

Protagonist Corner

Learning to Blush: The Emotional Formation of the Preacher

Charles L. Campbell

Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, Georgia

When Walter Brueggemann was a youth, an airplane crashed in a cornfield near his home. With his friends, Brueggemann ran to watch as the ambulance crew, wearing rubber gloves, pulled pieces of human beings out of the wreckage and put those pieces into plastic bags. The memory that lingers most vividly for Brueggemann is that of “watching a woman standing next to me holding a baby, eating an apple.” Brueggemann remembers wondering, “How can she do that, now, here?”

In his mature reflection on those childhood feelings, Brueggemann came to understand his bewilderment. “She had no shame,” he writes. “She had no sense of incongruity, no sense of disproportion....” Brueggemann suggests that the greatest task of religious leadership in this country is to help Americans learn to blush at the incongruities with which we are daily confronted. “We have lost the capacity to blush,” he concludes; we must resensitize our eyes to the embarrassments of our days and become offended at the obscenity of it all. Embarrassment is not innate. We must *learn* to blush.¹

The Narrative Shape of the Emotions

Brueggemann’s experience and reflections present a powerful challenge to the church in the face of the suffering and injustice in the world, and I have used this story on numerous occasions to share this challenge with churches. Brueggemann’s conclusion has come to intrigue me: *We learn* to blush. That assertion seems strange, for we usually think of blushing, and the feeling of embarrassment behind it, as something “natural.” We think of blushing not as something we *learn*, but something that just happens, something beyond our control. Indeed, many of us often think of all our emotions in this way, as being somehow more basic, more natural, more innate than intellectual knowledge.

Along with Brueggemann, many anthropologists and philosophers argue that our emotions are in fact not natural at all, but socially constructed—learned. Philosopher Martha Nussbaum has argued for the socially-constructed character of human emotions, highlighting, in particular, the role of narrative in the formation and strengthening of feelings. The stories we hear throughout our lives shape our emotions:

... emotions are not feelings that well up in some natural and untutored way from our natural selves... they are in fact, not personal or natural at all,...they are, instead, contrivances, social constructs. We learn how to feel and we learn our emotional repertoire. We learn our emotions in the same way that we learn our beliefs—from our society. But emotions, unlike many of our beliefs, are not taught to us directly through propositional claims about the world, either abstract or concrete. They are taught, above all, through stories. Stories express their structure and teach us their dynamics. These stories are constructed by others, and then taught and learned. But once

internalized, they shape the way life feels and looks.... emotion itself is the acceptance of, the assent to live according to, a certain sort of story. Stories, in short, contain and teach forms of feeling, forms of life.²

Through the narratives that shape our lives, we learn to blush. Our emotions are not simply natural and innate, but are formed by the narratives through which we see the world and respond to it. We are trained to have specific feelings in particular situations, whether that training takes place through the repetition of a central, overriding story through the course of our lives or through a more immediate “conversion experience” brought about by a “collision of narratives.”³

The implications of this insight for preaching are important. Sermons may, in fact, serve an emotion-forming role, and preachers would benefit from an awareness of the power of sermons in this regard. Even more important, however, are the implications of this insight about the narrative shape of the emotions for the *character formation of the preacher*. This understanding of the emotions sheds significant light on the relationship between the journey of preaching and the preacher’s own emotional formation.

The Journey of Preaching and the Emotions of the Preacher

My initial interest in the relationship between the ongoing process of preaching and the emotional formation of the preacher grew out of my six years in the parish. During that time, I found that many homiletics texts treated the sermon as if it were a discrete event that takes place on Sunday morning apart from the remainder of the preacher’s life. Anyone who has preached, however, knows that this is not true. Preaching is an ongoing, at times all consuming, journey; one might even call it a way of life. Day in and day out the preacher lives with the biblical stories from which Sunday’s sermon will be gleaned; simultaneously the preacher lives with numerous emotions related both to her pastoral work and to her personal life. Consequently, what takes place on the journey of preaching is a constant interaction between the deeply emotional life of the pastor/preacher and the ongoing biblical immersion of the preacher/pastor. Within this context the emotional life of the preacher may be formed in a unique way by the Christian story.⁴

Recently, as I looked back over a journal I kept during my pastorate, I was reminded of the dynamic interaction between the preacher’s emotions and the biblical narrative that takes place on the journey of preaching. The text for this particular week was Psalm 67, a psalm of praise and thanksgiving. Everything that happened during that week, however, seemed to argue against a doxological sermon. I could not keep doxology with me anywhere. It was one of my most emotionally trying weeks in the ministry.

I met three times with a couple who had separated and were on the verge of rushing into a divorce. I visited with two crushed and bitter grandparents, whose granddaughter, whom they had raised for ten years because her parents didn’t want her, left without notice to go live with her father (she had been visiting him and simply called her grandparents to say she wasn’t coming home). I visited a woman whose husband had recently died after a long bout with cancer. I also saw another woman whose husband was in the hospital in a coma--and I went to the hospital to sit with him a while as well. I had two calls to help transients through the Salvation Army.

I was ready to give up and toss out the sermon on praise and thanksgiving. What could it possibly have to say in the light of this week? But I decided to stick with the text and plow ahead. Then on Friday evening I got a third Salvation Army call. A seventy-year-old man, his sixty-five-year-old sister, and the woman's thirty-four-year-old severely disabled daughter were hitchhiking from Kentucky to Louisiana. Their trailer had burned to the ground; they had lost everything. They were headed to their sister's house in Bogalusa, Louisiana. I arranged bus tickets and food for them. I didn't meet them on Friday night but worked through the clerk at the motel where they had been given a room. (The woman who had picked them up on the highway had become too distraught to work with them any longer.) I asked the clerk to bring them by the church the next day to get some clothes for the rest of their trip. I went home thinking, "And I'm going to preach Sunday on praise!"

Saturday morning the three people came to the church to get some clothes. When I saw them I was immediately depressed. But a few moments with them spoke good news to me, judged and healed me, and confirmed the appropriateness of praise even this week. (I was reminded of the three strangers--GOD--who came to visit Abraham.) These three people had praise in their hearts--despite everything that had happened to them. They were as kind and thoughtful as any people I've ever met. They wanted very few clothes--but what they took was remarkable. The older woman chose the brightest orange blouse on the rack. And the daughter chose a pair of blinding yellow slacks and a matching top. And they took some big old tennis shoes--soft and comfortable for the trip. That's all they took. That's all they wanted. And as they were going out the door, they stopped and asked that we pray together. Before I could open my mouth, *they* did the praying! They praised God and gave thanks for the kindness people had shown them on their journey, for the certainty of God's presence, for the upcoming arrival at their sister's home. Who could have imagined it? They were tired and sad. But at the same time they were joyful in a strange and humble way. After the prayer, they filed out the door with their orange blouse and yellow slacks and funny shoes--like clowns in some bizarre parade, as if they didn't have a care in the world.

It was only upon much later reflection that I began to realize what was happening in this experience. During that week my emotions were being trained as I wrestled to hold together the joy and thanksgiving of the Psalm and the suffering and emotional turmoil of pastoral work. The week's events began training me about the deep possibilities of praise and thanksgiving even in the midst of suffering--a response to suffering that certainly seems "unnatural," but which I have seen since that time among many oppressed people.⁵

In the midst of the struggle to discern the relationship between the biblical story and the week's events, I saw the three visitors and heard their prayers in a particular way. I began to see that these strangers were not an intrusion into my busy schedule, a group of fools who didn't know how bad off they were, a pitiful threesome for whom one could feel only pity or despair. Rather, they were angels--messengers of God--who embodied a profound sense of joy and thanksgiving right in the midst of pain and loss. They embodied the biblical narrative I was struggling to hear and proclaim. They offered a challenge both to me and to the middle-class church I served.

The tears that came during that week were in part tears of relief after a difficult time and tears of grief over all the suffering. Possibly they were also tears of failure because I had been unable to offer praise and thanksgiving for days. I see now that they were

also strange tears of joy, as I took an initial, small step toward living in a strange new world of orange blouses and yellow slacks, as I began to *feel* the Christian story in a new and surprising way. My emotions were being trained and formed by the Christian story during a week in which I struggled to glean a sermon from the biblical narrative. Although I suspect my sermon that Sunday was probably rather shallow and did not fully capture the reality or possibility of praise deep within suffering, I had at least begun a journey down that path—a journey inseparably related to my emotional formation.

This experience represents just one week in the life of a single preacher. As I reflect on it, I am convinced that this kind of emotional formation goes on continuously in the preacher's life. In this crucible of life and work the Christian story is constantly interacting in a unique way with a variety of deep emotional experiences. In the process, these emotions themselves are formed as the preacher comes to see and feel the world in new ways. And in the process, along the journey, these story-formed emotions shape and inform the preaching occasion itself.

Notes

¹Brueggemann's story and reflections are recounted in P. C. Enniss, Jr., "The Things That Make for Peace," *Journal for Preachers* 6, no. 5 (1983): 19.

²Martha Nussbaum, "Narrative Emotions: Beckett's Genealogy of Love," in *Why Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology* ed. Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1989), 217-18.

³I have borrowed the concept of the "collision of narratives" from George Stroup, *The Promise of Narrative Theology* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), 171-175.

⁴The preacher's emotional life also can shape the way he or she reads Scripture, often providing new insights into familiar texts. In this essay, however, I am focusing on the way Scripture can shape the emotional life of the preacher.

⁵For an insightful exploration of the Christian story as one that surprises us with joy in the midst of pain and suffering, see Kathleen O'Connor, "Easter Joy," *Journal for Preachers* 23, no.3 (2000): 31-35. The text that week might have been a psalm of lament, rather than a psalm of praise. In that case, I would have potentially been trained in a different, equally important and appropriate emotional response to the events of the week. The texture of the preacher's emotional formation becomes rich and multivalent as different kinds of texts are preached in different contexts throughout the preacher's life.