

The Unfinished Sermon: Involving the Body In Preparation and Delivery

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Abstract: Sermons have long been the exclusive province of the trained professional; their formulation and documentation the very pedigree of a professional clergy class. But while bolstering authority and expertise, the private, finished sermon actually promotes individualism over community. How can we include others in the generation and delivery of a sermon without compromising legitimate Scriptural authority? How participatory does a sermon need to be?

Ever since the invention of the printing press, homiletics has been heavily influenced by the communicative dynamics of the printed page. Sermon crafting and delivery became almost synonymous with the skills of penmanship and scribal documentation. Even today the verb most often connected to homiletics is “write.” We don’t often say, “I’m going to go speak my sermon” or “meditate my sermon.” Sermons, since Gutenberg, have been a highly literary enterprise. ⁱ

This is not a surprise to any student of the history of communication, nor is it entirely lamentable. Literary approaches have greatly assisted a sermon’s ability to be preserved, distributed, and, inevitably, sold as a commodity. Without mass literacy, the ideas behind great sermons would not have had the widespread impact they had in the past and can still command today. Who doesn’t have a collection of great sermons on a shelf, and who hasn’t benefited from reading another preacher’s substantive work?

Nevertheless, the literary shaping of homiletics has also had some unfortunate consequences that together do not typically assist a preacher in the vital task of building community. In this paper we will unpack the ingredients of a sermon as a product of literary modernity and then reassemble those same ingredients from the perspective of an older, more oral orientation with an eye toward preaching as a community-building experience. ⁱⁱ

The Modern Preacher

The modern preacher is laden with the metaphor of the expert. Being the most highly trained and most articulate student of theology among the congregation, the modern preacher is expected to be, and indeed sometimes enjoys the prospect of being, the best. Such a preacher feels a responsibility to take seriously the study of the word of God and to deliver the product of that study accurately and with appropriate authority. But this places him or her on a higher plane than the average layperson who typically defers to pastoral expertise on matters of theology and biblical interpretation.

Such a preacher labors away in privacy. For only in privacy, surrounded with concomitant literary resources, can he responsibly prepare. So prepare he does, working diligently to craft a document that will adequately express the ideas of the passage and their application to

contemporary life. But with the privacy comes a subtle sense of secrecy, or at least anticipation. That is, the congregation does not know what is being prepared and must wait until Sunday for the grand unveiling. To see or hear of the sermon before that time would be akin to peeking prematurely behind the homiletic curtain. All good experts work alone.

The Modern Sermon

The modern sermon then, takes on documentary authority. It has been culled from text and reformulated into text. It is word-smithed and polished, organized and outlined. But above all, it is finished. That is, when the final period has been typed or the final sub-point enumerated, there is a sense of completion. It may be Wednesday, or Friday, or Saturday night. But it comes to a point of completion before delivery on Sunday.

Besides being finished, it is external to the preacher. The sermon lives on a hard drive, or a set of note cards, or a hand-written outline. In any event, it can sit on a table or reside in a file. It is out “there,” localized in space and time.

The Modern Audience

When Sunday arrives, the expert preacher and the finished sermon meet a passive audience. They are conceived as the recipients of the prior preparation. They gather, ideally anyway, with a sense of curiosity about what the preacher might address today. Of course they have, other than perhaps the scriptural reference of the day’s passage, no idea what might be said. They have no expectation that they could or should know. They are not professionals and are inclined to leave such things to professionals, hoping for a delivery that will at least not be tedious and perhaps offer a dash of helpful inspiration. But they do not conceive of themselves as a shaping force or as co-crafters of the sermon. They cannot imagine what that might mean or how they could possibly participate.

This communicative environment can build and sustain a sense of individual expertise and scriptural authority. A sermon series from this orientation can address the subject of community and the importance of community-building endeavors. But it cannot effectively build community itself because it is, in its very nature, at cross-purposes with community. This environment is designed for something else: authority, accuracy, and predictability. But if homiletics is going to promote community its composition and praxis, it must be reassembled an entirely different way.

The Pre-Modern Option

To think differently about homiletics requires a certain strategic forgetting. We must realize that modern preachers and their congregations are products of a certain period of history. We need not fault ourselves for that, but we must acknowledge it. Preachers did not always prepare and deliver like we do today and congregations did not always follow along in their study bibles. Moderns are sometimes surprised to discover that in the early church, only about 10% of house church congregants could have read and written like we do today.ⁱⁱⁱ Most were largely or entirely illiterate. In fact, this was the case from the church’s founding clear up to the early

Renaissance. For most of church history, lay people simply did not have access to and proficiency in, literacy. For most of church history people had no personal Bibles and no ability or even expectation to acquire one. Preaching in these circumstances of limited literacy had to be different.

Without launching into an entire treatise on the history of communication and preaching, it is enough to remember that things were not always done like they have been done since Gutenberg where knowledge and wisdom became virtually equated with textual competence. There is another kind of competence, an oral and communal intelligence, that used to work amazingly well in generations before us. It is that competence, as applied to homiletics, we will attempt to build.

The Pre-Modern Preacher

What if the preacher had no books to study? What then? What if there were no commentaries and only scant collections of copied texts? What if there was no complete Bible anywhere in the church? What if preachers had to preach without the later standards of literary competence? Or what if they could read and write a little in Latin, but couldn't make much of the Greek papyri on which Paul's letter was copied? What if, in say 200 AD, they were required to ration writing materials and could not practically afford effusive literacy? In short, how did they preach without our dependence upon text since they had to do so for such a long and formative period?

In the primarily oral societies prior to mass literacy, preaching was closer to poetic performance than to writing. There was a collective sense of a delivered body of truth that was owned by the congregation, not one individual. The preacher was not so much the expert, as the bard; ^{iv}rehearsing orally the communal standards and the established body of truth that was ensconced and preserved in sacred text, but not expressed in terms of precise literate standards. Let me be clear. Literacy has always played a vital role in preserving sacred text and does that job admirably. But there is a difference between using literacy to preserve truth and expecting it to build community. Literacy invariably builds individual, not communal understanding of truth. The novel was the first literary device intended to be read privately and individually. Before that, literacy captured truth that had already been expressed orally and communally. The order was speak first, write later. Now we write first, speak later. The difference is hard to overestimate.

If the preacher does not have to maintain an exclusive and expert hold on the truth, the sacred text, instead of the preacher, can become the authority. The preacher can become one of many hearers of the word. Practically, the preacher can deliberately break up the monopoly on sermon preparation and open that process up to others in the congregation (spouse, staff members, elders, other pastors). This is not to say that everyone in the congregation is equally prepared and competent to interpret scripture. But even the best-trained theologian can learn from the insights of others, especially others who have been trained to look for the right interpretive clues. In this case, the process of sermon preparation becomes synergistically a process of homiletic discipleship. By the time Sunday comes, the preacher has been speaking about the issue of the text for days. He does not wait until the last minute to start converting ideas into fluent speech. In fact there is no conversion at all, since the ideas are processed orally before they are ever

annotated. This process of shared sermon preparation not only builds verbal proficiency all week long, but also affirms others in their respective understanding of the text and their value as co-crafters. This is the beginning of a process which can build community and minimize individuality.

The Pre-Modern Sermon

If the modern sermon was finished when it was ensconced in text, the pre-modern sermon runs on a different schedule. Because it relies on the resources in the room where it is being preached, the pre-modern sermon is not finished until it is delivered. Do not confuse this with an unprepared sermon. Ancient rhetorical scholars taught how to organize and prepare without necessarily writing anything down^v. There was a process whereby a speech or sermon could be organized, crafted, and premeditated without relying on quill and paper. Ancients exploited the powerful resources of memory and could employ narrative structures to keep vast amounts of material on the tip of their tongues^{vi}. Do not confuse this with memorization which relies on rote sound recall and be done automatically as most of us can recite the pledge of allegiance or John 3:16. True memory requires full engagement of the mind and deep, not cursory, understanding of the subject matter.^{vii} The sermon was internalized and would not have been conceived as something outside, or on a table. It was clear, but not precise. Grounded, but incomplete. It needed something or someone to activate it and the actual assembled audience became the catalyst that unleashed it.

The Pre-Modern Audience

Here is where the full potential of the pre-modern sermon comes to fruition as a community-building force. Far from being passive recipients of the sermon's finished points, the pre-modern sermon relies upon actual people to midwife the sermon. The preacher was prepared, no doubt. The content was clear in his mind. The sequence of ideas was natural and organic. The illustrations and applications were ready. But exactly how those ideas were delivered depended, literally, upon the faces of the people in the room.^{viii}

In other words, only so much can be prepared ahead of time. Anytime we write or speak to ourselves in preparation, we are required to imagine an audience because no one can address no one^{ix}. We only know what to say by empathetically guessing what the other person needs to hear in that moment. We do not talk to 3 year olds the same way we talk to teens. We know this intuitively and practice it reflexively in everyday speech. To do so in preaching requires us to read faces and digest from those facial cues a complex set of feedback that helps us know *how* to say what we know. We formulate words based on what we are seeing and hearing from others. This is the dynamic process of allowing a live environment to co-create the expression of the sermon. In a smaller way we already talked about how certain people can co-craft the content of the sermon during preparation. But in delivery, that circle widens considerably as we invite those actual faces to help us speak, to decide *how* to say what we have prepared.

The great enemy to a community-building sermon is the finished sermon needing no one save its author. That is the self-contained and generic sermon addressed equally to everyone in the

world. That kind of sermon, though true and precise, will reliably fail to build community. But if a preacher can risk the formulation of syntax in the moment, he will not fail to send a clear if subtle backchannel message: “I speak to you and no others. We share this moment as fellow-hearers of God’s word. This moment is unrepeatable because these ingredients will never be gathered in exactly the same way again. We are a unique community.”

Objections

Some will object at this point, concluding it is unrealistic to expect a mind to be so agile. Only 1 preacher in 100 could possibly be gifted enough to preach extemporaneously. Then be that 1 preacher. It is really not difficult once we understand how to prepare orally. Remember all preachers used to have to preach this way. They had no other option. So why do we conclude, without ever trying, that we could not possibly preach the way all preachers once did? Have our brains atrophied that much? Can they not be rehabilitated (in the same way we might relearn arithmetic after relying too much on calculators)?

In actual life we are extemporaneous all day. We respond to each person and each event as the situation dictates. We already know how to do this. We already know how to speak from internal resources. If asked to explain the meaning of the cross, must we consult a note card? Do not we know certain things so well that we can draw them out in a variety of settings? And if we do not, should we not? By speaking the sermon all week, fluency forms, ideas crystallize, and stress decreases.

Some will say this is dangerously close to winging it. I concede the point. But winging can occur in literary preaching as well. Is not using an old outline winging it? Is not using somebody else’s outline or manuscript winging it? Either method of preparation can be irresponsibly employed. But there is a big difference between extemporaneous speech and spontaneous speech. Spontaneous speech has no preparation. It unfolds completely in the moment as in some preaching traditions that taught that preparation is sinful dependence on the flesh. The truly godly preacher, they thought, is spontaneous. That is not what is advocated here. Extemporaneous speech requires a tremendous level of preparation and only has the appearance of spontaneity^x. It is simply a difference kind of preparing. The extemporaneous preacher knows what he will say before he starts. What he does not know, is how he will say it.

Some will say this erodes the authority of the preacher. So be it. It is the word that is supposed to have the authority, not the preacher. But what if it devolves into everybody pooling their ignorance and calling it a sermon? The participation outlined here does not assume everybody has valid thoughts. Scripture does not mean anything and it does not mean everything. It means something. As people participate, they learn good hermeneutics and gain more confidence in their own interpretive skills. They also learn what makes a bad hermeneutic and how to recognize isogesis and other sloppy trends. This not only helpful but necessary if we are to take seriously the Reformation idea that people can read the Bible for themselves. If we reserve all the interpretation for ourselves as professionals, what separates us practically from Catholic praxis? At the very least if we are to adopt the Catholic view of interpretation, we should stop berating them for it. Catholics have a legitimate fear about hermeneutics run amok. Just look at

the thousands of denominations. All the more reason to teach lay people good hermeneutics by fostering varying levels of participation.

Some will say we have Bible Studies for that sort of thing. That would be great if the Bible Studies were actual Bible Studies. Too many are simply question and answer formats from a printed curriculum fraught with interpretive bias before the student even begins. You can complete an entire book and never think for yourself or engage the text in a fresh way. The beauty of allowing lay participation at the sermonic level is teaching them to listen to scripture without a prior grid. Just start with the text. Do we really want laypeople who do not feel competent to read the Bible without a study guide in hand?

Conclusion

It is not comfortable to preach in an unfinished way. It is more risky. Less predictable. We fear looking foolish or unprepared. We need to maintain rhetoric of professional expertise. So we reserve the sermon for ourselves. We use it to display our insight and eloquence. We long to be recognized as competent preachers and enjoy the sense that somebody might actually look forward to hearing us. We want at least one area of ecclesiastical life in which we are unquestionably the best. But if we keep a lock on the private finished sermon, we will sacrifice community-building on the altar of expertise and miss one of the vital and necessary ways to be part of the community instead of above it.

ⁱ For a thorough analysis of the impact of the printing press see Marshall McLuhan's classic *Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*. (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1962).

ⁱⁱ For a full description of the communicative dynamics of the primarily oral culture see Walter Ong's *Orality and Literacy*, (New York: Routledge, 2002).

ⁱⁱⁱ William Harris *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 61,173.

^{iv} Walter Ong, p. 46.

^v Quintilian. *Institutes of Oratory*. Ed. Lee Honeycutt. Trans. John Selby Watson. 2006. Iowa State University. 22 March 2007. <http://honeyl.public.iastate.edu/quintilian/> 10.6.6.

^{vi} Memory was one of the original 5 canons of Greco-Roman rhetoric (Invention, Arrangement, Style, Memory, and Delivery). <http://rhetoric.byu.edu/canons/Canons.htm>

^{vii} Quintilian, 12.2.4.

^{viii} Depending on how far one goes back, there may have been a decidedly spontaneous sense to early Christian preaching linked to the idea of preaching as prophecy. As time went on the spontaneous Hebraic sense of prophecy gave way to a more Greek sense of speaking *ex tempore*, especially after the Montanist crisis of the 2nd century. See Ronald Osborne *Folly of God: The Rise of Christian Preaching* (St. Louis, Chalice Press, 1999), p. 361.

^{ix} Walter Ong, "The Writer's Audience Is Always a Fiction" *PMLA* 90:1 (January 1975): 9-21.

^x William Shepherd, *Without a Net: Preaching in the Paperless Pulpit*. (Lima: CSS Publishing, 2004), p. 20. Shepherd appropriates Ciceronian rhetoric for preaching.