

The Preacher

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My preaching colleague once preached a sermon which had an important refrain. Over and over again in the sermon, he said, “We are all God’s.” He was reminding us that we all belong to God, first and foremost. In this individualistic culture, he was giving the counter cultural message that we are not our own. It’s not all about us. We are all God’s. The repetition drove the point home.

I loved the sermon, and standing next to him in the receiving line, I noted the responses, one after the other. “Morning.” “Why was Mary in the prayer concerns? I couldn’t hear.” “Can you tell me where the youth group medical waiver forms should be dropped off?” And occasionally, there was a reference to the preaching: “Nice sermon.”

Finally one man came through the line and held the preacher’s hand with intensity. “That sermon was what I have been waiting to hear preached in this church for years. Incredible. Life changing. Thank you.”

Now, this man was actually an occasional critic of the preaching at the church, both my own and my colleague’s. We knew that he was a devotee of an obscure new age Indian guru whose pamphlets he passed along to us as examples of what we might say instead of “spouting doctrine.” He came to church to appease his wife and children, but he was also clearly a seeker with a deep passion for matters of the spirit. So his praise was unexpected and notable in a sea of “Nice sermons.”

“What moved you?” the preacher asked.

“You finally got it right. I mean that one line said it all: we are all gods. Every one of us is a god. There is no one big god who is better than the rest of us. We are all gods ourselves. It’s what I have been trying to say around here for years, and finally, you get it.”

The preacher blanched. Others were pushing through the line, and there was no time for him to respond that this was not what he had intended to say. But after the receiving line, and by the time he preached that sermon at the second service, the refrain was no longer “We are all God’s.” The refrain had become “We all belong to God.” It was not the first time a preacher has been understood to be saying exactly the opposite of what he thought he was saying. He made adjustments.

Every preacher has a story in which someone has interpreted a sermon to mean the opposite of what it meant. We can go back and look at our notes, and we think we were clear, but people bring their whole lives to the listening. Sometimes something is lost in translation.

This isn’t always a bad thing. Most preachers have experienced the flip side of this situation. We have delivered a sermon that was not our best. Perhaps we even thought it was our worst. And then later we will hear that it touched someone in a particular way. They brought their lives to church that day, a recent diagnosis, a heartbreak, the thrilling news of a first grandchild on the way, and somehow our meager offering delivered more than our own efforts. The Holy Spirit was at work.

Was the Holy Spirit at work when the man heard “We are all gods” instead of “We

are all God's"? That is a question I am waiting to ask Jesus when I meet him in heaven and all questions are answered. But I hope he tells me this: not everything that happens in the preaching moment is of the Holy Spirit. Some interpretations are in error, just as some sermons are in error, and there needs to be a place for the discernment of the spirits. For now, I live in this awkward liminality where somehow the Holy Spirit chooses to work through the broken vessel in me and the broken vessel in the listener to proclaim God's word.

Never was that more clear than when I decided to explain from the pulpit the social and historical context of the image of Jesus as the shepherd. "Most of us have no idea what life is like for shepherds," I explained, projecting my own urban prejudices upon the entire congregation. But I had at least taken the time to read something about sheep and their shepherds. "The shepherd really knew the sheep," I explained. "I mean, he really *knew* them." I noticed a few people in the congregation grimace, as if uncomfortable. I had no idea why, so I sought to be clearer.

"No, what I mean to say is that the shepherd wasn't just in charge of the sheep; he cared about them. I mean, he was out there, all alone, with them. So he loved them. Really loved them." More expressions of people who looked somewhat disgusted.

"So my point here is that this wasn't a distant or disconnected relationship. Perhaps he was lonely himself, longing for companionship with those for whom he was responsible." I could tell by their expressions they were not following, so I had to explain. "The shepherd, God, was *intimate* with those sheep."

At that point giggling broke out, and I moved on to my next point, baffled. It wasn't until after the sermon, when people with farm experience told me a little bit about life that I realized I had given the worst sermon about Jesus the shepherd that they had ever heard, and sadly, would never forget. I had taken animal husbandry to a whole new level.

"How do you come up with what you say on Sunday mornings?" It is a question that every pastor gets asked. There are few jobs in the world that require anything like a sermon once a week. Some people are impressed that we can do such an enormous thing. Others think we are making it up on the spot. Sometimes both are right.

Preachers can make it look hard and impressive, or casual and easy. Either way, it is the most important thing most ministers do in a given week, and for me, it is the reason I do what I do. I am a preacher. More than any other aspect of the job, this is the one thing that defines my particular call.

Yet I know there are ministers for whom preaching is not the central point around which their ministry revolves. They may be in a specialized ministry where their focus is on youth, or children, counseling, chaplaincy or pastoral care. Increasingly, the church is finding ways to use clergy's different gifts and acknowledging that not everyone's gift is preaching. But most clergy find themselves preaching at some point, whether they like it or not.

Few would admit it, but clergy know that there are pastors who preach every week, but do so grudgingly. It is the payment for getting to do all the other things they love to do. There are churches that faithfully exist without good preaching, in which the members are cared for at the hospital bedside, babies are baptized, and God's word is proclaimed at funerals. At some churches, the preacher may enjoy preaching, but the congregation gets little out of it. And still the church goes on. It makes one suspect that the Holy Spirit may actually be at work.

Preaching, when done well, can change lives, build congregations, rebuke the haughty, inspire the discouraged, challenge the proud, and lift up the lowly. When we stand up to preach, we follow a man who started preaching as a youth at the temple and never stopped, even on the cross. There is much that the Son of God did that we could never hope to do. But in standing up to preach, in reflecting on the sacred texts, we really do follow Jesus.

I work more on my sermon than any other aspect of my work. In ministry, much of our time management is triage. Most of the work that is demanded of us is worthy, good, and of God, but we cannot possibly do it all. So we make decisions. I am not ashamed to make the decision to put my sermon preparation at the top of my list each week. I have learned that of everything I do, the sermon is the thing that touches the largest number of people. It deserves the greatest amount of attention.

There are clergy who disagree with me on this point. They will drop everything to rush to the hospital, to respond to the latest need, to deal with an administrative matter because a lay leader is clamoring for something to be fixed right now. By Saturday night, the sermon is left undone. These clergy are working into the wee hours, writing with the last scrap of energy from the week. These clergy are faithful. Some of them are excellent preachers. They claim to care deeply about preaching, but they believe that outside forces such as the demands of the pastorate are keeping them from giving the sermon the attention it deserves.

But my colleagues who are writing these sermons in the middle of the night or the early morning hours on weekends are exhausted. If they do care deeply about preaching, they feel somewhat guilty too. They know in their hearts that they are not giving the task their best, but rather giving it their leftovers from a glass that is more than half empty. Their families and friends who have waited until the weekend to get their attention are also left shortchanged.

Lay people might be shocked to discover how many clergy live on this hamster wheel, in which preaching has been stripped of both its joy and its privilege. If church members' demands and expectations have created this situation, they would do well to consider the consequences to the church as a whole. But if this situation is caused less by the laity and more by the unrealistic expectations the pastor imposes upon herself, the lay leaders can still help. They can tell the pastor how much they value the preached word. It is what every preacher longs to hear from a church member: that this particular work matters. The Sunday when the church says goodbye to the pastor is not the right Sunday to have this conversation. By then, it is too late.

But when preaching is given its due, started early and entered into as a gift of study, creativity, and generosity, it is the most life-giving thing I can do as a pastor. And the one receiving the gift is I. What a mind-boggling privilege to get to sit with the scriptures, to ponder the text, to wrack my brain in search of the right story, to read and take in the culture around me, to search myself with the passion of an artist, all in service to Christ. No other career offers such an opportunity. There are people all over the world stuck in jobs that offer nothing but monotony, yet we are given the opportunity to create, teach, and preach. Why would a pastor leave such a thing hanging undone? When finally we approach it, it should be with reverence for the uniqueness of the task.

Yet having privileged this task so highly, I cannot imagine being a minister for whom preaching would be my only duty. I know there are a few ministers out there who

have jobs that allow them to focus almost exclusively on the study and proclamation of the word, or celebrity preachers who travel and speak in one place after another. But for me, preaching is rooted in the rest of my pastoral life.

When I visit a family in their home to prepare for a baptism, I am taking in their lives, learning in our conversation what matters to them. I want to see what state their living rooms are in, as well as hear about the state of their souls. The questions they ask about the church are often not the ones I would have assumed they had. I remember these points, and they find their way into a sermon down the road.

In meeting with couples in crisis, I realize that my own reflections on marriage are being shaped and enriched in ways that undoubtedly will make their way into my preaching. In the administration meeting where we agonize between two important budget items, my thoughts on stewardship are being shaped. Later when I read a text for the week, all these memories become part of what ends up on the page.

For this reason, I am baffled to hear about preachers who use sermons that other people have preached. Not only is it unethical, but I can not imagine it working. The congregation needs to see themselves in the sermon, and a sermon written for an entirely different congregation would ring false. Perhaps this is why pastors who steal sermons are often caught. The church can tell when a word is for them and when it is not. And congregations would rather have the preacher speak from his heart and theirs than use the polished and impressive words of another. They will forgive poor word choice or clumsy writing and call it a good sermon when it is clear to them that the pastor knows them, cares for them, and is speaking to them.

For that reason, when I speak to groups other than my congregation, I know I am not doing my best preaching. While the gospel is constant, what I bring to it is in danger of being irrelevant, because I am winging it and working on hunches. On those occasions, I do my best, but I miss the intimacy that a parish minister has with a body of people. The best sermons are not written in a vacuum. They are crafted in community, each sermon part of a long conversation that continues week after week. The congregation shapes the preacher as much as the other way around.

Yet when the time comes to actually write the sermon, the congregation is with me in spirit only. I am alone with the task of putting all this into words. For this reason, for many preachers, the time of sermon preparation is a lonely set of hours. There we are, with a job that no one else can do for us. With nothing but some texts from the Bible, we are stripped down. The blank computer screen, the unmarked legal pad, the pen that taps nervously on the desk, these are the reminders that we are on our own here. But of course we are not. It is in the deep loneliness of preaching preparation that I find myself closest to God. At that moment when I feel like I have nothing to say, prayer comes easily. It is a prayer of lament or petition or a confession as to my unworthiness for the task at hand. I feel Jesus with me at those times, encouraging me to try anyway. The moment before the writing begins is the loneliest time of the week, and Jesus uses it to get the attention of otherwise busy pastors. I have to listen to him at that moment. There is nothing left to distract me.

When I say “there is nothing left to distract me,” I mean that I have already fully milked every possible distraction. I have made myself a bagel. I have surfed the web. I have tried coffee and soda and I am about to consider liquor. I have appointed myself the church janitor to take care of some stains on the rug, and I have finally cleaned out the youth group’s “lost and found” box. Now, I wander into the offices of other staff

members, looking pathetic, asking them if they would like to hear my suggestions for a program for next year. They know how to respond. “So, you’ve got writers’ block again, Lillian? Don’t worry, something will come to you.”

And sent back to my lonely office, something does. I am convinced that the “something” is Jesus, who knows how hard this job is and picked me anyway. I am convinced that the “something” is God, who took seven days to create the universe, and so would probably prefer that I start my sermon on day one. I am convinced that the “something” is the Holy Spirit, who intercedes in the loneliness with sighs too deep for words.

I know the loneliness is a valley through which I walk to get to the rich pasture of Sunday morning. There, the day finally breaks and the loneliness ends. In preaching, the silence is broken. It is the moment I wait for all week. It’s not always perfect. Sometimes, it’s not even good. But when the sermon is working, when the congregation is meeting me in this liminal moment with the gift of their attention, there is an electrifying presence of the Holy Spirit that leaves me feeling like I have run a race and won, not through my own legs, but because there are wings on my shoes.

In every generation, somebody predicts the death of preaching. In our generation, technology has been lifted up as the big distraction. Churches make creative use of video screens and sound systems to keep up with the changes. But still, that preaching moment is decidedly low tech. A person stands alone telling a community what she knows of the word of life, and they listen. I am always struck by that and humbled. They actually listen.

After the Sunday services are over, I go home and experience a peace that is absolutely unique to that moment in the week. I really do relax. I can barely make conversation. I am so tired, but blessedly so. I would like to tell you I pray, but at that time, what I really do is eat pasta, watch mindless television, and sleep for hours on end.

Sunday afternoon, after preaching, is the Sabbath. Creation has been taken care of. Like the God who made us, we get to rest. And in that rest, I reflect on what I have done—or, to be more accurate, what God has done through me. Sometimes I say that it is good.

Other times, I find myself reliving quirky moments I felt in preaching that leave me wondering about moments like this: Why were they laughing at my explanation of the different streams within early Judaism? After all, all I said was, “In the ancient world, they had sects just like we have sects.”