

Looking on the Other Side: Preaching in a Multicultural Society

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My wife, Caroline Leach, and I have been pastors at Oakhurst Presbyterian Church in Decatur, Georgia, for twenty-three years. We were the first clergy couple to serve a church in the former P.C.U.S., and we came of age in the 1960's. We had seen and done a lot, but nothing prepared us for the challenge to our faith and for the deepening of our faith that we have encountered in the multicultural collage that is Oakhurst. This challenge and this deepening occurred on many levels. I learned that I had a cultural context when I came to the Bible. I learned that I brought a particular way of understanding the world, a particular sensory apparatus that I used in reading and interpreting the Bible and to reading and interpreting life. I learned that this is not a bad thing: it just is. It is a necessary part of being raised and defined by a particular cultural context. I learned also that there are other contexts for approaching the biblical text, and they have validity just as mine has validity.

As I write this, I am aware of the frequent criticism of a multicultural approach, that it relativizes biblical truths, that an appreciation of pluralism requires that we "dumb it down," that we lose our base of truth that has guided us so well, whatever our cultural context may be. The first response to this criticism is biblical and theological. The account of Pentecost in Acts 2 reminds us that the church did not begin or grow in homogeneity. It began, and it grew, in a multicultural context. The women and men who were driven out into the streets by the Holy Spirit were from similar backgrounds, but they spoke in many different languages and to many different contexts. It was so confusing that the crowds asked: "What does this mean?" Some answered that it meant nothing, that it was accidental, that indeed these first followers of Jesus were filled with spirits other than the Holy Spirit. Peter stepped forward to give a different meaning, that it was the work of God's Spirit, a powerful force from the God of the Exodus, a God who had made Herself available to humanity in a new way in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. The Pentecost story in Acts 2 proclaims that God has acted decisively in Jesus Christ to break down the dividing walls of hostility, as the author of Ephesians so eloquently put it. In all our stories and in all our sermons, we should keep this multicultural origin of the church before us.

The second response to this lingering suspicion of a multicultural approach comes from our experience at Oakhurst. We experienced this in many ways, but it came home to me most powerfully in a Bible study. We do this on a weekly basis, and we are blessed to have people from different cultural contexts participate. I remember especially a time when we studied Luke's Gospel, and we encountered Jesus engaging a centurion in Capernaum (7:1-10). The story focuses on the authority of Jesus and the faith that the centurion has in that authority. The centurion has a slave whom he values highly but who is dying. He sends word to Jesus, asking Jesus to come and heal his slave. As Jesus approaches the centurion's house, the centurion sends word to Jesus not to come to his house, for he is not worthy to have Jesus enter his house. He

requests that Jesus command his slave to be healed from a distance, believing that Jesus' authority is so powerful that it will be done. Jesus is amazed at the centurion's faith and contrasts it with the faith of the people of Israel. And the slave is healed.

As we began our discussion on this passage, I had intended to take it toward such issues as faith healing, the power of faith, and whether folk believed that this happened in quite this way or whether it had been embellished by the tradition. I also thought the contrast between the centurion's faith and the faith of Israel might be a good direction. The African American folk in our study, however, raised another issue: why didn't Jesus order the centurion to free his slave? Did this passage mean that Jesus gave implicit if not explicit blessings to slavery? Was the mission of Jesus to change society, or was it a mission only to individuals? Was his mission to heal individuals such as this slave without healing the society that created the sickness called slavery?

I learned that many of us who are white had accepted slavery as part of the social landscape of this passage, part of the background to the real meaning and power of this story. Those who were black had a different orientation; this story spoke to them about slavery. We had a lively discussion as we noted the differences between Roman slavery and American slavery, and as we noted the ambivalence of the biblical witness on the issue of slavery. In Deuteronomy 23:15 we find that runaway slaves are not to be returned to their masters, while in Philemon, Paul returns a runaway slave but urges Philemon to grant him freedom. Paul also emphasizes obedience to masters by slaves (Colossians 3 and Ephesians 6), but in Galatians 5 urges all Christians not to allow themselves to become slaves.

Preaching in a multicultural context has reminded me of the rich diversity that God has created and continues to sustain. In an age of great technological and material power, it has helped me to rediscover the bedrock Reformed idea that God is greater and deeper and wider than I can ever imagine. I have said that and believed that with integrity in the past, but I have learned that I also believed that God surely operated as a white, middle class, Western male. That cozy accommodation of my cultural beliefs with the nature of God has been exposed to me in ways that have been painful and delightful and liberating at the same time. I give thanks for my family and for my culture and for their nurturing of me. It is important to know my story and my history, for these have given me life and meaning and hope. If I don't appreciate my story, then I cannot appreciate the stories of others, and I will not be able to receive the gift of the story of God's coming to us in Jesus Christ.

This is part of my narrative. I grew up in the Deep South in the 1950's and 1960's, in a little town in Arkansas in the Mississippi River delta. My Presbyterian church was very important to me because my father had abandoned my family when I was a baby, and I was raised by a very dedicated and loving mother and great aunt. Despite their loving devotion, I listened to a powerful voice inside me that told me that I was not worth much because my father had left me and had never come back to see me. My developing definition of myself became "boy abandoned by his father." The people of my church "stepped into the breach," to use that wonderful phrase from Isaiah 58. They helped me to begin to hear that I was a boy loved by God. They were loving and caring people who taught me who God was and who I was: a child of God. Instead of being "boy abandoned by his father," I began to hear that I was "boy claimed by his Father in Jesus Christ." It was a great gift to me from First Presbyterian Church.

At the same time, though, they taught me about another god, a god who would rival

the God I knew in Jesus Christ. They taught me the god of racism, the idea that white people are superior and should be in control. They taught me that black people especially were not human beings like I was, and I believed them. I accepted the lie of racism as a valid understanding of life and of my life. I became captive to racism. They taught me racism not because they were mean and evil people but because they were anxious and fearful people, because they too were captive to racism. I am captive to many other powers, and I learned them all from really decent people. God has worked on me in many of these areas, and the multicultural context is one of the central places where I have learned about my captivity and about the possibility of freedom and liberation.

In this context we have rediscovered our faith and ourselves there, and we have rediscovered God there. We have discovered that our cultural contexts are central but also can be confining, that God intends for us to retain our context while broadening it to include the gifts of other cultures. Our calling is not to give up our culture or to seek to strip others of their culture, but rather our calling is to seek to be weavers of all our stories, making a new tapestry called the church, a community of faith whose base must necessarily be multicultural if we are to receive the depth of the riches of God's gifts to us.

In this journey we have found at least four guidelines for preaching in a multicultural society. First is the value of our stories and our cultures, each of us and all of us. It is vital to our faith development that we have an awareness of our own stories and cultural values, with both the enriching dimensions and the difficult aspects. It is also vital to realize that there are other stories and other cultures in God's creation. Those others stand as both gifts and challenges to our own stories, and our goal should not be the competition that we have emphasized for so long in Western culture, but rather developing a sense of complementing one another. The truth of the multicultural context in which the church began, and in which we increasingly find ourselves again, is that this is an opportunity to rediscover the richness and depth of the God that we thought we knew and that we thought that we had confined. The richness and diversity of our stories and our contexts will help us find the gift of the truth that God has broken down the dividing wall of hostility. What we find on the other side of that wall are not the monsters that we had been taught to fear but rather the sisters and brothers for whom our hearts are longing.

The second guideline is the re-emergence and even the necessity of community. Our American context, still so strongly rooted in the white and the Enlightenment belief that the individual is ultimate, values the autonomous individual above all else. Talk radio and television are filled with this idea that the goal of life and of society is to develop independent individuals who are self-sufficient and in control. We have the technological power to lead us to believe that this is possible, but recent events like September 11 and hurricane Katrina have reminded us of the inadequacy and the danger of this approach. Even more difficult is the fact that our individual hearts cannot bear the weight of this expectation. Our hearts long for God and for others, and unless we feed this hunger with authentic food, we will move toward feeding it with the clans and cheap community that so pervades our society at present.¹ In our multicultural context at Oakhurst, we have been intrigued to learn that this individualism is not biblical, but rather cultural, based on the slaveholders' captivity of the Bible and theology on which we were raised. The biblical emphasis is not on God's

Spirit working to redeem individuals who will go to heaven when they are saved (and when they die) but rather on the development of the community of God's people whose life and whose worship will glorify God and will testify to God's grace and God's justice.²

Preaching in a multicultural society requires that we encounter the truth that many other cultures still value the power of the community as well as the individual, and in some cases, over the individual. Rather than seeing them as primitive relics to be exploited and developed in free market globalization, we would do well to listen to their wisdom in seeking to hold on to the importance and the necessity of community. Preachers in our mainline denominations will need to consider the extent to which our imaginations and our sermons are captured by our cultural value of individualism and how much we need to be enlivened by the idea of the value of community.

A third guideline concerning preaching in a multicultural society is one that many of us have already experienced: there will be plenty of conflicts in crossing cultural boundaries. Part of this is a natural process because our cultures and our stories are important and life-giving to us. When we encounter other stories and other approaches that present different orientations, our usual approach is to build our walls of defense even stronger. Part of the source of the conflicts also is that we do not have much practice in these conversations. Because the demonic powers of race and class have captured our hearts and imaginations, our first response to such encounters is to make ourselves ready to fight or to flee, rather than seeing them as opportunities for growth. Our usual experience of the "other" is to be dominated by fear rather than by possibility. Thus, we lack practice at crossing cultural boundaries with openness and hope rather than our usual fear and resentment. Even when we seek to cross the boundaries with hope, we will make mistakes, for that is the nature of the process. The answer is not withdrawal into fear but rather a recognition of our limitations and our need for practice. That is, after all, the meaning of practice.

The biblical witness is that the miracle of Pentecost leads into conflicts that abound in the multicultural context of the church in Acts. Peter and John are arrested after they are vessels for the healing power of Jesus Christ for the man at the Beautiful Gate in Acts 3, and by the end of Acts 4, they are praying for boldness to continue to cross these kinds of boundaries. They recognize both the external forces and their own internal forces that have a gravitational pull on their hearts, a pull that would make them draw back in fear. In Acts 5, there is the terrifying story of conflict about the power of money, as Ananias and Sapphira fall down dead when their worship of money and subsequent deceptions to the community are exposed. In Acts 6, the office of deacon is established as a result of complaints by the Greek-speaking widows about the favoritism shown toward the Hebrew-speaking widows in the distribution of food.

These biblical stories remind us that when we actually begin to step through the hole that God has made in the dividing wall of hostility, we will almost immediately find conflict. Such conflicts often make us timid, fill us with fear, and cause us to feel pain and to inflict pain. The remainder of the the New Testament witness is, in many ways, the story of this fledgling community of faith seeking to follow the Spirit of God into the brave new world of multicultural ministry. Whether it is Paul trying to find his way in Jewish-Gentile relations in Romans, or trying to help the cross-cultural currents of the church at Corinth flow into one river, or whether it is the author of Ephesians reminding the diverse churches of the region of Ephesus that they belong

to Christ and to one another, or the author of James reminding his community how much their life together is influenced by class, the New Testament witness is that the dividing walls of hostility are broken down in Jesus Christ, and our calling as the people of God is to walk through that breach in the wall and find both conflict and possibility.

It is this idea of possibility that is the fourth and final guideline for preaching in a multicultural society. The promise of possibility is what the biblical witness proclaims in so many metaphors and images: a new heaven and new earth, being born again, seeing more clearly after many years of seeing only dimly, gaining new life, life abundant, a life greater than we ever had imagined. Preaching in a multicultural society must acknowledge the fears and the conflicts, but it must also be an invitation to experience this new life. It must point us to the Promised Land, a place where we learn to be dominated by loving rather than being dominated by fear. In our journey together at Oakhurst, we have come to know Jesus Christ in a way that we were not previously aware was possible. As one of our elders put it, "Oh, I need to be at Oakhurst every week. It is the power that renews me and enables me to go out into the world each day of the week."³ That power is not Oakhurst but what it represents for those of us who are part of it: the diverse, gathered people of God, molded into a community of faith by the power of God's Spirit through our crucified and risen Lord. It is a power that comforts us and confronts us and uplifts us and challenges us and gives us hope and courage and vision. It is a power that gathers us up and then sends us down into ourselves and out into the world to experience and to proclaim God's calling of each of us and all of us as children, calling us to imagine the whole new world that God has called into being in Jesus Christ. It is the power that calls us to hear that our primary definition is not rooted in any category of the world but in the gracious mercy and love of God. Our primary definition is daughter and son of God, and out of that definition comes the high and difficult calling to which the author of Ephesians exhorts us to live: that we are sisters and brothers after all. That is the scary and the wonderful part of preaching and living in a multicultural society.

Notes

1. For more discussion of this, see Gibson Stroupe, "Preaching on Covenant in an Age of Individualism," *Journal for Preachers* (Pentecost 1992): 23-26.
2. For more information on this, see Nibs Stroupe and Caroline Leach, *O Lord, Hold Our Hands: How a Church Thrives in a Multicultural World* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2003), 134-140.
3. Stroupe and Leach, 148.