

The trifle of communication

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June 6, 2016

In this time of our church history, when going to a service is no longer a societal expectation and people don't necessarily make business connections in the pews, preaching has become more important. We're working against the general inertia that keeps people in their sheets and reading the newspaper on Sunday morning.

As preachers, we don't just say things. We don't just write sermons and read them off our manuscript, but throughout our careers, we think on various levels about the communication process.

We think of the profound questions. What are the Scriptures saying to us? What is the Spirit trying to communicate? What does the congregation need to hear? What do I need to hear? How can I faithfully bear witness to Jesus Christ? Do my words inspire us to love God and neighbor?

Then we think of the ways in which we communicate. We know that even slight changes will have a huge impact on our message. Where should we stand? Should we use a manuscript or not? Will we use technology? We think about our congregation's traditions. We know that whether our worship community is small or large, formal or intimate, will affect the ways we get the message across.

Also, we need to get behind our own motivations. Do we want to veer from the manuscript because we are unprepared? (If so, this is rarely a good idea. You might get away with it once or twice, but it's a huge gamble that the Spirit will be generous to the lazy. Or worse, you think you're getting away with it, but you're not.)

When we've thought of the what and the how, there's that third level: **the emotional level**. This one is a bit trickier. We have emotionally manipulative sermons, filled with schmaltzy, tear jerker stories that are part of the apocryphal canon of preachers. A seasoned parishioner has heard the story before, she's trying not to roll her eyes, but when she looks around the congregation, she notices people pulling out their tissues.

Or the preacher hasn't quite gone to enough therapy and so he is working out his issues in the pulpit. For the most part, the cliché illustrations are pretty harmless. The therapy session sermons may make a pastor more vulnerable (which isn't always great), but at least they're more human and interesting.

There is a way that we communicate on an emotional level that can be dangerous though. We need to be careful with our hatred and wrath. I haven't experienced this a lot since I moved from conservative churches, but I have felt it on the Internet. It's been said that the Internet is fueled by sex and anger. Our political/religious dialogue can be as well. My hands aren't clean here. I've been blogging for ten years, so I know the fine art of rage writing. I can intuit what's going to be click bait and shared. I know that if I put an important Christian figure down by name, I will get more traction. Anger can be good and important, but sometimes it's hard to tell the difference between prophetic fury and narcissistic rage. I haven't figured it all out so I have to be careful.

Anger and religion can lead to social justice. But anger and religion can also lead to crusades and witch trials. And each time we attack the "other side," they can get stronger. So we have to keep watching, making sure we have the [strength to love](#) in the midst of our righteous indignation.

We need to keep in mind that 1) we're in a time when pastors feel a pressing need to fill the pews and 2) we're learning that hatred keeps passions burning. And so, I'm writing this reminder for myself as much anyone--we will need to keep all three levels of communication in check.