Musical preaching

By Gracia Grindal

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For sermon-prep help, I frequently look at hymns, paintings, novels, poems, etc. Also Bach cantatas. *Meinen Jesus laß ich nicht*, written for the first Sunday after Epiphany, has intrigued me with its interpretation of Luke 2:41-52.

As I was reading through and listening to the cantata on Youtube—I recommend the Nicolaus Harnoncourt performance—I whiled away some time looking at the text of the chorale that Bach uses as the beginning and ending of the cantata. I remembered that the hymn (in English, “I shall not let my Jesus go”) is one of those anagram hymns that so interested the writers of the Baroque age—and that leave us somewhat baffled or at least unimpressed, partly because we are romantics and think such structures inhibit creativity rather than spur it on.

The first line of the hymn is repeated as the last line of each stanza; the first word of the five stanzas make up the phrase *Meinen Jesus laß ich nicht;* and the first letters in each line of the sixth stanza are the first letters of the title of the patron of the writer. While it is arcane, I got to wondering if there was any worth in writing such a hymn today—and whether or not the deep form within the hymn helps make it any richer or more powerful to the unassuming singer.

Does form communicate without our even knowing it? Or does it just delight us when we figure it out? I find it difficult to say, but we do believe in the Incarnation. The shape and form of something should make a difference of some kind. We cannot learn without having some kind of structure to what we are learning, and then storing it so we can remember it later.

To store and recollect content we need images, stories and memorably shaped sentences. The preacher would do well to find such shapes and structures as he or she puts the sermon for the week into some kind of memorable, sensible shape.

Music perhaps is a better way to understand this than poetry is. One can hear in Bach's cantata the thrumming of some anxiety in the bass parts of "Furcht und Schrecken" ("Fear and terror"). Music communicates such structures as part of its art. Someone once said he loved listening to music with an audience because without knowing it they were sitting there doing the math.

Is it possible for the writer of a hymn text to think the same way as a musician and use these same kinds of repetitions and hidden forms to communicate something in the text? Preachers have the musicality of their language. Repetition, which is a musical impulse, can create meanings in the listener too deep to be understood, yet apprehended in some way or another physically.

Much of our preaching and Christian communication seems too dominated by the notion that a sermon is merely information, or a message. If that is all, send an email. But the sermon is a saving event to which people should long to come and hear because something deeper than their intellect or emotions is being engaged.

The dean of American hymn writers and composers, Alice Parker, gave a speech at the latest Hymn Society meeting in Winnipeg. She considered how much of the body is involved in singing a word, and how much better it is when the word sounds right in its context. And how bad it sounds when words in a hymn say something you agree with but sound awful together or unnatural in their stresses.

Structure is something we need to work to do in all our communications, including preaching.