

Sermon Crafting for Intercultural Preaching

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A decade ago, I was sitting in a large historic Episcopal church in a Southern city, interpreting for our Mexican parishioners as a retired priest began his sermon with an old joke. It was the old chestnut about an American businessman with a Harvard MBA that pretends to lecture a poor Mexican fisherman about how to improve his business so that he can go from one boat to a fleet of boats. The Mexican says he has a full life: “I sleep late, fish a little, play with my children, take siesta with my wife Maria, stroll into the village each evening where I sip wine and play guitar with my friends.” The American thinks this life is insufficient. If the Mexican just fished more hours, bought more boats, hired more fishermen, invested in Wall Street, paid into a pension, he’d be able to retire at 65 and then he could fish, play with his grandkids, drink with his friends, and take a nap every day.¹ It’s an old joke that Mexicans know well. The fool in the story, of course, is the Harvard MBA.

But this preacher continued: “What a waste of a life,” he intoned. Just a little more effort on his part, and allowing an American to advise him, and that fisherman could have been happy. I was so stunned by the turn of the sermon that I stopped interpreting.² I’ve also been asked by bishops and other visiting dignitaries to interpret their sermons in Latino congregations. It doesn’t always go as planned. Images and illustrations that refer to American baseball or football, American sitcoms, or British literature are not easily transferrable. Does it do the original sermon justice—is something *lost*?—if the reference needs to be explained?

Preaching, at its best, is part of a conversation between the preacher, the Scriptures, and the congregation. If the preacher only listens to the text of Scripture, he or she has only done part of the work of preparing a sermon, which may only be partially heard and probably at least partially rejected. Listening to the congregation—by taking stock of the diversity present in the congregation, the history, the habits of thought, the taboo topics—is an essential component in that conversation as much as the “delivery” of the message.

Leonora Tubbs Tisdale describes getting to know one’s congregation as practicing a kind of cultural ethnography in a pastoral context: listening, observing, analyzing, and reflecting on the cultural practices of your congregation in order to be better equipped to preach to them. She says preaching is local theology, developed from within the culture and experience of the local congregation. It’s a kind of preaching that is hearer-oriented rather than speaker-oriented, and requires the preaching on the congregation’s grounds, not on one’s own. She compares this to Calvin’s theology of incarnation: “Reflecting the image of the God who (as Calvin reminds us) accommodated Godself to us in order to enter our frame of reference and aid our under-

standing, the preacher lets go some of his or her own communicational prerogatives in order to proclaim from within the congregation's own symbolic framework, the transformative message of the gospel."³

Tisdale likens this kind of pastoral ethnography to contextual theology, which centers the hermeneutic activity on the Scriptures but expands into the local culture to provide illustrations and illumination. In contextual theology, *anything* is material for theological insight, and context weighs heavily.⁴ For Bevans, contextual theology is an approach to bringing the Incarnation into a local setting, a way, he says, of "doing theology in which one takes into account the spirit and message of the gospel; the tradition of the church; the culture in which one is theologizing; and social change within that culture...." Bevans says that the secular or religious culture of an ethnic group can prove a rich source of theological raw materials as well as personal and communal experiences.

Attending to both Tisdale and Bevans, I realized recently that over the years, I've been practicing both ethnography and contextual theology with my multicultural parish. As I grew to know my dual-culture parish in depth, my observations and some online reading, plus a 42-year university career in Intercultural Communications served to give me a door into the cultures, so that I could "enflesh" the message of the Gospel in ways that were appropriate to their cultures.

For three years, I served as deacon-in-charge of an historic African American congregation in Alabama that had played a central role in the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Civil Rights movement but now was suffering from the same challenges of many small Episcopal parishes—an aging congregation with limited resources and dwindling attendance (18). The deaths of two "pillars" of the congregation made its survival even more challenging. I was invited to be "long-term supply," and I was able to continue to minister at another location to a Latino congregation that I had shepherded for 12 years. Eventually, when the Latino congregation's presence at an all-white congregation became untenable, the African American congregation invited me to bring the Latino congregation to their parish.

Because of my long association with the Latino congregation, I was aware of the unique ethnic characteristics and had developed methods of formation and pastoral care, as well as ways of preaching that seemed to be working. Membership grew from a dozen in 2005 to about 265 in 2019 (35). Although in most urban areas in the U.S. the "Latino/Hispanic" population is usually highly diverse, with Mexican, Dominican, Cuban, Venezuelan, and US-born members, the Latino population in this small city is not at all diverse. It is overwhelmingly Mexican, with a small number of Hondurans and Guatemalans; even within this almost homogeneous group, there was little regional diversity. The largest group of the city's Latino population was from two states in southern Mexico, Guerrero and Chiapas.⁵

The Christians from the state of Guerrero represented a new challenge for me—they were not dominant Spanish-speakers. Most of the adults were native speakers

of an ancient indigenous language, Mixteco, and a specific dialect of that language, Metlatónoc. Because most of the older adults had never had formal schooling, which in Mexico is in Spanish, they had never learned Spanish. Some of the younger adults had had up to a fifth grade education and could hold a conversation in Spanish but spoke Mixteco at home with their parents and children. The school-age children were learning English at school but were never exposed to Spanish. So on any given Sunday, I could expect there to be 20-30 Mixteco-speaking adults, with varying degrees of Spanish proficiency, a dozen or so children with only Mixteco and fairly high English proficiency, and a handful of people from Chiapas who were Spanish dominant. The result was that finding lay readers for the Spanish service was complicated, and many times there were no Spanish-literates at all, and I'd have to do all the readings myself.

Not only had the Mixtecos been marginalized linguistically in their home state of Guerrero, but they had been pastorally abandoned as well. Most of them had only seen a priest once or twice a year. Their only regular pastoral contact was with lay ministers called *rezanderos*, or pray-ers, who were hired by families to say memorized prayers at the anniversaries of funerals. So although they were baptized Roman Catholics, their religious formation was minimal.

Having come from a rural setting in Mexico, most of my parishioners sought out work in agriculture when they arrived in Montgomery, but this took on a specific tone in Alabama. Although some worked in landscaping, ranching, and farming, the vast majority worked in the chicken processing plants—hard, dangerous, revolting work that risked their lives and health on a daily basis. However, their knowledge of the life cycles of animals and plants was much greater than that of most native Montgomerians.

The challenges of low literacy, low Spanish (or English) proficiency, and recent immigration status taught me about ministry in ways that few people ever experience. I could not depend on written materials, as many people didn't read at all, and those who did might be self-conscious of their abilities to read aloud in public. It meant that I would have to *migrate* into an oral world and minister *orally*, placing most of my ministry "eggs" into the preaching basket. I further realized that since no published formation materials existed that bridged the gap between the dominant U.S. culture and the Mixteco culture, preaching was going to have to do double duty as evangelism and formation.

The African American congregation, however, was much more diverse. An active community of 25 souls contained about 10 who were college educated, with degrees in law, nursing, management, or education, and some were retired military. About half were working class, and a few were disabled. Some were life-long Angli-cans who had immigrated from Jamaica; others were descendants of enslaved people from Alabama's plantations who had grown up in the Baptist tradition. There were very wealthy individuals and some mothers on welfare. There were also 3 white con-

gregants, all of whom had advanced degrees but were diverse in terms of life experiences—a retired Episcopal priest, an educator, and a retired businessman. The life experiences of the African American congregation—from former addicts to former clergy—were more varied than those of the Mexican congregation.

As I’ve described it above, I had done my ethnography—I had observed my congregations for over a decade, absorbing a great deal of information and insight into their lives, and I had a reasonably good idea of what was going to be meaningful in a sermon. The challenge, however, was that the two congregations were so different—but I was preaching from the same texts every week!

The 1996 Nairobi Statement on Worship and Culture,⁶ crafted by the Lutheran World Federation, proposes that there are four ways in which worship, and by inclusion, the sermon and culture, can intersect. If the worship is “transcultural,” the assumption is that there is some substance (texts, sermons, imagery) and form (liturgy, music) in worship that transcends culture, and everyone participates in the worship service in more or less the same way. Another way in which culture and worship intersect is in contextuality—like dynamic equivalence in translation, worship leaders attempt to substitute elements from the source culture for “equivalent” elements in the target culture, for example using praise songs from the target culture rather than traditional English hymns in the case of Anglican worship. Another possibility, which may be interrogated by a post-colonial perspective, would be “counter-cultural” worship, in which worship leaders challenge elements in the target culture that they deem to be contrary to the Gospel, such as the use of images of saints or national flags. The fourth possibility is “cross-cultural,” an approach that seeks to share cultural practices between two distinct local cultures. My Latino congregation “shared” the celebration of the Virgin of Guadalupe with the African American congregation, who in turn hosted a Fourth of July picnic with the Latino congregation.

These four approaches to intercultural worship can be applied to sermon crafting. A transcultural approach, Lisa Lamb says, can be detrimental to both congregations. She says the best preachers are those who “actively celebrate diversity in their sermons and work hard to name the distinctive treasures, heartaches, and even sins, of the cultures in their midst, calling their members to risky repentance and deep unity.”⁷

This meant that my preparation for preaching began on Monday with printing out the texts, in Spanish and English. One might assume that preparation would be the same for both languages, but often the Spanish translation differed somewhat from the English. I couldn’t build a whole sermon on one word or phrase without checking the other version to see if that would work.

As I worked to “read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest” the weekly Scripture passages, I intentionally looked for images and phrases that would ignite the imagination of both groups. I discovered over time that there were three kinds of images that fell into three categories: 1. Images that would work well cross-culturally and

mean basically the same for both groups; 2. Images that would work, but they'd work *differently* for the two groups; 3. Images that would only work with one group, if at all. These were only effective for one group.

Usually, I developed the sermon for the African American congregation first and prepared extensive notes to be used during my homily, rather than a fully scripted sermon. This approach allowed me considerable flexibility to adjust my sermon for the Mexican congregation, as I noticed who was arriving. I could eliminate or substitute images accordingly.

Among the images that *worked* in both congregations were images from nature—the love of growing plants and caring for animals is transcultural. But the contexts are different—the relationship with animals, for example, in a small town in Mexico will be different from that in suburban Montgomery. But images from agriculture and animal husbandry were not very far removed from the life experience of the English-speaking congregation. I used a story about a kitten in a Christmas tree for a sermon on Luke 8:43-48 (Proper 16C), about Jesus teaching in a synagogue and healing a woman bent double. The effect I was aiming for was an over-loaded system that can't handle a small intrusion—as a Christmas tree overloaded with beautiful decorations that couldn't handle the weight of a kitten, so the purity laws with all their accretions could not heal a woman with a flow of blood.

On another occasion, the propers were from Lent 2C, where Jesus longs to gather the people of Jerusalem to his breast like a mother hen sheltering her chicks (Luke 13:31-35). In the news that week was the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and many news outlets were mentioning how the people of Ukraine were attempting to escape with their small pets hidden in their coats. This was an image that had moved both the Mexicans and the English-speakers. On Christmas Eve, I told a combined congregation of a trip I had made with my son to the archaeological site of Monte Albán in southern Mexico. I told of how he and I had climbed the highest pyramid there, and were able to see the beautiful city of Oaxaca below. We returned at night and climbed the same pyramid—but our gaze was shifted to the extraordinary view of the stars from the same position. The stars at Monte Albán, like those on the starry night that Jesus was born, were calling us to change our perspective from the world to the heavens.

Not all images that one can think of as sermon illustrations will work in one context the same way they work in another. The image of the desert, for example, is a metaphor for most North Americans, including my African American congregation, but it was a lived experience for the Mexicans, who had crossed the life-endangering Sonoran desert some months before. It was not an image of beauty and mystery, but a traumatic experience. I had to think carefully about how I talked about exile and law enforcement, as the experiences of all my congregants were fraught on many levels.

Sometimes I used similar images but adjusted the culture context, using what Nairobi refers to as the “contextual” approach. I wanted to talk about the “mystery”

of the Eucharist, and I began by talking about how we use the term in everyday conversation. For the African American congregation, I referred to the American tradition of summer road trips, and the “Mystery Spots,” roadside attractions that one finds all over the U.S. map, usually in small towns, with “amazing” natural phenomena such as crooked houses where gravity “doesn’t work,” or creeks that flow uphill. Instead of Mystery Spots, I mentioned the Mexican town of Real de Catorce, which is widely known for its mysterious phenomena. This was an example of “dynamic equivalence,” similar to the way a translator substitutes a folk saying from one culture for the folk saying of another, giving a culturally appropriate equivalence rather than a word-for-word translation.

There are probably *more* cases in which the image appropriate for one congregation will not work at all for the other. If you’re preaching to a diverse congregation, be aware that the following kinds of images are not going to “translate”: references to commercials, slogans, or lyrics of songs (even hymns!); characters from literature or television (Movies may actually work, as they may be dubbed in many world languages.); references to courtship rituals and family structures; folktales like “Br’er Rabbit” or “The Little Red Hen.” In order for some of these to work, you may have to spend half your sermon *explaining*, and then the sermon becomes about the folktale, not the Gospel.

On Advent 1C, I used the lyrics of a folk song to open the sermon in the African American congregation: “Christmas is coming, the goose is getting fat. Please put a penny in the old man’s hat.” Curiously the Jamaicans were more familiar with that tune than the native-born Americans! But it was clear that the Mexicans were not going to know that song at all—so I completely reframed the opening of the sermon for that congregation.

In the sixth chapter of Acts, the apostles have to solve an intercultural conflict—the Hellenistic widows are being slighted at the meals, in favor of the Hebrew widows. The Twelve delegated the daily feeding to representatives from both ethnic groups so that cultural sensitivity could be considered. In our sermon-crafting, we pray for our congregations, and we open our hearts and minds to the Holy Spirit in the process of exegesis. As we do, let us pray that the Spirit will guide us in choosing culturally appropriate images, stories, and illustrations that speak to the hearts of our diverse congregations, so that the “word of God [can] continue to spread” (Acts 6:7) and God’s transcendent love be made manifest through our cultures.

Notes

¹ Numerous examples of this story can be found online. Here’s one source: <https://starts60.com/media/lifestyle/jokes/daily-joke-businessman-fisherman-advice>.

² By interpreting, we mean the rendering of speech communication, rather than written communication (translating).

³ Leonoro Tubbs Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 139.

⁴ Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2002), 1.

⁵ The 2020 Census shows Montgomery with a 3.79% Hispanic population, with 5301 people from Mexico and 2786 from Guatemala. Since the Census does not inform us of the regions of origins of the immigrants, I'll simply state that those of us who collaborate in Latino ministry agreed that the overwhelming majority of the Mexican population was indigenous peoples from Guerrero, with Chiapas and Veracruz much further behind. My own estimate would be that there were at least 4000 adults born in Guerrero, and probably three times that many children of Mixteco heritage born in the US. <https://datausa.io/profile/geo/montgomery-al/#:~:text=Foreign%2DBorn%20Population&text=As%20of%202020%2C%205.05%25%20of%20Montgomery%2C%20AL%20residents%20,the%20national%20average%20of%2013.5%25>.

⁶ Federation, Worship, and Culture, Lutheran World Federation Study Team on Worship, and Culture, *Nairobi Statement on Worship and Culture: Contemporary Challenges and Opportunities*, Lutheran World Federation, 1996, <https://books.google.com.mx/books?id=KSmmGwAACAAJ>. The document is also available at several sites online.

⁷ Lisa Washington, *Blessed and Beautiful: Churches and the Preaching that Sustains them* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2014), viii.