

Garden, Park, Glen, and Meadow: The Effect of Metaphor on Proclamation Today

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Abstract

Metaphor is embodied in Scripture and increasingly embraced in our pulpits. This paper will look beyond metaphor as illustration, to the role of metaphor in understanding preaching concepts and contexts, especially in providing a conceptual framework for understanding preaching and the church.

Metaphor has historically been a figurative device for comparison. Specifically, a word or phrase which denotes one kind of object or idea is used in place of another word or phrase to suggest a likeness or analogy between them. A distinction is made between the simile, which compares objects or ideas using words such as “like” or “as”.

Defining the Metaphor

Aristotle believed that metaphors were an exceptional way of using words, valuable in poetry and in prose (Rhetoric, 1405.5) and that they must be drawn from things related to the original thing, yet not so obviously related (Rhetoric, 1412.10). For Aristotle, the use of metaphor gave one’s style clarity, charm and distinction, but was a gift some people have and others do not (Rhetoric. 1405.10). He cited examples such as Cephisodotus, who called warships “painted millstones” and Pericles, who bade his countrymen to remove Aegina, “that eyesore of the Pieraeus” (Rhetoric, 1411.15ff).

Ernesto Grassi called metaphor the most important figure of speech because it embodies the notion of transfer and of movement from inward personal space to external domain. He described the process of “*ingenium*” – the basic human faculty for seeing similarities – as the essence of rhetoric. The metaphor sees the similarities and is the basic process in language by which we think, know, and process the events of our world (Foss & Foss, 1985, p. 242). Grassi pointed to Cicero, who used metaphor to describe metaphor, “the

metaphor acts like a 'light' because it presupposes an insight into 'relationship.'" Metaphoric thinking, for Grassi, encourages us to refer to something beyond ourselves and make a connection to something else. (Foss & Foss, 1985, p. 139) Grassi pointed to the use of metaphor as a basic humanistic activity (as opposed to scientific rational thought), revitalizing us in our encounters with the world, and helping us to know and cope with the world by always having available the possibility of reinterpreting a situation (Foss & Foss, 1985, pp. 145,146).

"Insofar as metaphor has its roots in the analogy between different things and makes this analogy immediately spring into 'sight,' it makes a fundamental contribution to the structure of our world. Empirical observation itself takes place through the 'reduction' of sensory phenomena to types of meanings existing in the living being; and this 'reduction' consists in the 'transferring' of a meaning to sensory phenomena. It is only through this 'transference' that phenomena can be recognized as similar or dissimilar, useful or useless, for our human realization. In order to make 'sensory' observations we are forced to 'reach back' for a transposition, for a metaphor. Man can manifest himself only through his own 'transpositions,' and this is the essence of his work in every field of human activity." (Grassi, [Rhetoric as Philosophy](#), 1980, p. 33)

Ivor Armstrong Richards was concerned with how language works, and a major element of how words work in discourse is the metaphor. But he disagreed with Aristotle's view that the use of metaphor is a gift for only a few to use, or that it was an exceptional use of language. For I.A. Richards, a metaphor is more than a figure of speech used for stylistic effect. It is one's thought process, a means by which meaning is developed and a method by which a communicator may provide listeners with the experience needed to elicit similar references for a particular symbol. The speaker uses metaphor to supply the listener's experience, using principles of sorting, categorization, comparison and abstraction (Foss & Foss, 1985, pp. 33, 34).

Richards proposes two terms concerning metaphor. "Tenor" refers to the underlying idea or principle subject of the metaphor, or what is meant. "Vehicle" refers to the means by which one conveys the underlying idea or the borrowed idea. "Metaphor" includes both. In Jesus' familiar metaphor, "you are the salt of the earth," the tenor is "you" and the vehicle is "the salt of the earth." For Richards, the interplay of tenor and vehicle may work in their resemblance, or discrepancy (Foss & Foss, 1985, p. 34).

Kenneth Burke saw life from a metaphorical perspective, using the dramatistic approach, ("Life is a drama and the world is its theatre") to develop a perspective for studying motivation. Language and thought processes are viewed as modes of action. His common definition of humans as symbol-using and the inventor of the negative add an additional insight to our understanding of metaphor. For Burke, the negative is added to our world through our language symbols. In [The Rhetoric of Religion](#), he admits the paradox of using the word to describe the thing.

“Quite as the *word* “tree” is verbal and the *thing* tree is non-verbal, so all words for the non-verbal must, by the very nature of the case, discuss the realm of the non-verbal in terms of *what it is not*. . . . The most obvious formal instance of this feeling for the negative discount is an irony, a figure which, at its simplest, states A in terms of non-A (as when, on a day of bad weather, we might say, ‘What a beautiful day it is!’). And all metaphor involves a similar feeling for the discount. Thus, the expression ‘to sail the ship of State’ is interpreted properly only insofar as we know that statesmen are not sailors and the State is not a ship.” (Burke, 1970, pp. 18,19).

Burke also considers our descriptions about God limited to the problem of negativity in language. We define God in terms of what he is not: immortal, immutable, infinite. Even positive descriptors of God are “quasi-positives” for Burke in that they must be understood analogically, making sense only insofar as we discount it for the negative (Burke, 1970, p. 22). If the Apostle John speaks of the love of the Father, he doesn’t mean the love we’ve personally seen because we witness merely human love. John also does not mean God to be father like our human expressions of fatherhood, for we believe God to be much more perfect than that.

It is clear, then, that metaphor is not just perceived as a figurative device for gifted writers, employed to create interest for illustrating a sermon. Metaphor may be a perspective, a thought process, a way of seeing things that brings out the life of that thing (from the speaker’s perspective, as it should be). Metaphor helps us know and see in a different way that is more deeply true of a thing’s nature so as to create greater understanding, and so engage the listener more thoroughly.

A mindful discussion about metaphor must take into account one’s hermeneutical perspective. While hermeneutics was originally and primarily a method for interpreting biblical texts, there has been a broadening in its application for rhetorical theory in general. The existentialist Martin Heidegger suggested that hermeneutical understanding is a dialogue between the interpreter, who asks “questions” of the text, and the text, which “answers”. Wilhelm Dilthey and Friedrich Schleiermacher were concerned that the interpreter’s own situation could serve as a bias that distorted understanding of the text being studied. However, Hans-Georg Gadamer encouraged the influence of the interpreter’s situation, including prejudices and interests, in producing greater understanding. Gadamer’s perspective allows for different meanings to emerge as each new interpreter approaches the text (Foss & Foss, 1985, p. 221).

Walter Kaiser sounded an alarm about this in his work, Toward an Exegetical Theology. Kaiser’s concern was the loss of interpreting the text as having a single meaning, which he termed, a crisis. “Is the meaning of a text to be defined solely in terms of the *verbal* meaning of that text as those words were used by the Scriptural author? Or should the meaning of a text be partly understood in terms of ‘what it *now* means to me,’ the reader and interpreter?” (Kaiser, 1981, p. 24). For Kaiser, Gadamer believes it is now an impossibility to recognize the original author’s meaning. Heidegger, Rudolf Bultmann, Gerhard Ebeling and Ernst Fuchs also deny the possibility of objective historical

knowledge with the result that they “thrust the integrity of knowledge of the past out on a sea of relativity and subjectivism. (Kaiser, 1981, p. 31).

As proclaimers of the message of God’s Word, there is a sense in which the preacher’s unique perspective colors or shapes the meaning given. In a sense, each of us lives life out in a vivid metaphor. We address people and consider each from a unique perspective. The speaker’s personal style affects the message. If, for example, I’m depressive, I see life one way. If I’m optimistic, I may see life another way. If I’m opportunistic, I may present a matter in a different way so as to benefit my design. The speaker’s unique style and tone affect the presentation of the message. Also, the speaker’s audience and situational context affects the presentation of the message. The Apostle Paul preached differently to the various churches and individuals in the New Testament.

But a conservative view of Scripture would not permit the preacher’s perspective to alter the objective meaning of the text. There remains a single meaning of the text, but varied applications as dictated by the context, the audience, the situation, the purpose, and the personal experience of the preacher.

Dangers of Metaphor

Let us consider some obvious dangers, then, of the metaphor for use in the Christian pulpit.

First, the audience may not understand. Confusion may come from differences in culture or ages. For example, parables were often used by Jesus, not for clarity but for confusion. This was in stated fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy (Isaiah 6:9,10). Unless Jesus explained his parables to his own disciples, they appeared slow to understand. Crowds who listened from the distance seemed even more confused. So, when Jesus proclaimed “You are the light of the world” in Matthew 5:14, what did the audience understand? In a day without artificial or automatic light, people knew the value of light, but did they grasp the power of Jesus’ metaphor? Is the modern-day reader to summarize, “believers are bright” or to think of moral purity transforming a culture of spiritual darkness?

Second, a metaphor, like the parable, may break down at some point. A metaphor can’t be pushed too far. For example, when Jesus said, “You are the salt of the earth” in Matthew 5:14, the audience may be tempted to push the metaphor past its intended meaning. Salt had several usages in Jesus’ day. Salt has more usages today in North America of the twenty-first century. Salt rusts cars, melts ice, flavors food, makes us thirsty, and heals wounds. We clarify by asking, what is the nature of salt that the followers of Christ most embody? To push the metaphor to a different application may cause it to break down as to the original meaning.

Third, the usage of metaphor gives away the ownership of meaning to the audience. Of course, from a dialogical perspective meaning is shared and shaped together anyway. This is part of the power of metaphor, that the meaning was never fully the speaker’s to

begin with. Using metaphor allows for a more dynamic interaction between the sender and receiver of the message in shaping the meaning. But when meaning is shared, there is the possibility that the audience may derive a different meaning than the speaker intended. Kaiser's concerns above heighten the danger of multiple understandings of the biblical message when using metaphor.

Fourth, a metaphor may misuse Scripture. It is difficult to argue that a metaphor that a contemporary preacher uses carries the authoritative weight to Scripturally-inspired metaphors. Amos' plumb line demonstrated that God has a simple standard for justice today. However, could today's interpreter and proclaimer of the text craft a metaphor with similar authority? Consider the metaphorical picture embraced by Roman Catholic theologians teaching on the doctrine of praying to Mary. While there is no Scriptural support for this teaching, the human picture of a son's devotion and attention to his mother forces a new type of interpretation on Scripture. What son who loves his mother wouldn't pay special attention to what she has to say? Here, the metaphor of a mother-son relationship runs off on its own and invents a non-scriptural teaching.

Fifth, a metaphor may drift away from its original intent. Such "metaphor drift" is seen in our post-Christian culture where former biblical metaphors have become rooted into our western language, and used by speakers who are biblically misinformed. For example, the Apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthian Christians (I Cor. 6:19) that one's body is the temple of the Holy Spirit. Paul's point behind the temple-metaphor was that Christ-followers' submission to obey God with his/her body because of the high privilege of God dwelling in us through the Person of the Holy Spirit. Paul was clearly drawing from the Old Testament concept of the temple. In a recent Dharma and Greg television situational comedy, Dharma calls out "your body is your temple." Her point in the context of the show was that one should take care of one's body because it is sacred and your abode as a god on earth. Such metaphor drift demonstrates an opposite message from the Apostle Paul's intent, that in modern thought, your body is yours to do with as you please.

Sixth, a metaphor may drown out the message. Above, our definition for metaphor was demonstrated to be greater than an occasional sermon illustration. But consider a basic truth regarding illustrations: they are not to "take over" the sermon. When illustrations are too showy, too funny, too powerful in their emotional impact, the core truth may be forgotten. In the field of argumentation and debate, basic principles of organizing arguments suggest that when a subordinate point, the illustrative metaphor, no longer justifies, supports, or proves the originating statement or idea, there is a problem of subordination. Illustrations should bring light to the point, metaphors should also assist the listener in comparing and connecting to the main argument being advanced (Ziegelmueller, Kay and Dause, 1990, p. 136). Many recall Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech, but many remember the "dream" aspect, but not the true metaphor King advanced, of a promissory note that needs to be cashed.

"In a sense we've come to our nation's capital to cash a check. When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the

Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the "unalienable Rights" of "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note, insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked "insufficient funds."

But we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation. And so, we've come to cash this check, a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice."

Other dangers of metaphor may be advanced, but the power of metaphor must not be ignored.

Power of metaphor

First, use of metaphor helps us to hear. The ownership of the message is in the ears of the hearer, as she interacts with, and shapes the message for her own application.

Second, a metaphor helps us to see. Effective metaphors carry vivid imagery. Pictures move us to action. When Nathan the prophet informed David the King of a rich man who stole the poor man's beloved ewe lamb for a traveler's dinner (2 Samuel 12), David "burned with anger against the man" (2 Samuel 12:5).

Third, a metaphor helps us to remember. Effective metaphors assist in retention. They have a staying quality. Rob Bell's spoke of two trees at Wheaton College chapel, one in the Garden of Eden in Genesis, and another in Revelation 22:1. To conclude his message, he stood between the two trees with arms extended, portraying the cross of Christ as bridging the gap. Brenda Salter McNeil's used the two beams of the cross to bring out the need for reconciliation in the body of Christ. The cross, she said, includes a vertical beam, portraying peace with God, and a horizontal beam, proclaiming peace with others. The cross is God's message to us, and because God is not mad at us, we can't be mad with each other.

Fourth, an effective metaphor is able to carry the weight of prophetic witness. One can, by use of a metaphor, launch a challenging message otherwise very resistible. A study of the Old Testament prophets floods the hearer with prophetic metaphors.

Fifth, a metaphor may help us to act. The metaphor is a powerful persuasive tool. Sometimes metaphors battle against each other, and the metaphor that dominates the public discussion wins the argument. For example, during the peak of the debate on abortion in this country, the coat-hanger became a louder metaphor than the two baby feet. Many politicians and judges overlooked the little ones in the womb to see the potential for unsanitary and unsafe abortions in dark places. Obviously, other forces

were involved in the North American debate over the sanctity of life, but the pictures dominated in public and judicial forum.

Sixth, a metaphor may shape values within. When President Reagan sought support for the Nicaraguan rebels, he described them as “freedom fighters” and secured millions of dollars in support from Congress. When Jesus used metaphor for his followers, he spoke words realigning them to their true nature, their intended design if they follow him. His followers were probably not truly salt or light, but in Jesus they would be. As they followed him, he shared their true identity, to what they would be conformed.

Thus said, the effective metaphor becomes more intrinsically motivating. There is an inner driving power to action as I agree with it, it resonates within me and I take action on it.

Derek Tidball has listed countless metaphors used by the Apostle Paul, relationships reflecting models for ministry today. He was a father to them as children, a nurse to them as infants, a teacher to learners, an example to imitators, a priest and a sacrifice. Paul referred to the Christian minister as the helmsman of the ship (Rom 12:8, I Cor. 12:28), the pastor as a workman (Col 4:17; 2 Tim 2:15), ambassador (2 Cor 5:20; Eph. 6:20), farmer (I Cor. 3:6-9; 2 Tim. 2:6), careful builder (I Cor. 3:9-15), soldier (2 Tim. 2:3-4), and disciplined athlete (2 Tim. 2:5) (Tidball, 1986, pp 104 ff).

For the proclaimer of God’s word, metaphors take on the greatest value when they resonate w/Scriptural truth; and provide clarity of portrayal of the Bible message.

Modern Metaphor as Typology

Leonard Sweet’s metaphor for understanding the church and its relationship with modern culture is set forth in a recent work, The Church in Emerging Culture: Five Perspectives. Sweet offers a matrix representing the church’s response to cultural change, using two axes measuring the church’s view about method-form-style change, and the church’s view of change in message/content/substance.

<p>High Change in Message Low Change in Method</p> <p>“The Glen”</p>	<p>High Change in Message High Change in Method</p> <p>“The Meadow”</p>
<p>Low Change in Message Low Change in Method</p> <p>“The Garden”</p>	<p>Low Change in Message High Change in Method</p> <p>“The Park”</p>

As with any useful metaphor, we must be careful not to push too far, or critique too closely. The vivid imagery of four types of clearings sets off a fascinating discussion of where and how current church leaders are serving Christ in their world. Sweet gets us started by suggesting each setting proposes different ways of treating social change, some react to it as a crisis, others respond to it as it occurs, and still others seek to get ahead of the change and steer it. There are thoughtful, faithful laborers in each clearing, but each labors under different conditions.

Sweet begins in the Garden. The garden is a beautiful place, enclosed from the outside culture as much as possible. Those in it guard its historical beauty and maintain its traditions. Change is slow, if at all, intrinsic, not extrinsic. Great care is taken to preserve the purity and constancy of all that lies within the garden.

Preaching in the garden is more concerned with faithfulness to the old, rather than creativity with the new. Relevance with the outside is not a concern, but authority is. If one were to stumble upon John Stott's Between Two Worlds, they would be confused, thinking there is only one world, the Bible world which we must know and proclaim. Faithfulness to the tried and true, the faith of our fathers, is of utmost concern. The tone is cautious, careful, deliberate. The goal is to guard. The beauty of the message in the garden is that it is unchanging. The same issues of two thousand years ago are the issues of today. Any metaphoric thinking or talking would be limited to metaphors of the past. Use of metaphor is limited and rigid, not easily adapted beyond pre-used metaphors either from Scripture or from historical tradition. Innovations in theology are, of course, viewed with suspicion.

The garden is a beautiful place which does not change. For those within, therein lies its beauty and charm.

Dwellers in the park are more open to the outside. As Sweet says, "The Park is the favored natural habitat of much of the evangelical world (Sweet, 2003, p. 26)." Parksiders are happy to let people come in and see their beauty, and hope to influence them to join. At the park, many garden-like methods exist, as does much beauty. But a well-worn road is there to encourage visitors at the appointed times of operation.

Preaching in the park seeks to tell the old story in new ways. The message does not change, but methods do. The methods are not viewed as the message, but a means to acquainting others more purposely with the timeless abiding truths of God's Word. Preaching may be deductive or inductive, expository or narrative. Metaphor may be employed with rich imagery, as long as the preacher is faithful to the original intent of the biblical writer. Preachers in the park seek to speak the language of the culture, without being fully immersed in that culture. The effectiveness of their metaphor is judged both on its authority from Scripture and its relevance to contemporary audiences.

Sometimes, the tension of being in the world, but not of the world gets difficult. Conforming to culture and following Christ do not go together in the park. Some park-

dwellers may yearn for the old garden-like days. But in the park, there is great opportunity for the increase of inhabitants, but less for message drift.

The glen is shaped in dialogue with its surroundings. The outside borders are the terrors the glen resists, but members of the glen live closer to them. Inhabitants of the glen understand that culture has shaped the spiritual responses of Christ-followers in every age. Today, members of the glen resist modern methods and technologies, consumerism and materialism, and find great comfort in the methods of the past. Don't bring power-pointed messages and singing into worship, take comfort in the liturgy and organ. They exult in mysteries of the faith. Such methods ensure their historic anchor.

Preachers of the glen would take comfort in non-modern metaphors as they proclaim the methods of the past. However, while technological innovations are resisted, theological innovations are welcome here, and members are not as easily bothered with new interpretations of the old, old story.

As we come to the meadow, one notices that wildflowers abound. Here one finds wandering expanses of vegetation, not neatly kept or tidily pruned. The meadow springs forth after a forest fire. The meadow is unmanaged, it just happens. The meadow embraces the outside as it is the outside. People of the meadow are more engaged in their outside world, more outreach-oriented. People of the meadow are comfortable with theological diversity and unformed doctrines. People of the meadow rejoice in creativity and innovation. People of the meadow oppose the sinfulness of the world, but still identify closely with it. The weeds grow thick among the wheat here.

Preachers in the meadow ask questions more than give answers. Metaphor is not in the illustration, nor the decoration added to language. Metaphor is the message and it is constantly changing. Metaphor asks the question, probes the idea more deeply, and restores the thing to its original design. Sweet extends the idea, "Meadowers believe people today are starved not for doctrines but for images and relationships and stories (Sweet, 2003, p. 35)." Narrative from the Gospels is more often heard than didactic from the Epistles. Former systematic theological paradigms don't fit the discussions here, accomplishing the mission does. Failure is high, heritage is weak, and adventure abounds in the meadow.

Closing Observations

Leonard Sweet has launched a helpful paradigm for thinking about the church's interaction with secular culture. The thoughtful student of biblical preaching must understand the context in which she or he preaches. To proclaim garden messages in the glen would not do. To think we are tilling wildflowers in the garden would be only to fool ourselves. Garden preachers may not be having the impact on culture they think they are. It is probably true that the use of a method or message from one type of clearing would be less understood in another type of clearing. For example, the message of the meadow would not be embraced by people of the garden. These words hold value: know your culture and don't fool yourself.

Certainly, Sweet's matrix of clearings holds heuristic value. Future dialogue will determine how sound his typology is. Are the distinctions valid and consistent? Do most churches in the garden have garden-like qualities? Is most of the evangelical world in the park? Should Parksiders fear the glen and meadow, or will they equally add value to the global mission of Christ?

The use of metaphor has great utility for proclamation today. Metaphor is more than a type of illustration. We should experiment with the power of metaphor, and think more metaphorically.

The use of metaphor should not be embraced simply as the latest trend. There are dangers about which to be aware. The thoughtful preacher must examine his or her comfort level theologically with its use, not employ metaphor simply for relevance sake. For those with a conservative understanding of Scripture, there is always the need to not sacrifice the authority of the Bible while being dynamically relevant. Did Jesus use metaphor to unearth a timeless abiding truth or to launch an image that could be reshaped in countless ways, tailored to mean something different to each hearer at each location at each era?

Finally, people of the meadow remind us of a basic axiom. Proclamation devoid of caring and thoughtful relationships will rarely be heard and seldom acted upon. The value of metaphor is when we understand it holistically. We must live the message of Christ among them before we shout the message of Christ at them. Such relationships are based upon authenticity crafted by much listening and asking and founded on a heart of compassion.

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