

Toward A Theology of Preaching¹

- I. The Christian Church is first and foremost a worshiping community.
 - A. It is “the assembly of all believers among whom the Gospel is preached in its purity and the holy sacraments are administered according to the Gospel” (Augsburg Confession, VII).
 - B. When Christians gather to worship, the most important symbol of Christ is the assembly. While Word, table, and font create the assembly and call it to do its work, preaching, baptism, and Eucharist cannot exist without calling an assembly into being (Lathrop, *Holy People*, 82).
 - C. The assembly, and not any individual or group, celebrates and is responsible for the proclamation of the Word, the formation of the community through baptism, and the celebration of Holy Communion.
 1. The congregation assembles in God=s presence, hears the word of life, baptizes and remembers Baptism, and celebrates the Holy Supper@ (*The Use of the Means of Grace*, 6A).
 2. Preaching, like the entire liturgy, therefore, is an action of the whole people of God. All participate; none are spectators. Each contributes for the benefit of all. By calling forth the gifts of each and requiring the participation of all, Christian worship forms the assembly to be the Body of Christ in the world.
- II. Like all human social activities, the Christian assembly requires leadership roles, assigned responsibility with corresponding authority and accountability, in order to carry out its work.
 - A. One way the liturgy defines the parts of its ritual action is that different people perform different functions. The liturgy also uses variety in leadership to maintain the congregation’s interest and involvement. More important, a variety of leadership roles in worship reflects the assembly’s identity as the Body of Christ.
 - B. While all in the assembly are made equal in baptism, everyone in the assembly is not the same with respect to abilities and gifts. Rather than manifesting false equality, which suggests that everyone should do everything and that no one should do what everyone cannot do, Christian liturgy lifts up the New Testament understanding of the Church as the Body of Christ, richly invested by God with a variety of gifts (1 Corinthians 11-14). Christian worship seeks to utilize the

¹ Much of this lecture is published in Craig A. Satterlee, *Presiding in the Assembly*, A Worship Handbook, Augsburg Fortress, Minneapolis, 2003. It continues to evolve in the intervening years.

different abilities represented in the congregation. It gives space and attention to the various gifts of the people so that every member of the assembly celebrates the liturgy according to their calling, gifts, and abilities (1 Corinthians 12: 4-7).

- C. Thus, Christian liturgy does not envision the same person leading the assembly in every part of the liturgy. Christian liturgy does not envision anyone celebrating the liturgy on behalf of the assembly. At the same time, Christian liturgy does not envision the chaos and confusion that result from everyone doing everything.
- D. In celebrating the gifts and abilities within the assembly, some serve as readers of Scripture, cantors, musicians, and leaders of prayer. Some serve as ushers and greeters; others prepare and serve at the altar. Many serve as the common voice of the assembly, proclaiming the Word through hymns, liturgy and creed, and enacting the Word by offering, praying, greeting one another with the peace of Christ, and receiving that same Christ in the Holy Supper. Within every gathering of Christians for worship, one serves by preaching in the assembly.
- E. Unlike many other human social activities, the Christian assembly does not understand any of these leadership roles as superior or inferior to another. Instead, all are subordinate to the assembly because, in Christian worship, no leader can function without the assembly's consent, permission and blessing. Therefore, like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, the members of the assembly serve one another with whatever gift each has received (cf. 1 Peter 4:10).

III. The preacher is, therefore, the servant of the assembly.

- A. As the assembly's servant, the preacher's ministry is marked by mutuality and reciprocity, as well as competence. As one who serves in the stead and place of Christ (Apology to the Augsburg Confession, VII and VIII), there is no place in the preacher's ministry for dominance or preeminence.
- B. Since their authority to preach rests in the assembly they serve, preaching ministers take their place in the assembly with an appropriate sense of humility. Their ministry is contextual, collegial, and communal. More than doing things "correctly," preachers are called to function in ways that encourage the entire assembly to participate in and take responsibility for proclaiming God's Word. Thus, the preacher's style, presence, and way of being facilitate the assembly celebrating the liturgy as the showing forth of the Reign of God.
- C. Preachers serve individuals within the congregation. Preachers also serve the congregation as a corporate body.

1. In fact, the baptismal identity of the Christian assembly overshadows individual authority and status. All are united in the Body of Christ; all are equal. In an important way, each member of the assembly becomes anonymous in favor of all, the larger, encompassing identity within which one finds oneself (Adams, *Shaped by Images*, 29).
 2. An essential way the preacher ministers to the assembly as a whole is by giving life to the corporate ministry of the Body of Christ, which the liturgy seeks to demonstrate and celebrate. Preachers understand that, the more richly exemplified the congregation's ministry is in the liturgy, the more well formed the congregation itself will be. One who preaches and presides in the assembly, therefore, strives to empower the ministries of others and the participation of the whole people of God.
 - a. The preacher/presider serves other ministers by cultivating a team-making process, attending to the value and the specific contribution of each member, and choreographing or orchestrating their ritual interaction.
 - b. The preacher/presider facilitates shared leadership by making others feel comfortable, discreetly yielding the focus as other ministers carry out their appointed functions, and by guiding, prompting when necessary, and leading the congregation by example to attend to the action. One who preaches and presides in the assembly listens well as others read, prays and attends to prayer in a manner mindful that one is speaking to God for the people, preaches as one who trusts God and the assembly to join in the making of the sermon, hosts in a way that makes all feel welcome at the table, and avoids idiosyncrasies that emphasize the person of the preacher or presider and tend to distract the assembly from its work.
- D. As servants of the assembly, preachers take seriously that they are invited by the assembly to enter into and preach at its worship.
1. "Preachers preach because of the graciousness and hospitality of the community. This is the starting point of preaching. It should never mean that the invitation gives any community the right to control, manipulate, or compromise what preachers ultimately feel they must say and do in the preaching act. Yet, it is an act of graciousness extended by the community that could easily be assumed or taken for granted . . . We are invited to share a word of promise, hope, indictment, and challenge by the larger community who not only accepts our words, but invites and 'counts on' our prophetic and life-giving proclamations for daily sustenance, nourishment, and for their own struggle for life and human agency" (Christine Smith, *Purposes of Preaching*, pp. 104-105).

2. Preachers join assemblies that had a life and ministry before they arrived and that will most likely continue to have a life and ministry after they are gone. The preacher's task, therefore, is not to reinvent or reform the congregation according to some ideal but to share in and help to shape and nurture the continuing life of Christ in that assembly.
3. As the assembly's steward of Word and Sacrament, the presiding minister also helps the assembly to reflect on its liturgical experience as an encounter with God by continually asking how the assembly's worship expresses the assembly's belief. The preacher also enlightens the assembly to the implications of Christian worship for faith, life and mission.

IV. An ordained minister preaches and presides in the assembly (Augsburg Confession, XIV).

- A. In the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, "called and ordained ministers bear responsibility for the preached Word in the Church gathered for public worship." Furthermore, "in witness that this sacrament as a celebration of the Church, serving its unity, an ordained minister presides in the service of Holy Communion and proclaims the Great Thanksgiving" (*The Use of the Means of Grace*, 9, 40).
1. In the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, other rostered leaders proclaim the Gospel in contexts other than worship, often in contexts the ordained cannot, and may on occasion be called by a congregation to preach in worship. Thus, while the ELCA does not have a developed theology of preaching for leaders other than the ordained, LSTC believes that the reality that all rostered leaders will be called upon to preach makes it incumbent on us to prepare all rostered leaders to preach.
 2. While other persons may sometimes preach, the called pastor of a congregation has responsibility for this preaching, ordinarily preparing and delivering the sermon and overseeing all public ministry of the Word in the congregation. In congregations without a called pastor, the synodical bishop assumes this responsibility, often by providing an interim pastor (*The Use of the means of Grace*, 9B).
- A. The assembly does not relinquish responsibility for proclaiming the Word, forming the community through baptism, and celebrating Holy Communion to its pastor.
1. Rather, pastors are called by assemblies and entrusted with the responsibility of ensuring that the assembly proclaims the Gospel in its purity and administers the sacraments according to the Gospel.

2. As one called from outside the assembly, an ordained pastor presiding in the assembly makes clear that, while the assembly celebrates the Word and sacraments, these gifts are not the assembly's creation or possession. Rather, Word and sacrament are Christ's gifts to the entire Church. The ordained minister represents this divine initiative and serves to connect the assembly with all the communities of faith that comprise the universal Church.
- II. In order to empower the ministry of all the baptized and celebrate the gifts of all rostered leaders, our church and its pastors must be clear that preaching the Word and administering the sacraments are the circumscribed but essential tasks to which the ordained are called.
 - A. Within the assembly, the ordained "are to preside at baptisms, to preach Christ from the scriptures that have been read, to give thanks at table, to see to it that a collection for the poor is taken, and to reconcile the estranged to the purposes of the meeting. That is all they are to do under charge from their ritual appointment" (Lathrop, *Holy Things*, 201).
 - B. Preaching and presiding in the assembly is the primary expression of ordained ministry. The practicality of this understanding of ordained ministry is evident when we remember that the Sunday assembly is where most practicing Christians connect their faith and life, and the way the vast majority of people have the most intentional, sustained, and important contact with their pastor. It is through preaching and presiding that many people determine whether their pastor is faithful, caring, and competent. Preaching and presiding in the assembly should therefore be the central concern and focus of every pastor's ministry.
 - C. Within *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, the presider's responsibilities include:
 1. Leading the prayer of confession and declaring God's forgiveness,
 2. Thanksgiving for and celebration of baptism
 3. Greeting and Prayer of the Day
 4. Reading the appointed Gospel and preaching the sermon
 5. Introducing the exchange of the Peace of Christ
 6. The Great Thanksgiving, and the blessing.
 - D. Other leadership roles belong to designated and trained lay persons.

1. When the presiding minister assumes these responsibilities, both the ministry of the baptized and the formation and witness of the assembly as the Body of Christ are diminished.
 2. When disparity exists between teaching about the ministry of the baptized and leadership within the assembly, the theology of ministry enacted in worship will supplant teaching in the minds of worshipers. It is difficult, for example, to call for the leadership of the baptized in mission when all ordained persons perform all the leadership roles in worship.
- III. Lutherans confess that we preach by the Church's authority, not our own.
- A. "No one should publicly teach, preach, or administer the sacraments without a proper [public] call." *Augsburg Confession*, Article XIV.
 1. The reason that this is so important is that, for Lutherans, preaching constitutes the Christian Church.
 2. The Church exists to proclaim the Gospel. The Church is "the assembly of all believers among whom the Gospel is preached in its purity and the holy sacraments administered according to the Gospel." *Augsburg Confession*, Article VII
 - B. "Called and ordained ministers bear responsibility for the preached Word in the Church gathered for public worship." ELCA, *The Use of the Means of Grace*, 9.
 1. "Bear responsibility" is the key phrase here.
 - a. It means that preaching is a chief priority and responsibility of pastoral ministry.
 - b. It also means that, on those occasions when someone other than the pastor preaches, the pastor bears responsibility for that proclamation.
 - c. "While other persons may sometimes preach, the called pastor of a congregation has responsibility for this preaching, ordinarily preparing and delivering the sermon and overseeing all public ministry of the Word in the congregation. In congregations without a called pastor, the synodical bishop assumes this responsibility." ELCA, *The Use of the Means of Grace*, 9a.
 2. The phrase "public worship" is also a key to understanding the pastor's role. It recognizes that other rostered leaders, and indeed all the baptized, bear responsibility for the Word in other settings, in many instances in ways and circumstances the ordained cannot.

3. “All Christians, however, bear responsibility to speak and teach the Gospel in daily life.” ELCA, *The Use of the Means of Grace*, 9a.

IV. Implications of Ordination for Preaching. See *Occasional Services*..

- A. Lutheran congregations expect this from anyone who stands in their pulpit.
- B. We understand that God’s call to preach comes through the Church.
 1. “Before almighty God, to whom you must give account, and in the presence of this congregation, I ask: Will you assume this office, believing that the Church’s call is God’s call to the ministry of Word and Sacrament?”
 2. “Will you, assembled as the people of God and speaking for the whole Church, receive name as a messenger of Jesus Christ sent to serve God’s people with the Gospel of hope and salvation? Will you regard *him/her* as a *servant(s)* of Christ?”
 3. This gives preachers a certain authority and demands a certain accountability.
- C. Preaching is in accordance with Scripture, the ecumenical creeds, and the Lutheran Confessions.
 1. “The Church in which you are to be ordained confesses that the Holy Scriptures are the Word of God and the norm of its faith and life. We accept, teach, and confess the Apostles’, the Nicene, and the Athanasian Creeds. We also acknowledge the Lutheran Confessions as true witnesses and faithful expositions of the Holy Scriptures. Will you therefore preach and teach in accordance with the Holy Scriptures and these creeds and confessions?”
 2. Notice that we promise to preach and teach and not to believe. We will have doubts and dark nights of the soul; we don’t work these things out in the pulpit.
 3. We need to know the creeds and confessions
 - a. Be clear about the questions the creeds and confessions are meant to address and the ones they are not.
 - b. “I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, made me

holy and kept me in the true faith, just as he calls, gathers, enlightenes, and makes holy the whole Christian church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith.” (The Small Catechism)

- D. We preach with Christ’s authority: “Let it be acclaimed that name is ordained a minister in the Church of Christ. *He/She* has Christ’s authority to preach the Word and administer the Sacraments, serving God’s people. “
- V. A Theology of Preaching determines content, form, and style of delivery.
- A. What is the purpose of preaching?
1. How is God active in preaching?
 - a. Do we understand preaching as providing information about God and Christ that the people, aided by grace or the Spirit, are expected to accept or agree to by an act of will? If so, the content, form and delivery of preaching must assist people to agree and accept.
 - b. Do we understand preaching as God’s activity of ending the old and beginning the new, of putting to death and raising to life? Do we understand preaching as God speaking God’s promise? Do we understand preaching as the actual pronouncing, declaring and giving of God’s gift of new life? If so, the content, form, and delivery of preaching must help people to participate in this activity.
- B. Lutherans believe that preaching is God’s activity.
1. “Jesus Christ is the living and abiding Word of God. By the power of the Spirit, this very Word of God, which is Jesus Christ, is read in the Scriptures, proclaimed in preaching, announced in the forgiveness of sins, eaten and drunk in the Holy Communion, and encountered in the bodily presence of the Christian community. By the power of the Spirit active in Holy Baptism, the Word washes a people to be Christ’s own Body in the world. We have called this gift of Word and Sacrament by the name “the means of grace.” The living heart of all these means is the presence of Jesus Christ through the power of the Spirit as the gift of the Father.” ELCA, *The Use of the Means of Grace*, 1.
 2. “We believe that ‘through the Word and the sacraments, as through means, the Holy Spirit is given, and the Holy Spirit produces faith, where and when it pleases God, in those who hear the Gospel.” *Augsburg Confession*, Article V.

VI. Theology *in* Preaching

- A. Lutheran theology is expressed in the content of our preaching but Lutheran theology is not the content of our preaching.
1. When systematic theology and proclamation get confused, proclamation “gets displaced by explanation, teaching, lecturing, persuasion, ethical exhortation, or public display of emotion about Jesus.” Forde, *Theology is for Proclamation*, p. 1.
 2. Proclamation is the Word *from* God. Systematic Theology is words *about* God. Proclamation is making theology. Systematic Theology is reflecting on theology. Systematic Theology guides and governs our making of theology in preaching.
- B. Unstated theology is expressed in the form and delivery of our preaching.
1. People receive our unstated theology much more readily than they do our stated theology.
 2. Do we tell people that salvation is God’s gift of grace with our words while at the same time conveying with our form and delivery that it is really something we have to earn or deserve or appreciate?
 3. Are we saved by God’s grace or our faith?