Repeat performance: Making preaching come alive

by Richard Lischer in the August 28, 2002 issue

Preachers are like comedians. They are always looking for new material. If the recent spate of articles on preachers plagiarizing in their sermons is any indication, the production of the weekly sermon in the face of limited time and a challenged imagination has become the overriding issue for busy ministers.

Many preachers feel overmatched not by the competing messages around them but by the sensorium itself, the technological and economic atmosphere in which all messages are communicated. With its worship of electronic images, no culture has proved less hospitable to the spoken word than our own. Our predecessors faced their distinctive challenges, to be sure, but at least Augustine, Chrysostom, Luther and Spurgeon did not have to justify the effectiveness of public speech or, worse, deal with its obsolescence.

Preachers have always worried about where the next sermon is coming from. A young Reinhold Niebuhr confided to his diary, “Now that I have preached about a dozen sermons I find I am repeating myself. A different text simply means a different pretext for saying the same thing over again. The few ideas that I had worked into sermons at the seminary have all been used, and now what?”

Preachers today worry about the effectiveness of the homily and their own powers of imagination, too. They wonder where they will find the necessary time for study and quiet reflection. As Niebuhr’s comments reveal, earlier generations of preachers were plagued by similar questions, but they also confronted the theological elements of preaching with a seriousness that is rarely seen in the over-programmed minister of today.

Indeed, the homiletical tradition speaks more about the spiritual condition of the preacher than any other subject. For more than a millennium, the most frequently voiced homiletical issue was not the number of points a sermon should have but the character and holiness of the one who preaches it. This concern was in part derived

from the rhetorical ideal of “the good person speaking well” but was even more an outgrowth of Augustinian and early medieval spirituality. Most homiletical treatises after Augustine and through the Middle Ages expound on the authority, formation and sanctity of the one appointed to preach, topics almost universally ignored by contemporary homiletical textbooks. Those same concerns are evident in later pastoral texts, whether by Baxter, Herbert, Spener or Schleiermacher. They eventually gave way to 19th- and 20th-century discussions of the “personality” of the preacher.

Despite the wave of spirituality in both the church and popular culture today, we are not seeing a corresponding revival of interest in the holiness of the preacher. The spotlight on “my story” notwithstanding, Protestant homiletics has avoided the larger issue of the spiritual formation of preachers. Ironically, the recent exposé of widespread plagiarism in the pulpit seems to be reviving the character question by examining the role of the minister’s faith and intelligence in the practice of preaching.

If there is a connection between spirituality and preaching, it lies in the preacher’s devotional reading of scripture. Yet it is precisely there, in the study of the Bible, that many preachers feel their historical-critical training has failed to build a bridge toward proclamation. Many were never trained to pray the text, to meditate on its images or to seek its spiritual power, but only to excavate it for its most important ideas. We did not read the Bible as the poet Adrienne Rich counseled all serious readers: “as if your life depended on it.”

More and more preachers are engaged in the spiritual reading of the Bible using methods taught by the fathers, mothers and mystics of the church. One such method is the use of allegory, which, instead of constricting the interpreter’s options, celebrates the divine abundance within the biblical text. The church “settled” the matter of allegory twice, repudiating it first during the Reformation and a second time in the heyday of historical criticism. Yet the debate over the multiplicity of meanings in texts has not gone away, as postmodern interpreters have made clear. Literary criticism has opened our eyes to the multivalency of texts. Contrary to what many of us learned in seminary, most biblical texts do not broadcast one clear, easily outlined lesson. And theological interpretation, which makes the modest proposal that texts are about God and are meant to be read by the church at worship, has opened our eyes to the great galaxy of readers and to the riches of patristic exegesis, including once-despised allegory.

Issues of biblical interpretation have always been related to the larger debate over the church's reliance on secular learning. For a millennium or so it appeared that Augustine had relieved the church's agony over the use of Roman rhetoric by "baptizing" Cicero in Book 4 of *On Christian Doctrine*. "What has Jerusalem to do with Athens?" Tertullian had asked (with an Athenian rhetorical flourish). Augustine replied, in effect, Why do the pagans get to brandish their persuasive artillery while Christians stand by tongue-tied and unarmed? The question of rhetorical style was revived among the Puritans, whose stern corrective—"plain and perspicuous" English—was itself a carefully crafted form of rhetoric.

In the late 20th and early 21st centuries the old concern with secular methods has reappeared in the debate over technology and religious values. Television can simulate "church" in the family rooms of millions of television viewers. How is this modern communications technique and the popular preaching style it generates to be evaluated over against traditional ecclesiology and the fleshly fellowship of word and table?

In fact, what is the role of "technique" in preaching? Our predecessors endlessly debated the proportions of the human versus divine operations in preaching. Who is really responsible for the sermon? For Puritans such as Jonathan Edwards, the sermon's effectiveness was controlled by the sovereignty of God. Nineteenth-century revivalists such as Charles Grandison Finney vanquished Puritan qualms about human freedom by dimming the houselights and suggesting another form of sovereignty—that of the laws of good theater and the methods of spiritual persuasion. The question, once hotly debated, seldom comes up in pragmatic America.

Nor does the controversy over law and gospel in preaching, at least not as pervasively as it once did. Luther's passion for the gospel ignited the discussion, and the abiding danger of moralism—the deadly confusion of God's grace with the moral correctness of its recipients—will keep the question alive in some form. The discussion of judgment and grace was taken up by Wesley, Edwards, Finney, Barth, Bultmann and many others who attempted to set the rules for their coexistence in the sermon. One still hears echoes of its mighty sense of conflict, its battle against "the powers" of sin, and its radical reliance on God's mercy in African-American preaching and in sermons inspired by liberation theology.

But on the whole, recent interest in narrative preaching has changed the terms of the law-gospel debate. In narrative preaching the mode is less kerygmatic, less existentially decisive, less outraged by evil. The narrative preacher does not explicitly rivet the hearer by focusing on God's judgment in preparation for the gracious word of promise. Instead, many contemporary preachers and homileticians envision the sermon as a means of enrolling the listener in a larger consciousness. Scratch deeply enough into the human condition (by means of the word of God) and you will find intimations of the divine. The sermon is better viewed as an experiential process of discovery than a proclamation, a process whose end is self-recognition, repentance, new vision, and participation in the life of the community. Narrative preaching does not proceed from above. The word does not knife downward through history toward its target as much as it rises from below out of the shared humanity and Christian identity of its hearers.

When narrative preaching is rooted in the biblical story, it opens onto a new and promising way of conceiving the sermon. Generations of liberals were convinced that biblical concepts were hopelessly outmoded; therefore they sought to "translate" the gospel into the familiar terms of morality, psychology and politics. Preachers found themselves on the front line in this endeavor. The liberal project was essentially apologetic in character. It wanted to show the modern world that, far from being incompatible with modernity, the message of Jesus was capable of matching and topping off the best of human aspirations. Postliberal preaching, on the other hand, worries that too much is lost in translation. Between Jesus the eschatological prophet and Jesus the successful life-coach a great gulf is fixed. One had to be crucified, the other does not.

Postliberalism therefore refuses to jettison the "peculiar" language of the gospel, that is, its talk of "sin," "covenant," "grace" and all the rest, but rather finds in this speech the distinctive clues to Christian identity and the community's mission. Such preaching is nourished by the church's rich narrative tradition. Instead of making substitutions for the Bible's key concepts or scavenging for clever illustrations of them, postliberalism tells the story again and again. Thus in its preaching and worship the church is forever learning its own language in order to embody its own story in the world.

Finally, the word of God promises results, and preachers have always wanted to see them with their own eyes. That is human nature. But what is the most appropriate response to the preached word? Is it the life of freedom and service enjoyed by

those who attempt to live out their baptismal covenant? Is it sanctification and the pursuit of holiness, as the Wesleyans preached, or the mastery of personal and social problems as counseled by Harry Emerson Fosdick? Perhaps the results are more immediately and dramatically manifest: the terrors of an Edwards sermon, the conversions of a Finney revival, the ecstasy of a Pentecostal meeting, or the courage to march in threatening places like Selma or Birmingham.

Whatever the answers proposed, the whole company of preachers has this in common: all breathe a longing for the renewal of preaching. In every era we hear voices lamenting the corruption of the pulpit and calling for its reform. No one is satisfied with the status quo.

If the church is to find that renewal, it will find it where it has always experienced it, in its continuous rediscovery of the gospel. Virtually every reform movement in the church—whether the Franciscan, Dominican, Lollard, Brethren, Reformation, Methodist, or that of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference—has meant not only a revival of preaching but a new kind of sermon. But in no case did the redesign work precede the theological earthquake that made it necessary. Neither the New Testament evangelists nor Augustine, Luther or Wesley created new models of preaching for aesthetically motivated reasons. The pressure came from elsewhere. The notion of *ars gratia artis* is as foreign to the great preachers as it is to the folk literature of the New Testament.

“The New Utterance,” as Amos Wilder named the gospel, has always depended on its own inner logic and the demands of the situation for its most effective rhetorical shape. Some sermons last five minutes, some 45. Some are preached beneath the canopied pulpits of great cathedrals, others in storefront halls, hospitals or cemeteries. Some contain poetic evocations of the divine-human encounter, others explain the text in a style plain, natural and familiar. Yet all participate in the gospel and are valid expressions of it.

For years homileticians have sought the perfect glass slipper of form in the hope that, once found, it would rescue and transform dowdy sermons. The many design-schemes that have dominated our generation’s homiletical thinking, as well as more recent theories of culture and group consciousness, cannot produce the renewal promised by the faithful practice of the gospel. For speech grows in the soil of suffering, joy, conflict and hope—the soil of ministry itself. Instead of seeking a form by which to clothe and communicate a religious idea, preachers will eventually ask the more integrated, theological question: What is it about the cross of Christ that

demands this particular expression in this, our peculiar fullness of time? It is this question, and no other, that holds the promise of the renewal of preaching.