

Sermon Notes from a Jazzman

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A few weeks ago, a jazzman roused in me the remembrance of a preaching principle. It goes by many names. He called it the importance of “the absence of sound,” a.k.a. the pause. The jazzman was Buster Williams, now 70. He has jammed with the likes of Miles Davis, Count Basie, Herbie Hancock, Sarah Vaughan, and Nancy Wilson. Recently he spent three days at a Montgomery County private school doing what he could to make sure a new generation will pick up the beat in the twenty-first century. He was listening as sixteen-year-old Alex Wood played the jazz standard “Misty” on the piano. But Williams was listening for a quality he called “the absence of sound.” Then he elaborated, “Allow the space and the air in the music to be part of the improvisation.”

On that afternoon in Jenkintown, his words struck a chord, the reporter wrote. Wood played again, and there was more nuance as he slowed, allowing quiet moments in the music instead of running through the piece like the classically trained pianist that he is. Williams loved that. “What he learned in that short time,” the jazzman said later, “was to trust not only what he had to say; he trusted what others were saying. You don’t have to fill up space just to fill up space.”

Great preachers of the last century had excellent content, scholarly and imaginative. Story and narrative were replacing theological lecture style. However, there was also a nuance to what they said that involved pregnant pauses. In fact two master preachers were talking to each other about a recent preaching mission one of them had. Bryant Kirlkand, the returning preacher, light-heartedly characterized his effort, “I was practicing my pauses.” He might have used the jazzman’s words “allow space and air in the words.”

It is the pause that allows what has been said to sink in. It creates anticipation for what will come next. It allows the listener to catch up, perhaps to take meaning down unexpected paths. It is a pregnant pause that prevents overpowering the listener and makes preaching a collaborative experience rather than a “tour de force.” In such a pause there is even a note of suspense before words begin again. A suggestion of this is in the Book of Revelation where “there was a silence in heaven for about half an hour” (Rev. 8:1). The reader wonders, “What next?” Seven angels who had seven trumpets made ready to blow them. “Are you ready for what is to come?” Or, if an apocalyptic setting is “too, too,” think of the conductor who strikes the baton and holds it in air before bringing it down for the music to begin.

Practical illustrators of the pause are often comedians. Public radio has been airing lives of Jack Paar, Johnny Carson, and Jack Benny. Note the number of times they say something and wait, look off into space, often with a deadpan expression while the humor sinks in. What mileage they get out of the pregnant pause. Buster Williams might say, “You don’t have to fill up space just to fill up space.” Strangely, rather than a pause lengthening a sermon, it is one of the ways good preachers can be brief about it.