

Kleptomania Homiletica

Matthew 5:42

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Jesus said it, I believe it, that settles it. That's why this poor preacher gets by only with a little help from my generous friends.

A few years ago I got a call from a reporter in the Northeast. "What is your position on preachers plagiarizing the work of other preachers?" she asked.

"Oh, I guess Craig Barnes has been whining about my lifting some of his material," I said, with contempt.

"No. This week a prominent pastor in the city will be removed from his pulpit because he's been caught downloading some of your sermons from Duke Chapel. Repreaching. Word for word. The laity discovered it. In fact, a layperson has been secretly handing out copies of your sermons to other laity on the last two Sundays. They sit there in the service and follow along. Caught him red handed. Don't you think the preacher should have at least changed the titles?" she asked.

Sometimes I despise laity.

Stephen Colbert employs something like thirty writers to help him come up with a nightly ten-minute monologue on Trump. It's nuts to think that I, much less any preacher who went to a seminary not as good as mine, can come up with a weekly sermon on Jesus, solo. An accountant can be solitary, keeping her eyes on her own work, refusing to ask for help, and do double entry bookkeeping just fine. But no preacher can afford to work alone.

If you are going to define and then condemn sermonic plagiarism, then you must come up with a definition of stealing that's so broad and charitable as to be meaningless. Source critics tell us that Luke and Matthew routinely ripped off Mark. The Bible is better for it. What if Matthew had not said to Mark, "Let me see your gospel. I think I can work this up into something mighty fine," or Mark had refused Matthew with, "Hey, I came up with this stuff on my own. It's my intellectual property"?

I define "heresy" as the arrogant attempt to be theologically original, breaking free of the resources of the *communio sanctorum*, refusing dependency on the "great company of preachers" (Psalm 68:11), going rogue.

"Loved your sermon!" a woman gushed as she emerged from Duke Chapel after service one Sunday. "Loved it when Tom Long preached it here in April, 1991. Shouldn't you at least have transposed some of the details?"

Laity!

For years I've written for *Pulpit Resource*, filling it with material to help pastors get going on next Sunday's sermon.

"Aren't you worried that some unscrupulous pastors may simply preach your sermons verbatim from *Pulpit Resource*?" critics ask.

I wish. As long as they do it with a Southern accent. Better my sermons than Adam Hamilton's, I say.

Jean Valjean stole bread only to feed his starving children. Me too. Kleptomania, the inability to refrain from stealing, "is usually done for reasons other than personal

use or financial gain,” says the DSM. Stealing isn’t really stealing if it’s done unselfishly for the good of my neighbor. I’ve never taken anything from any preacher that was not done in service to my listeners. My sermon borrowing is an indication of how much I love my people.

Sure, Ephesians says, “Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands.” Cite that passage to rebuke me and I will insist that you quote the rest of the verse: “So that he may have something to share with anyone in need” (Ephesians 4:28). I took Tom Long’s story of a group of men standing under an oak tree at his home church in Georgia, moved all of them to a larger church and a dogwood in South Carolina, and nobody was the worse for it. I doubt Tom preached that story to more than a couple of hundred; I’ve shared it with two thousand Baptists in Canada, and they ate it up. I’m sure Tom would be flattered that his work did good all the way up in Canada. It’s not stealing if you can improve on what you took.

As I’ve always said, “Don’t just borrow sermon material, steal it.” Picky you respond, “Hey, Picasso said that, not you. To quote more accurately, the great artist actually said this to his fellow artists, ‘Good artists copy; great artists steal.’” Well, it turns out that Picasso stole that from T. S. Eliot who said, “Good poets borrow, great poets steal, . . . Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better . . .” Take that, all you fastidious OCD’s who are always demanding attribution.

You say, “Hey, that’s a story from David Buttrick.” I’ll say, “I have no idea how that got in my bag.”

Stanley Hauerwas said, “If you think you’ve had an original thought, it means that you forgot where you read it.” Or maybe Oscar Wilde said that. Benjamin Franklin? Who cares? Hey, how do you know that *I* didn’t say it?

Walter Brueggemann had a great story about a woman in a wheelchair and his meaningful conversation with her. All I did was take Walt’s seat in that hospital room, have her retell the story to me, repackage her touching vignette, retell it with a Southern accent, connect it with a text from Genesis rather than the Psalms, and work it up into a more moving illustration than Walt’s. And who was the worse for it? Just trying to help Walt obey Matthew 5:42.

When possible, if you are going to snatch something from a fellow preacher, it’s usually good to ask in advance, but not always. I apologized for preaching an illustration of Jana Childers, and she generously said, “I don’t care. I don’t need it anymore.” Then Jana spoiled it by saying, “I don’t even believe that any more. It’s a sappy story anyway. Take it; it’s yours.”

“Do you mind if I borrow that little thing about the addict and the priest for my sermon on Good Friday?” I asked Nadia Bolz-Weber, “At my age I’m having increased difficulty kicking butt in the pulpit, and you are so good at it.”

“Sure, older adult,” Nadia said, “happy to have your sermons benefit from my workouts at Crossfit.”

Wait. You say that my story last Sunday about the little boy needing a dollar wasn’t something that could have happened to me because I’ve never even been to Buffalo? Oh well. Next time I use that story I’ll give proper attribution: “Here’s what the Lord would have done in Buffalo on a snowy Sunday morning if Betty Achtemier had taken me with her to Buffalo . . .”

Jim Wallis and Tony Campolo met with Bill Clinton years ago to help him repent. The only reason that I wasn't there was I wasn't asked. I'm sure it was an oversight. Desperate for a good contrition story for a Maundy Thursday sermon, I thought it only right for me to say what I would have said if Bill had been smart enough to invite me. "So like I said to Bill, Bill old buddy, you can't" They loved it.

Footnotes, impossible in sermons and attribution ("As I read in a recent book by the Right Reverend Bishop N. T. Wright last week...."), can come across as pompous and presumptuous. Though occasionally I will give credit by saying to the congregation, "All you bean counters, don't bother to Google this story to find its true origin. It's from an April 1990 sermon by Fred Craddock. I recount Fred's story today, as if it were my own, as my humble homage to a great preacher."

Some years ago somebody published a collection of women's sermons. After a long preface that argued forcefully that women preach in a way that is quite special, very perceptive, even unavailable to men, the book's first sermon was one that a woman on the West Coast had purloined from me! A sermon on John 3 that I had preached a few years before at Duke Chapel. Should I be flattered or incensed? When I complained to Stanley Hauerwas, he replied, "By God you *do* preach like a woman! Besides, you've got too long an incriminating paper trail to be indignant that a fellow preacher snatched from you."

I know it's good to take sermon illustrations from your own life, but let's face it, my life hasn't been that interesting. People make way too much out of creativity and personal insight. I'm always grateful when, in the middle of my sermon preparation on a tough text, I stumble across a fellow preacher who can help me with the heavy lifting. If a preacher is vain enough to put stuff out on the web or to publish it, it's fair game. I paid \$19.95 for a book of your sermons. Now they're mine.

So go ahead all you possessive, miserly preachers, lock it down, smack a © on it; you won't keep out this professional purloiner from poaching your preachments (Matthew 24:43). In the dead of night some Saturday, I'll creep in with a ski mask, crowbar, and flashlight and take your precious metaphor and make it my own. The ski mask and flashlight I stole from a speech by poet Billy Collins.