

Preaching ~~to~~ with Exiles¹

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imagine no possessions,
i wonder if you can,
no need for greed or hunger, a brotherhood of man
imagine all the people
sharing all the world...
you may say i'm a dreamer
but i'm not the only one
i hope some day you'll join us
and the world will be as one.²

By many standards, December 8, 2005, was an unremarkable winter day in upstate South Carolina—just another day in the life of a college chaplain. Across the wide-ranging campus ministry community where the chaplain – this author – lives and serves, the “congregation” of some 1300 students, staff, and faculty was focused on final exams and the extended holiday break that loomed, tantalizingly, just beyond this brief period of intense test-taking and grading. As it happened, this chilly, overcast day also marked the twenty-fifth anniversary of the assassination of John Lennon.

In response to that anniversary, one of the youngest faculty members from within the college community – a well-liked and respected history professor – organized an informal service on the steps of the main academic building. The casual outdoor gathering was designed to celebrate and honor the life and legacy of the enormously important singer-songwriter –considered a prophetic voice (albeit a radical and polarizing one) of the twentieth century with his stirring and evocative songs of hope, peace, and reconciliation.³

The service itself was brief and very informal. About forty-five people huddled together on cold concrete steps and listened, intently, as four John Lennon songs were amplified over a small CD player borrowed from a nearby dorm room. The “liturgy” consisted only of typed song lyrics; during the gaps between each song individuals shared spontaneous remarks and reflected upon the transformative power and impact of John Lennon’s music. Though intergenerational in composition, the crowd consisted mostly of young adults in their late teens and early twenties, all of them born *after* the death of the man they were gathering to remember.

At the conclusion of the service – and in lieu of community prayer – the professor who organized the service sincerely and warmly thanked everyone for coming together for this event. There was an informal, impassioned charge to the community to evidence signs of hope and love with others in the days ahead. People exchanged hugs and words of peace with one another and departed into the rest of their day.

Along with a couple of other students, I headed back across the crowded, grassy quad to my office in the campus’s student center. As is my Pavlov-like pattern, I walked into the office, turned up the heat, flipped on my stereo, and promptly checked my phone and email messages. “Wow,” I remarked to the people who’d accompanied

me back to the office, “That’s pretty cool. I’ve just sent out my 11,000th email of the year.”⁴

Though random, fairly generic, and only subversively “religious,” these two experiences are useful and significant illustrations for the purposes of this article. My invitation for this issue of the *Journal* was to “write an article on Easter preaching to young adults.” Why, one might wonder, so narrow a topic when most of us will be preaching to a much wider range of age groups in our worship services? Is it because this may be the *last* sermon that some of our young adults hear and experience until Christmas rolls around? Unquestionably, there is a perceptible sense of anxious “straw-grasping” occurring within the church today when it comes to more effectively engaging the preaching task with newer, more practical and meaningful approaches.

I also suspect that the invitation is related more to a faithful, loving, and urgent awareness – a shared, growing attentiveness within many congregations and contexts for ministry – of perceived patterns of *irreligiousness* and *irreverence* in the attitudes and outlooks of so many young adults toward church membership and institutionalized religion. Those are certainly extraordinarily important observations and critiques. As an iPod-carrying member of *Generation X*, a demographic coveted and pursued so arduously by *both* Madison Avenue marketers and the church, I will offer up yet another essential “I” word related to this topic. This word is prophetic and possibly a threatening one (though it is hardly a new or original one) that, for me and others of my generation, captures a bit of the nature of the relationship between *some* young adults and *some* forms of organized religion in the twenty-first century: *irrelevance*.⁵

The opening illustrations of this article point to unavoidable and undeniable realities of the lived experiences of many young adults today. The Lennon service emphasizes the popular, emerging, and spiritually meaningful appeal of “worship” styles, formats, and settings that may *not* seem overtly or obviously religious – at least not to some people – and perhaps especially to those from other generations and perspectives. The flood of e-mails shared between a campus pastor and the young adults in his “congregation” reminds us of the hugely transformative shift in media and communication over the last decade – our popular and ever-expanding *dependence* upon using instantaneous and (arguably) impersonal modes of contact for information-sharing and relationship-building. A substantial majority of those 11,000 e-mails I sent out during the course of a year involved engaging in some sort of pastoral conversation or moment of pastoral care. In almost all cases, these e-mails were either an *initial* or *ongoing* part of an ever-developing, Christ-centered, pastoral relationship.⁶

These anecdotes suggest that the culture is rapidly changing and evolving in these postmodern times. I also believe these two specific examples hint hopefully at ways the Holy Spirit is alive, active, and well in this re-formation of spiritual self-understandings that also, and *importantly*, should become connected coherently to corporate expressions of our enthusiastically grateful worship of God. The importance of our generous, bold, and imaginative ability to seek and discover Christ’s presence and God’s purposes *wherever* and *whenever* possible with our young adults will have tremendous implications for preaching and pastoral tasks in the twenty-first century—and with all people of faith.⁷

My own experience tells me that far too often, we give only passing attention to

thinking creatively, joyfully, and honestly about how it is that we actually relate, pastor, preach, teach, empower, and equip our young adults. On the one hand, we can be very quick and ready to ask: Which young couples can we approach and ask to serve as our volunteer youth group leaders and nursery attendants this year? (I recommend inviting retirees to become volunteer youth advisors. They will be terrific companions in those journeys of youthful faith!) What snazzy and appealing “inducement” – a fitness center, terrific childcare – will prove to be a good entry point of evangelism for attracting young adults and young families to consider church membership? What program – perhaps a terrifically-themed Christian education course or Wednesday night supper program – will provoke eager attendance among our young adults?

These questions are better asked in a secondary and supplementary way. There are far better questions that are often *not* being asked as often *or* as passionately: How can we embrace the broadly diverse faith backgrounds and current experiences of “young adults” while also somehow not minimizing, patronizing, or ignoring the gorgeous diversity of God’s purposeful evidence and presence in the lives of individuals and communities? How are we empowering and supporting our *single* adults to feel equally welcomed and celebrated? This, to me, is a shared failure in so many settings of ministry. Young adults are getting married – if at all – much later in life than did the Boomers. Much of the time, we are not well-equipped or fully focused (however well-intentioned) on ministering with this part of the young adult population. How openly are we caring for (and preaching about) those going through divorce, joblessness, infertility, loneliness, overwhelming busyness, and the loneliness of spiritual fatigue and confusion – all commonly ignored and often-avoided issues (at least, from the pulpit) that characterize young adulthood for many people?

I have said very little about the actual *task* of preaching. That is intentional. To be able to *preach* with young adults, we must first be better able to *know* and *relate* to them. We must boldly discover *embodied* models for proclaiming the Good News of God – the unshakable, true, and life-transforming Word of God – in language and in presence that *authentically* reveal how we genuinely appreciate, support, love, and care about these generations of people and how we seek to be able to become dependable, humble fellow sojourners on the path of experiencing Christ’s redeeming grace and sustaining love.

Non-Negotiables

Easter preaching with young adults cannot and should not be isolated to one season of the year. Many of us summon up some of our “best” and boldest sermons for Easter Sunday. We must summon up that same exuberant wonder and excitement that accompanies the miraculous choice and event of the resurrection with the wonder and excitement that fills each day of the lectionary calendar.

Second, Easter preaching with young adults must remain biblically-centered, gimmick-free, culturally-aware, and authentically shared. We, as young adults, do not want our gospel in watered-down forms. That seems to be a gentle critique offered up toward some emerging forms of ecclesiology. And, in some cases, that critique may be fairly aimed. However, most of the young adults I know want to know more about the Jesus they read about in the pages of the gospels – the God who chose to love, eat, bless, and to simply enjoy hanging out with strangers, outcasts, sinners, and lepers.

Finally, Easter preaching with young adults can happen, by the power and pur-

poses of the Holy Spirit, whenever and wherever the gospel of Jesus Christ is proclaimed. It far less about location and much more about the relevance, coherence, and sincerity of the lived-out faith of covenant communities of shared meaning. This may or may not include the presence of wooden pews and high pulpits. We must become more attuned and less afraid of the many revelatory possibilities for how and when God's word can be shared with young adults, and with all people.

Explanation of Terms: Postmodernism, Young Adults, and Exile

In a wide-ranging, overreaching article like this one, language becomes precariously dangerous and contested. Undoubtedly, I will misuse or be misunderstood in my use of these terms, but this is my current, still forming, and faith-filled understanding of common expressions that relate, vitally, to the topic of postmodern preaching.

In so many ways, an article examining the topic of preaching to young adults might more accurately be described as exploring "postmodern preaching." In "The Gospel for Post-Modernity: Finding a Center," William Stacy Johnson sketches the outlines of *postmodernity*, a term largely indefinable by its very paradoxical nature. In part, he claims:

Postmodernity represents much more than a passing fad among radically chic academics; it is a wide-ranging set of cultural shifts that are fast becoming second-nature for many of our parishioners. Like it or not, these shifts will profoundly affect the way the church conducts its ministry for the foreseeable future. [Postmodernity] is not a monolithic reality but a bewildering profusion of responses to the contradictions and limitations raised by "modernity." One of these is the problem of "foundations." At least since the seventeenth century, the modern world has tended to construe meaning and truth according to a set of incorrigible foundations—certain cornerstones believed to be objectively, universally, and self-evidently true. Some found an unblemished foundation of knowledge in "experience," while others found it in "reason."

In the wake of the modern experiment, *postmodernity* has come to recognize the futility of this desire for fixed foundations. Like the character in the biblical story who stored up for himself treasures on earth instead of in heaven, those who seek to secure their lives with a set of human foundations are sure to be disappointed. In contrast to the modern fixation on foundations, postmodernity has asserted the plural, contextual, and open-ended character of meaning. Rather than looking for a single "center" of meaning, postmodernity appreciates the "decentered" character of meaning and truth. The postmodern mindset decenters "reason"; it decenters "experience"; and it suspects that claims to speak from the "center" all too often are but a subterfuge for wielding power over others.

Some Christians may well perceive in the open-endedness of postmodernity a radical threat to the gospel. If Jesus Christ is the way, the truth, and the life, then how can there be any Christian rapprochement with this adolescent worldview that casually brushes aside all claims to universal certainty? Indeed, many advocates of postmodernity have abandoned belief in God and drifted away from the church. Still, the postmodern milieu also

offers the church a tremendous opportunity. Times of momentous cultural change have often provided the pivotal occasion for the gospel to be heard afresh. This was clearly the case in the world of late antiquity; it was also the case during the reformations of the sixteenth century; and, by God's grace, it may once again be so in the cyberworld of the rapidly approaching twenty-first century.⁸

I also deeply admire what Brian McClaren describes as the *five core values of postmodernism* in his provocative book, *The Church on the Other Side*.⁹ His sensible insights pair nicely with Johnson's theologically enriching understandings of postmodernism.

1. Postmodernism is skeptical of certainty. There are moments for us to more openly confess and exuberantly celebrate the *mystery* and *paradox* of becoming and being faithful, impassioned followers of Christ. Let us be bold, vulnerable, and honest: we do *not* know all the answers. Let's claim the parable-like, mystically-experienced qualities of our humanity that wonderfully challenge and enrich it as we live it.

2. Postmodernism is sensitive to context. Too often, we seem to think that we need to adapt parts of popular culture (offering "contemporary worship" or having a weekly session of "theology on tap" at a local pub) to attract and serve our young adults. These might be fantastic entry points for immersion into popular forms of culture. Pastors, preachers, and laity need to attend to the broader context of life experiences in more sensitive and patient kinds of ways. Let's listen to the narrative arcs and narrative wreckage of our communities of faith.

3. Postmodernism leans toward the humorous. There is a balance between wit and wisdom. We need to trust our sense of humor and be able to express God's love and radical claims in ways that are also generous in spirit and mood. There is something audaciously awesome and hilarious about our seeking to "explain" God's abundant love and grace.

4. Postmodernism highly values subjective experience.

5. For postmoderns, togetherness is a rare, precious, and elusive experience.

Young adults—who are they? A common way to capture this ambiguous demographic is to simply speak of folks in their twenties and thirties. This, however, diminishes the wide variety of experiences that are being lived out by people who just happen to be born in the same era. Some young adults are determinedly single. Some are married with children. Some are going through divorce. Some are new to the faith. Some are blissfully steeped in traditions imprinted in the households of their childhood. Others have discovered the joy and excitement of meeting God, again, in the more autonomous *landscape* of adulthood. To my mind, there is a better way to talk about this group.

First, think of this group more in terms of attitude than age. Many folks in their forties might want to be able to participate in the programs and classes but feel excluded because they were born too early in the 1960's. Similarly, some in their late twenties feel limited in their being thrust into a narrow category of options for fellowship and Christian education. We can become a bit more relaxed and flexible.

Second, it is time to invite college-age adults in this group. Far too often, our ministry for and with this demographic consists mostly of monthly newsletters and Christmas care packages sent to students who are away at colleges and universities.

This is not enough. Congregations must find ways to work with schools and families in continuing to serve their adults when they leave their homes of origin for school and work. Young adulthood most certainly signals an immersion into exile – a liberating, terrifying departure from the forms of faith and religious inculcated in the first two decades of life toward the wide-open expanse of spiritual self-discovery and exposure that seems most emphatic as folks leave their home for school, work, and marriage.

Third, consider the language we have often used to describe this group: “Young” can carry with it the unintended meaning of being immature and unready; “Young” can unwittingly imply a lack of wisdom and ability to lead. Maybe it is time for us to use much broader categories. For instance, we could identify those in the time of life between (roughly) ages eighteen through forty-three as “Middlers.” This might better capture the shared variety of experiences of this twenty-five-year span of life that finds many people discerning their vocational call, forming lifelong relationships, and creating homes and communities of meaning for themselves and their families.¹⁰

Exile is a common and critical *theological* description and metaphor that aptly captures the experiences of many young adults. The theological description and existential condition of *exile* is a terrifically evocative and descriptive term for relating the un-relatable — the shared, and yet also completely personal *experiences* of many young adults who find themselves cultivating their faith and spirituality after leaving home, often permanently, for the first time in their young lives.

This theological concept of *exile* is invested with new and life-altering meaning for young adults as they often find themselves in a strange and unfamiliar spiritual “land” upon leaving their homes of origin. For many people, a college community becomes the first place and first time in their religious lives where faith-related decisions (about church participation, for example) become an almost fully *independent* choice. This is both disorienting and thrilling for them as they encounter unfamiliar forms and expressions of belief – both Christian and non-Christian. Evidence and experience suggests that this time of life often also marks a time of departure into the *wilderness* away from the religious traditions and beliefs that have been instilled and nurtured during the “household” faith of childhood and youth.

Many young adults of current generations will explore, adapt, nurture, and understand their spiritual selves in ways that do *not* necessarily include membership in local congregations or that conform to the models instilled and installed by their families of origin. Though this trend feels alarming to many people from many parts of the church, I think it signals an exciting shift and re-formation of ecclesiological patterns and possibilities. As Walter Brueggemann might suggest in any of his wonderful texts, this exilic status presents terrific pastoral possibilities and opportunities for the church. Let’s seize these opportunities with hope.

Conclusion

Many of us, perhaps and especially, young adults, are amused by David Letterman-like lists. They appeal to our irreverent outlook and sense of humor. Such lists appeal to our preference to quickly assimilate small, sound-bite pieces of information. In that spirit, here is my own list, titled, “In Our Ever-Emerging E-World, Eleven Elements of Effective Easter Preaching With Young Adults.”

11. *Extend*. We must physically, personally, and continually *extend* invitations

to young adults into times of worship and fellowship. Cutesy, clever signs posted out in front of sanctuaries on the church lawn won't work. Nor will simply hoping that my peers will come together on Sunday mornings and Wednesday nights because of habit or tradition. Bulk mailings feel random and painfully indifferent. Pastors and congregations need to reach out and *build personal relationships* to open wider the possibility for hearing the Word proclaimed.

10. *Eat*. Strongly consider establishing an effective "ministry of meals" whereby you hear and share in stories of life and faith with young adults over sub sandwiches, salads, or a pint of beer. Listen deeply and carefully to the shape, characters, and moods that fill these narratives. Help us to find language and God's purposeful meanings in our stories.

9. *Empower*. Young adults need to experience much more than just lip-service surrounding the notion that young adults (and youth) are *equally* and fully called into life of shared ministry. When was the last time we took a young adult to lunch to talk about his or her passions and gifts for ministry? How often does my spiritual "home-land," site of my marriage, and my retreat center of choice – the Montreat Conference Center – invite young adults to preach in their nationally-known Summer Worship preaching series? Young adults want to see folks who look and sound like them. Don't relegate us to the "kid's table" of church leadership. Boldly invite us into shifting from *consumers* of church to *creators* of church. We are not all that invested in "church maintenance."

8. *Educate*. Let us be pastorally sensitive that we will each come into worship with differing backgrounds and exposures into Christian education and biblical literacy. As we preach God's Word, let's be patiently committed to fleshing out the people and places that form the backdrop for God's compelling story. Please do not patronize us but lead us through the many aspects and parts of "becoming" part of the body of Christ.

7. *Embrace ecumenism*. Generation X and the Millenials are more optimistic and open to possibilities of deeper denominational friendships. Let us continue to seek ways to reach out and to become pulled into *dialogue* and *community* (two words rapidly losing their meaning and power to members of these generations) with our neighbors. Let us, in our words and behavior, reflect God's own hospitality with others.

6. *Embrace the exilic*. Liminality is an unavoidable condition of our human experience. And for many good reasons, the liminal, exilic quality of the time of life between childhood and later adulthood is one of the most critical times in our faith development and understanding. More than ever, we need to be physically, pastorally, and patiently present with young adults in exile.

5. *Embrace the emergent*. The Holy Spirit is still participating in the re-forming and reshaping of ecclesiological forms. Don't dismiss traditional, conservative, and deeply enriching modes and models of worship. At the same time, let's not become overly suspicious or dismissive of emerging forms of church life and worship.

4. *Exhort*. Let us become more prophetic in our preaching. We must become more passionate, radical, and even reckless in proclaiming the amazing expanses of God's grace and intentionality for creation. Anything short of such faithful exhortation runs a risk of sounding too safe or too hypocritical. Show us why God matters.

3. *Evangelize* (gently and generously!). Give witness to an invitation to a

committed Christian life with language, opportunities for service and study, and images that bring sustenance for our souls while helping express the meaning of our lives that naturally take upon Christ-shaped forms.

2. *Experience*. What we feel will linger longer than what we hear. Lead us in unearthing a life-giving and life-shaping faith and spirituality. Help us to discover the richness and fullness of a life in Christ through the trustworthy, open, and generous companionship of people, and God, who dares and continually chooses to love each one of us.

1. *Easter*. In each of our sermons, let us always proclaim – faithfully, strongly, and joyfully – the saving death of our Risen Lord until he comes again.

Preaching with young adults *cannot* begin and end with written words carefully exegeted and engagingly composed alone in the confinement of our church libraries and offices. Though this may seem to be an overly obvious attribute of good homiletics, it certainly needs to be emphasized for the expressed purposes of this article. The preaching task, perhaps most especially with young adults, will begin and remain connected to hearers of the Word through embodied, energizing, and sustained relationships between preachers and the members of their congregations. Let's give the final word attributed to St. Francis of Assisi: "Preach the gospel always, and when necessary, use words."

Notes

1. This title gives me a chance to offer a caveat and a clue about the thesis of the article. My invitation to write for the *Journal* requested comments on "Easter preaching to young adults." I am convinced that a huge chasm is closed in changing "to" to "with." One of the primary points of the article is an emphasis on empowering young adults (indeed, all hearers of the proclaimed Word) into a more fully participatory role in the preaching task. Similarly, I know that the opportunity to preach *just* with young adults is rare. None of us who preach can narrow God's Word to one demographic in most of our Sunday services; hence, I like the broad use of "exiles." I agree with Walter Brueggemann's idea of the Church in exile. Further, I sense that young adults—Generation X'ers and Millennials—often experience a profound type of exile today.

2. Lyrics from the title track of John Lennon's second solo album, *Imagine* (Apple Records, 1971). Written by Lennon, a member of the Beatles (arguably the most famous and acclaimed rock band of all time), the song became and remains popular as an anti-war protest song.

3. In many ways, the professor and friend of mine who organized this event also fits the profile of the "type" of young adult I focus on in this article. Raised in the Roman Catholic church, this thirty-two-year-old teacher would probably not describe himself as an active member of a local congregation. This fact, however, does not diminish (in my opinion) his faithful, devoted pursuit of Christ-like humility, service, and kindness to humanity. For example, he generously volunteers to preach at community chapels and is active in cultivating the spiritual lives of the students he teaches.

4. On this day—December 8, 2005—my email "SENT" box registered exactly 11,000 e-mails, the number of e-mails I had sent out from my office computer over a span of twenty months. While many of the e-mails could be categorized as some combination of administrative functions, casual exchanges, and personal correspondence, a substantial portion would fall into a category of "*pastoral conversation*" and care. As the primary form of communication, along with mobile phones, for young, college-age adults, e-mail has become an effective and necessary pastoral tool in my ministry.

5. By *irrelevance*, I am most certainly *not* referring to the life-transforming, Christ-centered richness and relevance of God's Word. In so many ways, this article could fairly and rightly be characterized as navel-gazing. *I am* a young adult. And as a young adult, I am – at least in some ways – limited to a very narrow and limited insight into my demographic and part of the church. It will be very easy – and rightfully and agreeably so – for other young adults and other people to find disagreement with any of my assertions and

claims. However, my hope and prayer is that these tentative and sincere suggestions will extend the dialogue about the postmodern preaching task in the twenty-first century. I love, respect, honor, and cherish the “expressed” form of the Church that is the Presbyterian Church (USA); I love, respect, honor, cherish, and am committed, much more, to trying to live out my sense of call to participate in the body of Christ.

6. I am *not* suggesting that the Lennon service was a Christian worship service of Word and Sacrament. However, it is illustrative of a style and form that is meaningful – even if offered only in a supplemental form – to the spiritual lives and development of young adults. Similarly, my e-mail example should not be misread as an invitation to extend teaching and pastoral care to purely electronic forms. That would be disastrous. Yet electronic media *will* likely continue to be a necessary form for *extending* the reach of the church and of the pastoral presence of the preachers and the congregation *beyond* the four walls of the church itself.

7. In using dangerous, reckless words like “whenever” and “wherever,” I am being intentional in exposing postmodern issues. However, I *absolutely* think and believe that there are certain non-negotiables involved in the preaching task. The preaching of God’s Word must, I believe, *always* be biblically-based, prayerfully discerned, and prophetically proclaimed. I am in *no* way suggesting that we mute, muffle, or manipulate God’s good, challenging, demanding and loving Word for God’s people merely to attract and sustain the allegiance of a generation.

8. William Stacy Johnson, “The Gospel in Postmodernity: Finding a Center.” *The Gospel and Our Culture: Encouraging the Encounter in North America* 9, No. 3 (1997).

9. As part of the “mainline” church, we need to extend ourselves more deeply into the friendship and dialogue with the Emerging Church “movement.”

10. Many volumes of literature examine and explain generational differences and distinctions. For my purposes, I am referring to Generation X (perhaps first identified by this name in Douglas Coupland’s book of the same name) as the age group born between 1965 and 1981. The Millennials (or Generation Y) are those born between 1981 and the end of the last millennium. More than generational age groupings, Generation X and Millennials, I think, are more identifiable by their respective attitudes and outlooks.