

Light! Energy! Illumination!

Introducing a New Method of Preaching

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A few years ago, I had an extensive three-day academic job interview for a position as a Hebrew Bible professor; among other presentations, I was to offer a class on preaching. The interview process prodded me to think deeply about how I approach writing sermons. Coming from a family of preachers (as the wife/daughter/sister of ministers and as an ordained minister myself), I have heard thousands of sermons over the years. I find the best sermons are equally engaging, educational, relevant, and inspiring, so I developed a method that reflects these priorities.

Now as a seminary professor, I have taught this sermon form to my students, who have nicknamed it “the Parker Method.” This four-step approach is highly focused on the listeners in hopes of promoting active and engaged lives of faith. In this article, I outline the four steps of this method, then apply and analyze this approach using a sermon that I recently preached. My hope is that you may find this sermon form as helpful as I do.

Four Steps

1) My preaching method begins with a **Hook**. First, capture your hearers’ attention by giving them an immediate reason to stay tuned. Preaching is an anachronistic art. As preachers, we are like Victrolas in the age of Spotify. People in the 21st century are used to being entertained in ways that they were not centuries ago when preaching *was* entertainment. This expectation of gratification and amusement creates a homiletical challenge. The Hook grabs the hearer’s ear. Possible hooks include a surprising statement, a captivating story, a short and funny joke, a personal (but appropriate) confession, or naming an issue in the culture that is already on people’s minds. Unless your congregants are motivated to listen at the outset of your sermon when their attention is fresh, they may soon be thinking about what they would like to order for brunch.

2) Once you have engaged the listener with the Hook, delve into **Exegesis**. Most preachers have had the privilege of seminary or other focused, academic scriptural study, which their parishioners have not. Share your knowledge. People in our churches are hungry to learn about the Bible. Do your homework and teach them something new. Be sure that they leave worship understanding at least one thing about the Bible that they did not know prior to the sermon. Your talk from the pulpit (physical or virtual) may be a brilliant lecture or a scintillating speech, but it is only a sermon if rooted in the Bible. Increase Scriptural understanding. Your listeners will be grateful.

3) Having captured your hearers’ attention and then educated them about your biblical text, make this knowledge relevant. Your **Application** brings the Bible to your listener. What does this text have to do with me and you? What difference can it make in our day-to-day lives? What is happening in our lives and community, or the culture, society, and wider world, that connects to this text? Guide your hearers to discover the passage not only as a text from an ancient world but as a living Word.

4) The fourth and final segment of this method is the **Takeaway**. Push your hearers in their faith. Give the congregants one assignment. Articulate a way to live differently next week from last week, based on the sermon. Provide a specific suggestion that is doable. Inspire them—and show them how—to grow as people of faith.

As you may have deduced from the bold type above, the “Parker Method” (**H**ook, **E**xegesis, **A**pplication, **T**akeaway) can be remembered with an acronym. Create **H.E.A.T.** Let your sermon shed light on God’s word, illumine your congregants’ understanding of the Bible, and energize them for the work of living their spiritual convictions. Spark warmth in your family of faith.

Sample Sermon Illustration

I would now like to demonstrate this form with a sermon I recently preached at The General Theological Seminary of the Episcopal Church in New York City, where I teach. This sermon was preached for the Proper 22 Thursday Eucharist service (the eighteenth week after Pentecost); my text was Luke 11:5-13 (NRSV) reprinted below. I will go through the sermon and point out the use of the method in its four segments.

Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, “Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.” And he answers from within, “Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.” I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.

So I say to you, “Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”

Sermon Title: “Cosmic Vending Machine”

1) **Hook:**

I have a friend in the Mafia.

You heard me right. And there is no catch. I do not mean “friend” like a character from a tv show or movie with whom I feel a special kinship. I am not referring to the “Mafia” as some acronym you have never heard of like, “*My Association of Friends in Absentia*.” No. I mean a man from Queens whose family was the model for the movie *Goodfellas*. Let me explain.

Last year I got an email out of the blue from a man trying to contact any professor in religious studies. He was calling seminaries randomly, and someone gave him my email. Now probably most people who got an email from a stranger would have Googled him. They would have seen the instant Mafia connection (which, I later

discovered, pops up right away), then decided to stay away from him. Curiously, I did not look him up online. Instead, I emailed back to this stranger, trying to be generous of spirit. This man then told me that he had a video that he had taken while fishing, of Jesus walking on the water, and would I like to see it? His priest told him he needed some religious authority to verify it. He did not want to send his precious video over the internet. I suggested that we meet for coffee at Le Grainne Café, nearby on the corner of 9th Avenue and 21st Street.

When I told my husband, Bill, about my plans to have coffee with this unknown man (whom I still had not Googled), Bill thought it would be a smart idea to join us. So one sunny morning, Bill and I met this fisherman, Peter. Over coffee and café au lait, Peter showed us his video. He mentioned living in Howard Beach and working in construction. He spoke about “the company” and referred to large sums of money. He looked like he could be in the Mafia—right out of central casting. At one point, Bill asked him point blank, “Is your family connected to the Mob?” Peter did not skip a beat. “Oh yes,” he said (rather blithely, it seemed to me), “the movie *Goodfellas* was based on my family. Martin Scorsese is now a family friend. They’re not bad people, it’s just the family business.”

I decided to write a letter for Peter explaining the various ways God speaks through visions in the Bible, supporting his spiritual encounter. He was grateful for my help and said that he wanted to do something for me. Right away I asked Peter for prayer. More specifically, I asked if he would pray that my son Graham would get a job. This was just before the pandemic began, and my son was severely underemployed.

Peter prayed for Graham. I prayed for Graham. This seminary community prayed for Graham because I frequently said his name during the prayers of intercession. Graham has come to this worship service other times when I have preached, but he is not here now, and do you know why? He is at work. Even in this pandemic, my son got a job. It feels like a miracle.

Hook Commentary: In my seminary community, few people have Mafia associations (that I am aware of, anyway). This opening statement gets their attention. The Hook above is a little long, but there is some humor and a happy ending woven in. It also provides a concrete connection with the congregation because students and faculty on campus know Graham and have prayed for him. I had asked both Peter and Graham’s permission to share this story.

2) *Exegesis:*

I tell you this story because it offers one clear and recent example in my life of the power of prayer. Luke 11, where our passage comes from today, starts with the Lord’s Prayer before picking up with the parable about prayer. This parable describing a persistent nighttime seeker only appears in Luke and reflects this Gospel writer’s commitment to prayer. Jesus prays far more in Luke than he does in any of the other Gospels.

So what is Luke trying to teach us about prayer in these verses? Verses five to eight do not pose tough interpretational challenges. Someone comes to a friend’s house because a visitor has arrived and he has nothing to offer him to eat. Within the honor-shame culture of Jesus’ world, the consequences from not showing hospitality were a real threat to one’s own well-being. But the house is locked, the children are asleep, and the person inside cannot be bothered. Yet the one who is outside does not

give up and eventually gets what he came for. Positioned before and after verses on prayer, the message is clear: keep praying for what you need. Persist.

It is the next part of the passage that really challenges me. “⁹So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. ¹⁰For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.” Really? We get everything we ask for through persistent prayer?

And then Jesus adds an odd analogy about children asking for fish, and would the parent give them a snake or asking for an egg, and would the parent give them a scorpion. I looked at the Greek here to see if there were any translation issues to help clarify this strange passage but sadly came up empty. However, I did learn the Greek word for “scorpion”: σκορπίον (“scorpion”).

And then, if our understanding is not muddled enough, Jesus calls his disciples, those to whom he just taught the Lord’s prayer, evil! What is going on here?

Exegesis commentary: This section offers a few pieces of biblical information that most people did not know at the outset of the sermon: 1) this passage comes right after The Lord’s Prayer so is in a wider prayerful context; 2) Jesus prays more in Luke than the other Gospels; 3) Jesus comes from an honor-shame culture where stakes for hospitality are high; 4) scorpion is a Greek/English cognate. This section also sets up the application to our lives: how come so many prayers feel unanswered?

3) *Application:*

Why does Jesus assert “ask and it will be given” in the context of speaking about prayer? All we need to do is pray? It seems like Jesus sets up God as a cosmic vending machine.

I have two friends, one man and one woman, who would love to be married but are not. For decades, they have been praying to God for a partner, but both are still single. So what happened?

We all could come up with lots of examples of unanswered prayer, some very dire. George Floyd needed to breathe. People with Covid need health. Billions of people around the world need enough food, clean water, breathable air. To say that they did not pray enough or ask God in the right way is an awful example of blaming the victim. Jesus does not insist that we pray all day every day to get what we need. He just says ask, search, knock, and it will be given, found, and opened. But is it?

I do not think that Jesus viewed God as a cosmic vending machine. Jesus certainly asked for things that he did not get, even in Luke’s Gospel. Jesus knows spiritual disappointment (for example, Luke 22:45). Knowing the pain that awaits on the journey to the cross, Jesus asks God that he might be spared (Luke 22:42). Jesus does not always get what he wanted from God—then why does he tell us to expect that we will?

For me, the key to make sense of this passage comes in the very last verse: “¹³If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”

You and I do not think of ourselves as evil, but how can we escape it? We would rather point to the Mafia as an obvious example of evil—but how exempt are we? We live in and contribute to a racist, sexist, classist, society through our actions and our silent complicity. What we buy and the way we live perpetuate oppression. I can

easily see why sometimes Jesus might call those listening, and therefore us, evil.

Application Commentary:

The application above joins the hearer to the text through cognitive dissonance. Jesus' words suggest one thing (pray and your prayers will be answered), but we know otherwise. Examples of unanswered prayer abound). This section also names evils in society and our own role in perpetuating these evils. The application section will vary significantly according to the community receiving the sermon. The above statements about participating in a racist, classist, sexist society are apt for those receiving this sermon (myself included).

4) Takeaway:

Jesus' response to evil in this passage is two-fold. First, be persistent in prayer no matter what the circumstances of your life or how inconvenient prayer may be. Commit to praying with your whole heart, and persist. Right now, renew your commitment to more constant prayer. Do not expect all your prayers to be instantly answered as you want them to be—but be aware of how God may be working in your life.

Second, recognize what Jesus promises in this text. He does not say you will receive exactly what you want. He does not say you will find your heart's perfect desires. He does not say knock and all your problems will disappear or the door will be opened for all your dreams to come true.

Instead, Jesus promises the Holy Spirit. When we pray, the Holy Spirit comes to us. This Spirit rescues us from wallowing in bitterness, disappointment, sorrow, or self-pity. The Holy Spirit guides us, keeps us, and comforts us. The Spirit is what we receive when we ask and open our hearts. And that is its own miracle.

God knows, Jesus knows, and we do too—life is messy and hard. You show me someone with a perfect life, and I will show you someone whom you do not know very well. No one gets everything they want; we are still on this side of heaven. And our job while we are here is to go through life with grace and generosity of Spirit so there is room for the Holy Spirit to move in us and through us.

So pray fervently. Believe that the Holy Spirit is working through you and your prayers. Be gracious of spirit, toward others and yourself. Be generous in your praying. We will not get everything we ask for, but the opening of possibilities and avenues of hope and strength will come through persistent prayer.

Every day—as believers in the Gospel of radical love—let us be inspired and sustained by prayer so that the Holy Spirit may flow through us.

In Christ's name, may it be so.

Amen.

Takeaway Commentary:

The Takeaway here has a few components, highlighting trust, grace, and prayer. A concrete task is put before the listener: pray more. The hearers are invited to recommit and revitalize their prayer lives, trusting that the Holy Spirit will work through their prayers. This concrete task strengthens the listener's life as a person of faith.

Conclusion

Preaching combines scriptural study and practiced skill in an act of courage, vulnerability, passion, and faith. Crafting a sermon can be overwhelming, which is why I

find breaking the process into four simple steps so helpful. The hearers easily connect to the sermon because it reaches out to them with the opening hook and exegetical sharing of biblical knowledge. The message then invites them to walk further in their journey of faith, with the application of the text to their own lives and the takeaway that gives them homiletical homework going forward.

And so, thoughtful preacher, I close my reflection on a sermon about prayer with a prayer for you:

God of Grace and God of Glory,

On this preacher, pour your power.

Amen.