

The Preaching Event¹

Why Delivery is Essential to Effective Preaching

- I Essential to Effective Communication: Studies show that what we say is but a small part of effective communication.
 - a) According to Bergan Evans of Northwestern University, we speak about 20,000 words a day. However, the speaking of those 20,000 words only takes about 25 minutes. “All the rest of the time [the speaker] spends communicating with others is done by nonverbal means. It is also true that the eye is at times more efficient than the ear in terms of the amount and specificity of the information it can collect.”²
 - b) Words by themselves do not automatically have meaning for the hearer, or at least not the meaning that the speaker intends.
 - i) Words and phrases get assigned meanings, very largely, by the nonverbal response of communicators to their own words.
 - ii) Accuracy of meaning for hearers grows to the degree that they perceive a consistency of the speaker and the speaker's message. Meaning for hearers grows to the degree to which they see speakers incarnate their message.³
 - iii) Furthermore, words alone do not move listeners to change or to act. While the message communicates, the manner inspires. Delivery calls the passions to the aid of words.⁴
- II Delivery is Essential to God: God knows that how one communicates is as important as what one says.
 - a) The word of God is living and active. Neither God nor God's word can be packaged but must be experienced.
 - b) In the fullness of time, God came in the person of the Son (Galatians 4:4.). Today God's Spirit comes to us in word and sacrament.
 - i) Sermons, then, are not mere words. They are events, moments when God's presence, grace, and power are experienced.⁵
 - ii) Preaching involves the whole person both of the preacher and the listeners, the liturgical context, and the physical space.
 - iii) To neglect these elements is to reduce preaching to a text or manuscript.

Essential Components of Effective Sermon Delivery

I The Listeners

- a) The listeners are not only influenced by the nature and occasion of the preaching event, they also bring to that event personal and social factors that influence both how they hear the sermon and the preaching itself.
- b) What kind of listeners are these? What is the congregation's attention span? Are these active, attentive, interested, and involved listeners? What role does listening to sermons play in this culture? Does the congregation have high expectations of preaching and of the preacher? What is the pastoral relationship? How highly invested is the congregation in the message?
- c) When people expect to hear a good preacher, they listen carefully and, due in great part to the fact that they are listening carefully, they hear a good preacher.
- d) Pay attention to their nonverbal feedback!

II The Preacher - The preacher is the incarnation of the message as well as the bearer of it.

- a) **Attitude** – What is your attitude toward preaching, your call, these people, and this message? (Tune in next week for “A Theology of Preaching,” when all your questions will be confounded!)

b) Character of the Preacher

i) William Willimon argues that the preacher's chief homiletical-moral task is to be yoked so securely and joyously to the word that in the process of the proclamation of the word, we become the word, and it dwells in us richly.⁶

ii) Walter Burghardt claims that preachers are most strongly yoked to the word and, therefore, preach best when they are suffering servants.⁷

(1) Suffering charges our words with fresh power because we are uncommonly aware that of ourselves we can do nothing, that if these words are to strike fire, it is the Lord who must light the flame.

(2) Suffering servants do the most difficult thing Christ asks of us, entrusting their whole selves to the Lord who alone can change hearts through our tongues.

(3) We come through more effectively, more passionately because we are sharing more intimately in the passion of our Lord and of our sisters and

brothers.

- c) **Habits** - More obvious than the effect that the quality of the preacher's life has on sermon delivery is the influence exerted by the quality of the preacher's habits of sermon preparation.

i) Craddock says that, "the minister is prepared by the study and reflection that has gone into the sermon and by the prayer in which the sermon has been bathed."⁸

(1) Disciplined, weekly study that is based on honesty and humility about what the text says and does not say

(2) Confidence in the ability of God to make our congregations worthy to hear God's Word

(3) A weekly willingness to allow the Word to devastate the preacher before it lays a hand on the congregation. This calls us out of the study to be about ministry.

(a) Burghardt is correct that "sheer study is not enough."⁹ Preachers must know God, God's people, and the world as well.

(b) Additionally, preaching requires balance. The preacher is prepared for effective sermon delivery by carving out some time to get distance and perspective on a vocation that is emotionally demanding.

d) **Style and Method of Delivery**

i) Preachers must decide whether they will deliver their sermons extemporaneously, from memory, from notes or an outline, or from a manuscript.

ii) Our emphasis on the importance of writing in the preparation of a sermon does not in any way imply that sermons should normally be read. Writing is a means to arrive at good organization, clarity of expression, and concreteness.

iii) Making value judgments about the use or non-use of manuscripts or other notes may be more harmful than helpful. Preachers should ask, what is the most effective method for liberating both myself and the listeners so that this message will be heard? Both preaching from memory and reading from a manuscript are skills that need to be cultivated.

iv) Whether or not we actually take a manuscript with us to the pulpit will depend on a number of factors

- (1) the nature of the gathering (very formal or more informal)
 - (2) how familiar we are with our own material
 - (3) how apprehensive we feel about forgetting something essential.
- v) It is wise not to be trapped into using the same method for every sermon on every occasion.

e) **Voice**

- i) Craddock correctly assumes that the slightest problem with the speech mechanism will send the preacher to the professionals at a speech and hearing clinic, and that the preacher has some routine of speech exercises.
- ii) Three goals of the voice:
- (1) Responsiveness. In order for the voice to be responsive, the preacher must have a message, something to say, something that moves, motivates, and makes a demand on the preacher.
 - (2) Clarity in voice and speech involves precise articulation and begins with clarity of thought.
 - (a) Ideas and images must be perceived clearly, and also the manner and expression of these ideas and images must be conceived definitely.
 - (b) Preachers should not hurry, but give thoughts a pause for reflection. Such patience results in better articulation for the preacher and better understanding for the listeners.
 - (c) Finally, preachers should use a wide range of vocal variety, mindful that the purpose of vocal variety is to speak with an inflectional pattern that evidences concern about thoughts and about how they are heard by those who must comprehend and react to them.

f) **Nonverbal communication**

- i) “Words expect both vocal response and physical action.”¹⁰ The preacher therefore needs to respond to the demands of the preaching moment with body, as well as with mind and voice.
- (1) If preachers do not respond in a physically appropriate way, they can be assured that what the body is saying—or failing to say, through

noninvolvement--is what will be "heard."¹¹ Preachers can also be assured that the voice will not sound as clear and intense as it might.

(2) The task of the preacher is to say something with their bodies appropriate to the words they are speaking and to their purpose in speaking them.

(a) The visual aspects of nonverbal communication should not draw attention to themselves.

(b) All that preachers do should appear natural, unobtrusive, and suitable for promoting our own and our congregation's listening.

ii) Gestures

(1) Gesture and gross movements effectively suggest the intensity of speaker's basic moods and attitudes toward their subject matter and those with whom their subject matter is being shared.

(2) If the center--area just below the breast bone--moves in the direction of a specific gesture, that gesture is perceived as having some strength. If the center does not move in the direction of the gesture, the gesture appears rather weak and halfhearted.

(3) Preachers can learn to develop gestures by observing good gestures, teaching their unconscious mind the necessity of gesturing, and telling descriptive stories and using all the gestures they can to animate them, remaining conscious of what they are doing with their hands.

iii) Face

(1) The face communicates specific emotions and "affect blends."

(2) The most important function of facial expression in preaching is to enable preachers to indicate as fully and as appropriately as possible the full range of their responses to the experiences evoked in their sermons, so that their listeners can react empathically to what they say.

(3) While it is possible to overwhelm people with facial expression, for most preachers, the neutral mask is pervasive. Listeners associate this mask with sluggish or careless articulation.

iv) Eye Contact serves three purposes.

(1) Makes listeners feel that they are being addressed and that their presence counts.

- (2) Eye contact provides preachers with feedback from their hearers so essential for effective preaching.
- (3) Indirect eye contact, focusing on a thought, may suggest with the imagination either that the preacher sees something in front of her or that attention is turned inward on the self.

III The Liturgy and Occasion

- a) The liturgy and occasion impact sermon delivery in three ways:
 - i) Prepares the preacher to preach and congregation to listen
 - ii) Sets the context in which the preaching event takes place
 - iii) Offers the first opportunity for the community to respond to the sermon in prayer, praise, action, and mission.
- b) On the one hand, sitting alone with the order of service for a while the evening before will be an important time for the preacher. On the other, the sermon will neither be destroyed by nor dependent upon uncertain variables in the service.
- c) I have more to say in the lecture “Preaching and Liturgy: Word and Sacrament”

IV The Architectural Setting

- a) The conflicting demands of liturgical celebration often result in worship spaces that are not conducive to preaching.
- b) The space in which preaching occurs has the power to either enhance or detract from effective sermon delivery.¹²
 - i) The ideal arrangement for preaching is a rectangular “shoebox” space no wider than 75-80 feet in which the pulpit is positioned at one end of the shoebox with the congregation facing it.
 - ii) Such a space contradicts other demands put on a contemporary worship space such as the desire to cultivate and reflect a greater sense of community, the liturgy’s requirement that the assembly not only listen but sing, speak, move, and respond.
 - iii) Preachers need to spend time in the pulpit prior to the worship event in order to accommodate the particularities of the space.
- c) **Acoustics:** Most obviously, the worship space impacts the preaching event by

its acoustics.¹³

- i) Determining “good acoustics” for preaching is a matter of personal taste-- power and grandeur or warmth, intimacy, and tenderness? Vocal expression or hearing every word without difficulty? Natural acoustics at the expense of some volume and clarity in order to avoid speech that sounds canned or artificial or the volume, clarity, and ease of listening that sound reinforcement provides? What is the preacher’s vocal ability (or lack thereof) and desire to sound a certain way?
- ii) Determining and creating the “best” acoustics for preaching is a process unique to every liturgical space and every gathering of worshipers.

d) **Pulpit** (ambo or reading desk)

- i) A single “place of the Word” is preferable to a pulpit for the ordained and a lectern for the laity.
- ii) For best acoustics, the pulpit should be centrally located and highly elevated because the greatest concentration of sound energy from an untrained voice projects forward and down at a slight angle. From an elevated position, sound is projected more efficiently and uniformly.
- iii) While a highly elevated, canopied pulpit may be the best acoustically and may afford the Word of God a prominent place, for many people such a pulpit may also symbolize a hierarchical church, domination by the clergy, and the removal of the Word of God from the people.
- iv) Whether preachers use the pulpit or preach from the aisle depends upon congregational expectations, the preacher’s preparedness, comfort, and sense of authority, the message, and the occasion.

e) **Sound Amplification System**

- i) One consequence of the state of technology of our stereos and movie theaters is that natural acoustics sound unnatural because the sound lacks the volume and clarity that we are accustomed to.
- ii) A sound system should reinforce natural sound in such a way that listeners become aware of the sound system only when it malfunctions. Otherwise, the volume and quality of reinforced sound distract from the subtlety and naturalness of worship. A tremendous difference between the natural and reinforced acoustics of a space creates a discontinuity between what worshipers see and hear. Stated simply, a cathedral should not sound like a country church and a country church should not sound like a cathedral. In

- employing a sound system, the goal is to create a balance between natural acoustics and the clarity provided by sound reinforcement.
- iii) Sound systems are very personal. What works well for the preacher may not work well for the visiting preacher, and what works well for the visiting preacher may not work well for the untrained voices of lectors, and assisting ministers. A sound system must be friendly to all users.
 - iv) Be aware that many congregations have a “sound guy” whose express purpose in coming to church is to play with the sound system.
 - v) **Microphones:**
 - (1) Large, imposing microphones minimize listeners’ view of the preacher.
 - (2) Avoid the temptation to shout directly into large microphones, creating an unnatural sound.
 - (3) Be certain that the microphone is placed in such a way that you are able to move head and body and the microphone will still pick up what is being said. Also, make certain that the microphone is placed so that it is not blocked when a Bible is placed on the reading desk and so the sound of rustling papers and turned pages is minimized.
 - (4) Be especially careful of wireless microphones.
 - f) The **atmosphere or ambiance** created by the worship space also affects sermon delivery.
 - i) Is this a country church, a chapel or a cathedral? Preaching in Augustana Chapel is different from preaching in Rockefeller Chapel.
 - ii) The feelings and memories that the faith community associates with the space affect preaching by the influence they exert on both the listeners and the preacher.

V Concluding Thought

- a) The best way to improve sermon delivery is for preachers to listen to their own sermons. Preachers should allow themselves to hear the claim made upon them in their sermons, for the message has the power to disclose new ways of being and acting.
- b) Preachers accomplish this by putting themselves at the disposal of everything in the sermon that possibly can call for response—the ideas, words, figures,

anecdotes, and stories that make it up. See, hear, taste, smell, and feel the images.

- c) Read yourself into the situation. Respond appropriately to what your sermon may expect of you and your hearers, and sermon delivery becomes a matter of helping the hearers to re-experience that claim.

¹ This lecture is found in published form in Craig Alan Satterlee, *Ambrose of Milan's Method of Mystagogical Preaching*, A Pueblo Book (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2002), pp. 282-304.

² Robert L. Benedetti, *The Actor at Work* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1970), p. 19.

³ Cf. Rob Anderson and Veronica Ross, *Questions of Communication: A Practical Introduction to Theory*, Second Edition (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), Ch. 2, esp. pp. 63-67; Ch. 4, esp. pp. 171-176; Zeno Vender, "Meaning" in *International Encyclopedia of Communications*, Erik Barnouw (ed.) (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), Vol. 3, pp. 1-5; Harms, *Power From the Pulpit*, p. 28.

⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 31.

⁵ Mary Catherine Hilbert, *Naming Grace: Preaching and the Sacramental Imagination* (New York: Continuum, 1997), pp. 46ff.

⁶ William H. Willimon, "The Preacher as an Extension of the Preaching Moment," in *Preaching on the Brink: The Future of Homiletics*, ed. Martha J. Simmons (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), p. 170.

⁷ Burghardt, *Preaching: The Art and the Craft*, p. 117.

⁸ Craddock, *Preaching*, p. 212.

⁹ Burghardt, *Preaching: The Art and the Craft*, p. 59.

¹⁰ Bartow, *The Preaching Moment*, p. 37.

¹¹ See Julius Fast, *Body Language* (New York: M. Evans and Company, Inc. 1970), pp. 5, 18, 173. Although this is a popular work, it offers helpful insights into the important role that body language plays in preaching.

¹² See James F. White and Susan J. White, *Church Architecture: Building and Renovating for Christian Worship* (Akron: OSL Publications, 1998), pp. 26-28.

¹³ See Craig A. Satterlee, "Preaching and Acoustics," *Environment and Art Letter* 12 No. 3 (May 1999): 30-33.