

Speaking the Truth in Love

Charles L. Campbell

Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, Georgia

John the Baptist came preaching, and Herod beheaded him. Jesus came preaching, and his hometown congregation in Nazareth tried to throw him off a cliff. He kept on preaching, and he was nailed to a cross. Paul came preaching, and he was flogged, stoned, and thrown into prison. Preaching can create conflict! In fact, if we are faithfully proclaiming the gospel, preaching *will* create conflict. As Martin Luther put it, “how difficult an occupation preaching is. Indeed, to preach the Word of God is nothing less than to bring upon oneself all the furies of hell and of Satan, and therefore also of . . . every power of this world. It is the most dangerous kind of life to throw oneself in the way of Satan’s many teeth.”¹ Or, in the equally challenging words of the French lay theologian and sociologist, Jacques Ellul, “If you see the powers of the world so well disposed, when you see the state, money, cities accepting your word, it is because your word . . . has become false. For it is only to the extent that you are a traitor that the world can put up with you.”² We need to be honest about this dimension of preaching. Proclaiming the gospel can and does create conflict and disagreement. Preaching can indeed be a most dangerous kind of life.

I am not saying, however, that preachers are called to create conflict for the sake of creating conflict. The level of conflict generated by our sermons is not always a measure of their faithfulness (though some preachers try to justify their “prophetic” ministry in this way). Nor am I saying that preachers are called to alienate people in the name of the gospel. We want to be heard! And we should make every effort to help this happen. Finally, I am definitely not saying that we are called to “beat up” on people from the pulpit in the name of a distorted kind of “prophetic” preaching. Such “I’m-right-you’re-wrong” preaching all too often becomes verbally abusive—and verbal abuse from the pulpit is a demonic distortion of Christian proclamation.³

However, preaching should not simply seek to insure that no one gets offended or angry. The purpose of preaching is not simply to help us all get along or insure that “everybody has a place to stand.” The purpose of preaching is faithfully to preach the gospel. The purpose is to preach a redemptive word that frees people and communities from the powers of sin and death that seek to rule the world. But such redemptive preaching requires truth-telling, which often challenges the powers of the world that hold many of us captive and benefit those of us who enjoy privilege and power. Such preaching can and will create conflict because, even though the stone has been rolled away from the tomb, many of us either can’t or won’t step outside into life.

There are simply times in ministry when preachers have to speak the “hard words” of the gospel that expose the powers of sin and death and call us to more faithful discipleship.⁴ There are times when preachers have to speak a word that will stir up disagreement and create conflict. And for many of us, we are living in such times right now. The United States is engaged in a preemptive war in Iraq, in which over 1,000 U.S. troops and an estimated 100,000 Iraqis—including countless civilians—have been killed. The disparity between the rich and the poor within our nation, as well as between wealthy and impoverished nations, grows ever larger. Gay and lesbian people

are being oppressed not only in the nation, but in the church, and opposition to gay marriage played a critical—some would say decisive—role in the recent presidential election. The relentless and resilient force of racism continues to rise up in “ever more beguiling forms and predatory guises.”⁵ These and countless other conflicts show no sign of abating in the months and years ahead. In such times, the gospel cries out to be proclaimed—and such proclamation will stir up disagreement and create conflict.

As many of us prepare for a season of challenging, even dangerous, preaching, I have been reflecting on some broad “guidelines” to help us in this task. Two key questions, posed to me by pastors, have shaped my reflections: First, how can we preach the hard words and still get a hearing, rather than simply shutting people down or alienating them? Second, how can we speak the hard words without destroying the personal and pastoral relationships that are critical to our ministry?⁶ In response to these questions, I have been reflecting not primarily on the rhetorical tactics of the sermon (e.g. stories can be a helpful way to address particular concerns), but on some of the larger matters that shape our lives as preachers and help us maintain our relationship with parishioners. While my reflections are by no means exhaustive, I do hope they will help preachers navigate some of the difficult roads that lie ahead.

Compelled to Speak

The hard word we proclaim should be one the gospel compels us to speak. That is, we need to pay close attention to our motivation in such preaching. Such preaching is not a time to work out our own anger or our own issues. It is not a time to “get” the congregation (or some members of the congregation) because they are so misguided or sinful. If we can’t wait to leap into the pulpit and “let those folks have it,” then we should question our motivation. As a wise pastor once told me, “Never trust a prophet who enjoys the job.”

Preachers in the Bible, who knew something about proclaiming a hard word, have captured this motivation very clearly. Jeremiah writes, “If I say, ‘I will not mention the Lord or speak any more in the Lord’s name,’ then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones. I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot” (Jer 20:9). Amos announces, “The Lion has roared; who will not fear? The Lord God has spoken; who can but prophesy?” (Amos 3:8). And the Apostle Paul agonizes, “woe to me if I do not proclaim the gospel” (1 Cor 9:16). The biblical prophets were compelled to speak, and we should be as well.

Such discernment about our motivations is not always easy. Anger is an often-overlooked virtue for the preacher.⁷ As the bumper sticker says, “If you’re not mad as hell, you’re not paying attention.” The Spirit works in mysterious ways, including sometimes through the personal frustrations and anger of the preacher who is paying attention to the world. Discernment of our motivations can be difficult. However, a simple test may be helpful. We should ask ourselves, “Are we speaking out of love because we *have* to? Or are we out to ‘get’ people because we *want* to?” That is, does the gospel compel us to speak this word? And can we speak this truth in love?

Preach the Text

Controversial sermons, which will create conflict, need to be solidly grounded in a text. And the connection to the text needs to be clear in the sermon itself. Such sermons should not be op-ed pieces that might appear in the local newspaper. As much

as possible, the congregation needs to sense that we are not simply spouting our own opinions, but trying faithfully to proclaim the gospel that has come to us in a particular text. Obviously, this process is complex—for we are always dealing with our *interpretation* of a text. But the clear connection between text and sermon is critical. Then disagreement may not simply be with the preacher's personal opinions, but with the text and its interpretation.

If the text is given to the preacher by the lectionary, that can be even more helpful. In these cases, the preacher has not even chosen the text, but has had to wrestle with a word assigned by *the church* for that day. And we should not discount the radical and surprising words that the lectionary may provide on particular occasions. For example, on the Sunday after the U.S. invaded Iraq, the lectionary text was 1 Corinthians 1:18-25:

For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written,
"I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart."

Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

In the midst of the national fervor and idolatry that always accompany war, Paul speaks a disturbing and subversive word.

Similarly, on the Sunday following the entry of U.S. troops into Baghdad, the text was Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Jesus enters the city, not in a chariot or a tank, but on a donkey. Engaging in a kind of burlesque "street theater," Jesus enacts a parody of the military conqueror who enters the city in triumph. Coming as a humble servant, he overturns the world's ways of domination and violence and challenges the world's understanding of power. At the beginning of Holy Week, Jesus, in other words, challenges what Walter Wink calls the myth of redemptive violence. According to this myth, the way to bring order out of chaos—the way to deal with enemies who threaten us—is through violence.⁸ The contrast between Jesus' entry into Jerusalem and the United States' entry into Baghdad simply cannot be ignored. To proclaim the lectionary text on that particular Sunday would probably have created conflict. But if the preacher proclaims the *text*, the conflict may be focused on the gospel, rather than simply on the person of the preacher.

Powers not Persons

On most Sunday mornings preachers do not face people who actively seek to do evil, but rather people who are complicit with the powers of death that hold them

captive. The fundamental problem is not so much evil minds as paralyzed consciences, not so much malevolence as the *demoralization* of people who have become immobilized by their physical and spiritual captivity to principalities and powers, whether those be institutions, structures, ideologies, or myths. In fact, in many instances these people are deeply frustrated by their complicity with the powers because they know the way they are following is not the way of life.

Within this context, sin primarily involves complicity in our own moral death; it is the human inability or refusal to step into the freedom and life made possible in Jesus Christ. The problem is as much *weakness* or *powerlessness* as active evil. Consequently, redemption takes on its original connotations of release from bondage, and the purpose of preaching becomes empowering the community of faith to step out of the open tomb to begin to live into the way of the crucified and risen Jesus.

Within this framework, the focus of ethical critique in preaching changes. Hard words will not be directed primarily against persons, for we are “not contending against enemies of blood and flesh” (Ephesians 6:12). Rather than making the people in the pews the enemy, the focus of critique will be the powers that hold people captive. The preacher does not “beat up on people” or load them up with guilt, but rather seeks to set them free, possibly even tapping into their longing for release. Preaching thus moves beyond simplistically condemning or challenging individuals and moves toward exposing and confronting the powers that hold people captive. The “tone” of preaching consequently becomes more empathetic and hopeful, rather than judgmental and angry.

In this kind of preaching, to put it another way, the distinctions between the “pastoral” and the “prophetic” begin to lose some of their sharpness. When prophetic preaching seeks not to condemn individuals, but to expose the powers that hold people captive and envision alternatives to the way of death, that preaching is deeply pastoral. Such preaching offers the most profound pastoral care for people who live in captivity to the powers of death. Similarly, in the midst of the powers, pastoral preaching will fundamentally seek to set people free for newness of life, which will require a prophetic exposing and envisioning in relation to the principalities and powers. In this kind of preaching, the most profound prophetic work and the deepest pastoral work come together.

Stand with the Congregation

In proclaiming the hard words of the gospel, the preacher should stand *with* the congregation before the text. That is, the preacher is also being confronted and challenged by the gospel. The preacher is not the “righteous” one who has “arrived,” while everyone else has to repent and change. All of us together come as captives to the powers of death; and all together we are hearing the Word that challenges those powers and seeks to set us free from them. As preachers, we need to beware of taking the role of Jesus and placing the congregation in the shoes of the Pharisees, or claiming the role of the Apostle Paul and casting the congregation as those intractable Corinthians.

In other words, we preachers simply need to be truthful about our own captivity to the very powers of domination and violence that we confront in our sermons. We need to be honest about the ways in which the gospel challenges *us* as well as the congregation. We cannot lose sight of our own sinfulness and complicity with the

powers, but should always listen for a word that disturbs *us* and makes *us* uneasy. In the sermon we can give clear signals that we are standing with the congregation before the gospel, rather than over against them as the “righteous one.” We can share our own struggle with the text, acknowledge our vulnerability before the Word, and confess our own complicity with the powers from which we too need to be set free. Controversial preaching never has to become “us” against “them,” because, if we preachers are honest, we know that we must stand with the congregation before the gospel.

Take Time for Homework

The powers that be will often try to silence preachers (and indeed, critics in general) by telling us we don’t have enough “information” or “expertise” to speak on a particular matter. Only the “experts” should address the issue. If we accept that argument, we will never speak. For example, if we think we cannot speak about economic injustice or global capitalism until we have earned a master’s degree in economics, the pulpit will mostly fall silent (and the powers will rejoice over the silence they have imposed). As preachers, we will always have to recognize that we are not the “experts” in most matters—and that is okay. Our calling is not to be experts in every discipline, but to address the large powers of injustice, domination, and violence that hold us captive.

Nevertheless, if we are dealing with a particular issue, we need to have done our homework. Although sometimes critical events take place, and we need to speak a word on short notice, in most instances when we are preaching on a controversial issue, we need to do significant planning and preparation. Our goal is not to become an “expert,” but to do the best we can to avoid creating conflict for the *wrong* reasons. That is, if the sermon creates disagreement, we want it to focus on the critical matter at hand, rather than on a factual error or uninformed claim. We don’t want to create diversions that allow folks to focus on the “gnats” while avoiding the larger matters of justice. To avoid such missteps, we will need to do some homework.

Not Just Critique

As Barbara Lundblad has noted, when we are preaching a hard word we need to move beyond critique to “provocative alternatives.”⁹ In such sermons, we need not only to expose the powers of death in the world, but also to envision the alternatives of the new creation. This does not mean that preachers will offer detailed and tedious policy recommendations. Rather, it means that we will help the congregation “see” beyond our present captivity to new possibilities. At times, in order to move beyond the despair and even paralysis that can come in the face of overwhelming problems, preachers may suggest some concrete practices that will help the congregation take a “next step” toward these new possibilities. At the very least, preachers will always seek to speak a redemptive word, which helps to set people free for newness and empower them for alternatives, rather than simply burdening them with guilt or frustration. Admittedly, in a sermon that proclaims a hard word, people may get bogged down in the critique and have trouble hearing the “provocative alternative.” But in these sermons, such an alternative should always be offered.

Integrity Between Word and Deed

When we are compelled to proclaim a hard word, those of us who preach need to

attend carefully to the integrity between our words and our lives. Nothing will undermine such preaching more quickly than a disconnect between what we speak in the pulpit and the way we live our lives during the week. If we speak out against economic injustice while living an unapologetically extravagant lifestyle ourselves, we undermine our message. If we speak out against war, but relate to people violently in our daily lives, we will have trouble being heard. We may not like living in a “fish bowl,” but our living proclaims what we believe day in and day out as clearly (and often more clearly) than our speech from the pulpit on Sunday mornings. And when we are speaking a hard word, the relationship between word and deed is particularly important.

This concern for integrity does not mean, however, that we can never speak to a matter until we have become perfectly faithful disciples. If that were the case, the pulpit would grow silent indeed. While our preaching will take on increased power as we genuinely seek to live what we proclaim, we also often have to speak a word that is beyond where we are and challenges our own discipleship. Indeed, one of the great joys and challenges of preaching is that we often proclaim a word—and then we have to try to live into it ourselves.

I think this is what happened to Philip in his encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8. Philip proclaims the gospel from Isaiah’s text about the Suffering Servant. He announces that this mysterious figure who was despised and rejected, oppressed and afflicted is actually the Messiah! As a result, when the eunuch (himself an outsider who was despised and rejected) asks to be baptized, Philip must live into his sermon. He cannot deny baptism to this person from the margins, even though his Book of Order—Deuteronomy—states that eunuchs should not be admitted to the assembly of the Lord (Deut 23:1). And he cannot deny the baptism precisely because he has just proclaimed Jesus as the Suffering Servant.

Philip reminds us that integrity between word and deed is a complex matter. Such integrity does not require us to be perfect disciples before we can preach. Rather, this kind of integrity has several different layers. First, such integrity requires that we are always *seeking* to live more fully in ways that are consistent with the gospel. Then, when we have to preach a hard word, there will be some consistency between our lives and our sermon. Second, this kind of integrity means that we are honest in the sermon about the ways in which our own lives fall short. We admit our own struggles and shortcomings from the pulpit; we are honest about them. We do not pretend to be perfect disciples whom everyone else should emulate. Indeed, such preaching may also recognize other people, including people in the congregation, who are more faithful disciples than we are and may serve as saints from whom we can learn.

Finally, this integrity between word and deed requires that we, like Philip, struggle alongside the members of the congregation to live into the word we proclaim. There is an integrity that *follows* the sermon, as well as one that precedes it. We simply cannot preach a challenging word and then go back to business as usual ourselves. And we should be open with the congregation about the ways we are seeking to live into our own proclamation. Integrity between word and deed is thus a complex matter, which involves our lives before, during, and after the sermon. But such integrity in its various forms is essential when we are preaching a hard word.

Take Pastoral Work Seriously

I believe, and many experienced pastors have confirmed, that faithful day-to-day pastoral work enables us to speak the hard words when they are called for. Admittedly, as Reinhold Niebuhr has noted, pastoral care can at times inhibit “prophetic” speech:

I am not surprised that most prophets are itinerants. Critics of the church think we preachers are afraid to tell the truth because we are economically dependent upon the people of our church. There is something in that, but it does not quite get to the root of the matter. I certainly could easily enough get more money than I am securing now, and yet I catch myself weighing my words and gauging their possible effect upon this and that person. I think the real clue to the tameness of a preacher is the difficulty one finds in telling unpleasant truths to people whom one has learned to love.

To speak the truth in love is a difficult, and sometimes an almost impossible, achievement. If you speak the truth unqualifiedly, that is usually because your ire has been aroused or because you have no personal attachment to the object of your strictures. Once personal contact is established you are very prone to temper your wind to the shorn sheep. It is certainly difficult to be human and honest at the same time. I’m not surprised that most budding prophets are tamed in time to become harmless parish priests.¹⁰

Although, as Niebuhr insightfully notes, pastoral care can make speaking the truth a “difficult, and sometimes an almost impossible, achievement,” there is, I believe, a “flip side” to his argument: faithful pastoral work can also actually free us to become more “prophetic” preachers.

In the first place, our pastoral work often opens the space for us to speak the hard words. If we have been in members’ homes, visited them in the hospital, and stood beside them in times of crisis, we will be pleased at what they will be willing to hear from the pulpit. If the congregation knows their preacher loves them and is one of them, they will usually be willing at least to listen to a hard word, just as they would listen to a difficult truth from a friend.¹¹ Everyone may not agree with the word that is proclaimed, but the disagreements will not necessarily destroy personal or pastoral relationships.

I learned this truth firsthand as a youth. The pastor at our church preached a strong, unequivocal sermon against the Vietnam War. I remember to this day the preacher’s opening words: “I’m going to read the sermon today because I want to be clear and careful about what I am saying.” (He had done his homework!) On our drive home after church, my father, who supported the war and the president, made a comment I will never forget: “I disagree with everything he said. But I respect his right to say it.” Because of the relationship that had been nurtured by our pastor, my father could disagree with the sermon, but respect the pastor and maintain that personal relationship. And over the years, despite their disagreements, the pastor and my father became close friends. Faithful pastoral work can enable preachers to speak hard words without vital pastoral relationships necessarily being destroyed.

Second, pastoral work enables us to know our congregations intimately, which may help us discern the most effective ways to speak a difficult word. As Nora Tisdale

has pointed out, such pastoral work gets us in touch with the “local theology” of the congregation.¹² We come to know their convictions and values and fears in concrete and particular ways. And knowledge of this “local theology” may provide the “contact points” that preachers can build on when we need to preach a hard word. Such knowledge of the congregation may help us discern the “common ground” that enables a hard word to be proclaimed and heard. Indeed, as a result of our pastoral work, we may be surprised to find the congregation more open to a challenging word than we might have guessed—if we can simply discern the best way “in.”

Such pastoral knowledge of the congregation’s “local theology” will also help preachers be aware of the points at which there will be conflict and disagreement. When the pastor knows the convictions, values, and fears of the congregation, she will not be caught off guard by their response to a sermon, but will know the ways in which nerves will be touched and concerns aroused. She will thus be better prepared to deal with these conflicts when they arise.

Finally, as I have just suggested, faithful pastoral work *prior to* a challenging sermon opens the door to the necessary pastoral work that may *follow* such a sermon. Whether formal or informal, time for conversation and open disagreement is critical following sermons that create conflict. And there will also probably be a need for genuine pastoral care because such sermons often raise fears, stir up grief, and lead to personal struggles. If the preacher has been a faithful pastor and has established a genuine “friendship” with the congregation, she will be in a position to welcome these disagreements and concerns and remain in conversation with the people.¹³ Ideally, the friendship will be deep enough to sustain the relationships in the midst of and through the conflict. Sometimes, however, this does not happen. Relationships are broken, and people leave the church, or the preacher is figuratively flogged. While faithful pastoral work can never guarantee such negative outcomes won’t occur, it at least helps to give the congregation and pastor an opportunity to remain and grow together in difficult times.

I suspect we preachers have some tough days ahead as we seek to be faithful proclaimers of the Word. In our current context, I believe the gospel will create significant conflict and disagreement. Ours is indeed a dangerous and risky occupation. In the midst of the danger, however, our calling is to proclaim the “hard words” in ways that are redemptive, rather than abusive, in ways that build up, rather than simply tear down, and in ways that lead to hope, rather than despair. This path is a challenging and difficult one, but it is the only one on which the truth will be spoken in love.

Notes

1. WA, 25, 253. Thanks to Justo Gonzalez and Judi Holley for translating the Latin. See also Heiko Oberman, “The Preaching of the Word in the Reformation,” *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, 25, 1 (Oct 1960): 9.

2. Jacques Ellul, *The Meaning of the City*, trans. Dennis Pardee (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1970), 37.

3. For an examination of verbal abuse, see Patricia Evans, *The Verbally Abusive Relationship: How to Recognize It and How to Respond*, 2d ed. (Holbrook, Mass: Adams Media Corporation, 1996).

4. I have borrowed the phrase “hard words” from Barbara K. Lundblad’s book, *Transforming the Stone: Preaching Through Resistance to Change* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), 95. I prefer this phrase to “prophetic preaching” because in Scripture the prophetic word involves much more than challenge or

judgment; it also includes promise and vision. Lundblad's excellent book covers some of the same material I cover here and should be read by pastors facing the challenge of "bearing the hard words" to their congregations.

5. See Bill Wylie-Kellermann, "Not Vice Versa. Reading the Powers Biblically: Stringfellow, Hermeneutics, and the Principalities," *Anglican Theological Review* 81, 4 (1999): 672-4.

6. These reflections were stimulated by responses I have received from pastors to my book, *The Word Before the Powers: An Ethic of Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002). Pastors have often requested concrete suggestions about ways to preach amidst the powers without completely alienating their congregations or destroying critical pastoral and personal relationships. While I do make some suggestions in the book, this article is an attempt to provide some more concrete guidance. The article necessarily presumes much material in the book because there is not space to flesh out details that are covered there. For a detailed discussion of the nature and strategies of the principalities and powers, see *Word before the Powers*, 7-43.

7. On anger as virtue of the preacher, see Campbell, *Word before the Powers*, 176-78.

8. On the myth of redemptive violence, see Campbell, *Word before the Powers*, 27-30. I would argue that the events of Jesus' ministry and passion, which we remember during Lent (from the temptation to the predictions of his death to the triumphal entry to the other events of Holy Week), all focus particularly on Jesus' challenge to the myth of redemptive violence and his embodiment of *nonviolent* resistance to the powers. See *Word before the Powers*, 44-67.

9. Lundblad, *Transforming the Stone*, 98.

10. Reinhold Niebuhr, *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*; reprint (New York: Da Capo Press, 1976), 53.

11. On the church as a community of friends and the implications of this friendship for preaching, see Campbell, *Word before the Powers*, 159-69.

12. Nora Tubbs Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997).

13. John McClure has proposed that such conversation with members of the congregation also *precede* the sermon and contribute to its development. This approach may also be particularly helpful when one is preaching a hard word. See John S. McClure, *The Roundtable Pulpit: Where Leadership and Preaching Meet* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995).