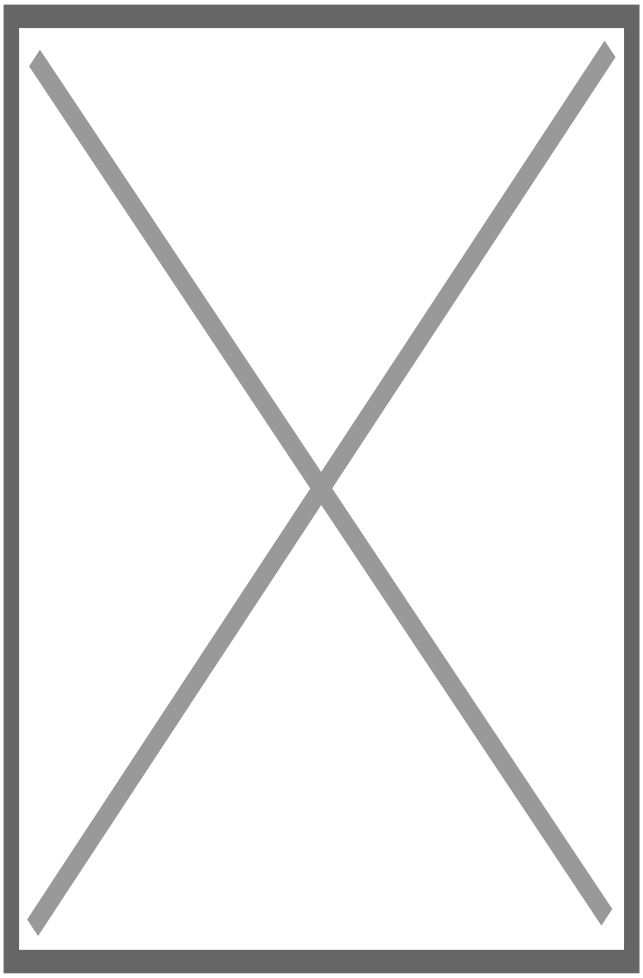
Performing the text

By Barbara Brown Taylor in the December 27, 2005 issue

In Review



The End of Words: The Language of Reconciliation in a Culture of Violence

Richard Lischer
Eerdmans

How shall one preach given the lateness of the hour? This question forms a haunting refrain in Richard Lischer's book, which is based on his Lyman Beecher Lectures at Yale Divinity School. Like the title of the book, the question has more than one meaning. The hour is late because preachers have been preaching the gospel for a very long time now. The hour is late because the world shows no appreciable signs of having embraced the good news of God's peace. The hour is late because language has become so culture-bound and diluted that words stagger under the weight of making meaning. "What does one *say* after a televised beheading?" Lischer asks early on, posing his question in its most graphic form.

He does not hunt for an answer in this book. Instead, he gives the answer on the first page of his preface, where he suggests that worldwide terrorism, war and religious conflict have not neutered the vocation of the preacher but have instead given the ministry of reconciliation "a terrible new urgency."

Lischer builds his case in the four richly theological chapters that follow, treating vocation, interpretation, narration and reconciliation as the four pillars that support the life-saving work of the minister of God's word. Because the world Lischer describes is the world in which all Christians live, and the language he trusts to reconcile the world is the language Christians speak, this book is as relevant for thoughtful laypersons as it is for the pastors and preachers to whom it is chiefly addressed.

Readers of Lischer's previous work will recognize all of his gifts at work in this volume. The voice of the teacher is here, along with the voice of the pastor, the preacher, the scholar and the storyteller. Martin Luther King Jr. is here, along with Barth, Bonhoeffer, Augustine and Luther. But so are Paul Simon, Adrienne Rich, Wendell Berry and James Baldwin, for Lischer's ear has as wide a range as his voice. It is hard to miss the strong chords of Lutheran theology or the influence of Stanley Hauerwas and the Niebuhrs, and this lineage adds to the already strong center of gravity in the book. Lischer's content, like his theme, is weighty. Nothing he says is in danger of flying off the page.

In his chapter on reconciliation, Lischer walks his readers through the three moves of what he calls the reconciling sermon. Those who have paid attention to the preceding chapters may discern in these three moves the pattern of the whole book.

"The reconciling sermon begins with pastoral discernment of the way things are," Lischer writes. In his view, the present predicament of the preacher has a great deal to do with the erosion of language by the mass media, which both overwhelm the senses and reduce the kerygma to one more broken plank floating in a sea of words. As Martin Luther King said of the war in Vietnam, "We have allowed our technology to outrun our theology."

But preachers share responsibility for the way things are. By creating substitutes for the authority of the word of God, by seeking to professionalize its proclamation and by making themselves compulsively available to anyone in need, "time-kept" preachers allow the gospel to be fractured into "a hundred lesser duties." Of particular concern to Lischer are sermon presentations that aim to dazzle listeners with videos, light shows and bulleted lists. Manifesting "a fundamental lack of confidence in the spoken word of God," these media link the sermon with the same technology that rules the world, so that "the new power-symbol is the remote in the shepherd's hand." Lischer makes his case with one withering question. "What would Martin Luther King's 'I Have a Dream' speech look like in PowerPoint?"

At this, the average preacher might be forgiven for demurring that not everyone is as gifted as King. But Lischer's confidence in the spoken word has little to do with the gifts of the speaker and a great deal to do with the power of the incarnate Word. "The sermon, in fact, is Jesus trying to speak once again in his own community," Lischer writes, "but because he has assumed the full extent of our fallibility, the power of his word is hidden and often disregarded by the world."

That is the way things are, but there are two more steps to be taken in a reconciling sermon. The second move occurs when the same pastor who has been chastened by the way things are is nonetheless moved by the hope of peace to tell the truth. This truth-telling includes confessing the moral failings of the church and the deep complicity of Christians in the violence of the world. It also includes witnessing to the church's vitality in Latin America and Eastern Europe, where Christians suffer willingly in the struggle for reconciliation. Finally, it includes claiming the identity conferred by baptism "because who we are in Jesus Christ is as much the truth about us as is our complicity in the sins of the world."

The third phase in a reconciling sermon takes place when the preacher stands up to proclaim the good news in Jesus Christ and offers with it “signs and gestures of reconciliation.” These signs and gestures include the sermon itself, which constitutes “an overarching alternative to physical violence.” By declining to practice pugilism from the pulpit, preachers become conscientious objectors in the war of words. To do this, Lischer admits, will mean parting company with some of the more famous polemicists of the faith, such as Tertullian, Jerome and Luther, but the departure is necessary in a culture of violence. If the language of the reconciling sermon is not true to its subject, then the message of peace is dead on arrival.

In his chapter on narration, Lischer says that the preacher’s job is not to squeeze new meaning from an ancient text but to offer a new performance of the text, “one that will enable its listeners to perform it themselves in their daily lives.” Offering the fainthearted a handhold as they tread such high places, he reminds his readers that the best any preacher can do is to preach *toward* reconciliation. “By consistently gesturing in the direction of reconciliation while at the same time acknowledging its partial and imperfect character,” he says, “the preacher reveals something of the ultimate purpose of the gospel.”

Perhaps the most astonishing claim in *The End of Words* is that “preaching is the ultimate vocation because it will save the lives of others.” Whether the reader is a preacher or a listener, this bold affirmation is bound to strain credulity. To grapple with it at all, one must begin where Lischer begins, with the assumption that “sermons no longer talk about the end, they are signs and emblems of it.” Every week the preacher begins from the end of words, addressing a national cemetery no less dead than the one the prophet Ezekiel addressed. Every time the preacher draws enough breath to repeat God’s promises, the gospel is performed in the valley of dry bones.

My predecessor in the last parish I served was famous for ending his sermons before he was halfway through. If, while he was preaching, he saw eyes glaze or jaws drop open, he would slam his sermon folder shut with such force that all the sleepers awoke with a start. “Well, I can see that this is going nowhere,” he would snarl at his listeners, some of them just coming to. “So we’ll pick up here next time, when you have had a chance to catch up on your rest. Now let us stand and affirm our faith in the words of the Nicene Creed.” True to his word, this fierce preacher would return to the pulpit the following Sunday and pick up where he left off, with no assurance that anything had changed in the church or in the world.

“The ministry of the word,” Lischer says near the end of his book, “is an endless card game played out among people who never stop talking with and caring for one another.” This is the truest definition of preaching imaginable, offered by someone whose love of the game has given scores of others reason to keep coming back to the table.