

What Happened to Narrative Preaching?

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We need figures or mirrors to display spiritual and heavenly things to our sight in an earthly kind of way. Otherwise they would be beyond our reach.

John Calvin

Recently I was talking with an accomplished pastor, one whose serious and creative preaching and nimble leadership have in the last decade helped to revitalize an “Old First Church” congregation into a place of vibrant worship and social witness. “When I was in seminary [twenty-five years ago],” he said, “we were all fascinated with ‘narrative preaching.’ But you know, I don’t think any of us would be enchanted with that approach today.”

What did he mean? Is this pastor representative of others? Has today’s pulpit indeed fallen out of love with the storytelling style? Was narrative preaching, all the rage in the 1970s and 1980s, merely the “pink bathroom” of homiletical fashion, a once-trendy innovation that has now seen its day?

In 1980, when this pastor was in seminary, the authors of the state-of-the-art textbook *Preaching the Story* engaged in a bit of rhetorical flourish when they declared they were searching around for the perfect master image to gather up the whole of the preaching task in a single stitch. “We are trying,” they said,

to find that formative image that could both articulate what preaching is and free people to do it. Is there an image adequate to shape the form, content, and style of preaching? If we had to say, in a word or two, or in a picture, what preaching is and how it is done well, what would that phrase or picture be? ... Let us consider the storyteller. ... If we were pressed to say what Christian faith and life are, we could hardly do better than *hearing, telling, and living a story*. And if asked for a short definition of preaching, could we do better than *shared story*?¹

Of course, what these authors said they were trying so hard to find, and finally claimed to discover, the key image of preaching as “shared story,” had already been found, several times before as a matter of fact. A decade earlier, story preaching had already begun to be the hot topic among homileticians, and even this was not the first time. Indeed, a preference for narrative sermons springs up periodically in American church history, usually whenever preaching has run out of steam and gone flat, didactic, and dogmatic.² So what *Preaching the Story* hailed as a breakthrough was, in fact, just the Haley’s Comet of narrative preaching come around again, this time in reaction to the staid one-two-three rationalistic sermons of the 1950s. By the mid-seventies, the interest in narrative preaching had grown strong enough that the Academy of Homiletics (a professional guild of preaching professors) devoted an entire annual meeting to thrashing it over. So when the authors of *Preaching the Story* said they had found “shared story” as the central image for preaching, they were less

crying “Eureka!” over a discovery and more reporting an emerging consensus in the field. Narrative preaching, whatever it was, was now in vogue.

Two observations can be made about this eruption of interest in story preaching in the 1970s and 1980s. First, the move toward narrative began as a shift in practice before it was a shift in theory. The dance between theory and practice is always a delicate choreography, and in some fields – molecular physics, for example – theory almost always takes the lead. In homiletics, however, the opposite is usually true. Some preacher out in the field devises (or, more likely, falls into) some new way of preaching, and it catches fire. Only later and in retrospect do the theoreticians move in to analyze and criticize the innovation. Jonathan Edwards’ use of religious affection to modify the Puritan plain style sermon, Finney’s new-style approach to evangelistic preaching, Beecher’s theatrical illustrations, Fosdick’s counseling from the pulpit, Barbara Brown Taylor’s luminous memoirs – the history of American preaching is replete with examples of preachers who intuitively forged some innovation that was widely imitated by other preachers and only later dissected by theoreticians.

The same is true for the shift toward story preaching in the 1970s. As a movement, it has become associated with the name of Fred Craddock, one of the most influential preachers and homileticians of our time, but ironically, Craddock was not the main voice in the period calling for narrative preaching and, in fact, his own theoretical approach to preaching, which he called “inductive preaching,” is not actually narrative at all. Inductive preaching is essentially a proposal about sermon *structure* and *logic*, a method of sermon construction that places value upon suspenseful, exploratory, end-stress sermons in which the listeners are dialogically involved throughout the sermon process and actually participate in forming the sermon’s conclusion.³ Craddock defined inductive preaching over against “deductive preaching,” by which he meant sermons in which the preacher thrusts already formed conclusions toward the listeners in a point one-point two-point three fashion. An inductive sermon can include stories, of course, but there is nothing about inductive movement *per se* that demands them. It was, rather, Craddock’s *practice* more than his theory that put him in the forefront of the renaissance of narrative preaching. Craddock’s sermons, with their deft blend of angular biblical exegesis, wry humor, and homespun stories hit the American pulpit like the Beatles hit the charts. The American church had grown weary of the grandiloquent pulpit princes with their big voices and their so-called biblical principles and their dramatic gestures and their teachy sermons and their overblown moral lessons. The times were ripe for change, and along comes Craddock with his winsome style and different voice and ability to see the New Testament churches just like the churches down the road, telling stories about milking cows and chance conversations on airplanes. Craddock sounded less like pulpit royalty and more like a wise man on a country porch, and his sermons moved on the refreshing winds of everyday stories. Suddenly pulpits everywhere were filled with imitators, beginning their sermons not with “Dear Christian friends, I wish to tell you three things this morning about the power of prayer,” but “When I was a boy there was in our little town an old man with a wrinkled face who worked in Gibson’s Hardware....”

The second observation about the move toward story preaching in the 1970s and 1980s is that, when homileticians began to refract the practice of story preaching through theoretical lenses, the single bright light of narrative became a rainbow of different approaches and methods. Why was story preaching so powerful and so

effective? Opinions differed. Some homileticsians decided that narrative preaching is effective because the human mind itself is a narrative factory that takes raw, unmediated experience and turns it into story-shaped meanings and memories. Thus, the best sermons are shaped like narratives and bear “homiletical plots.” Others found the power of story preaching to be in its capacity to evoke long-forgotten sacred experiences, “memories of Eden.” Some saw the power of narrative to reside in its imagery and evocative language, or in its capacity to generate identification with characters, and still others said that the power of narrative preaching came through its replication of the narrative qualities of scripture.

Homiletical theory engaged homiletical practice and, as a result, generated more practices, a multitude of them. With the concept of the pulpit as the place to “tell the story” firmly in hand, the late 1970s and 1980s became a highly experimental time in American preaching. Dialogue sermons, short-story sermons, first-person sermons, pantomime sermons, image-rich sermons, confessional sermons, and more – the varieties were endless, but all of them riffs on the notion that good preaching was somehow story-shaped, story-saturated, story-driven. For an American pulpit thrown overboard by the general hostility and apathy toward preaching generated in the late 1960s, the idea of story preaching brought an infusion of energy, excitement, and purpose to preaching, and the narrative approach was seized like a life preserver. Also, the word “story” was big enough for everybody to find room for all manners of innovations and self-expression. Everything, it seemed, could claim to be story preaching.

From the very beginning, however, there were doubters. Even in the early rush of excitement over narrative preaching, some homileticsians soured quickly on the tendency of story sermons to become sloppy, amateurish, undisciplined, and self-indulgent. For example, Ronald Sleeth at Iliff School of Theology began speaking out in the mid-1970s against “private parables in the name of self-expression,” and held out for a return to the then outmoded idea that preachers should get their main ideas, or points, from the Bible and should design sermons to clearly convey those ideas to the listeners. He said,

Surprisingly, there is a great deal of negative reaction to the idea that a sermon should have a clear, main idea that controls the sermon. Some suggest that we live in a frenetic, kaleidoscopic world where persons do not think logically, and we apprehend material holistically through an all-at-onceness. . . . To these persons, a thesis suggests a rationalistic discourse. . . . Yet, many sermons fail, simply because they are not clear. Preachers will raise several ideas in the beginning of a sermon and either develop one, or several, or none. People do not know what it is all about, and it becomes a mystery hour. What some take for creativity and expressive language may in reality be evidence of a fuzzy mind.⁴

At the time, Sleeth’s demurral sounded simply like the last gasp of the old school, but lately, as my pastor acquaintance suggested, many have begun to have second thoughts about the whole narrative preaching approach. In fact, shots at story preaching are now flying fast and furiously from the right, the middle, and the left. From the right, evangelicals were slow to warm to story preaching and quick to cool

to it. Narrative preaching was always thought to be too soft, too doctrinally unclear, too ethically ambiguous, and too shy about evangelism. Recently, James W. Thompson at Abilene Christian University has done a very sophisticated critique of the approach of Craddock and the narrative homiletical school and pointed to several significant shortcomings. Among other drawbacks, Thompson argues, the narrative and inductive style of homiletics wrongly assumes a Christian culture already in place, focuses on the form of the sermon to the neglect of the larger theological aims of the sermon, limits the capacities of hearers to think rationally and reflectively about the faith, is reluctant to press demands for ethical change, and is weak at building and sustaining communities of faith.⁵

Thompson's charge that "inductive preaching functions best in a Christian culture in which listeners are well informed of the Christian heritage" and his complaint that such preaching "will not build and sustain communities of faith"⁶ overlap with the main developing concerns of theological moderates about the narrative style. The cluster of preaching styles associated with narrative have mainly depended for their effectiveness on evoking with aesthetic power long dormant Christian memories and convictions. They work best, in other words, among people who have been well taught and well organized in church but who have been bored, lulled to sleep, and who have not experienced the delight of the gospel. In that narcotic environment, narrative approaches are refreshing stimulants, exciting counters to old ways of "doing church." But in a culture in which those memories, convictions, and churchly patterns are not there to evoke and revivify, narrative preaching can easily end up being like a massage at a spa, a pleasurable aesthetic experience without content or goal.

In his powerfully argued book *Preaching Jesus*, Charles L. Campbell claims that a good bit of what passes for narrative preaching has been fastened to the wrong stories, consisting of anecdotes of human experience or alleged plot structures in the imagination, rather than the gospel narrative of Jesus. "[W]hat is important for Christian preaching," he says, "is not 'stories' in general or even 'homiletical plots', but rather a specific story that renders the identity of a particular person ... Preaching that ignores the ascriptive logic of the gospels—grammatically, preaching in which Jesus is not the subject of his own predicates—comes in for critique."⁷

More recently, it has been critics from the left who have expressed profound displeasure with the "new homiletics," narrative preaching, and "soft hermeneutics." In fact, their attacks are the most severe of all since they allege that practitioners of the new homiletics are not merely rhetorically mistaken, theologically misguided, or trendy, but they have committed far more serious offenses: potential oppression and abuse of power. What are the crimes? They are, in fact, the very virtues claimed by the narrative preachers, that they speak the gospel from and to the common experiences of the hearers.

If I understand one of the points that a sharp critic on the left, John McClure, is making in his crabbed and often difficult lament *Other-wise Preaching*, it is that the kind of stories that Craddock-like preachers tend to tell carry the implied message, "Here is an everyday experience that we all have had or could have had, and if you really knew how to look at this experience, you would recognize it as a sacred experience." But in this seemingly gentle gesture of telling such stories, these preachers, McClure seems to say, have exercised their privileged positions of power to grind down all human differences, have lifted their own views of experience to the

level of the universal and commanded the hearers to fit their lives into this frame, and have insisted that people see God at work in every little nook and cranny of life and in just the way the preachers do, all the while hiding behind a false front of seemingly neutral and objective but really power-laden language. McClure aims right for the cozy gospel storytellers (among others) when he says,

God should not become too accessible, too easily located, too easily associated with symbols elevated to kerygmatic status within the tradition...or associated with symbols that may derive their meanings from subtle juxtapositions with what are largely hegemonic forms of human experience.⁸

I, myself, am chastened and instructed by all of these criticisms – from the left, the right, and the middle – but finally not fully persuaded by any of them. To be sure, what has been for the last thirty years called “narrative preaching” has too often devolved into a hodgepodge of sentimental pseudo-art, confused rhetorical strategies, and competing theological epistemologies. Preachers have larded sermons with silly stories of their cats and their children, told anecdotes from the playground to illustrate Golgotha, told hundreds of stories about certain kinds of people and shut out others, and crafted shifty trapdoor plots to keep the listeners amused. If the effect of these critiques is to burn away this kind of story stubble, then burn, baby, burn.

But, at its best, the narrative impulse in preaching grows out of a deep sense of the character, shape, and epistemology of the gospel. If preaching is a sacramental meeting place between the church and the word, the hearers and the gospel, then the substance of preaching is shaped by scripture and by human experience under the sign of grace, and both of these aspects call for narration. If we are to be faithful to the biblical testimony, we will not always speak in a narrative voice – humanity does not live by narrative alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God – but finally we are compelled to tell the Story and the stories of the God who has acted mightily in many and diverse ways and most profoundly in the raising of Jesus of Nazareth from the dead.

Moreover, if the preaching of the gospel is, as Calvin would have it, a means by which “the children of Adam and Eve become the children of Christ,”⁹ then we will have to tell the storied experiences of both kinds of children, stories of tragedy and stories of hope. In this way, preaching bears a similarity to the Eucharist. We come from the ambiguities and brokenness of our lives to the Lord’s Table, and there we encounter a gracious and benevolent God who gives and gives and gives. When we get up from that Table, our vision has been changed, transfigured, so that we now see the world as it truly is, as the theater of the glory of God to which it is our duty and delight to say “thank you, thank you, thank you.” Likewise, if we come to the “audible sacrament” of preaching, and there encounter the One who speaks to us the life-giving promises, then it is the task of preaching not only to announce those promises and to reflect on them, but also to imagine what shape a life formed in thanksgiving and praise might take. This means that preaching is in part a dress rehearsal for going to out to Main Street, to Wal-Mart, to the neighbor’s house, and to the funeral home and living as those who are not afraid to tell the truth about the fractures they see in human experience because they are also ones who see God’s grace and judgment at work in

those places. This dress rehearsal will require stories – not stories told for their aesthetic pleasure or power alone – but stories of human experiences told as only the eyes of faith can see them.

So, my preacher friend was right. The giddy season of “short stories for Christ,” artsy “I am Lydia, the seller of purple” first-person sermons, and “three stories and a poem” preaching is coming to an end, and good riddance. None of us is as enchanted by that kind of story sermon as perhaps we once were or is convinced that somehow “Narrative Saves.” We also know that the cycles of homiletical history will surely repeat themselves. At some point in the future, American preaching will once more become stuffy and stale and dogmatic, and when it does, a new generation of preachers will “discover” narrative preaching for the first time...again.

But as for now, a chastened, revised, theologically more astute, and biblically engaged form of narrative preaching endures, and will continue to endure. It has learned much from the display of rhetorical techniques and the rush of adrenaline injected by the poets, the plot-makers, and the narrative artists who have dominated homiletics for the last three decades, but it has finally returned to its theological base. How can we know if our “narrative preaching” is faithful to the gospel or just a bunch of stories? Perhaps the most reliable measure is whether or not the life of the church is nourished by such preaching and finds itself more and more formed in the image of Christ. Faithful preaching is not story time; it is instead the spoken word at the epicenter of a community of courageous testimony. Such preaching models the vocabulary, the hospitable style of talking, the humility, the prayerful seeking, the awareness of ambiguity, the confident hope, and the gospel-storied shape of the lives of people who will talk to their children about their faith and bear witness in the world to the overwhelming generosity of God.

Notes

1. Edmund Steimle, Morris J. Niedenthal, and Charles L. Rice, *Preaching the Story* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 12-13.
2. See David S. Reynolds, “From Doctrine to Narrative: The Rise of Pulpit Storytelling in America,” *American Quarterly* 32 (Winter 1980): 479-498.
3. Fred B. Craddock, *As One Without Authority* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1971), 51-76.
4. Ronald E. Sleeth, *God’s Word and Our Words: Basic Homiletics* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1986), 44. This book brought together a number of Sleeth’s lectures and articles from the mid-1970s until his untimely death in 1985.
5. James W. Thompson, *Preaching Like Paul: Homiletical Wisdom for Today* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 9-14.
6. *Ibid.*, 9, 14.
7. Charles L. Campbell, *Preaching Jesus: New Directions for Homiletics in Hans Frei’s Postliberal Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 192-193.
8. John S. McClure, *Other-wise Preaching: A Postmodern Ethic for Homiletics* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001), 81.
9. B.A. Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude: The Eucharistic Theology of John Calvin* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1993), 89.