

Preaching to Young Adults

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A couple of years ago, the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* ran a column written by a young mother in our community. Having decided to end her habit of lazy Sunday brunching, she had set out on a quest to find a church where she, her husband, and their baby could feel at home. The column recounted various missteps in the journey but ended on a note of celebration over having at last found a spiritual home. Sunday brunches had been replaced by wine and wafer meals around the communion table. Faith formation had begun for a heretofore thoroughly secular family.

Around the time the piece appeared in the newspaper, I began to meet with a young woman who, along with her formerly Roman Catholic husband, had been visiting the Presbyterian church I served as pastor. She was embarking on a professional career and was expecting their first child. Both husband and wife were realizing that a life made up of work, grocery shopping, and exercising was not enough. They wanted to be grounded in something beyond their busy, but ironically barren world. On the recommendation of a colleague at her office, they had been quietly slipping in and out of worship at our church. A few months into it, she called and asked if she could come by to talk. "Of course," I said.

What I learned in that conversation was revelatory and altered the way I preached, the way our bulletin looked, the assumptions I customarily made about what the young people who come to worship understand and don't understand. My takeaway learning was that when I stand in the pulpit to preach, I should not assume prior exposure to Scripture, church tradition, or liturgy on the part of those who have gathered to hear a word from the Lord. I met with this young, impressive mom-to-be a number of times and then had the triple privilege of presenting her with her first Bible and of baptizing her and her first baby on the same glorious Sunday morning.

I wish stories like these were not exceptions to current trends, but sadly, they are. The majority of young adults today are not leaving behind their bagels and cream cheese to join "the joyful feast of the people of God." According to a study highlighted in a lead article in *USA Today* (4/27/10), "Most young adults today don't pray, don't worship, and don't read the Bible." The headline read: *Young Adults less Devoted to Faith*. The sub-head read: *Survey Shows Steady Drift from Church Life*. Three fourths of the 1,200 surveyed agreed that they were "more spiritual than religious." Thom Rainer, president of LifeWay Christian Resources, says that of those who call themselves Christian, only 15 percent claim to be "deeply committed."

How shall we who preach reach members of Generation X (those born in the 1960's and the 1970's) and members of Generation Y, also known as the Millennial Generation or the iPod Generation (those born from the mid 1970's to the early 2,000's) with the Good News? How can we help them grow in their knowledge and love of God? How can we inspire young adults who have been steeped in the cultural message that "It's all About you" to follow a Savior who said, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life

for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what does it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?" (Mark 8:34-36) How shall we speak to Facebook devotees about the One who "set his face to go to Jerusalem" where he would be mocked, scorned, crucified? (Luke 9:51)

The first thing we who preach must do is not dumb down the gospel or its demands, reducing the good news to a bland, pleasant drink, palatable to all. Don't water down the message! One of the reasons mainline Protestant churches have lost the majority of the younger generations is not that we asked too much, but that we asked too little. No sacrifice required. No commitment necessary. No, we should not have shoved doctrines down the throats of young people, but we should have said, "This faith journey is the most important journey you will ever take. Questions are welcome, even essential. Nevertheless, here is a foundation of values and spiritual realities upon which you can build your life, your family life, your vocational life. Here is a way to discern what really matters in the grand scheme of things. Center your life on God, the transcendent, Holy One of Israel, Creator of heaven and earth, Author of salvation. Let Jesus, God's only son, be your role model for how to live and how to die. Love your neighbor. Love your enemies too. Yes, it all sounds radical, but this is the path to the deepest joy and meaning human existence has to offer."

I am haunted by a story I once heard about a preacher who ended his sermon by saying, "Then again, what do I know?" May those who bear the responsibility and the privilege of proclaiming God's word never offer dull, in-house platitudes. Young adults who come to church in our time have *chosen* to come. They want and need sermons that help them see what God is up to in the world and where they can hook in. They want help from the scriptures of the Christian tradition in grappling with the great issues of their personal lives, but also with the great issues of culture and society. Young adults want and need a message of substance. Let's offer that message as best we can, trusting that, in addition to the congregation, the Holy Spirit has also shown up to do the heavy lifting.

The second thing that is called for is taking into account the lack of background knowledge and experience with the Christian faith, as well as negative knowledge and experience with the Christian faith. Many young adults have been put off by the mean spirited rhetoric and irrelevance of the message they have heard from many quarters about what Christianity stands for in our time. The majority of them stay away from the church in droves. Thank God for those who do come. Some are just exploring. Many, if not most, have no interest in ecclesiastical or theological arguments. They come hungry to learn and eager to be taught, but they are decidedly not eager either for in-crowd issues or sermons that leave them asking, "So...?" Recently, I sat next to a young minister at a city wide pastors' luncheon. He was in his second year as pastor of a congregation he and a few dedicated church planters had started. Because he was exceptionally appealing and extroverted, I assumed he was attracting the young adults, both singles and families, through his personal charisma. When I asked him what he thought was drawing people, he answered simply, "I teach. They learn. Nobody can seem to get enough of it."

I think of another young preacher I know whose congregation is mostly made up of people between the ages of 20 -35. His sermons meet people where they are. His illustrations come from the world in which his congregants live and work. A long process of discernment through prayer and study must take place before professions

of faith are allowed. His way of preaching balances didactic moments with relevant illustrations. The teaching is designed to open people up to new possibilities, to fresh ways of thinking. People walk away wanting to know more. They are asking themselves, “How can I practice this faith that is growing in my heart? How can my mostly crazy life actually glorify God?”

Thirdly, we who preach to young adults must never feel self-conscious about not being young adults ourselves! In my denomination, only seven percent of our pastors are 40 or younger, so all of us who are older need to be aware that we are perfectly capable of offering substantive messages, not just to the members of the Boomer and Centrum Silver Generations, but to the young adults who have made the radical choice to follow Christ in this complicated, everything-is-up-for-grabs age. All the congregations I served in the latter years of parish ministry grew in number, mostly due to the commitment and participation of adults much younger than myself. The reason that happened is that young adults want substance in the sermons they hear, and I tried to offer it. In my sermon preparation, I would try to ask of the text the questions I thought they might be asking. I did a lot of listening to them in various settings. I respected where they were. I knew they could spot a phony at 50 feet, so I tried to go to the scriptures with their concerns and questions in mind and come back with honest answers. Truth be known, people of every age respond with gratitude when they can sense that the message they are hearing is being preached with genuine humility before the awesomeness of the task and with contagious conviction about the power of words, the power of the Word to comfort, heal, and transform, through the power of the Holy Spirit.

When I come to the end of a sermon, I want something to have happened to those who have been present and to me. I want us to have had an encounter with the living God whom alone we worship and serve. I want the Word of God to have come alive in what I am preaching and teaching. I want that new life to take root in the lives of those who have heard the sermon.

I think of two young adults I knew years ago who volunteered together at a night shelter in our church. They began to date, and then they fell in love. They married. Before long a son was born and later a daughter. They remained steadfastly committed to the shelter and to its guests during those hectic, stressful, rapidly passing years. One year when the children were little, they became particularly concerned about one of the guests. He had had pneumonia twice that winter and was constantly engaged in a battle with alcoholism. When he got sick again, my young friends invited the man to their house to live with them and their two little ones until he got better. It seemed way too risky to me. “Why?” I asked. “We think Jesus wasn’t kidding when he said, ‘I was a stranger, and you welcomed me.’” This is what I mean about the power of words, the power of the Word. I have learned to trust the message we preach.

Some say that ours is the Age of the Image—the Nike swoosh, the apple with one bite missing, the empty pair of sequined gloves. We can visualize them instantly in our minds. I am all for including various ways of communicating the reality of God in worship. I know of a young minister who very effectively shows a clip from a movie to illustrate a point in her sermons. During Lent one year, members of the congregation, most of whom are sophisticated city dwellers beginning their careers, played the roles of various people in the Biblical stories of Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem and the events that occurred upon his arrival. In dramatic fashion, they embodied the

biblical story. But film clips and drama cannot carry all the weight. The right word, the loving word, the word that bears the weight of truth, the word that challenges, the word that questions, the word that cuts through the nonsense, the word that lifts the sagging spirit, the word that teaches how to live and how to die: the Word that became flesh in Jesus Christ is now, through the grace of God, found in the Biblical word that bears to him. When we preach, time and distance become irrelevant, our words become a means of grace, through the power of God.

When I become anxious about the effectiveness of my preaching to young adults, I remember that Jesus was himself a young adult as he went about his ministry in Galilee. Likely, many of his followers were young as well, identified, as they were by who their parents were (i.e. "sons of Zebedee"). They were physically active (fishing all night, for example) and remarkably open to hearing the ancient promises of redemption expressed in ways they had never heard before. To be sure, there was some resistance. The "downward mobility of which Jesus spoke and which he lived out as he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross" (Philippians 2:8) was not easy for anyone to take; many, by following his way, were transformed themselves and became ambassadors to all the world of God's transforming love in Jesus Christ.

Today, I sense a growing resonance among young adults with Christ's call to an alternative lifestyle. Yes, self absorption is a temptation for them and for all us who live in a consumer driven, it's-all-about-me culture, but more and more, young adults are realizing that a life focused only on self is a dead end life. Many are worried about getting and keeping jobs, but they also realize that there is more to life than having all the stuff you want. Young adults are more likely than ever to reexamine the meaning of success and to reset personal priorities in light of that reexamination. Some decide to forego a big pay check for an occupation that pays off in other ways, such as job satisfaction or in helping others.

Not long ago, I sat with a creative young businessman who was doing fine financially but was frustrated because he genuinely wanted to use his particular skill set to make a contribution to society. "I listened to you enough in the pulpit, Joanna, to know I am supposed to do more than live for myself alone."

I hear that kind of thing a lot these days. I am working with a new grassroots non-profit effort in our community. Our mission is to serve as a good neighbor to all with whom we share community, especially those who are experiencing poverty, hunger, and homelessness. Our new director, a young man with a great vision, took a 50 percent pay cut in order to do this work. "How are you going to live?" I asked. "For years, I have saved for just such a chance as this. I grow my own vegetables, and I have talked to my dentist who is willing to help me out for free if I need it." Without doubt, a lifetime of listening to the teachings of Jesus has made all the difference in the world to him.

In a recent column, "The Gospel of Wealth,"¹ David Brooks wrote, "In the coming years of slow growth, people are bound to establish new norms and seek non economic ways to find meaning." I can think of no more appropriate place to help with the "recalibration effort" than the pulpits of Christian churches. As society moves away from the notion that bigger is better and the biggest is the best of all, the visions of the prophets and the teachings of Jesus can provide the moral framework on which to build a new world view, a different definition of personal fulfillment. Preachers

who are only interested in building super-sized congregations will not be particularly useful, but preachers who preach the Jesus of the Bible will play an indispensable role in debunking the idea that having lots of material stuff is the way to happiness. It is not and never has been. Neither is having lots of money. According to a recent study in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, “Beyond household income of \$75,000 a year, money does nothing for happiness, enjoyment, sadness, or stress.” Having no money can [certainly] be the cause of unhappiness, but “the benefits of having a high income are ambiguous.”²

How regularly do preachers address these matters? Not often enough. What a great opportunity the present economic situation offers to proclaim the Christian message with renewed vigor. As theologian Douglas John Hall puts it, “Instead of retreating into the theological and ethical systems that insulate us from the moral dilemmas [of our time] we . . . must learn how to go to our scriptures and traditions as bearers and representatives of those dilemmas.”³ How would Jesus speak to members of these younger generations, to young singles, to young parents?

Undoubtedly, many of them do not and will never come to Sunday morning worship, but that is not a problem. It is simply a challenge. Jesus did not limit his sharing of the good news to 22 minutes on a weekend morning. From the beginning, he was where the people were. After a while, they began to come to where he was. Now is the time for creative, out-of-the-box approaches to the communication of “the timeless and the timely message of the Bible.” According to preacher Peter Gomes, “The reading and hearing of Scripture are for Christians in each generation a Pentecostal experience.” The Bible’s dynamic capacity to speak to people in every age “is attributable directly to the power of the Holy Spirit, the agent of Pentecost....”⁴

There are occasions for speaking to young adults beyond Sunday morning worship. How about a Theology on Tap gathering by men to hear the Word informally taught and preached? How about a Saturday retreat for young professionals, for stay at home moms, for singles? For couples? There are many occasions in addition to Sunday morning to preach/teach the Word. Sometimes, in a wedding homily, I will urge the couple standing before me to allow a single man who lived thousands of years ago to be their role model for how to live as husband and wife. “Imitate the way of Jesus,” I say, “his way of not living for himself alone, but with understanding of the other, with concern for friend and stranger alike, with compassion for the suffering, with forgiveness always at the ready and reconciliation as the goal in every human estrangement. Build your house upon the rock that is the reality of the realm of God, and your house will be able to withstand the stormy times when they come.” More than few of the young couples I have married have looked back at me as I spoke words like these, wishing that I would hurry up and move on to the vows and the kiss, but many have listened, realizing at least for one moment that their future depended on their receiving the gift of spiritual guidance for the road ahead.

What follows are two sermon suggestions based on lectionary texts for the Season after Pentecost, with subjects that might be especially clarifying to young adults:

I. The 18th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B: II Samuel 11:26-12:13a, “Does Character matter?”

If there is a story that better illustrates the consequences of overreaching greed, I would like to see it. As the economy continues to reel from the excesses of those

interested in short term reward with callous disregard for the long term dangers, the story of David's betrayal of Uriah and Bathsheba, his eagerness to protect his reputation, his condemnation by the prophet Nathan can serve as spectacles with which to see more clearly many of the moral predicaments of today. Ethical behavior: is it still the glue that holds an individual together? Is it the glue that maintains order in our society, keeping us in right relationships with the material world, with one another, and with God? Are there timeless moral parameters in place beyond which people ought not to go, lest they drown in a sea of self-deceit and destruction? People come to worship because they need help in keeping straight whose world it is we live in and to whom they are answerable for the way they live. People need to be reminded that actions have repercussions which even divine forgiveness does not wipe away. The prophet Nathan puts it starkly: "The sword will never depart from your house." The text is rich with preaching possibilities.

II. The 33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time, Matthew 25:14-30, "The Parable of the Talents"

This parable, which is both about money and not about money, offers help for people trying to keep their balance in uncertain times. The help comes in the form of a kick in the pants. One simply cannot live one's life based on fear and dread and expect anything other than to lose the joy and meaning of life. When your sole concern is whether you are going to be all right, then you have signed off from the life God intends you to live. The credo of the one talent man was, "Hold on to what you've got." That is no way to live, the parable says. Take what you have been given and use it! As far as the mission of the church is concerned, the learning is that the light of Christ should not be put under a bushel. Take risks for the sake of the world God loves and intends to save! The same mandate applies also to individuals. Harry Emerson Fosdick, one of the great preachers of the twentieth century wrote,

Fear imprisons, faith liberates; fear paralyzes, faith empowers; fear disheartens, faith encourages; fear sickens, faith heals; fear makes useless, faith makes serviceable—and, most of all, fear puts hopelessness at the heart of life, while faith rejoices in its God.

Oh, you young and gifted ones out there, use the gifts you've got. If you find yourself becoming disheartened, remember this: in times of great testing, we become our best selves, to the glory of God.

Notes

1 David Brooks, "The Gospel of Wealth," *The New York Times*, September 9, 2010.

2 *The New York Times*, September 12, 2010.

3. Douglas John Hall, "An Awkward Church," *Theology and Worship Occasional Paper*, No. 5, PCUSA.

4 Peter J. Gomes, *The Good Book* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc. 1996), 20-21.