

Stories that get to us

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October 18, 2010

*For more commentary on this week's readings, see the [Reflections on the Lectionary](#) page, which includes Modahl's current Living by the Word column as well as past magazine and blog content. For full-text access to all articles, [subscribe](#) to the Century.*

In my [homiletical reading](#) (subscription required) of this week's gospel lesson, I attempted to do two things suggested by former teachers.

First, Charles Rice advised us to put as much energy and imagination into our telling of the biblical account as we put into a narrative of our own creation. So in retelling the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, I tried to include some context. Jesus' hearers knew the details of temple worship; we do not. We assume the tax collector's prayer position was the norm because this is how our parents, Sunday school teachers and pastors taught us to pray. We view the Pharisee's outstretched arms, upturned face and audible prayer to be marks of arrogance. However, his actions reflect the norm in temple worship in Jesus' day.

The preacher can teach all these things in the course of the sermon. However, I think the congregation better hears and understands this information when the preacher folds it into the narrative.

Second, Will Willimon recommends that preachers ask not only what the text means but also what it *does*. Whatever the text does, he says, do that to the congregation. What Jesus' parable did to me this time around was to reveal me as the Pharisee. It worked on me the way Nathan's story of the poor man's lamb worked on King David. It was a sudden and horrifying experience to recognize myself in the Pharisee. I attempted to do the same for those who read the magazine lectionary column.

Of course, this isn't the only thing the parable does. Jesus' parables are thick with meaning and at the same time are porous, offering many points of entry and many

points of contact for our lives. One of the delights in working with texts in preparation for preaching is to discover a new insight or a new application.

Words of judgment are difficult to hear. Actually, I have no trouble hearing how they apply to others. And when the preacher gives a logical explanation of how the law applies to me, I understand it and nod my head in agreement. But it often makes little connection with my heart and even less with the way I live.

This is a hermeneutical gap caused not by the centuries or cultural differences but by our age-old self-defense mechanism. Stories—Nathan's story for David, Jesus' parables, narratives drawn from our culture and experience—have a better chance of getting behind our defenses.

This is important because unless we realize our situation is deadly, we will not understand how good the good news is.