

Preaching in Concert with Professional Companions

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In initial encounters with fellow preachers, I've learned it can be wise to mask my identity as a preaching *teacher*. Case in point: as faculty in one of my denomination's seminaries, I was attending a Sunday service at the university where it was associated. The preacher had recently made a well-publicized, highly regarded presentation to my denomination's senior clerics, and he delivered what I deemed an outstanding sermon. After the service, I went to express my appreciation. "I'm the homiletics professor here," I began—and got no further. The preacher's face went ashen. The high anxiety in her eyes spoke volumes. I quickly moved to share specific appreciation for her sermon—which was politely received with obvious relief. Yet the apprehension in her eyes never abated. She had been accosted by someone she presumed would be a sermon judge, intent upon rendering a negative verdict! I had intended to engage her as a colleague and companion (not to mention fellow Christian). My ill-considered lead-in had, in two seconds, rendered that connection impossible.

It wasn't hard to "learn my lesson." (I've never committed such a blunder since.) But the lesson beneath the lesson was larger. Preachers often confess, "I don't mind preaching to my congregation; but I'm afraid to preach to colleagues." Why should that be daunting? Standard practice among professionals in many disciplines is to seek the company of colleagues, not simply to trade "shop talk" and tell "war stories," but to share information, observations, insights, and to invite informal peer review—all in the interests of advancing individual and corporate expertise. (Imagine the long-term impact on the effectiveness of physicians who sought to avoid regular conferences and consults. Imagine the impact on their patients!)

Why the often-encountered reticence (or at least ambivalence)—the unconscious or well-masked feeling of competition with other preachers? To some extent this hesitation may derive from unfortunate experiences accumulated in seminary preaching classes, where tentative sermons from fledgling preachers are subjected to dissections akin to scalp incisions conducted in zoology laboratory classes.

Criticism from professors and student peers, even well-intended and gently offered, can sometimes come across as "cutting," particularly since not just time and energy, but heart and soul have been poured into the preparation of sermons shared—then immediately subjected to "evaluation." (I once visited a seminary where a required "senior sermon" became the occasion of what the preacher could only experience as ritual hazing. After sermon presentation in the seminary chapel before the full seminary faculty, everyone adjourned to a conference room where the preacher

was required to listen without comment, as one by one, faculty members informed the student preacher “what was wrong” with the sermon!)

I suspect, however, that the sense of mutual defensiveness preachers encounter arises from a deeper source. To stand before God and God’s people—to speak on behalf of the Former to the latter—if there is *not* some sense of inadequacy and vulnerability, there *should* be. “Have I gotten it ‘right’ about what God has said and is saying to God’s people?” No amount of preparation can assure an unequivocal answer “yes!” “Have I found the right way to *share* that word? Will what I have heard be what my *listeners* hear? If, for whatever reason, they don’t like what they hear, will they slay, or at least discount, the messenger?”

So one might think preachers would seek one another out. Some do. They come together in study groups to share questions and insights about upcoming Biblical texts. They exchange sermons previously preached (perhaps rejoicing with colleagues who rejoice and weeping with colleagues who weep). Preachers attend topic-focused continuing education sessions. They might occasionally send out SOS signals to deeply-trusted colleagues: “This isn’t working; got any good ideas?”

Still, there is an irreducibly solitary dimension to the act and ministry of preaching that can be isolating and insulating, especially over the long haul. Building professional colleague relationships takes time that parish ministers find *hard* to find. Feeling never able “to do enough” in preparation, or never being sure if or how one’s sermons are being heard, received, or responded to—these factors can make it less and less likely that preachers will avail themselves of what they need more and more—the ears and voices of discerning colleagues, those who “know what it’s like” to enter a pulpit.

Perhaps the critical case arises when preachers are working at the same time on the same Biblical texts. The creative process of one preacher can “get in the way” of another. Preachers may not wish, or feel it right, to use material or approaches their colleagues are employing. Comparisons might be mutually helpful, but even named and disavowed, sermon competition is difficult to keep at bay. Competition can insinuate itself into sermon comparison in several ways:

- 1) My sermon is not as good as my colleague’s! I should have done that; but, not having the time or skill, I can’t.
- 2) My sermon is better than my colleague’s. Perhaps I’m not a bad preacher!
- 3) My colleague and I arrived at pretty much the same place—maybe that’s good (I’m not as inadequate as I think!); but maybe not so good—my approach wasn’t as original as I thought!)
- 4) I like what both of us are doing, though each sermon is different. Maybe I can work some of my colleague’s sermon into mine.
- 5) The approach of my colleague is different from mine; perhaps I can go that route when next I preach on these texts.

The patterning effect in the first two comparisons further isolates preachers from each other and insulates them from the vital Spirit-ed Conversation that preaching can and needs to be. Response Three brings into bold relief the “approach-avoidance/promise-peril” tension that preachers may experience in sermon interchanges. This tension can be “retreated from” into further isolation and insulation. It can also, however, be “moved through” to a place where comparison is freed from the specter of competition. The best way to achieve “breakthrough” is closer attention to the perceived similarities of approach and expression: how does each preacher *particularly* nuance *both*? Where, amid similarities, are *differences*—differences *not* accurately or helpfully described as “better” or “worse”?

Responses Four and Five are more promising. There may be clarifying, illuminating, enriching alterations one preacher can make in an unfinished sermon draft that are fostered by reviewing the sermon-in-process of another preacher. Even if preachers keep their sermon drafts essentially intact, retaining the sermons of colleagues on given texts in a folder with one’s similarly based sermons can nurture the kind of collegiality preachers need, even if the “payoff” regarding sermons on these texts isn’t immediate.

There is another possibility for fruitful sermon comparison—one offered me by a preaching colleague with whom I have, for several years, traded insights, strategies, sermon drafts, and texts. We were both preaching on the same texts (the temptation of Adam and Eve in Genesis, and the temptation of Jesus in Matthew). She was preaching as school chaplain to early adolescent boys; I was preaching in my home parish where I serve as pastoral volunteer.

Her approach to these texts was exploring how temptations frequently involve a transgressing of boundaries perceived (and presented by the Tempter) as unduly restrictive—when those boundaries are actually life-preserving and freedom-fostering. My approach (in a congregation well-educated but Biblically ill-informed) was describing the nature of evil metaphorically—a cancerous growth, a counterfeit coin, a conjuring trick, the last of which the devil deftly employs. Clearly, these two approaches were complementary but incompatible in either single sermon.

Having read my draft as she was preparing hers, in an email, my colleague wrote: “I will take these ideas (of yours) not into my own text, but into how I perform my sermon.” She was more than acknowledging the value in my approach. She was affirming two implications of our interactions:

- 1) That in her preaching, I could stand with her (and she with me in mine) as Aaron and Hur stood with Moses (in the Old Testament story, when Aaron and Hur hold aloft Moses’s arms as he intercedes for the people). In colloquial terms, my colleague was saying that in our own preaching we could “have each other’s back.” This was more than saying simply “we’ll pray for each other as we preach.” Rather: “In specific ways, in our respective settings, with our shared Scripture texts, we will each stand to preach with the other.”

2) That in her preaching, my approach to the Scripture texts would serve as “background music”—not directly audible to the ears of her listeners, but in her own ears as she preached. And this would make a difference in her sermon delivery as an act of worship and proclamation.

What difference, exactly, did that make for her and for me as I continued to prepare my sermon? That is impossible to quantify, of course. I know, however, that led by her insight, as I continued my preaching preparation, I had a palpable sense that the demonic trickster was, with Adam, Eve, and Jesus, appealing to their understandable desire to “spread their wings” into infinite space—a lure that the Tempter was employing to disorient them. With regard to the temptations of Jesus, I was able (remembering my own “boundary testings” at various life stages) to identify with Jesus as a “Beloved Son” who nevertheless had to discern for himself what that identity consisted in, what its freedom-fostering limits entailed. To name all this in my sermon would have been distracting, but these insights, derived from my colleague’s sermon, were “there” in the act of my preaching in ways that made a difference, subtle but substantial.

My colleague’s sermon was part of a more complex, multidimensional worship experience. It involved, in her school chapel service, incorporating into its delivery the use of props and student actors who played out brief dramatic scenarios as she spoke. In checking back in on “how it went,” my colleague noted that she had held in her mind and imagination the interpretive angle on the text that I had taken. She allowed that it had illuminated the scenes from each text while she directed and staged them. She wrote: “It enriched those decisions and at no point felt as if it were in competition with the approach I’d chosen and that you had affirmed as valid.”

She proceeded to list examples in which some of her specific decisions were “enriched,” resulting in the actors, students, and school faculty colleagues listening intently. She described post-preaching responses and interactions from listeners indicating that as her sermon *ended*, it was, in their engaged imaginations, just getting *started*. Summarizing her experience in preparation and delivery, she concluded:

Because I had heard your interpretation of this text before performing my own, I knew exactly how I wanted to deliver my narration and interpretation and how I wanted the boys to act the scenes.

In short, your hearing my sermon gave me confidence to direct and perform it with clarity and leadership, and brought theological depth and understanding to the way I directed and performed sections of text that supported my own focus “out of bounds vs. respecting bounds.” Because I had read your sermon, I approached the texts with more curiosity and imagination than I otherwise would have.¹

The gift for me, in this exchange between trusted colleagues, extends beyond how our sermon-shaping analogously informed each other’s. I have worked with (literally) “generations” of preaching students, always advocating that they listen close-

ly to each other (evaluation allowed only after attentive, extensive, communal “thick description”). I regularly encourage student preachers to work as colleagues rather than as competitors for a grade. I have shared sermons with preaching peers, inviting and offering observations, reflections, and suggestions (not “Change X to Y,” but “What would happen *if* . . .”). What I had never considered was that an orchestration of aural/oral theological artistry by one preaching composer could resonate helpfully “in tuneful accord” with that of another preaching composer. It is, perhaps, possible for solo preachers to survive. It is very difficult for solo preachers to thrive. But why should preachers go it alone, when the alternative can, for them and for God’s people, be so much more fruitful and so much more enjoyable?

Note

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