing would sit erect and silent on the

couch while the father would stand, sometimes pacing back and forth, and mete out correction mingled with disappointment.

Between the pulpit and lectern, and one step up from the congregation, was a rectangular table upon which sat unadorned but shiny silver trays. Etched across the top front edge of the table were the words: "Do this in remembrance of me." Within the smaller trays, my mind's eye could see the salt-less saltine crackers lying on a doily in the dark, passively awaiting the lifting of the lid on Sunday morning. Under the lids of the larger trays were the tiny shot glasses filled three-fourths of the way up with Welch's grape juice. Just looking at the trays and the words across the top front edge of the table made me remember the words frequently spoken before communion. In good Zwinglian fashion we were reminded every week that the "bread" and "fruit of the vine" were mere symbols and not really the body and blood of Christ. Funny, but the more the man pleaded this way, the more a voice whispered in my ear, "Methinks thou protesteth a bit too strongly." We used the King James Version.

In every church of my childhood there was a baptistry in a prominent place. It symbolized the place of new beginning, of salvation, of the cleansing of sin by the blood of the Lamb. Since the churches I grew up in practiced immersion of adults, the baptistry was always the largest entity up front, a fact that spoke of its importance to the proceedings. Indeed, virtually every word from the pulpit culminated in a call to be baptized into Christ, even if everyone there had already been immersed, and immersed "correctly." And that's the other thing the baptistry symbolized for me: correct religion. We had baptism "right." Other churches had it "wrong." The right/wrong, correct/incorrect, true teachers/false teachers, orthodox/heretical mentality pervaded everything seen, said, and heard in the worship space. It created a deep sense of fear and uncertainty, but also a warm, safe feeling for the guardians of the code.

Though no crosses adorned the churches in which I grew up, either inside or outside, I remember hearing about the cross every Sunday. The word of the cross in my church family of origin was a word about sin and the way our sin separated us from the holy God. Jesus' sacrifice on the cross was God's way of providing the necessary payment for our reconciliation, redemption, and salvation. Without Jesus' death on the cross we would remain lost in our sins. The word of the cross was summarized in the song, "He paid a debt he did not owe. I owed a debt I could not pay. I needed someone to wash my sins away. And now I sing a brand new song, 'Amazing Grace.' Christ Jesus paid the debt that I could never pay." The word of the cross was spoken exclusively in the language of substitutionary atonement and was focused on the individual. As one might suspect from the foregoing, my church of origin was a white, conservative, middle-class church of the conservative south. Racism, misogyny, and classism bubbled beneath, if not directly on top of the surface, though I grew up virtually blind to these realities since such sentiments came out of some of the same mouths as those who spoke of God and the cross to me.

I had no operative hermeneutics of suspicion growing up but do remember nascent questions that lurked, questions such as, "If God is really God, then why is the Divine confined within the sacrificial system? Where did that system come from anyway? How does the shedding of blood atone for sin?" It seemed simplistic and formulaic. The justification for it was confined to texts of scripture from Paul and Hebrews, with some Old Testament texts on sacrifice amended for support. I remember being puzzled by the gospels' conspicuous and almost total silence about atonement matters.

My ministers and teachers at the time told me that the gospel stories were best explained by the epistles. That is why the preaching I heard was based more in the epistles, and was primarily didactic in character. The point of contact (*anknupfungspunkt*) for people with the word of the cross had purely to do with their own recognition of personal sin, desire for repentance and forgiveness, and submission to baptism where Christ's blood proved efficacious for their sins' removal. Evangelism and preaching took the route of "pricking the conscience," or at least achieving an intellectual assent to the idea that without the cross, without Christ's sacrificially shed blood, and without our coming in contact with that in baptism by immersion, we would go to hell.

The Critical Period

I succeeded as an evangelist of the traditional gospel of the cross—a gospel that focused on the personal and private but avoided the public and the social—but cracks in the earthen vessel were starting to show. I remember convincing (at least cognitively) one woman of her sin and her need for Christ's sacrificial atonement which she could only access by obedience to the waters of baptism. She was persuaded, but reluctantly. I'll never forget her words, "This seems right, but something about it smells fishy." Soon I found myself at a Christian university and introduced for the first time to the critical study of the Bible, history, and theology. Though the effect on my childhood faith was about a 9.5 on the Richter scale (my Alma Mater sat directly on top of the San Andreas Fault), I recognized only later that the ark of my understanding of the word of the cross remained relatively untouched. Even so, this period brought two significant alterations to the simple formula. The first was the important new awareness, gained primarily from Paul, that sin was not merely to be understood as discreet acts of moral rebellion on our part, one of which was potent enough to knock us off the tightrope of faith, below which no safety net lay. Sin, rather, was a realm of power in which we were stuck and inexorably damned. God's graceful gift in Christ's death on the cross was a miraculous deliverance from sin's realm that transports us into Christ. The second, also from Paul, was the related realization that salvation was not merely individualistic. Paul's pronouns are persistently plural. There are no "Lone Ranger" Christians, as my old New Testament professor liked to say. The "in Christ" realm is profoundly communal. The cross as the gift of God's grace thus became for me a point of solidarity with all whom God called, judged, redeemed, and initiated into the household of faith.

The deeper and more disturbing critical period of re-evaluation of the word of the cross did not really begin, I am not proud to confess, until my doctoral work. There I was forced to deal with the perspectives of non-white, non-European, non-male readers and hearers of the word of the cross. My immediate response to these "other" readings and hearings was reactionary. My way of reading scripture and hearing the word of the cross was not merely *a* way of reading and hearing, it was *the* way. I had been taught that if we all signed on to the same, neutral, but best methods of research (mainly, the historical and traditional literary critical methods), we would all end up in the same place. Unaware of my own social location and the way that the forebears of my social location had both produced these particular methods and then wielded them with hegemonic power over all theological realms, I found myself on a steep and threatening learning curve. Discovering who I was, and where these ostensibly neutral

methods had come from, and how they had been used to keep control of those unlike us, I learned that my social location and its servant methods postured me to read and hear what I read and heard. I learned that my facility to dispatch what I saw as hermeneutically ill-conceived specks in other people's eyes (with the same kind of speed and vigor that I had evangelized those not-baptized-correctly-folks in my youth) was due to the hegemonic beam in my own eye. Even in my dissertation, a treatise on the message of the cross and its importance for the person of the preacher, I proved myself a good imitator of Job's friends by dismissing virtually without sympathy the experience of someone for whom the word of the cross has been nothing but bad news, brutality, and the antithesis of love and redemption. I now find my words there to be too quick, too sure, and not too full of the grace that is a crucial aspect of the word of the cross.

The critical period threatens to undo everything that came before in one's world of faith. It is a fire that relentlessly burns everything in its path. When one suffers through the sifting, the burning, the shaking of the foundations, one wonders what, if anything, will remain. Of necessity, for a time everything does seem lost. The center of one's being no longer holds. It is wilderness and wandering, waterless clouds and dried-up brooks. It is that down-time that Qoheleth warned us about on the negative side of each antithesis—the time of death, uprooting, killing, tearing down, weeping, non-embrace, mourning, losing, casting away, rending, hating, war—it is, for the preacher, the profoundly threatening time to keep silence. We want to retreat back to a simpler time, but know that there is no going back. Paul Ricoeur comments on this experience: "Does that mean that we could go back to a primitive naïveté? Not at all. In every way, something has been lost, irremediably lost: immediacy of belief. But if we can no longer live the great symbolisms of the sacred in accordance with the original belief in them, we can, we modern men [and women], aim at a second naïveté in and through criticism."¹

As I travel through the critical period, I am learning that folks from my social location have had the audacity to take a God's eye point of view regarding the cross and have forced that view on everyone else as the normative and, often, as the only view. What I am also observing is that it is very easy to dismiss out of hand, and with offensively pejorative and condescending language, anything that looks different from our traditional way of reading, hearing, or preaching the cross. Gerhard O. Forde is a striking example. In 1997, Forde wrote on the theology of the cross because "there isn't much of anything in English one can recommend enthusiastically to the ordinary reader." With the possible exception of Alister McGrath, the current avalanche of discussion on the theology of the cross is, for Forde, nothing more than sentimentalized platitudes on victimization and the vulnerability of God. "Such platitudes become the stock-in-trade of preachers and theologians who want to stroke the psyche of today's religionists. But this results in rather blatant and suffocating sentimentality... 'Misery loves company' becomes the unspoken motif of such theology."² The arrogance of such a position is hard to accept, especially when one realizes that all points of view are from below. None among us rises above the others to trump the table with the one revelation card in the deck, not even Luther. Only God holds such a "card." Everyone else is called to humility before the cross and before those who interpret it from their social location.

As I look back, I see that the seeds for my critical period were planted long ago by

several key experiences. My first consciousness-altering experience with the cross occurred when I saw in a history book a black and white photograph that had at its center a burning cross on the front lawn of a house. Between the house and the cross, a black man was hanging at the end of a rope. On the far left sat men on horseback wearing white robes and hoods. I could not reconcile what I knew of God, of Christ, of the gospel and of the cross with this gross act of hatred and violence. The second experience occurred in church history class when I read how the converted emperor Constantine had ordered that the cross be carried first into battle. Eusebius of Caesarea tells us that Constantine had a vision wherein he saw the trophy of a cross of light in the heavens with the inscription, "CONQUER BY THIS." Unsure of its meaning, Jesus himself appeared to Constantine and told him to use it as a safeguard against all his enemies.³ Crusaders wore the cross stitched on their chests as they slaughtered Jews and Moslems on their rapacious path to free Jerusalem in a stunningly different sense than the cross first freed Jerusalem. It crossed my mind that evangelism would be quite effective if one did it on a horse with a sword drawn in one hand and the words of invitation to the infidels "Be baptized or die!" on our lips. Just what sort of "converts" one would end up with is quite another story. Though less violent physically, this had been my method of evangelism, too, the kind that made that one woman smell fish.

The experience of feeling the horror of this use of the cross came back to me recently while I sat in a local seminary chapel waiting for a worship service to begin. Lifting up my eyes from the printed order on my lap, I beheld a massive, twenty-foot polished steel sword attached to a cutting board hanging from the wall in the chapel. It was a true Wittgensteinian duck/rabbit moment. My first thought was, "What is *that* doing in *here*?!" Then, the duck became a rabbit and I saw that it was actually a cross suspended on a wooden backdrop. I breathed a sigh of relief that I hadn't actually asked my question out loud. Given Wittgenstein's idea of exclusion, however, the implications of my chapel experience for preaching are profound. Applied to my "It's a sword, no, it's a cross!" situation, the thing itself cannot be both at once. The vision of one excludes the other. And there can be no middle ground, no cross/sword entity simultaneously. Those for whom the cross has had only a sword function in their mental and physical experience can only see a sword, no matter how loudly the preacher preaches, unless they—by the grace of God—undergo a radical perceptual and experiential paradigm shift for the cross to become a redemptive image of love and show the sword the door.

My experience of the critical period has been deepened as I have come into touch with the ethnic diversity that lives within my own genetic geography. I am one-half Jewish, one sixteenth Native American, but mostly Irish, and look that way, though when I read job ads I see that I am considered to be a person without color. Technically, I am both a racially and ethnically diverse person—a *mestizo*. Should I be offended that no one takes this reality into account, or should my Irish side take offense that white, Euro males have no color?

Getting in touch with my own ethnic, racial, and religious roots has sensitized me to the brutal forces that these, my relatives, have experienced often at the hands of Christians who held the cross as a sword in their own way. From Melito of Sardis to the Holocaust, Christians have justified anti-Semitism on the basis that the Jews were Christ-killers and thus God-murderers. Throughout the Jews' experience the cross has

been used against them by Christians as a tool of violence. Naftali Lavie poignantly describes her experience of the cross as symbol of hate:

Last month I stood with my immediate family—my wife, my daughter and my three sons at the Block of Horrors in Auschwitz....From a window on the second floor, a huge wooden cross, eight metres high, blocked my view. Behind it stood the Carmelite convent....Many Jews see the presence of the cross at Auschwitz as a provocation directed at the Jewish people, and as a desecration of the Holocaust.... I still remembered the fears that haunted us as children in Poland, as we tried to escape the presence of the cross. In our heavily Christian communities, Catholic funeral processions were always led by a young boy holding a long metal sceptre with a cross on top. Behind the child the priest would march, reading the prayers. Any Christian passer-by meeting the procession would remove his hat, bend his knee and bow to the cross. Jewish adults knew how to handle this situation, sometimes seeking shelter in doorways to avoid confronting the cross. Children were less experienced, and were occasionally beaten when the procession passed by and they did not bend their knee before the cross.... Those who raised the cross in Auschwitz perhaps meant to erase the uniqueness of what happened to the Jews in this evil place. But by doing this they have returned the symbol that has pursued us down through the generations to its proper place. There within eyesight of the gallows on which the commandant of Auschwitz was hanged, stands the cross—fitting reminder to the world of who is responsible for the most horrible crime since the beginning of time.⁴

I am quite sure that the Carmelites meant no harm. I would guess they were only trying to gather up all the senseless suffering at Auschwitz in the only symbol they knew to be large enough to do so. But the question, “What does *that* mean?” for the Jewish observers would have been a good question to ask before the cross was imposed on their visual landscape.

The conquest of the Americas by European settlers continued the cross’s violent thrust into the belly of weaker people by those who came to dominate and own, even while they evangelized along the way. Slave peoples from Africa, women from every human sector, and native people in the lands of colonization have all endured disgusting renditions of the cross. It is enough to make us ask with absolute seriousness the question that Mary C. Boys asked several years ago: “Is the cross a symbol Christians should now lay aside?”

The Second Naivete

Reading eighteenth and nineteenth century homiletical literature, I came across a prophetic printing error: “*The Rise of Scared Rhetoric*.” The author meant “sacred rhetoric,” of course, but the typesetter anticipated the fear that Barth meant to put into the heart of rhetoric-heavy homiletic approaches. It worked that way for me. Reading Barth’s *Word of God and Word of Man* in 1980, I never wanted to preach again. Barth’s warning descended “from above” in the question, “Who are you, O mortal, with the word of God on your lips?”

The new cause for pause in this preacher has ascended “from below”: “Who are you, O white, middle-class, heterosexual male to speak a word of suffering, a word of the cross, to us whose existence has been virtually nothing but suffering and cruciform?” Reflecting on this to near paralysis, I have seriously wondered how I could continue to hold on to an instrument of death that killed not the sin but the sinner again and again.

Paul Ricoeur insists that there exists the promise of breaking through and getting beyond the critical period—that period in which all is questioned and much is lost—to a new arena in which one is able even to claim enduring old truths and convictions from the land of the first naïveté, even though one now “knows better.” Ricoeur’s is a word of hermeneutical gospel, almost too good to be true. Arrival at such a place is a great and surprising gift. I do not feel that I have fully emerged from my current critical period of examining the word of the cross. I doubt that one ever can on the matter of the cross. As Ricoeur shows, the hermeneutic process of understanding is not a one time, linear sequential phenomenon. The sequence of first naïveté, critical period, and second naïveté is heuristic and flexible.

As I currently read the literature of Hispanic and Latino theology and edit a book on behalf of the National Interfaith Hospitality Network on issues of poverty, homelessness, and socially conscious preaching, I find myself straddling the border of the critical period and the second naïveté. Not attempting to be exhaustive, what follows are three suggestions regarding “preaching the cross” in light of the current theological and social situations in especially North American Christian contexts.

1. Preaching the cross means to resist triumphalism and glory and to risk folly and absurdity: in a word, to preach the cross today means to participate in the Spirit’s groaning toward redemption.

This may be a nearly impossible task, especially in those North American churches that are getting the most press because they are experiencing the most “success.” Paul was the first we know of to speak of the complete absurdity of the cross’s message. The message of the cross strained the bounds of morality, decency, and intelligence for both Jews and Gentiles. Paul’s irony and sarcasm are thick as he describes not only the message but also the nature of its preaching and ministry. I cannot imagine the Apostle meaning that the cross’s absurdity had an expiration date on it, say until Constantine became a Christian or America turned Christianity into big business and the cross into a pop-fashion bauble. The contemporary scandal of the cross is one that Mary Catherine Hilker has named well: “In Christian faith the last word about the cross may be that it is indeed a mystery of divine love, fidelity, and solidarity, but in the context of global suffering the first word that must be spoken is of its scandal, injustice, and absurdity.”⁵ The absurdity exists partly in this: The cross is a sign of humanity’s rejection of God’s version of God’s self. If T.S. Eliot was right in saying, “Humankind cannot take too much reality,” it is doubly correct to say that what we see in the incarnation of God in Jesus is that humankind cannot take too much of God. Humankind witnessed God’s version of God and said, “No, thank you. We’d rather not.” It was indeed foolhardy of God to attempt to come among us and embody love. It was a waste of God-time (*kairos*) to spend a life up close and personal with humankind when all we did was spit it back in God’s face in the end. The rejection of God’s self and God’s taking our rejection in humiliation is cause for outcry. The

death of God, for pure love and forgiveness, is cause for lament. Every time God's image is spit back again at God, lament is the only appropriate language of response.

In a culture that thrives in the denial of death, the church flees the tomb in search of a risen Lord too quickly. Good Friday must be given its say. Lament is an appropriate form for the cross to be preached today. Jesus' own words from the cross were few and brief, but Matthew and Mark tell us they included lament in good Psalmic fashion: "*My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?*" Lament as a mode for preaching the cross today sees part of preaching's task as one wherein the real questions and absurdities of people's lives are gathered up and given voice in the pulpit, in worship, and in the presence of the community of faith. Preaching the cross today sees the places where love has been abandoned and asks, "Why, O Lord, must these children be left alone, be raised by only one parent, be abandoned on the street to fend for themselves? And, how long before they know the safety and warmth of an embrace that does not hide motivations for abuse and violence? How long before they know the face of pure, non-violating, non-manipulative love?" Preaching the cross means articulating the questions for today's sufferers, questions they may not know how to ask for themselves, questions they may not feel free to ask in the context of worship and in the context of the worshipping community of faith—in the face of God.

Churches for whom worship has devolved into mere celebration cannot even imagine how questions and outcries could have a legitimate part of the program. Church music which has devolved into only "praise music" cannot imagine a place for the Sons of Korah, those lament psalm specialists, to sing on Sunday mornings. Lament as a form of preaching the cross stands on the side of the victimized and gives voice to those who suffer. Giving voice to sufferers is an act of good news.

Preaching the cross means proclaiming God's involvement with us in our groaning. Groaning is one of the ways the Holy Spirit works within believers while we, along with all creation, await adoption and the redemption of our bodies (Rom 8:22-23). Adoption and redemption as hope is a confession that we have not as yet experienced the fullness of what the gospel promises. As George Steiner has suggested, we exist not on Easter Sunday nor on Good Friday, but on Saturday, the day in between Jesus' death and his resurrection: a place between the reality of the cross, and all the suffering and hopelessness that the cross embraces, and the resurrection, with all the hope, resolution, reunion, and rest that it promises. In this in-between-time place we are not alone. Preaching the cross is an extension of the claim that God is with us, *Emmanuel*. Just as Matthew frames his entire gospel (Matt. 1:23, "they shall call him Emmanuel" and Matt. 28:20, "Lo, I am with you...") with this claim, preaching the cross continues to extend the claim of God's presence in the midst of the world's affliction, not apart from it.

This word of God's solidarity with sufferers, though, cannot be a ploy by the powerful to justify or glorify the suffering of those for whom it is in the best interests of the powerful to keep subjugated. The word of the cross that speaks of divine accompaniment in suffering rings true only when spoken by those who embody the word of accompaniment in suffering. This is not to say that the efficacy of the word preached depends on the preacher's capacity to live it out faithfully. I am not trotting out a contemporary homiletical Donatism. God, in God's mysterious grace, has caused the word of the cross to become gospel even when spoken by the most corrupt preachers imaginable, even those who have preached only for their own gain and

personal advancement. But from the vantage point of the hearers, the word does ring hollow when it is a word that smacks of manipulation rather than true accompaniment. Dominican missionary priest Brian Pierce experienced what true accompaniment means in Lima, Peru. On Good Friday, as he held the cross, hundreds streamed before him to kiss the feet of the crucified. However, on Easter Sunday only a smattering of people showed up to celebrate the resurrection. Disturbed by this at first, he soon realized that “there was no contradiction between the bloodied statue of Jesus in the church and faith in the Resurrection....The resurrection is experienced not as final victory, but in the recognition of the close presence of the living God who chooses to walk with and suffer alongside the poor. Resurrection is joyful and faithful reassurance here and now.”⁶ God with us in suffering is resurrection hope. In the process of this kind of concrete accompaniment, sufferers experience the hope and power of resurrection, but not apart from it. Cross and resurrection proclaimed from above without compassionate accompaniment is simply the newest form of being stoned from the pulpit, of the hearers becoming Craddock’s proverbial “javelin catchers.”

Moreover, the word of the cross as the word of God’s accompaniment with the sufferer is not a claim that human suffering is the will of God. The Spirit groans within creatures and creation for ultimate redemption. Christ’s death and resurrection were for the ultimate making whole of all that is. Following Edward Schillebeeckx, it is truer to say that God saves us as much in spite of the cross as because of it.⁷ God uses even our means of rejecting God as a means for reclaiming us.

2. Preaching the cross means proclaiming God’s justification by grace through faith, a proclamation in the present day that is itself an act of faith, not power.

Since this was the only way in which I had ever heard the cross preached while I was growing up, the critical period continues to function with a strong hermeneutics of suspicion every time I hear the cross preached this way. My first reaction is: why is this preacher preaching the cross this way? Who benefits by this interpretation of the cross? Who is hurt by it? Does the preacher seem to be aware of the ways the cross has been used to hurt marginalized and powerless people? Does the preacher seem to have an awareness of the voices from below who have experienced and reappropriated the cross differently?⁸ What does the preacher get out of this rendering of the message of the cross? Is it politically wise to preach thus? Is it a proof of orthodoxy to those present?

Nevertheless, in spite of all I now know, in my re-reading of scripture and in my hearing anew the word of the cross from pulpit and table and hymn, I have heard the word of salvation from sin and reconciliation to God. This is a reclamation of a truth from my first naïveté. If not a total rejection, I had at least quarantined this view for a number of reasons. My experience taught me that this was the only way the cross could be understood, thus negating all other experiences and receptions of the cross. And it had been reduced and made formulaic in my experience. In the reduced format, God was actually in our control because we had turned atonement into something that we had a handle on and would broker to the people of whom we approved; thus, in some contexts a person’s baptism could not be trusted if we had not administered it. Indeed, much preaching of the cross and atonement was meant to increase doubt so that we could get credit for the saved person. Foreskin counting became a competitive sport among preachers of the cross. In this, the cross had become a matter of human power

plays and control. It was no longer about God and what God did in spite of us to freely reconcile and reclaim us.

To reclaim the cross in its biblical manifestation is truly freeing. One such freeing realization comes in the observation that the New Testament offers up the seeds for at least a dozen interpretations of the cross. Distinctive understandings are to be found in the Synoptic Gospels, the Pauline Epistles, the Epistle to the Hebrews, and the Fourth Gospel. As Donald Monkcom observes, "All these interpretations are complementary, but distinct, and none of them is presented as the one, standard view."⁹ And in spite of all the ways that religious charlatans have used the preaching of Christ and the cross for their own fame and gain, to follow the truth of the Donatist argument one more time, none of these can destroy the true work of God by the falsity of their own lives. A great danger exists in theology and preaching that the abuser of the cross will win a second battle by jettisoning the cross from preaching because it has been wielded unfaithfully and unscrupulously. The grace of re-appropriating the cross as God's word, rather than a word of a manipulative oppressor, has allowed me even to reaffirm an earlier conclusion:

This is not to dismiss the very real misuse of the cross by people in power that has intensified the suffering especially of women and non-whites. I would argue, though, that misuse of the cross by ignorant or unscrupulous people does not invalidate the true cross of Christ through which God reveals God's own salvific ends for humanity. Indeed, when the cross is used in a profane manner to crucify the life out of people, Paul would want such misuse itself to be crucified. What needs to die in Christendom, then, is not the theology of the cross, but masochistic manifestations of a misinterpreted and mishandled cross.¹⁰

What God did in Christ fundamentally changed everything in heaven and on earth, objectively and subjectively. God in Christ was reconciling the world to God's self, and we can rest in the surety of God's complete and completed action done there. Sin, death, and Satan were all defeated in God's actions on the cross, once and for all. Baptism is a way for us in faith to say "Amen" to God's intercessory prayer on our behalf, an intercession that took the form of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. Baptism is a way for us to participate fully in the redeeming work that God did and does on the cross.

God's work in and through the cross does not stop there. Justification is not a freeze-frame moment that we just keep replaying over and over, as William Muehl lampoons as a reduced version of the meaning of the cross in his classic sermon, "The Cult of the Publican."¹¹ The cross functions in the Spirit's work of sanctifying the church by granting her a new means for perceiving what matters and what does not matter. Outside of Christ we operated with a *kata sarka* ("fleshly," or, "according to the flesh") mode of valuation. In Christ we are taught to be suspicious of worldly ways of judging and valuing. In Christ we put everything through a *kata stauron* ("cruciform," or, "according to the cross") test of perception. In so doing we privilege a theological and cross-informed ecclesial orientation in matters of discernment. Every other means of discernment and understanding, i.e., psychological, sociological, anthropological, rhetorical, historical, is put in critical conversation with our

fundamental theological orientation. These other means of discernment are not, indeed cannot, be jettisoned. Neither are they absorbed by the church as if they were ideologically neutral.¹² They are used, but critically, and in the bounds of a fundamental *kata stauron* orientation.¹³ An important part of what it means to preach the cross in North American contexts today consists in orienting in Christ persons to this cruciform way of perception and discernment.

3. Preaching the cross is an act of repentance, humility, and silent solidarity to all those who suffer and are afflicted.

Having just claimed a re-appropriation of the word of the cross as a word of reconciliation, atonement, and salvation, I quickly add that the re-appropriated word must not be spoken too quickly, too glibly, and in certain contexts should be spoken only in nonverbal ways. As preachers, we do not control the cross. We may not use it for our ends. We are stewards of its mystery, servants of its weakness, of its weak but strong One, Jesus Christ. In light of the world in which we live, and the lives of those to whom we are called to be stewards of the mystery and servants of the cross, to preach it truly may mean to do so in ways which require silence first.

In his brief, but still durable "orientation to theological study," Charles Wood made the disorienting suggestion that simply to say what the New Testament writers said is not necessarily to say what they said. To say what they said, in fact, may necessitate saying exactly the opposite. "Sometimes you can't say the same thing by saying the same thing; in order to say the same thing, you must say something different."¹⁴ For those to whom this suggestion causes significant nervousness, it is helpful to remember that Jesus' unusual birth, person, teaching, death on the cross, and resurrection from the dead were all instances of God saying and doing a different thing than people had heard before, in order for God to say what God had always said about covenant faithfulness, justice, righteousness, love, and mercy.

Applied to the preaching of the cross, Wood's remarks have at least two implications:

First, to preach the cross today as they preached the cross then may mean to preach an anti-cross. In other words, preachers must take seriously the ways in which people have been afflicted *by means of the cross*, kept down by a dominant culture who used God, Christ, and the cross to do so. The anti-cross gospel is a *logos* of the cross today that functions in the same subverting way as the original *logos* of the cross. Such a word is a cry of repentance and humility. It does not exert power and glorify suffering, but cries the bitter cry of anguish for the cross's implication in deepened suffering. The anti-cross gospel is a gospel word on behalf every African who had the cross branded into his skin while in transit to a life of hell in exile from his home and family. It is a gospel word on behalf of every Jew who was beaten for not genuflecting correctly. It is a gospel word on behalf of every woman who was beaten into submission by a man who used Christianity as a means of manipulating power over her.

Second, to preach the cross today as they preached it then may require the complete absence of words. This is not only to do the exact opposite of the Apostles in Acts, but it is to reclaim the initial *logos* of the cross in a profound sense. For, if we want to push things, the original *Logos* of the cross came as person, presence, and action. *Logos* did not come as a pretty or persuasive sermon in a recognizable rhetorical package of the day. He was rather the ghostly and mysterious figure of

Isaiah 53 whose mouth was silent even as he came on our behalf and took on our failings on our behalf. Preachers of the cross must discern the times and places to remain silent, in order to proclaim most effectively the enigmatic word of the cross. The preaching of the cross in silence means to enter into the ministries of redemption in the form of accompaniment and advocacy among “the least of these” who are all around us. Living the cross for others is a way of preaching the cross. Putting on the tool-belt at Habitat for Humanity for a day of bruising one’s fingers. Taking the overnight shift at the local National Interfaith Hospitality Network. Arranging for a hernia surgery for an impoverished migrant camp worker who has neither the means nor the connections to do so. Collecting and delivering coats to the inner city as winter threatens. Sitting with the lonely elderly. Playing with the neglected young. Being a reliable person to those who have never known such a person. Being faithful to your spouse. Showing your own children your tender vulnerable core of love. If what we have learned most purely in Christ’s self-giving sacrifice on the cross is how to be with and for others to an extent that knows no bounds, then our acceptance of that love empowers us to embody it and extend it to others in his name.

Wood’s words are haunting: to say the same thing that they said may require that we say a different thing. There is a time to speak of the cross and a time to keep silence. Wisdom consists in knowing what time it is. Wisdom consists in understanding the nature of reception, that preaching is not just about speaker performance but also profoundly about hearer reception. Do we have enough faith in the cross to trust the efficacy of the cross even though it goes verbally unspoken? Can we trust the efficacy of what we believe and say God truly works in the cross if we deliver that *logos* in the same kind of suffering and compassionate silence that Jesus first carried it?

The first *logos* of the cross was a virtually silent act of self-giving to violent and rebellious people who were unrepentant. Among the few words spoken from the cross were, “Forgive them, for they know not what they do.” How often has the Spirit groaned these words because of our need to verbalize the word of the cross even when the situation of our hearers would have been better served by a different form of proclamation? How often would our preaching of the cross have been more so if done in silence?

Conclusion

What does it mean today that preaching’s message is the cross? What does it mean to God, to preachers, to people who come from various social locations? Some have claimed that what we learn from Paul is that the cross is preaching’s message and it is to be performed as a herald’s duty without regard to sophistic audience analysis since this might dilute the “pure” proclamation. Paul cannot be pinned down so easily. His word of the cross was *the* word the prideful, divisive, and enthusiastic Corinthians needed to hear most in their particular situation, not in spite of it. Moreover, Paul’s rhetorical artistry in dismissing his own performance reveals a profound irony that penetrates his ministry and that reverberates through even the paradox of the gospel’s message.

My discussion here of the preaching of the cross has been scandalously autobiographical. This is because of my growing conviction that none of our God-talk, gospel-talk, or cross-talk has much meaning apart from the concrete intersection that such “talk” has had in our real lives. I am aware of the dangerous implications and frequent

abuses by preachers who allow their own stories and agendas to eclipse The Story and the gospel's agendas. But this is a risk that we must continue to take since we are called to be witnesses of and to a God that we do not merely have objective information about, but with whom we have genuine struggle and at times intensely joyful experiences. This fragile and personal witness is finally what it means to preach the cross in light of the empty tomb. Such a word transcends mere code words, which warm an insulated community's prejudices. Such a word bears witness by and to the power of God's grace to a love that compassionately holds even the greatest of human affliction. Whether that word is one of protest, reconciliation and forgiveness, or silent presence, we offer it up as a sacrifice itself in trust that it shall not return void, but will indeed accomplish that for which God in mercy continues to send and empower it.

Notes

¹ Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 351.

² Gerhard O. Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation, 1518* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1997), viii.

³ "The Life of Constantine the Great, I, 28-29" in Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds., *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd series, vol. 1, Eusebius (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), 490.

⁴ Naftali Lavie, "Cross and Gallows," *The Jerusalem Post International Edition*, week ending October 7, 1989, 8. Quoted in Mary C. Boys, "The Cross: Should a Symbol Betrayed be Reclaimed?" *Cross Currents* 44 (1994): 17.

⁵ Mary Catherine Hilkert, "Preaching the Folly of the Cross," *Word and World* 19 (1999): 40.

⁶ Brian J. Pierce, "The Cross and the Crib: Hope From the Underside," *America* 2 (1994): 13-14. Quoted in Roberto S. Goizueta, *Caminemo Con Jesús: Toward a Hispanic/Latino Theology of Accompaniment* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995), 210-11, n. 58.

⁷ See Mary Catherine Hilkert, *Naming Grace: Preaching and the Sacramental Imagination* (New York: Continuum, 1997), 115ff.

⁸ Cf. Jacob Tesfai, ed., *The Scandal of a Crucified World: Perspectives on the Cross and Suffering* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books), 1994.

⁹ Donald Monkcom, "Contemporary Views of the Cross," *Caribbean Journal of Religious Studies* 6 (1985): 62. Cf. Gerard S. Sloyan, *The Crucifixion: History, Myth, Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995).

¹⁰ André Resner Jr., *Preacher and Cross: Person and Message in Theology and Rhetoric* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1999), 146.

¹¹ William Muehl, "The Cult of the Publican," in Cornelius Plantinga and Thomas G. Long, eds., *Chorus of Witnesses* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1994), 146-54.

¹² The recent meeting of the Academy of Homiletics in Dallas illustrates how some still perpetuate the notion that non-theological means of discernment are ideologically neutral or "ambiguous" as keynote speaker, Tex Sample, said. Of course, Augustine assumed the same thing when he wrote *De Doctrina Christiana*. In 4.2.3 Augustine claimed that since rhetoric was a neutral means of winning hearers that it ought to be put to the gospel's service in the same way that philosophies other than Christianity did at the time in order to win potential adherents. The same argument is being used today with regard to electronic media and entertainment formats for worship. The lack of theological discretion is startling. An excellent discussion of the ideological freight inherent to marketing philosophy is Philip Kenneson and James Street, *Selling Out the Church: The Dangers of Church Marketing* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997).

¹³ For more on this, cf. Resner, *Preacher and Cross*, chapters 3-4.

¹⁴ Charles Wood, *Vision and Discernment: An Orientation in Theological Study* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985), 40.

*Surviving the Sermon Preparation Process**

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Preaching a sermon is relatively easy. Preparing one worth preaching is what is difficult. Like Elijah in the cave, we wait for the Divine voice. We look everywhere for the Word. Often, the more we look the less we find.

Through the years I have been given advice at great length—told *where* to look for sermon possibilities: through disciplined Bible study, in my pastoral experience, on my knees, at the theatre, in the paper, in my lying down and my rising up.

Now, of course, we have the lectionary—look there. But the problem remains, for, alas, the issue is not *where*—it is *what*. Would we be instructed by the p. s. attached to the bottom of that very old recipe for rabbit soup: “First, you catch a rabbit”? Partly, but unfortunately, that advice won’t quite suffice either. The issue is not simply that of catching the homiletical rabbit. The issue is whether you can *intentionally* and *inadvertently* allow the rabbit to catch you. And that is what this brief essay is about—how to intentionally and inadvertently allow the homiletical rabbit to *catch us*.

I venture this in spite of my long-held suspicion—a suspicion lacking incontrovertible evidence to be sure—that most folks who tell others how to get started in the sermon preparation process either do not really know how it is that they do it, or they do not seem to follow their own advice. The issue is, after all, the most elusive part of the homiletical art, and clearly the hardest to teach. Most of us know several options regarding the shaping of a sermon—if *only we had something to shape*.

You remember that moment, when someone close to you steps into the middle of your sermon preparation with: “How are you doing for Sunday?” You respond: “Not well. Nothing seems to be happening.” Later the person returns with the same question—and out of an entirely different world you exclaim: “I think I have something!” (It probably would be more accurate to say that something *has you*.) But the inquirer is not content—wants more data: “What is it that you have?” Your initial reaction is to ask the person to leave, and quickly, because your only honest reply would be “I don’t really know yet, but something *is working*.”

Our question here, then, is simply: How does one prompt, tease, evoke, claim, provoke, or facilitate that uncertain certainty: “I think I have something”? Actually, we will take the matter one step further, asking—once we arrive at that moment: How can we *keep alive* that almost euphoric epistemological experience before it turns to pale platitude? How do we live with it in the context of further preparation? For our purposes here, we will presume that the preacher begins with a text—lectionary or otherwise. The preparation process begins, obviously, by gaining an effective familiarity with the text to be utilized. Otherwise form will not follow function. This “effective familiarity” involves a peculiar blend of knowledge and mystery, of grasping and being grasped, of managing and being led. It is easier to say what it is

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