

Preaching through Pentecost

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Let me be honest and say that when my better angels are not in charge, summer preaching can bring me down. Back when I lived in New England, this was the season that the congregation, and sometimes the minister, simply took off. Some congregations merged for worship. The Unitarian minister down the street left town, and lay people preached, to a much smaller crowd of course.

In my current church outside Chicago, we switch from two services to one. Attendance drops, and the reason, we all claim, is that people are vacationing and travelling. Summer cottages in Michigan and Wisconsin pull them away, although I'm not convinced my members are boosting some other church's attendance those Sundays that I don't see them.

In addition, I always worry that we in church leadership send people the message that they don't need to be there – by reducing services, giving the choir a break, and by the preacher preaching less, or, in some cases, preaching worse. Why would your preaching get worse? Admit it, aren't you more likely to prepare more for the bigger crowd?

So I am always looking for new ways to keep my preaching energy up when worship attendance goes down. I remind myself that first time visitors tend to put a tentative foot in the door in those summer months, and I remind the congregation that they need to be here to greet that person who has not yet arrived. Rather than focusing on the missing choir, I look forward to the soloists we don't get to hear from during the program year. And lastly, I remember that some of the best stories in scripture show up in summer time.

In year C, there are some real gems from the gospel of Luke. On June 13, you have the story of the woman pouring ointment from an alabaster flask all over Jesus' feet, while judgmental men look on in disgust. Jesus then tells the parable of the creditor who cancelled the debts of two men. The one who had been forgiven the most, loved most extravagantly. This is the perfect Sunday to remind people that church is a school for sinners, not a club of saints, and to speak to some of those first time visitors who think that they may not belong in God's house.

On July 11, in Luke you get the story of the Good Samaritan, perfect for a time when people may be travelling themselves, and may find themselves in need of a stranger's kindness. And on July 25, Jesus teaches us the Lord's Prayer. There's so much to work within Luke in the summer months.

This year July 4, American Independence Day, falls on a Sunday. Given how seldom that happens, as one who is not a lectionary fundamentalist, and as one who has really looked ahead in order to prepare this article, I would be mightily tempted to steal the Hebrews reading from August 8. "If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them." I'd love to play with that while talking about our nation. You could address the issue of immigration, the way in which we

Americans conveniently forget that most of us descended from immigrants, and how that amnesia allows us to tolerate policies that are downright cruel. Or you could remind folks on this day that our real citizenship is in heaven. I realize that some readers will object to a secular holiday finding its way into church, especially in this case, since it offers the preacher a huge temptation to leave the lectionary, but to my mind the realities of the outside world are teaching opportunities. To pick a text that critiques our sentimental nationalism and also confronts our hard-hearted immigration policies is a far cry from asking the congregation to bow down before the American flag.

And for those of you who would never think of deviating from the lectionary, for those of you who faithfully read every lesson, finally you get your reward. On August 15, in Hebrews, you can find the name “Barak.” How cool is that?

Let me take a moment here to reflect on the lectionary. Clergy from more liturgical traditions are sometimes surprised to discover that people in my tradition, the United Church of Christ, do in fact follow the lectionary. Quite strictly these days, it seems. Unless we have a better idea.

In an ecumenical divinity school, I was taught to feel badly about such lapses. I was taught that lectionary preachers were more faithful to the text than topical preachers. Supposedly, by following the lectionary, we would be less tempted to preach on our pet themes, over and over again. We would be less likely to preach cheesy sermon series on how to fix your marriage, your life, your church, and your dog, all in six weeks based on the Lord’s Prayer. By following the lectionary, we would be less likely to sprinkle scripture, like seasoning, over what we were already planning to say.

For much of my ministry, I bought into this. To be honest, I also appreciated the structure. I work much better with an assignment than with a completely blank page. And I found what many lectionary preachers find. The word for the day, or at least one of the four, often speaks right to the heart of what is happening.

But sometimes there might be other scriptures that speak to the heart of the preacher as well. Maybe the lectionary passage “works” while some other passage might allow the sermon to truly soar. In cases like these, I will deviate from the assigned text. And to be honest, the long season of Pentecost is when I am most likely to do this.

The lectionary is many good things, but let’s not elevate it to the status of canon. The lectionary can do many things, but it cannot bear the whole freight of protecting preachers from our own subjectivity. We will still preach our pet themes, and part of that is because the lectionary itself is a product of human subjectivity. For example, if your pet theme is that divine wrath judgment should not have much place in the church, the lectionary will work marvelously for you.

September 5 offers both the promise and the difficulty of the lectionary. Here is the promise. Right before the program year gets going, the lectionary gives you the chance to tell the congregation about a powerful little epistle they, and perhaps their preachers, may never have heard of. In Philemon, you can examine Paul’s embrace of a slave as his brother in Christ and the rhetorical moves he makes to get his reader to do the same. It’s a gem I often miss because I’m on vacation, but what a great tie in to Labor Day weekend. Americans dress our children in adorable, cheap tee shirts made by other people’s children overseas. Workers struggle to make it working more

than full time, but they are invisible in their fast food uniforms or on the factory floor. Who are the sisters and brothers in Christ Paul might urge us to claim?

Yet if you are always on vacation on Labor Day weekend and miss this passage, would it be the worst thing in the world to preach on it another Sunday? Particularly if you had a guest preacher who came that weekend and didn't choose Philemon. This is where I break the lectionary rules the most. It's not that I am unwilling to preach on something that the lectionary has challenged me to confront. In fact, much that is most challenging has been left out of the lectionary. It is more the case that I feel deprived of the opportunity to preach on something. For example, if the children's musical program takes up the sermon time on a Sunday devoted to the kids, and there's a lectionary text assigned for that day which I feel moved to preach on for the good of the body but that could not be preached on that day, I will use it another Sunday. I think of the lectionary as a series of puzzle pieces without which I would be missing a large picture, but it is not the only picture, and part of the fun of a puzzle is playing with the moving parts.

And now back to the lectionary with that great sacred high festival day of the church, somehow not accounted for in the lectionary, the gospel stories or in many church calendars – Rally Day. Never heard of Rally Day? It seems to pop up in many main line Protestant churches on the Sunday after Labor Day weekend, around the time the kids are going back to school, which this year will be September 12. People call it different things (I've heard "Gathering Sunday" or "Homecoming"), and it may occur at different times based on the local school schedule, but it's basically the Sunday when we say to our members, "Of course you should have been in church all summer, but on September 12, we're going back to two services, bringing back the choir, starting Sunday school again and having a picnic." No wonder they take the summer off.

If you're feeling peeved and under-cherished as a pastor who really brought her preaching A-game all summer long while some of your members were taking the summer off, you could welcome the slackers back with the wrath of God toward the stiff necked people in Exodus. But you may go with the image of Jesus welcoming sinners and eating with them and his story about the shepherd's generous delight in finding the lost sheep.

I've spent a lot of time on summer readings; because that's the season I need encouragement for. But the fall preaching season has its own perils. The program year ramps up, committees are meeting again, and in our own personal lives, the summer breeze and ease gives way to hyper scheduling and the return of the school night. Therefore, in the fall, many of us have more enthusiasm than actual time to bring to the preaching project. Every summer, I tell myself I will map out the fall sermons. But I've learned that I can only hold about four upcoming sermons in my head at any one time.

So here are a few things you can look forward to and consider in advance. On September 26, you get to remind people that the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil. Yes, I am perfectly willing to quote from the letter that states that my sisters and I do not belong in the pulpit. Because this week when you pair the 1 Timothy passage with Luke, you can deliver a one-two punch to materialism well before stewardship season.

On October 3, you get the parable of the mustard seed, on October 10, nine lepers

forget to say thank you, and on October 17, Jacob wrestles with God, receiving the world's first non-surgical hip replacement.

October 24 offers the chance to consider some prophetic poetry from Joel. "Then afterward I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions." I love the way Joel plays with the generations and the different ways they might experience God. A preacher can expand upon that and remind the congregation that we are not all of one generation in the church, and as such we will see things differently. But the older generations do not have to be stereotyped as the "old guard" or the young people as the dreamers. In my own congregation, the retirees are much more open to change than some young parents in their thirties. Lay leaders will worry, "What will the older members think about this new thing?" But the older members are sometimes the most likely to support change, having survived a fair amount of it themselves. They are willing to dream.

But you may be serving a congregation where the older members see the younger generation as wildly tampering with tradition. In that case, the church may need to be reminded that young people can indeed be holders of the vision. In practicing discernment in community, you never know whom God might choose to speak through. This line from Joel may sound familiar to many of us, but I have seldom heard it interpreted next to the line that directly follows it: "Even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit." Can we imagine a world in which the last person you expect to be God's chosen really is? Who is the last person we would expect God to choose today? It is remarkable that Joel, in his time and context, makes the point that both male and female can receive the spirit, even male and female slaves. This year not only does July 4 fall on a Sunday, but Halloween does too. On October 31 the lectionary sheriffs allow you to use the All Saints readings of November 1 (if you don't have a separate All Saints service) that presents the intriguing idea of preaching on the Beatitudes on a day when most of the world is hooked on images of violence and gore. The dead can be remembered in many ways, but the Beatitudes remind us that how we live makes a difference to how God remembers us as well. On a Sunday when kids dress up as serial killers and are rewarded with candy, it may be worth giving them a counter cultural word like this: "If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other one." I've seen pregnant nuns and televangelists even, but no trick-or-treater has ever shown up on my doorstep dressed up like Jesus. On this Sunday morning, the congregation can get a dose of prophylactic goodness before the ghosts and goblins take the main stage.

In November, we near the end of this long season. Lent and Advent make sense to the average worshipper, but the season of Pentecost doesn't seem to have much to make it hang together. By now, I personally am getting tired of the color green and anticipating the next season. So a look ahead in November offers a reason to stay focused, because there are still more golden nuggets to be found in the gospel of Luke as well as the epistles.

November 7 presents one of the more confusing passages in scripture, with a comical conundrum. A woman's husband dies and his brother marries her, as was his duty back in the day. Then he dies, and the next brother marries her, and on and on until she dies. Will she have seven husbands waiting for her in heaven? Here let me be honest and say that if I had seven husbands waiting for me, I would be pretty sure I had

gained admission to the other place down below. This is most women's worst nightmare. It's hard enough to keep up with one husband, but seven? And for eternity?

While Jesus reassures us that it won't be like this, his further musings on marriage confuse me to this day. Is he saying that we would be better off not marrying in this life? Or is he saying that our marriages, good, bad, or indifferent, will not exist in heaven? Being happily married to one man and gratefully not married to any of his siblings, I don't want to hear that angels and children of God have no need of marriage. For those who see marriage as a gift, this is not an easy passage, although it may be deeply comforting to those who do not wish to spend eternity with their ex or perhaps even with their current spouse.

Jesus was privileging and lifting up single people as special. Today's society does quite the opposite. We want everyone partnered up for Hollywood happiness. Those who are not partnered get treated as objects of pity or "projects" who need to meet your cute unmarried nephew in order to be complete. Jesus sees them as future angels, full of possibility, not just in this life, but the next.

Perhaps Jesus is saying here that marriage in and of itself does not get the last word, and neither do any of our earthly social arrangements. It is our relationship to our creator that will make us special in heaven. That relationship with God will also be the great social equalizer. The mother of three will be just as happy as the woman who wanted children but couldn't have them. The couple that fought and hurt each other over the years will no longer be able to do so. The single person and the happily married will not be lonely, but have companionship that dwarves anything we dream about on this earth. And it is my hope that whether we are married in heaven or not, the happily married spouses will experience this joy together, at the heavenly banquet that does not require any of the guests to bring a date.

November 14 provides us all with the opportunity to celebrate my ordination anniversary. Ok, so maybe I will be the only person in the world thinking about my seventeen years in the ministry that day. The point is that in working with the lectionary and the church calendar, we always bring our own stuff to it. If I'm having a good time that week and feeling good about the church, I would go with Isaiah's beautiful words about how God is creating a new heaven and a new earth, and delight in that vision for justice in the world and for the church. But if I didn't get my way at the last committee meeting, I'll go with Malachi and announce, "See, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble." But wait. The people at the committee meeting might think that one applied to me. Back to Isaiah.

Is there a way that preaching actually improves us as people? I am sure that I am a little less evil and a little less arrogant because I get to spend time with all these texts, whether I preach on them or not. What a rarefied privilege it is to spend time in four different readings each week, asking God to reveal which one the congregation needs to hear, or, more commonly, which one the preacher needs to hear. On an occasion like an ordination anniversary, such time with the texts will cause me to reflect on those years I have labored in this odd and wondrous calling and the gift that preaching is to the one doing the preaching. God is always busier during sermon writing time than I am. I just have to craft a word for the day. God has to deal with all those preachers. The last Sunday in the season, November 21, is Christ the King Sunday, but again, it's one where we may sometimes veer off, in this country at least, to readings with a Thanksgiving theme, such as the Nov 25 reading from Deuteronomy, when the people

remember that after wandering, they finally arrived in the land of milk and honey. Now, this reading begs the particularly American question, just whose milk and honey was it before the newcomers arrived? The Pilgrims may have found milk and honey here, but surely God didn't intend it only for them. What of those who were here first? In order to avoid a triumphalist reading of this in which the Pilgrims get to be the only chosen people, you do have some options. If you are not a lectionary fundamentalist, you could have this November 25 Old Testament reading be in conversation with the Jeremiah reading from Sunday, November 21, which reads, "'Woe to the Shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!' says the Lord." On Christ the King Sunday, it might be worth remembering that Jesus did not die for one nation over another and that the ruler takes no pleasure in the scattering of his sheep, even in the name of progress or religious freedom.

Speaking of religious freedom, let's get back to that lectionary issue, and where you as a reader might fall. Having walked through this chunk of ordinary time, do you believe in it absolutely? I ask this because there are lectionary-preaching clergy who would sooner die than be called fundamentalists and who would laugh at any one who believes Moses actually wrote any scriptures. Yet these same people judge the non-lectionary preacher with disdain, with an attitude that looks a lot like fundamentalism. Apparently we are not to take scripture literally, for that would be anti-intellectual and naïve, but the lectionary may not be questioned. So, who's being naïve, now?

This issue of the journal offers my own reflections on the lectionary as one who does not always follow it, and I suspect that I am not alone. We all know the pitfalls of going it alone. We know there are plenty of cheesy topical sermons out there that read like the latest psychological self help book with scripture added as a condiment by the preacher as iron chef. But sometimes those topical preachers get to play with a deep idea several Sundays in a row or delve deeply into a practice or concept that the lectionary would not permit. Topical does not mean shallow, any more than lectionary guarantees deep.

Having said that, the lectionary is like a restraint that I don't always care for but can still believe that I need. I wear it like I wear a winter coat, something I suspect is good for me, but that also makes me feel hemmed in when the weather suddenly changes. It keeps me from preaching sermons that are nothing but vehicles for my own cute stories. It also occasionally forces me to deal with Biblical stories that are far from cute. But given that I always have three other choices, I'm not sure I take on those hard texts with more enthusiasm or practice than the topical preacher.

In these pages you will see creative ideas for how to preach a thematic sermon series with integrity, how to take a side road off the lectionary highway without the wheels coming off the bus. Not every sermon series has to be about fixing your relationship, your bank account, or your dog's obedience problems. Even among our own "lectionary" of acceptable main line sermon series topics, not every sermon series on the seven deadly sins, the Lord's prayer, or the seven last words will be the same — as surely as one preacher's preaching in ordinary time will not be the same as another's.

The lectionary can be rendered corny, and the topical sermon can go deep. Conversely, the lectionary week after week can offer excitement, and the sermon series can seem dull and disjointed. Just as fine Biblical preaching comes out of many methods, so does poor, manipulative preaching. God and the devil seem to be enormously flexible in this way.