

Protagonist Corner

Wrestlings, Relevance, and Janet Jackson: The Complexity of Contextualized Preaching

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We all know vaguely that our preaching should be contextualized. The sermonic event should always be relevant to and realized within the current context in which we find ourselves as proclaimers of the Good News. But, knowing *how* to do this is a little more complicated.

Clement Welsh has informed us that our days of dropping a “message” into a ready-made pre-packaged box are over.¹ There is no universal fit for sermons anymore—as if there ever was. Not all congregations are the same. Not all churchgoers are the same. Our preaching needs to respond to the particularities of the people to which we proclaim. But *how far* should we take this?

J. Randall Nichols writes that good contextualized preaching “deliberately sets out to touch and involve people’s personal concerns”² and Craig A. Satterlee proposes the best way to identify these concerns is through the group exercise of “holy and active listening.”³ Yet between the potlucks, the visits, the drop-ins, and the bulletins left on your desk with highlighted typos from last Sunday, do you really have time to sit down weekly with a group of your parishioners listening openly and attentively together with the expectation that God will speak in and through the conversation? Does the context week to week change that much? Could God perhaps speak more efficiently if we scheduled it for only once a month? What about once a quarter?

James Wallace likens the word proclaimed to a dinner served: “Preaching is a call to feed the people of God.”⁴ Should we take into account personal preferences when presenting the menu? What about their theological food allergies? What about those enjoying the gluten-free spiritual path? Leonora Tubbs Tisdale proposes that each sermon should serve as an example of “local theology and folk art.”⁵ But what if the local theology has turned sour? What if your artistic gifts do not lie in the local medium of choice. Would it still be possible to present a word from God in that place?

Gennifer Brooks tells the story of utilizing the perfect illustration in an imperfect way. Brooks used some lyrics from a then popular Janet Jackson song to emphasize one of the main points of her sermon, but she did it within an aged white upper-middle-class congregation who totally missed the reference and the point. She never told us what song it was (Secretly I hope it was either *Nasty* or *Rhythm Nation*.), but she did tell us the lesson she learned from it: “Contextualizing the sermon requires knowing the social, cultural, theological, and doctrinal norms as well as the experiences of the community past and present.”⁶ Well, what if you do not have all that information? What if you are still in the process of gathering that information? What about guest preachers? What about conference preaching? What about taking the pulpit for the first-time on your first-Sunday in the first-service? Can God speak through them anyway? Is it possible that God spoke through those Janet Jackson lyrics regardless? Knowing *how* to contextualize and *how far* to go with it is a challenge.

I recently moved to Aiken, South Carolina. I am brand new to this state. I am relatively new to this region. I was born in Seattle, raised in Kansas City, and graduated from Oklahoma State University, so I am what you would call “an import to the South.” Yet, like a prophet sent to a foreign territory, like a Yankee waking up in Mets stadium, I have begun my ministry at First Presbyterian Church in historic downtown Aiken.

The church was about what I imagined—quirky and lovable with a warmth and spiritual maturity that pastors love to see. The church was about what I imagined, but Aiken was not. Soon after I arrived, I was handed an essay written by Pat Conroy in 1973 about Aiken entitled “Horses Don’t Eat Moonpies.” While the essay can come across as cavalier and dated, I have found it to be an illuminating analysis of my new context.

I learned Aiken was officially founded in 1835, but it was in the 1870s that Aiken became the winter playground for some of the wealthiest families in the world such as the Vanderbilts, the Whitneys, the Posts, and the Bostwicks. These families would travel down to Aiken with their horses for the winter to escape the harsh cold of the northeast. As Conroy put it, “When the winter colony came to Aiken it was not only a discovery, it was an ordination. They did not simply find Aiken; they invented it.”⁷⁷ These families put Aiken on the map but also attempted to keep it off the radar. They wanted it to be their little secret; however, word got out. World renowned horse trainers, steeplechase jockeys, and polo players soon came in swarms to Aiken, as did their lifestyle. Fred Astaire and Bing Crosby regularly attended Aiken galas. President FDR would often come to Aiken in order to meet up with his mistress Lucy Page Mercer Rutherford. F. Scott Fitzgerald found inspiration for his novel *The Great Gatsby* in the person of Tommy Hitchcock Jr., an Aiken icon. Four first-class passengers who went down on the Titanic, including John Jacob Aster IV, had homes in Aiken. The 45.52 carat Hope Diamond was at one point owned by Evalyn Walsh McLean who made a special collar for her dog to strut the streets of Aiken while wearing one of the most famous jewels in the world.

Not only has Aiken had some well-off snowbirds and famous visitors, but also it later earned the reputation of having the most PhDs per capita in the US. Back in the 1950s, the Atomic Energy Commission relocated a nearby town in order to set up the Savannah River Site for atomic research. They did this just south of the City of Aiken, but within the County of Aiken. So literally thousands of engineers, scientists, and certified geniuses moved into Aiken. This mass migration of minds more than tripled the size of the city in less than 18 months. This influx brought with it new dynamics, new possibilities, and new government sponsored money. As Conroy wrote, “Southern boys got rich because some smartass split the atom.”⁷⁸

Through his comical, yet insightful essay, Conroy has truly helped me parse some of the idiosyncratic dynamics of Aiken. In addition to the wealthy socialites and the multiplying PhDs, Conroy goes on to describe other factions of the population: old Aikenites whose prominence is proven generationally, the Valley people who live on the outskirts of more than just the town, and the people of color who seem to only ever be identified as such. Within all these distinct cliques, ingroups, and outgroups that call this place home, Aiken seems to be a random assortment that remains sorted. It is like a melting pot before everything melts. On just one juxtaposing trip home, I passed an 80-room mansion, a 740 square-foot homeless shelter, and a 9-foot bronze

nuclear atom statue just before I saw 90s rapper turned movie star Mark Wahlberg walking into a restaurant! Aiken is an eclectic mix of people that, for some reason, do not seem to be mixing together at all. Perhaps Conroy put it best when he wrote, "Aiken is a town of categories. The categories have walls, boundaries, dimensions, and strict, implacable definitions. It is a long climb indeed, out of an Aiken category. People, like horses, find themselves grouped, branded, herded into preordained corrals, and handled according to their bloodlines. A rigorous chain of being exists, although nothing is written down; there is no tablet of laws. But there is."⁹ I have spent a lot of time with this quote. I have asked my congregation about it, I have read it aloud to others, I have analyzed it with those who showed any interest, I included it in my doctoral thesis, and it has completely captivated me in my sermon preparations.

You see, for me, contextualization has always had a weakness. We need to be able to admit that there is some false stabilization being imposed when we use the term "context" in relation to our preaching. Contextualized preaching is often a tragic attempt to make everything and everyone uniform in order to address the one variable we have selected for that week. In many ways, the utilization of contextualization can unwittingly serve to maintain an unhealthy taxonomic social order. It can reinforce rigidity. It can deny diversity. There may be trends and patterns that we note around us, but to say that we will ever fully understand our context is to deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us! Every week I preach to people with access to unimaginable wealth and I preach to the ones who work in their stables. I preach to people who are double my IQ and those who flunked out of high school. I preach to all different ages, different shades, and different backgrounds coming from different experiences over their different weeks and different lifetimes. I never preach to the same congregation even if it is the same people who always show up. So for me to smugly simplify the act of my contextualized preaching or to assert mastery and offer a fail-proof formula would be inauthentic and absurd.

But, nevertheless, in sermon preparations I still find myself trying, and Conroy has forever shaped my contextualization of Aiken. I wonder in which preordained corral people have been placed and how long they have been there. I search for examples of individuals who have either attempted or think they have made a long climb out. I identify with a multitude of people for no other reason than the shared common experience of being grouped, branded, and herded. I find myself drawn towards passages in which walls are brought down, strict principles fall short, and bloodlines get blended. For better or worse, this over generalization made in 1973 has become a lens through which I view my community and a soapbox from which I stand. So, I preach accordingly.

Unlike Gennifer Brooks, I now actively try to include Janet Jackson lyrics in my sermons. I do this not because I think my congregation has heard those lyrics before, but precisely because I know most of them have not. It is an attempt to get people to think beyond their categories of comfort to recognize that universal truth can exist beyond those previously implacable definitions they have experienced. It is part of an effort to help them test the permeability of their boundaries. I know that this does not touch all of their individual concerns, but it touches mine. I have not engaged in any sort of organized active listening sessions to determine how well I am doing on this front, but I do try to pay attention in those holy moments we share together. In this way of thinking, I am busy feeding the people of God at Aiken's First Presbyterian

Church, but I have concerns from time to time that I am force-feeding them the meal that I know how to prepare rather than the feast that they deserve. Some Sundays I worry that my sermon was just another generic message dropped into a ready-made, pre-packaged box or that it was improperly tailored for another occasion altogether. How local can a theology really be if it is done by a newcomer and an import? Is it even possible to preach through their folk art of thoroughbreds and nuclear fission? Charles H. Cosgrove and W. Dow Edgerton propose that contextual preaching takes place when we as preachers make the shift from “preaching as interpretation of a text toward the text as an interpretation of life.”¹⁰ They argue that the church needs to hear less from the perspective of an omniscient scholar and more from particular preachers in particular times and places for particular reasons. So, from time to time I do have to remind myself that I am not preaching for a grade anymore, but instead for the transformation of a people. More specifically, most weeks I am preaching for the transformation of God’s people at First Presbyterian Church of Aiken, South Carolina!

So, I will continue to try to glean more about this city, my context, and God’s people in this place. I will continue to wrestle with Conroy, complexity, and contextualization. Perhaps what I am doing could already be called contextualized preaching. Perhaps not. Perhaps I need your prayers for my preaching to be both relevant and realized within the current context in which I find myself as a proclaimer of the Good News. Prayers for you all as well!

Notes

- 1 Clement Welsh, *Preaching in a New Key: Studies in the Psychology of Thinking and Listening* (Philadelphia, PA: Pilgrim Press, 1974), 15-16.
- 2 J. Randall Nichols, *The Restoring Word: Preaching as Pastoral Communications* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1987), 16.
- 3 Craig A. Satterlee, *When God Speaks through You: How Faith Convictions Shape Preaching and Mission* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2008), xv.
- 4 James A. Wallace, *Preaching to the Hungers of the Heart: The Homily on the Feasts and within the Rites* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2002), 27.
- 5 Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art* (Minneapolis, MC: Fortress Press, 1997).
- 6 Gennifer Benjamin Brooks, *Good News Preaching: Offering The Gospel in Every Sermon* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2009), 59.
- 7 Pat Conroy, edited by Franklin Ashley, “Horses Don’t Eat Moonpies” in *Faces of South Carolina Essays on South Carolina in Transition* (New York City, NY: Doubleday, 1976), 47.
- 8 Ibid., 51.
- 9 Ibid., 47.
- 10 Charles H. Cosgrove & W. Dow Edgerton, *In Other Words: Incarnational Translation for Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2007), 16.