

Preaching as an Act of Friendship: Plain Speaking as a Sign of the Kingdom

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While much sermon preparation energy goes into trying to determine what one will *say* in a sermon, it is not always clear that an equal amount of energy goes into trying to determine what one will *do* in a sermon. In his preaching textbook, *The Witness of Preaching*, Thomas Long names these two parts of the preaching preparation process as identifying the sermon's "focus" and its "function."¹ Long's delineation of focus and function is an important move in helping preachers think about what a sermon does, yet my experience in listening to semester after semester of student sermons (as well as Sunday after Sunday of sermons in churches) suggests that clarity about what a sermon does remains a less intentional part of sermon preparation than attention to what a sermon says. Preachers fall back on a very limited repertoire of sermon functions, "to challenge," "to teach," "to call to change," "to inspire," without attending either to the fit between one of these conventional functions and the specifics of the biblical text for the day or to the larger pastoral and theological functions of a preaching ministry to which a sermon can give expression.

In this essay, I want to focus on one of these larger pastoral and theological functions by reflecting on preaching through the language and lens of friendship. In contemporary culture, we tend to think of friendship as something one does, but in the ancient world, friendship was equally about what and how one speaks. To be a friend was to speak openly and boldly. The Gospel of John provides a good entry point into this ancient understanding of friendship.

Plain Speaking

At the end of the Farewell Discourse, Jesus says to his disciples, "I have said these things to you in figures of speech. The hour is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figures, but will tell you plainly of the Father." The disciples respond to Jesus' saying with the affirmation, "Yes, now you are speaking plainly, not in any figures of speech! Now we know that you know all things, and do not need to have anyone question you; by this we believe that you came from God." Yet Jesus does not welcome the disciple's enthusiastic affirmation and profession of knowledge. Instead, Jesus ironically rebukes the disciples for their words, "Do you now believe? The hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered, each one to his home, and you will leave me alone" (16:25-32).

This exchange is Jesus' last teaching to his disciples. It is followed immediately by his prayer in John 17 and then by the story of his arrest, trial, and death (John 18-19). At first glance, it seems odd that Jesus should focus his last teaching on *how* he speaks, on the difference between speaking in figures (*paroimiai*) and speaking plainly (*parrēsia*) as an indication of the arrival of the hour, the decisive eschatological moment. Elsewhere in the Gospel, the hour is used to refer to the time of Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension (e.g., 13:1; 17:1), and of signs and wonders like the raising of the dead and the final judgement (5:28, "Do not be astonished at this, for the hour

is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his [the Son of Man's] voice, and will come out—those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation”). Is Jesus really intending to identify plain speaking as a sign of the arrival of the hour and the eschatological age? And is the disciples' flawed comprehension of Jesus' words really a harbinger of their abandonment of Jesus at the time of his death?

A closer glance suggests that this is indeed what Jesus is suggesting: that plain speaking is a sign of the eschatological age. Jesus rebukes the disciples for their easy embrace of his declaration about plain speaking because they do not recognize its eschatological significance.

Plain Speaking as the Language of Friendship

In the Hellenistic world in which the New Testament was written, friendship was an important topic in moral discourse and its characteristics were the subject of much philosophical and ethical reflection.² A central concern of philosophers like Plutarch and Cicero was how to distinguish between a true friend, and its opposite, the flatterer (*kolax*). One could recognize a friend by that person's "frankness of speech" or "plain speaking," *parrēsia*, the same word used by Jesus in 16:25 and the disciples in 16:29.³ Frank or plain speaking was an attribute of friendship, because the one who spoke plainly was understood to be trustworthy and speaking in the friend's best interest, not speaking, as a flatterer would, for one's own interest or betterment. As Plutarch expressed it, "Frankness of speech, by common report and belief, is the language of friendship especially (as an animal has its peculiar cry), and on the other hand, that lack of frankness is unfriendly and ignoble . . ." ⁴ Just as an animal can be recognized by its distinctive sound, so, too, can a friend be recognized by his or her distinctive frank speech.

The theme of friendship and frankness of speech was important in several contexts in the New Testament world. One was the patron-client/monarch-subject relationship, in which the patron or monarch (the benefactor) needed to be attentive to whether "friends" were speaking honestly and openly, or whether they were engaging in flattery to better their own situation. A second context was that of philosophical instruction, where frank speech was a mark of honest dialogue and instruction. A third context was philosophical debates, where frank speech was linked with freedom of speech and could involve taking unpopular or risky positions for the sake of intellectual honesty and truth.⁵

If we read the conversation between Jesus and his disciples in John 16 against this background, the intensity of Jesus' rebuke of his disciples' response to his words about "plain speaking" begins to make more sense. Jesus rebukes his disciples because in their quick and easy assent to his words, he recognizes the behavior of a flatterer instead of that of a friend. Jesus' rebuke suggests that he suspects the disciples are saying what they think Jesus wants to hear, not what they really believe. To prove they are flatterers and not friends, Jesus links their false words with what seems to be a much more serious offense, their abandonment of him at his hour. Yet this link makes sense if we think of the disciples' words in 16:29-30 as the words of flatterers (and not friends): their actions at his hour, their scattering "each one to his home," simply put into action what their words here already reveal. The disciples are interested only in furthering their own ends.

The contrast between friend and flatterer, between plain speaker and false speaker, is pivotal for the Gospel of John because Jesus is the ultimate plain speaker in John and hence, the ultimate friend. This is demonstrated most vividly in the juxtaposition of Jesus' interrogation by the high priest (18:19-24) and Peter's "interrogation" around the charcoal fire in the high priest's courtyard (18:15-18, 25-27). Jesus' testimony at his interrogation is bold and frank, "I have always spoken openly (*parrēsia*) to the world; I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all the Jews come together. I have said nothing in secret." Peter's "testimony," by contrast, is really an anti-testimony. Whereas Jesus responds to direct questions with frank, plain speech about his habit of frank speech, Peter responds to direct questions with lies and denials. Plutarch's analogy of the sound of frank speech and the distinctiveness of each animal's cry is appropriate to this situation: Jesus' words readily identify him as a friend, whereas Peter's words are not the sounds of a friend, but of one who is only interested in his own ends, the flatterer.

Plain Speaking as the Language of Love

The Greek word for "friend" is *philos*, from the verb *phileo*, to love. John 15:12-15 makes explicit the connection between love and friendship:

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from the Father.

"To lay down one's life for a friend," like plain speaking, belonged to the philosophical discussion of friendship in the Greek and Roman world:

... the virtuous man's conduct is often guided by the interests of his friends and of his country, and that he will if necessary lay down his life in their behalf... And this is doubtless the case with those who give their lives for others; thus they choose great nobility for themselves.⁶

This does not mean that any more people actually met this friendship ideal in the Greek and Roman world than do in the contemporary world, but that John's readers would have recognized the invitation to give one's life as the invitation to friendship. Yet the readers of the Gospel also know that here and in John 10:17-18 ("For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord"), Jesus is not simply using the idioms of well-known moral discourse. The reader of the Gospel knows that Jesus has already enacted this discourse in the gift of his life on the cross. Again John shows us how Jesus is the ultimate friend, because he lives out the ultimate ideal of friendship.

John 15:12-15 does more, however, than point to the offer of one's life as a sign of the fullness of love that defines friendship. Jesus' words here importantly link this act of love with Jesus' own plain speaking, and extend the identity of friends to the disciples themselves. Jesus says that he calls the disciples friends because "I have

made known to you everything that I have heard from the Father.” The precise word *parrêsia* is not used here, but Jesus’ words nonetheless confirm that this is the practice that has informed his teaching. He has held nothing back in what he has shared with his disciples, and through the openness of his speaking, he has formed the disciples as friends. The disciples have been welcomed into a community of friends in which one speaks frankly and openly and in which one loves with the fullness of one’s life. Through Jesus’ plain speaking, he enables the disciples “to participate in the intimacy and trust of the Father, by means of which they acquire that ‘openness’ (*parrêsia*) which is the privilege of a free man and a friend.”⁷ Jesus’ plain speaking, through which he treats the disciples as peers and not as servants, equips them to lead a life of love and friendship themselves.

The importance of plain speaking as the language of love and friendship was recognized by early interpreters of John. Ambrose, the fourth century bishop and teacher of Augustine, turned to John 15:15 as a defining text for the practice of Christian friendship:

Let us reveal our bosom to [a friend], and let him reveal his to us. Therefore, he said, I have called you friends, because all that I have heard from my Father, I have made known to you. Therefore a friend hides nothing, if he is true; he pours forth his mind, just as the Lord Jesus poured forth the mysteries of the Father.⁸

By speaking openly to his disciples, Jesus invites and enables them to be friends—with him, with one another, with God, for the world. Jesus invites and empowers them to love one another as he has loved them. This love is shaped by the gift of his life, but it is equally shaped by the gift of open and plain speaking.

This dual dimension of the invitation to friendship can be seen in the juxtaposition of the risen Jesus’ conversations with Peter and the beloved disciple in John 21. Both Peter and the beloved disciple receive the call, “Follow me,” in these closing scenes of the Gospel. Since this call is the paradigmatic call to discipleship, its use affirms that here we have two models of love and friendship, both of which are authorized by the risen Jesus.

Throughout the exchange between Jesus and Peter (21:15-19), Peter insists that he loves Jesus as a friend (*philo se*). It may not be too much of a stretch to say that, given Peter’s lack of plain speaking in the Gospel story, Jesus is not confident that Peter’s friendship can be measured and known in Peter’s words (and hence Jesus’ threefold questioning). Rather, Peter’s friendship will be measured and known by his actions. When Peter affirms his love and friendship for the third time, Jesus concludes the conversation with a prophecy of Peter’s death (vv. 18-19). Peter will show his love and friendship by giving his life for the sheep, just like Jesus did. Peter will enact the noble ideal of friendship.

The friendship of the beloved disciple, by contrast, will be marked by plain speaking, not by laying down his life for his friends. John 21:21-23 suggests that this disciple did not die the death of a martyr, like Peter, but instead lived into old age. His love and friendship can be measured and known by the plain and open speaking of his testimony, “This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them and we know that his testimony is true.” The beloved disciple enacts Jesus’ invitation

to friendship by passing on the stories and traditions about Jesus around which the Gospel takes shape. The beloved disciple tells all that he knows just as Jesus told all that he knew. The beloved disciple expresses his love for the community through the gift of his speech, just as Peter expresses his love through the gift of his life.

Plain Speaking as the Language of the Kingdom

The Gospel of John helps us to consider the power and possibility inherent in plain speaking. Plain speaking, characterized by openness, boldness, and frankness, is an act of friendship because through such speech one enacts the love and openness that characterized Jesus' own ministry. Jesus did not lord his knowledge over his disciples, dispensing what he knew as an exercise of power that reinforced his own authority. Rather, in 15:15, Jesus calls his disciples friends, not servants, because knowledge and truth are to be shared openly, not hoarded. Plain speaking binds him to his disciples—and them to him and to God—because they know what Jesus knows. He invites the disciples into friendship through his plain speaking, and then invites them to reciprocate this plain speaking by being friends themselves. The disciples are invited to love as Jesus loves—and that love involves speaking openly and boldly what one knows of God and God's hopes for the world.

What does this mean for the theological and pastoral function of our preaching? It suggests that at least one possible function for preaching is to be a friend in one's preaching.⁹ Note carefully that I did not say that one possible function is to be friendly in one's sermon. There is plenty of friendliness in much of the church's preaching—jokes, chatter, anecdotes told simply to make a congregation smile or to get them on one's good side, tangential personal asides—but friendliness is not the same thing as gospel friendship. If one were to have as a sermon function, "to be a friend," much of this friendly chatter would disappear, replaced by the plain speaking that characterized Jesus' testimony before the high priest and the beloved disciple's testimony to his community. One would tell the whole truth boldly and openly, remembering that plain speaking is as significant an act of friendship as the laying down of one's life.

To be a friend in a sermon is to tell the truth. To tell what one thinks people want to hear is flattery, not friendship, and the gospel pull of friendship is lost behind careful words and overly judicious phrases. Friendship requires bold, frank, open speech, a speech that is measured and assessed by its enactment of love, not its demonstration of power. The plain speaking of friendship, as embodied by Jesus in John, is always reciprocal, always contains within it the invitation to friendship for those who hear. Jesus is friend, but Jesus also called his disciples friends. A community of friends was created around and out of Jesus' plain speaking. A community of friends can be created around and out of the preacher's plain speaking.

It may help us to claim friendship as a model for what a sermon can do if we remember that Jesus linked such plain speaking with the arrival of the eschatological hour (16:25), of the time when the inbreaking of God's kingdom is made visible. Plain speaking, the language of friendship, is the language of the kingdom, because in our plain speaking we announce with boldness the fullness of God's love and presence. Or to put it another way, each time that we preach with boldness, as a friend, we claim God's eschatological possibilities for that moment. We proclaim that in this moment, in this act of friendship, God's kingdom may indeed be near.

Notes

1. Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989).
2. See the general discussion of friendship in the Gospel of John in Gail R. O'Day, "Jesus as Friend in the Gospel of John," *Interpretation* 58 (2004): 144-157; Luke Timothy Johnson, "Making Connections: The Material Expression of Friendship in the New Testament," *Interpretation* 58 (2004): 158-171; John T. Fitzgerald, *Greco-Roman Perspectives on Friendship*, SBLRBS 34 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997).
3. See, e.g., Plutarch, *How to Tell a Flatterer from a Friend* (*Adul.Amic.*) and Cicero, *On Friendship* (*Laelius; de amicitia*).
4. Plutarch, *How to Tell a Flatterer from a Friend*, 51.
5. See O'Day, "Jesus as Friend in the Gospel of John," 153.
6. Aristotle, *Eth.nic.* 9.8.9.
7. Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St. John*, 3 vols. (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 3.110.
8. Ambrose, *De officiis ministrorum* 3.22.135.
9. See Charles L. Campbell, *The Word before the Powers: An Ethic of Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002). 157-69. I am grateful to Chuck for suggesting the topic of friendship and preaching to me.