

Protagonist Corner

Great Preaching in the Second Half of the Twentieth Century

Louis C. Schuедdig
Atlanta, Georgia

Growing up in the Midwest in the 1950's, most Sunday mornings our mother, my sister, and I headed to our local Episcopal Church while my grandmother, an immigrant from Germany and its Reformed Protestant tradition, headed upstairs to her room to listen to the Protestant Radio Hour. In those days, "The Protestant Hour" was heard on more than 600 stations in almost all fifty states. It was at the head of its class of religious radio broadcasts that enjoyed the luxury of free airtime before de-regulation of the airwaves in the early 1980's did away with most of them.

It featured the best Protestant preachers of the second half of the twentieth century, icons like Edmund Steimle, John Redhead, Robert Goodrich, and Theodore Parker Ferris. Each was given a twelve-week series that generated lasting relationships with listeners. Steimle, a Lutheran, preached the longest, two full decades, before retiring as Professor of Homiletics at Union Seminary in New York. He was also probably the best in terms of both content and delivery.

At the height of mainline Protestant religion in America, these preachers' passionate allegiance to the power of the biblical text provided a platform for helping the country reflect theologically on World Wars I and II, the Great Depression, the Korean conflict, the Cold War, the rise of Communism, the growth of suburbia, juvenile delinquency, and moral decay across the U.S., as well as a perceived host of other grave threats to society. There was no partisan divide on these issues in society; the future of the entire world seemed at stake, and for those in the Methodist, Presbyterian, Lutheran, and Episcopal traditions, it was for many the only worship experience in the week, especially for the house-bound, those in hospitals, prisons, or overseas in the Armed Forces. "The Protestant Hour" played a unique role in the history of America in those complex decades.

As director of the agency that produced "The Protestant Hour," now heard on more than 200 stations as "Day1," I transitioned to retirement to oversee the restoration of archived programs from 1945 to 1992, recordings that were swiftly deteriorating in their original formats. I read 1,998 sermon transcripts, catalogued and summarized each one, and when the digital restoration was completed, I listened to nearly all the programs. What I learned was just how great Protestant preaching was in that era.

One of the more obvious differences from sermons of today was in the use of storytelling which has become a seedbed for preachers seeking creativity, humor, pathos, and a pastoral human touch in their sermons. In my hearing today, I find the preacher's stories often launch with a personal anecdote, usually humorous. There is a lot of "let me tell you what happened yesterday when our two year old..." and you can fill in the blank. The listener in a post World War II America got a good story all right, but it was almost never about the preacher. In fact, listeners ended up knowing very little about the person of the preacher. Vastly equipped with stories from history, literature, science, the battlefield, gospel hymns, and of course theology, these stories seemed to find their narrative in a reservoir of learning that if brought to the pulpit today may sound off-putting and stilted; and yet, I wonder if the erudition of

“The Protestant Hour” preachers just may have helped the church’s cause in a time of growing social disease.

Obviously quoting Plato, Milton, Shakespeare, Niebuhr and Bonhoeffer, and so many others may not fit our current social media culture, but I wonder if it is always necessary for the preachers of today to personalize stories in ways that can frequently stumble into banality. Biblical storytelling is a homiletical tradition that is never meant to over-shadow the text. It teaches ways to best amplify the Scriptures. I sense folks in the pew really want to get to the Gospel and have learned so much about the personal life of their preacher that they have grown weary of self-focused sermons that seem to take forever to weave their way to the Good News.

I recently heard, and later read, a sermon that began with eight paragraphs that told a personal story that occurred in another congregation, in another town the preacher had served more than a decade ago. In telling the story, the preacher used the first personal singular (I) a dozen times. Finally when the gospel reading for the day was presented, you could almost see the congregation lean in and listen-up. It was as if the sermon finally began.

Facebook, Twitter, and a host of other social media seem to demand self-revelation. It might have seemed unseemly in an earlier era to reveal private matters to a congregation as is so common today, but I urge preachers to plumb the archives of “The Protestant Hour” programs from those early years to learn better how to take a back seat to the star of the show, the Gospel.

Next year, 2015, marks the seventieth anniversary of “The Protestant Hour/Day 1.” It has never missed a Sunday broadcast in all those years. It will take great effort, as is now being planned, to make those early broadcasts available online through the Day1.org website, but when that happens, it will give seminaries, preachers, and lay persons who are hungry for the best in classical preaching, a resource that represents the finest preaching of a generation. Some will argue they are passé, but I argue they are a treasure trove for anyone committed to proclaiming the Good News in ways that can revive and feed hungry souls everywhere.

Note

For more information on “The Protestant Hour” archive collection contact the Rev. Peter Wallace, president and executive director of “Day 1,” at 2715 Peachtree Road, Atlanta, Georgia 30305, or at pwallace@day1.org.