

The Anguish of Preaching

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The soil of Dutch Reformed pietism in which my early religious experience was rooted shrouded the call to Christian ministry in mystery. Central to the call to ministry was the call to preach. God calls one to be a servant of the Word; one did not seek the office nor would one presume to set one's sights on it. But to be so called was high privilege, for the call to preach was the loftiest vocation a person could receive. What that early vision of ministry did not prepare me for was the anguish of preaching.

A little reflection on the experience of various biblical witnesses would have pointed in that direction. Moses protested the call. Jeremiah tried to avoid it and, in the midst of executing the task, vowed he would "Call him to mind no more, nor speak his name again," only to find God's word imprisoned in his body "like a fire blazing in my heart," until he grew weary of holding it under and could no longer endure. And Paul acknowledged that no one was sufficient for the task, but found he had no choice, for "it would be misery to me not to preach."

Reflection on the impossible nature of the task should also give one fair warning. What presumption it is for a person to speak a human word which makes the claim of being the very word of God. Could such a task be undertaken in any other way than in "fear and trembling"? If the human word spoken is to be transubstantiated into the word of God, might one not expect that it would involve a crucifixion? To preach is to suffer; it is to die a little every time one engages in the task.

That is my experience three decades after the initial blush of having the call to ministry confirmed by the call of the congregation. No wonder that a thin volume of lectures by the late, distinguished Lutheran theologian Joseph Sittler, *The Anguish of Preaching*, caught my eye. Sittler speaks of the anguish of preaching Christ. He cites Jesus' word, "I have a baptism to be baptised with; and how I am straitened til it be accomplished!" (Luke 12:50). The principal meaning of the

now unfamiliar Elizabethan word *straitened* is “to be aware of great and relentless pressure.”

It was the divine mission of Jesus that constituted his anguish. In one who would listen to Jesus, who would think and feel and imagine coming to an understanding of Jesus, there forms “a hard and unloosed knot in the spirit” as well. Sittler maintains that on the level proper to the servant of the straitened Word of God, the anguish is as real as it was for the Lord. The church has a rich tradition of Christology, but Sittler notes,

[T]here is another meaning to Christology. Not tradition but pressure; not the given but the terrifying and hard pressure to be as grave about Christ who is alive now as our fathers were grave about the Christ who was alive for them....What he has meant is indeed tutorial to what he means, but is never sufficient for the sheer pressure of present meaning in one's own heart and mind, for one's own time and place. [*The Anguish of Preaching*, p. 30.)

The present meaning of Christology—for oneself and in one's proclamation —is the issue, and it comes not without anguish. But if one would be true to the calling of servant of the Word, one has no alternative. Preaching Christ demands that “the heart [be] always restless and the mind always asking what the disclosure and concretion of the holy in the event of Jesus Christ means for the life of the world.”

The heart always restless, the mind always asking; that is the perpetual state of the preacher who is never finished with the task of understanding. The present horizon of human experience calls forth and demands ongoing translation of the meaning of the once-for-all event of the Word made flesh, living, dying, risen, and reigning.

The preacher is called to preach. Sunday morning approaches; the people will gather again out of their scattered worlds of contemporary human experience. Beneath their finely tailored Sunday attire beat hearts loaded with ultimate concern, crying out, “Is there a word from the Lord?” Who would dare enter the pulpit light-heartedly as though this were just another social occasion? Who would approach such a moment without anguish, trembling before one's own inadequacy, one's helplessness to effect that alone which saves and heals and transforms?

Preaching is a tortuous task; one dies a little on every outing, and it does not get easier. If anything, the anguish grows greater. But if one is called to preach, one cannot help oneself and one knows, as well, that one is blessed indeed to bear the pressure of the Word of God.

Living with a calling so serious, one might be tempted to take oneself seriously. That would be disastrous personally and deadly for the congregation. A healthy

dose of self-mockery and a playful sense of humor are essential to enabling the preacher to distinguish the calling and the person. The calling is serious and cannot be executed in a breezy manner as though nothing were at stake and a casual mediocrity were all that was demanded. But the one who executes the calling is human, and one dare never forget it. Only candor about one's own humanness and an ability to laugh at oneself will keep one from going mad in this vocation, both glorious and necessary.