

More Mysteries, or, Why We Still Come to Church Anyway

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Two years ago, on a brilliantly sunny day in February, I spoke to a small session of this Institute on the subject of preaching. In an address entitled "Behold I Tell You a Mystery: We Shall Not All Sleep," I attempted to initiate a discourse with clergy about preaching, in which the lay voice was not simply a mumbled sentence of praise or criticism given at the church door on Sunday morning, but was instead a participant in a more fully engaged meeting of minds and hearts. I commented at the outset on my claims to a purely lay status, since as far as I knew there had been no clergy in my family since the Civil War. However, I must stand corrected on that point. Mrs. Henrietta Stemmler, now 87 and a resident of Ft. Wayne, has written to tell me that as my grandmother's cousin, she wishes to assure me that one of her sister's grandsons is a Lutheran pastor in Texas, and so I do have a clergy relative after all. I was pretty well floored by this; revelations about one's family background have a way of reordering the way you look at the world--witness Tarzan, Tom Jones, Oedipus, Moll Flanders and so on. So I come before you this time somewhat humbled from my previously proud, purely lay position. I am closer to being one with the clergy, however hard that is to swallow, and thus I cannot take the high and mighty tone that some people said characterized my last talk.

One or two other things contribute to my interest in this conversation with clergy. First, I have been since the age of eighteen closely associated with Valparaiso University, and thus for nearly thirty years some of my best teachers, and my best friends, have been theologians. Most, but not all of these have been clergymen. I took very much to heart the words I heard from Robert Bertram on the first day of my college education, in my first theology class, that he wanted us to become able to think of ourselves as capable of doing theology, that in our classes we would be writing theology in the papers we wrote. Now, you can't say something like that to people and not mean it. I by no means think of myself as an

expert theologian, but I am an amateur--I know something and I care a lot. Secondly, my arrival on this campus coincided with the beginning of worship in the Chapel of the Resurrection, and thanks at least partly to that wonderful resource, my worship life has been extraordinarily rich. I would assume that for Lutherans particularly it is rare to have the chance to worship nearly every day for all those years. But at the point where theology and worship so remarkably and so explicitly meet--the preaching of the Word within the liturgy--I am most engaged and most unhappy. And though I do not claim to be a typical churchgoer, I think I share with that person some fundamental need that brings me here today to speak to you. It is the need to have my lay status in ministry valued and affirmed by the clergy, not simply in the larger world, but within the liturgy itself.

A Great Gulf Fixed

I still do believe that there is (and this seems to me one of the great sorrows about the church) a great gulf fixed between clergy and lay people. It is certainly one of the most serious of all the divisions in Christ's body that I know of, yet one of the least often addressed. And, I believe, it is highly pertinent to any discussion of preaching.

So, since my task today is to pick up from where I left off two years ago, and to carry further the weight of the discussion that I attempted then, let me please begin by quoting from the last paragraph of that talk:

As a laywoman I commend you in your part of that ministry that seeks to set at rest in the love of God the fretful spirits of His anxious children. But I also want to remind you that my participation in it is not the result of your allowing me in. It is rather my own answer to God's call for both of us. When your preaching is more fully informed by that conviction, then the places hurt by suspicions, distrusts, fears, and angers will have a chance of being healed at last.

Since writing those words, I have become all the more convinced that a part of what is wrong between clergy and

laity is a misconstruing of each other's places and tasks, and that such misconstruing, far from being diminished in the liturgy on Sunday, is exacerbated by it. Yes, we laypeople come to church, but often we come, as my title says, "anyway." We come despite the feeling that we have, which so far as I am aware of is never, never expressed openly by those of us who come, though it may be spoken by those who have shaken the dust of the nave from their feet, that our vocation as ministers is lessened by the practices of the liturgy, not enlivened by it. And, since those of us who are liturgically alert are aware of the two prime foci of the service--word and sacrament--it is impossible not to locate the source of our feelings right there. How can we be sent forth by God's blessing to function as active, vibrant individuals in the secular world when our qualities as active, vibrant individuals are not valued within the sacred space and the sacred time of Sunday morning? The ways in which this might happen in the Eucharist I will leave to someone else. My topic today is the ways in which the proclamation of the Word needs to be changed so as to affirm and validate the ministry of the laity in the world.

Let me be most radical right at the beginning. Let me say, not with frivolity at all, but with utter seriousness, that I hope in my old age to see that the standard practice in the church is that sermons, as we now know them, are given just four times a year. In my childhood, I remember, the rationale for the four-times-a-year model for the celebration of what we always used to call "The Lord's Supper" was that to do so more frequently was to cheapen it, to make it commonplace, to diminish its sacred character, and to cause people to regard it too lightly. The then-radical proponents of the once-a-month school argued with these reasons by stating that what was valid and important four times could be valid and important twelve times a year. Now, happily, I find that the appropriate authorities have determined that it is all right to provide me with the opportunity to participate in the Eucharist every Sunday, and at other times in addition. I wonder that the arguments used against every Sunday communion have never, so far as I know, been made against the every Sunday sermon. For I can guarantee that in its present status, the sermon is indeed cheapened, commonplace, its sacred character diminished, and it is cer-

tainly taken lightly by most of those who listen, or rather, who sit politely silent while it is going on.

Better Preachers, Better Listeners

Now what is to be done about this? The standard answer that I am aware of from the lists of hundreds of books about preaching is, "Teach pastors to preach better." It becomes another stick for clergybashing, as I found in some of the responses to my last talk. There I made some suggestions toward better preaching. I said some things about where preaching has to come from, what sermon preparation ought to consist of, what approaches there ought to be to the congregation and so on. In a way, I participated in the standard answer to the question "What can we do about the low status of preaching today?" Like others, I said, "Teach pastors to preach better."

But there is another answer that is sometimes given: "Teach listeners to listen better." And attempts are made at this too. My daughter currently in confirmation class is given what the pastors call "worship reports," and the children call "sermon reports," to fill out. These forms ask that the young person listen carefully and write answers to some very fine points: Where did the preacher remind you of your name as a child of God? Where did the preacher speak about the promise attached to your name? and so on. Imagine my horror one Sunday morning when Kate matter of factly pulled out the sheet after the sermon hymn and began writing things down as--of all people--her godfather began preaching. Though she didn't want me to see (after all the sermon report is their personal response to the preaching), I was appalled at what I *did* see--she was writing her own sermon on the text, but she wasn't listening to his. Briskly she put down what I took to be quite orthodox answers to the questions, based on the text, to which she had evidently listened with some attention. I will just leave this incident here without interpretation; I didn't know what to do with it.

But teaching preachers to preach better, or listeners to hear better--admitting that there might be hope for these methods of improvement even though we haven't seen it--does not really get at the heart of what is wrong with the present prominence of the sermon within the liturgy.

What seems to me most wrong is not that preaching is done badly, but with the profound limitations on what happens and who does it.

A Conversation

On these two points, I would like to refer to two sources: first, on who does it, to the deservedly revered Richard R. Caemmerer, Sr., from his book *Preaching for the Church*.

To this scheme the first Christian churches added readings from the sayings of Jesus in the gospels and from the letters of the apostles. St. Paul counseled Timothy to continue reading these lessons to his people and to link his exhortations and directions for Christian living to these readings. (I Tim. 4:13)

Christians early had the practice of breaking out, after one of those readings, into conversations which included comments or explanations, thanksgivings and exhortation (cf I Cor. 14:26). Such a conversation was termed a *homilia*. [And this is the sentence I want to emphasize:] Soon the leader of the worship began to incorporate what he expected to take place in such a conversation into a message by himself, a one man *homilia*--and thus was born the science and art of "homiletics." It's useful to remember that preaching represents an act in which all worshipers join.¹

Now I would invite you to consider these words carefully as a starting point. Caemmerer reminds his clerical students that the early "leader of the worship began to incorporate what he expected to take place in such a conversation into a message by himself." Just down the page, where Caemmerer addresses the current situation, he warns that "very easily the sermon can deteriorate simply

1. Richard R. Caemmerer, *Preaching for the Church* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1959) 56.

to a message from the preacher to the people, in effect an episode set apart from the portions of the service in which people worship together." Strangely, he does not seem to make the connection that I would instinctively make between the leader and "what he expect(s) to take place in a conversation" and "a message from the preacher to the people ... an episode set apart." How could anything else happen when what one person expects begins to determine the whole of what happens in a conversation? Have you ever been part of a conversation like that, where you know after a brief time that the other person is not listening to you, is not even aware of what your thoughts or your reactions are, but has simply decided on what he expects to take place, and is going ahead with it, come hell or high water? It seems to me that one of the problems with sermons as we typically think of them is that they are just what Caemmerer describes, *one* person's expectations for the conversation that arises out of a hearing of the Word. At this point I want to emphasize one person. I do not want to raise the objection that there should be no leader in Christian worship. I am enough of a German, and enough a lover of liturgy, to desire the order that a leader produces for the liturgy. But perhaps it is the irrepressibly Irish in me that asks, "Why should the leader be the only one to determine 'what is expected to take place' when the lessons are read and listened to, and when those powerful agents begin to enter the minds and hearts of hearers?" When we realize what it is we all of us long for when we are listening to a sermon, it is, I think, that in some really miraculous way, for an instant, whatever we mean when we say "heart," our heart and God's heart are open to each other. The preacher who can show me God's heart, God's desire for me, and let me see without shame and without fear my own heart as the object of that love--that is a preacher.

But who is that preacher to be? Is it of some necessity that he or she be the leader of worship? the comforting visitor of the sick? the fearless spokesperson for the poor? the organizer and chief executive of a large corporate entity? Poets are lousy leaders, but wonderful heartshowers. I believe, you see, that we ought to find the poets and let them preach.

Caemmerer goes on to say of the preacher that he "preaches most of his sermons to the church.... But he is also preaching for the Christians who in that very act are communicating the power of God to one another." It is at this point that I think we must ask ourselves seriously whether we believe that this is what's happening on Sunday morning. Are the preacher's words in any sense my words, opening up to my neighbor the heart of God as this text reveals it and as I understand it? I don't see how this can be, at least unless the pastor has spent some time talking with me or my neighbor about my thoughts and experiences with that text. When I do hear a sermon that sounds like my words, my thoughts, my experiences, it usually is precisely because I have been discussing the subject with one of my friends, or a colleague, or some of the several companions in spiritual growth, who later becomes, on an appropriate occasion, the preacher. And "discussing" is a cold word. Someone with whom I have lived forgiveness, someone who has shared my hurt pride, someone who has known my attempts to be pure in heart--will not that person preach the doctrines of redemption, reconciliation, sanctification to me, and through me to others, with real power?

But how can only one person live all of this with everyone in a parish? It isn't possible. People being what they are will respond differently to different preachers, of course. Some they will feel close to, some will seem to be speaking directly to their experience, some will know and express the truths of the hearer's life. As we presently have sermons then, the productions of only one person's ability and one person's experience, many hearers will have needs that are rarely satisfied by the sermon, since from that one person's utterance they cannot derive anything except a very sterile "agreement" or an intellectual assent to what was said. One way to address this problem is to let more people speak at the time of the liturgy when the proclamation of the word is called for. Why should the pastor, who has many functions within the operations of the parish, and within the structures of the liturgy as well, be the only preacher?

I would guess that in almost any parish, or in any group of worshippers, there is more than one preacher. Perhaps we could think of some ways to let those people

give expression to the word. I am not, by the way, suggesting that the pastor do any less sermon preparation; I am only suggesting that he or she not deliver every one that has been prepared. What would sermon preparation mean if you were to give one, or hear one, four times a year? Caemmerer again, on the specifics of preparation and rehearsal: "At this point we want to face the fact squarely: badly prepared, limply or absent-mindedly delivered sermons are probably worse than nothing."² Amen to that! But is the only answer to the problems of getting really good proclamation of the word, or really good teaching, or really good admonition to get the clergy to read yet more books to tell them how to preach? Why not encourage them to see what powers for preaching are all around them, in the pews?

Narrative

Earlier I said that I had two fundamental criticisms about sermons: the limitations on what happens and who does it. Having talked for awhile about "who does it" let me turn to the other limitation, "what happens." And here I would like to refer to another great voice about preaching whose words we are lucky to have, Walter Wangerin. In an essay called "Preaching"³ he states some important principles:

1. Where religion is concerned, we are a people of the priest. (I think this is overassumed on the part of the clergy, but grant him this point for now.) He says that since people assume that through the priest they will meet God, that unless the priest is careful, they will meet a very limited idea of God, a God contracted and abstracted.
2. God contracted means that the priests have always given the rest of us the idea of a specified God, one who can be met only in certain ways, at certain times, or in

2. Caemmerer, *Preaching* 123.

3. Walter Wangerin, Jr., *Ragman and Other Cries of Faith* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984) 71-82.

certain ceremonies. And people have often been happier to have God controlled like this. We really don't relish the idea of just running into God anyplace--that makes for crazy people.

3. God abstracted means God removed from experiential life and put into analytical structures, into doctrines, into understanding, into an activity of the mind. Now that isn't probably what is intended, not entirely anyway. Of course, no priest (and by this Wangerin means preachers) wants God confined to the minds of the people who listen to sermons. The preacher wants the person to have an encounter with God so powerful that it will send the hearer out singing, jumping for joy, active in pursuit of goodness, dashing to help others.

4. Unfortunately we tend to rely for this connection between God and people on this thing called "sermon," which is closer to lecture than to any other form of discourse we are familiar with. Thus we have the odd circumstance that while the preacher would like to provoke a response from the emotions of the hearers, he or she uses a means least likely to produce those responses. Lectures rarely do that for anybody. Anybody. Even people who lecture and listen to lectures for a living rarely respond with tears, or laughter, or dancing, singing, hugs and kisses, giving presents, or any other signs of being, as we calmly say, "moved." (Of course, I realize only too well that some people may be thinking "Moved? Who wants to do that? I want them to *understand the truth.*" But if you are thinking that, I'm sorry; we're not on the same wave length about this conference. Nobody, as I see it, gets sent forth by God's blessing on the basis of an understanding of certain concepts, however perfectly arranged.)

Wangerin then says that the object of preaching should be to tell the stories that replicate the incarnation, for stories about people "announce God's personal immersion in the events--the bloody events, the insignificant and

humbly common events of the lives of the people."⁴ Wangerin calls on the preacher to let the whole of his or her experience become the sermon:

Tell stories, ye preachers of God. Humble yourselves to make of yourselves a parable.

Because when you do that, you invite, as well, the wholeness of the hearers. Then not only their analytic minds, but their laughter shall be in the pew; and by laughter their lungs and their consternation; their bodies, their sympathy, their emotions, their distress, their inadequacy, their male- and femaleness, their parenthood--their experience!⁵

Wangerin is not the first, and I am not alone, in urging story as vital to preaching. After all, Jesus began a sermon saying "There was a man who had two sons." And in the lessons themselves, we have some powerful demonstrations of the effects of story, a demonstration that was made vivid for me in the readings of the Great Vigil just past. For a number of years it has fallen to me to read the first reading--the creation story from Genesis 1:1 to 2:2. Oh, what a wonderful tale that is to read! That effort to recapitulate vastness by repetition! The plainness of language--light, darkness, day, night, beasts, seeds, trees, grass, male, female--to express the most complex and difficult of concepts. The magnificence of order, progression, ranking, sequence--the establishment of the very idea of creative order itself. And the heart of God, saying his vast eternal "Let there be!" and responding to himself with an almost cosmically wistful "Good, Good, Good!" since there was no one else to say it to Him. And then, of course, we had other great stories: Noah and his salvific creation, Abraham and his son, Moses and the Egyptian army, Ezekiel's dry valley, and that magically euphonious trio, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego! But I digress. As I say, I read the creation

4. Wangerin, *Ragman* 75.

5. Wangerin, *Ragman* 77.

story. Later, because I was being subdeacon, I read the first lesson, from I Corinthians 15. "If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep." Now this is a thrilling statement, and I would not deny that it has power to call to our imaginations, and even to our hearts. But it is an argument, the setting forth of a rational, logical, carefully reasoned progression of thoughts: For if..., then...; but in fact.... For if in y you have consequence A, then in y1 you have consequence A1. And so on, through the "when all things are put in subjection under him, then the son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things under him." Compare this for impact and staying power to "And when the sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome, brought spices so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week..." We respond naturally, instinctively, and emotionally to story. And we must have story at the center of our religious life; we crave it. As Wangerin says

It is not doctrines that comfort us in crisis. Nor are crises like examinations in school.... It is Jesus himself who comes to comfort us, and crises are the dramas that swallow us down whole, as the fish did Jonah."⁶

If my only purpose here today were to encourage better preaching, then I couldn't do better than to read to you the whole of Wangerin's essay (or maybe it is a sermon). But it is not my purpose to scold you for what you are not doing, nor even to encourage you or admonish you to do better. Though I think Wangerin is the most eloquent and the most correct of all the current writing I know of about preaching, his work too assumes that preaching is a clerical ministry. And I am asserting that it is not. At least not exclusively.

6. Wangerin, *Ragman* 78.

A Shared Ministry of Preaching

I believe that we must at least begin to reconsider how the preaching ministry is to be shared between laity and clergy, to start right at the foundations of what we expect to have happen in that part of the liturgy that we specifically call the proclamation of the Word. Of course there are difficulties and obstacles to thinking about this sharing. But if you have, as a preacher, ever felt that your words were simply "a message from the preacher to the people, in effect an episode set apart from the portions of the service in which people worship together," then I would encourage you to think again about your task. Think with us, invite us into your heart. Perhaps it is time to set yourself free from bondage to a practice whose time has passed. Perhaps it is time to share that burden with others who are willing to take up that yoke because it is the one shaped to their talent, to their need to speak. Those of us for whom preaching is but one part of a whole liturgy can be thankful that our view of God is not limited to anyone's words, however eloquent, however sweet and strong.

Why do we come to church despite the frequent failures of the sermon to nourish and sustain us? Because we hunger, we hunger for what might be there. We suspect, perhaps we know, that in the mystery of word and sacrament is our closest hope of knowing God in each others' faces. We know God in the whole of word and sacrament and in the eyes and hands of our sisters and brothers who gather with us there. (And that does include you preachers.) From word and sacrament we are sent forth into a world that needs more than it can possibly need anything else to recognize in our actions and in our words the loving heart of God.

That was the point at which I had intended to end this talk, though I did realize that I wanted something more concrete and specific. Yesterday I realized what that was. I realized the meaning in the story of Katie's sermon report. Look again at what is happening as she composes her sermon. The liturgy has provided her with a text. She has heard that all of her thirteen years even before she knew what it was to hear. The text, the Gospel story, she can turn like a light on her own experience,

and she is old enough to begin to do that. The church has provided her with a form here, literally a piece of paper. The church as congregation, as gathered hearers, does provide us with forms for our proclamation of the word, though I would strongly suggest that we change some of those forms. The church has forms, has provided us with forms as it provided Kate with that one. Her community has provided her with the skills to write; her family has provided her with confidence to trust her mind and her skills; and God has provided her with that mind, with the imagination, with the capacity to turn thought into word, to reach another person. There she sat next to me with her unheard message. Now, one day Katie may be a preacher. Will you be one of those who assign her to the category of "non-speakers" (that is a woman or layperson)? Will you stop her mouth? Or will you be one who works as I will, as I must, to empower her to speak?