

Crafting the Sermonⁱ

- I The shape or form of the sermon is based on the message or content of the sermon but, more than that, the shape or form of the sermon is a way of getting the message heard.
 - a) “The form of a sermon is active, contributing to what the speaker wishes to say and do, sometimes no less persuasive than the content itself.”ⁱⁱ
 - b) Crafting the sermon is an attempt to take seriously the point of contact where the message meets the listener.
- II Determine the focus or central idea of the sermon. Light mist in the pulpit equals fog in the pew.
 - a) One and only one insight.
 - b) Focus Statement: “single sentence that summarizes the thrust of the sermon”ⁱⁱⁱ
 - i) Simple sentence that includes a subject, action verb, and predicate.
 - ii) Good news from God concerning God’s love for the world and God’s will for justice in the world.
 - (1) The subject is normally God.
 - (2) The verb is usually an activity of God.
 - (3) The predicate is usually a benefit or consequence of God’s love and justice.
 - (4) The tone is ordinarily positive, hopeful, and encouraging.
 - iii) Even when the congregation falls under the indictment of the law, the focus statement seeks to show how the Gospel empowers the congregation to move beyond its limitations.
- II Crafting the sermon is giving form to focus.
 - a) Goal is not to get the Gospel *said* but to get the Gospel *heard*.
 - b) Following Walter Brueggemann’s lead, preachers might imagine crafting the sermon as a river that consists of four currents: lamentation, assurance, promise, and invitation. Each of these currents contributes to the sermon’s flow, and should be carefully considered in crafting the sermon.

- i) Lamentation, the first current, calls us to “state what is happening by way of loss in vivid images so that the loss may be named by its right names and so that it can be publicly faced in the depth of its negativity.”
 - (1) Lamentation is different from accusation.
 - (2) Address the loss to God, who is implicated in it. Dare to give voice to the pain, loss, grief, shame, indignation, bewilderment, and rage that the congregation, community and/or world is feeling.
 - (3) Employ extreme images in order to cut through denial and self-deception.
 - (4) While some preachers caution that we should not move through lament too quickly, others warn against wallowing there too long. Some in the European-American community, for example, want to give congregations ample time to name and experience their grief and loss so that these feelings are not minimized or denied. These preachers remind us of the powerful way that naming loss frees and empowers us to move ahead.
- ii) Assurance, the second current, calls the preacher to assert that God is present in our existing circumstances, bringing newness out of seeming defeat.
 - (1) Brueggeman observes that we often fail to notice what a daring act of faith such an utterance is, how blatantly it speaks against and beyond perceived circumstances in order to reconstruct, replace, or redraw the threatened paradigm of meaning. =@
 - (2) Only by faith can the preacher speak and the congregation receive the assurance that God is not the prisoner of circumstance, that God can and will call into existence that which does not exist, to such a degree that both preacher and listeners anticipate what God is about to do.
- iii) The third current, promise, inspires the preacher to paint a picture of God=s promised future, the future that will more fully embody God=s intent for the congregation and, through the congregation, for the whole world.
 - (1) The picture of God=s promised future is concrete, specific, local, and small.
 - (2) Most important, God=s promised future is grounded in God, not in circumstance or in the congregation=s efforts.
 - (3) Employ biblical images.

- iv) Invitation, the fourth current, is the tone with which the preacher calls the congregation to abandon their despair and live the promise.
 - (1) When inviting people to respond, it is more effective to give examples than either abstractions or absolutes.
 - (2) When outlining the results of our efforts, it is more honest to identify possibilities than certitudes.
 - (3) Once again, be concrete, specific, local, and small when inviting people to respond so that they are eager and confident, rather than reluctant and overwhelmed.
- v) While all four of these currents need to be considered when crafting every sermon, the emphasis or primacy that each takes in a given sermon varies. Preachers may decide to leave one or more currents out of a sermon, but this should always be a carefully considered decision.

III Sermon Design

- a) There are distinct forms or structures for crafting a particular sermon. Yet, there is no one canonical form for sermons: central image, story or narrative, binary oppositions, speaking against the text.
- b) The design selected or created must be congenial not only to the Gospel, but also to the ways human beings order, understand, and appropriate reality.^{iv}
- c) Generally, inspiring works better than directing; exploring is better than defining.
- d) Consider your audience.
 - i) The primary audience for preaching is generally the faith community.
 - (1) The preacher should therefore consider the forms of sermons that the congregation is accustomed to and even appreciates. While preachers should not automatically give the congregation what it wants, they should recognize that introducing a new or unfamiliar sermon form adds another variable into the preaching event. People may embrace or discount the message based solely on the form the sermon takes.
 - (2) The preacher should also anticipate how the congregation feels about the message and will respond to the sermon.
 - ii) While the gathered congregation is the primary audience, preachers must never lose track of who is overhearing the sermon. In crafting the sermon, preachers should be mindful of as diverse of a community as possible so that



the shape of the sermon aims to address and speak for everyone. This will keep the sermon's focus on the world and mission.

e) Examples of Sermon Forms or Structures: simple techniques that have demonstrated that they can carry the burden of truth with clarity, thoughtfulness, and interest.^v

i) Inductive Reasoning

(1) Move from the particular to the general.

(2) Some preachers argue that framing the sermon as a story or moving from the particular to the general makes the connection of the congregation=s situation and God=s story of salvation more accessible and apparent. For these preachers, a story sermon makes the message more memorable, helps people to see the situation in new ways, leads the congregation to imagine new possibilities and responses to its situation, and calls the congregation to enter into an experience rather than receive information.

(3) Telling a story or moving from the particular to the general is a better approach when the sermon needs to change minds or move people to a different understanding and response.

ii) Deductive Reasoning

(1) Move from the general to the specific.

(2) Other preachers contend that a thematic approach to preaching-- announcing the point of the sermon and then drawing out the implications in ways relevant to the congregation=s situation--is the clearest way to bring the message home.

(3) Laying out a theme and building on it works best when the congregation agrees with the premise.

iii) Definition - Name and then define.

(1) Take seriously the truth about mystery--"a mystery can be pointed to, hinted at, even glimpsed, but it cannot be defined or exhausted."^{vi}

(2) Use images rather than syllogisms.

(a) Again, in using images, take seriously the truth about mystery; namely, that no one image can hold and contain the full meaning.

(b) Recognize and acknowledge the limits of an image or better yet, rather

than selecting a single image, unravels image after image in order to lift up different aspects and dimensions in order to plumb the depth of meaning.

iv) Move from problem to solution.

(1) Outline humanity's problem and then describe God's solution to that problem.

(2) Make certain to correctly identify the problem and concretely express the solution.

v) Progressing from the lesser to the greater

vi) Flashback

(1) Move from the present to the past and then return to the present.

(2) Biblical "flashback" places the hearers in a situation and identifies their experience with that of a biblical character. The sermon then flashes back to the biblical character's story, retelling it in such a way that the character's experience becomes the hearers' experience.

IV Enriching the Structure

a) Language

i) In preaching, there are two types of language.

(1) Informational language is designed to convey information. The language used to convey information is characterized by simplicity, accuracy, and straightforwardness.

(2) Experiential language is designed to generate experience, feelings, and memory.

(a) Specific and concrete.

(b) Appeals directly to all of the senses--seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, tasting

(c) Has an emotional content such as anxiety, disappointment, wonder, joy, curiosity, and doubt.

(d) Employs images rather than propositions.

(3) In preaching

- (a) The amount of experiential language far surpasses the amount of informational language
 - (b) Informational language is used in service to the experiential. While experience is generally evoked in order to assist hearers in understanding an idea, a theory, or a concept, the opposite is true in preaching. Informational language is provided to assist the hearers in exploring, clarifying, understanding, and appreciating their experience.
- ii) Exclusive language of any kind (language used exclusively) theologically limits rather than expands experience. It also “splits consciousness” as it takes the hearer somewhere other than where the sermon is going.
- iii) Be careful how you use the pronouns *I*, *you*, *they*, and *we*. Say what you mean!
- iv) Ask, what is my theological perspective when I use the verbs “should” and “must”? Ask, What happens if/when we won’t/don’t?

b) Description

- i) The goal of description is to create in one’s hearers the experience of the subject-matter. This purpose is grounded in the conviction that a sermon is not only to say something but to do something.^{vii}
- ii) Description takes seriously the power of images to effect deep change in people, lift them into truth, and move them beyond themselves.
 - (1) “If we want to change someone’s life from non-Christian to Christian, from dying to living, from despairing to hoping, from anxious to certain, from corrupted to whole, we must change the images, the imaginations of the heart.”^{viii}
 - (2) In order to create new attitudes and behavior, images must be replaced, and this comes only gradually, by other images. Images are therefore necessary for removing from the mind inadequate, erroneous, and distorted attitudes and behavior.^{ix} Here we are speaking of the power of images “to effect the deepest change possible, a change in life orientation, the theological journey of conversion.”^x
 - (3) Thomas Troeger writes of preachers building their sermons so that “listeners can step securely from image to image, from story to story, and thus climb up into the truth of their lives.”^{xi} For Troeger, the preacher’s use of images makes possible a communal ascent into union with Truth.
 - (4) Walter Brueggemann reminds us of the power of images to move us

outward by embodying an alternative vision of reality and giving us another world to enter.^{xii} “The more we turn to the picture language of the poet and the storyteller, the more that we will be able to preach in a way that invites people to respond from their heart as well as from their head.”^{xiii}

iii) Guidelines for Description

- (1) Draw on biblical themes and imagery.
- (2) Characters, actions, and settings all receive attention.
- (3) Descriptions are made with an economy of words and are therefore incomplete.

c) Illustration

- i) In preaching, illustrations are stories, images, and anecdotes that are used to carry the message of the sermon. Specifically, illustrations are the means by which the preacher uses the familiar to introduce or explain the unfamiliar.^{xiv}
- ii) Draw upon three kinds of illustrations: biblical illustrations, cultural illustrations, and natural illustrations.
- iii) The point of analogy between the thought and the image must be clear.^{xv} Do not tell us why you using this illustration, i.e., “the moral of the story is,” but give us clues as to how we are to use it. If you need to set it up at length, don’t use it.
- iv) The illustration should not overshadow the message or the temptation will be to abandon the text in order to preach on the illustration.

d) Use of media illustrations

- i) Proponents of media in preaching argue that it serves three purposes:
 - (1) Summarizes and visually presents sermon content.
 - (2) Provides the congregation a common experience from which the preaching can draw.
 - (3) Facilitates emotional knowing.
- ii) Ask: What is the theological foundation for the use of media in preaching? How does the use of media “fit” in your theology of preaching?
- iii) Recognize the dynamics of using media - Wabash Center for Teaching and

Learning

- (1) In the language of the culture
 - (2) Introduces another participant in the preaching event
 - (3) Positive response forestalls critical thinking.
 - (4) Media fosters imitative, secondary reflection.
 - (5) Power Point transforms preaching into instruction. We inform rather than form.
 - (a) One-way communication
 - (b) Hearers more passive
- iv) The use of media is as illustration not text. Sermons are not based on film clips. Like all illustrations, the media used grows out of the message and are not imposed on it.
- (1) Recognize that people get more out of media than you intend them to. Recognize the greater context of the clip.
 - (2) Do it well or don't do it.
 - (3) After a week of media, some hearers (of all ages) are looking for Sunday to be something different.
 - (4) Congregations do well is produce as well as project media.
- e) Tone.
- i) Tone is especially important in overcoming the burdens of communication, those things that the listeners bring to the message in terms of knowledge, attitude, feeling and prior experience.^{xvi}
 - ii) Explore the message, how the preacher feels about the message, the anticipated response to the message--audience analysis, and the occasion.

V Craddock's Qualities Commonly Held to be Desirable in Sermons

- a) These qualities to be sought in preaching are "comprehensive terms, few in number but specific enough to release and govern our creativity."^{xvii} They are characteristics of a message "congenial to the gospel, to the listeners, to the context, and to sound principles of communication."^{xviii}

b) Good News

- i) Name with equal vigor Sin and Grace, Law and Gospel, Cross and Resurrection, judgment and mercy, then fall on the side of grace.
- ii) The concreteness and intensity must match.
- iii) Need a Moment of Deliverance.
- iv) Include a clear and unambiguous statement of the Gospel. It is not enough for the sermon to mouth the words. The sermon must mean the Gospel. That is, the sermon proclaims the Gospel as good news that means something to these hearers.

c) Unity leads us to look for a simple, affirmative statement that serves as a unifying theme or governing idea and provides the direction of the sermon.

d) Ecclesial Consciousness is an understanding of the ways that the sermon is set within the tradition of the believing community.

- i) Tradition includes all those factors that shape the continuing life of the people of God.
- ii) The believing community includes not only the congregation, but the life of the universal Church, past, present, and future.

e) Recognition

- i) The ways that sermons are structured to enable the hearers to recognize in the preaching their own experience, their own confession of sin and repentance, their own affirmation of faith, their own vision and hope, and their own burst of praise.
- ii) Tools used to create recognition include
 - (1) Conveying information the congregation needs
 - (2) Giving a different perspective on the familiar
 - (3) Including and omitting details
 - (4) Presenting the familiar with interest and enthusiasm
 - (5) Giving the hearers a voice in the sermon by including what they want to say--their faith and their doubt, their joy and their disappointment. Techniques include asking questions, putting the hearers' likely reactions into words, and raising their objections,

f) Identification

- i) Identification is a “courtship, however roundabout,” reminding us that the “act of persuasion may be for the purpose of causing the audience to identify itself with the speaker’s interests; and the speaker draws on identification of interests to establish rapport between himself and his audience.”^{xix}
- ii) Craddock asks, “How do we draw and hold the listeners in the bond of identification so that the message may do its work on mind and heart?”
- iii) Identification is grounded in experience.
 - (1) Experience of the pastoral relationship.
 - (2) Experience of the preacher as person.
- iv) Tools to create identification.
 - (1) Both in content and in structure, the sermon is a journey
 - (2) Give primary attention to the specific and particular rather than the general and theoretical

g) Anticipation

- i) Anticipation involves the tools used by the preacher to shape a sermon that creates and sustains expectation so that the message is not only presented but also heard.
- ii) Creating anticipation is the primary burden of movement in the sermon. In order to create anticipation, the preacher must know the end toward which the sermon will move and take great care in crafting the journey to get the listeners to that end.^{xx}

h) Intimacy

- i) Intimacy involves the tools that the preacher uses to establish and maintain a personal relationship with the hearers.
- ii) Intimacy is maintained by the ongoing relationship between the preacher and hearers.
- iii) Tools used in crafting the sermon include direct address, questions, and a familiar tone.
- iv) Tools used in delivering the sermon to create and maintain intimacy include

attitude, eye contact, and an oral, conversational style.

i This lecture is based on Satterlee, *Ambrose of Milan's Method of Mystagogical Preaching*, pp. 241-282; *When God Speaks through Change: Preaching in Times of Congregational Transition*, pp. 41-66.

ii Craddock, *Preaching*, p. 172.

iii Allen, *Preaching the Topical Sermon*, pp. 63-64.

iv Craddock, *Preaching*, p. 171.

v Craddock, *Preaching*, p. 176.

vi Harmless, *Augustine and the Catechumenate*, p. 367.

vii Craddock, *Preaching*, p. 200.

viii Achtemeier, *Creative Preaching*, p. 24.

ix Craddock, *Preaching*, p. 201.

x Wallace, *Imaginal Preaching: An Archetypal Perspective*, p. 17.

xi Troeger, *Creating Fresh Images for Preaching*, p. 30.

xii Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet*, esp. pp. 79-110.

xiii National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Fulfilled in Your Hearing*, p. 25.

xiv Craddock, *Preaching*, p. 204.

xv Craddock, *Preaching*, pp. 204-205.

xvi Craddock, *Preaching*, p. 182.

xvii Craddock, *Preaching*, p. 182.

xviii Craddock, *Preaching*, p. 182.

xix Craddock, *Preaching*, p. 163.

xx Craddock, *Preaching*, p. 167.