

What Is Good News?

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The goal of preaching is not to get something said, but to get something heard. So contends Fred Craddock in his popular textbook, *Preaching*. That may sound obvious, but it is not so at all, at least not from the perspective of the preacher. Far too often, we who are called to the task of the weekly proclamation concentrate exclusively on developing something to say and fail to recognize that the problem is not to say Something, but rather...to be heard. We must never rest content with delivering a message; we must exercise our best gifts and our strenuous effort to get a message heard that forms in the consciousness of the congregation and shapes God's people.

To make this claim is not to deny that whatever is effected through the preached word is finally the work of the Spirit of God, the Spirit who caused the Word to be written and who must make it in the moment of proclamation the living Word that effects the purpose of God. Such a conviction, however, must not be used by the preacher to evade the responsibility to work seriously at the task of preaching so as to be effective.

Hans van der Geest studied the effects of preaching from a psychological perspective. A supervisor in clinical pastoral education in a hospital in Switzerland, van der Geest became interested in the personality of the preacher and its impact on effectiveness in the pulpit. *Presence in the Pulpit: The Impact of Personality in Preaching* reports his findings and presents a serious challenge to the traditional emphasis in the training of preachers. Practicing preachers, too, could profitably evaluate their own practices in the light of what van der Geest has discovered.

Van der Geest was surprised to find that the most important quality in the preaching event mentioned by those surveyed was the personal manner of the preacher. This might well send shock waves through a church of the Reformed tradition with its heavily intellectual bent. Yet van der Geest, himself steeped in

the Dutch Reformed Church, found again and again that the content of what is said is much less important for the process of engaging the listeners than most textbooks on preaching allow.

The author raises the questions that immediately come to mind as one views the results of this psychological perspective on preaching: Are we now going to judge preaching's effectiveness by whether or not it satisfies people? Is it legitimate to judge preaching by psychological effect?

Van der Geest contends that the listeners' statements of response as to what they actually experienced have great value:

It's not just primitive or, for that matter, illegitimate wishes alive in them, but also expectations wakened by worship services in the past and still alive. At least in part these expectations are a reflection of what a worship service and sermon intend to mean to a congregation.

Taking the needs of the congregation seriously as they present themselves at worship is imperative. Van der Geest isolates three dimensions in the experience of a worship service that must be present if the basic needs that people bring to worship, and specifically to the sermon, are to be met effectively: the renewal and restoration of basic trust; a hope for deliverance, a sense of release from the everyday burdens and struggles of life; and a new perspective from which to gain understanding in light of the gospel. Security, deliverance, understanding: apart from these three dimensions, all of which must be present, a sermon will be less than effective and people will leave without the feeling of having been personally addressed.

These three dimensions can be delineated for the sake of analysis, but they cannot be separated; they comprise a unity in the worship event. Van der Geest writes:

There is admittedly a security without release, but it is an infantile security addressing only immature people; and without understanding, it is naive. Release without security is irrelevant; release without understanding is not dependable. Understanding without security is impersonal; without release it is sterile. The three dimensions are intimately related. They are variations of the trio of love, hope and faith.

Security

People need to feel they are being addressed as individuals. In psychological terms this need represents the necessity of having our basic trust renewed at regular intervals. Psychologist Erik H. Erikson coined the expression *primal trust*, the development in earliest infancy of the conviction that life in this world is a good thing. Theologically, it is the fundamental conviction of being loved and secured by God. While primal trust is formed in us through the earliest

experiences of infancy, it is in need of constant renewal. In the face of the deepest and final questions of life, people need the confirmation of this basic trust in the worship service.

The questions that play on most people, according to van der Geest, include Do I have a future? Am I lost or supported? Do I have ground under my feet? Am I left alone by myself, or is there help? Do I have to defend myself, brace myself, or should I relax and be giving? Does it make sense to have courage, or should I be resigned? Life is simple for only very few. Disturbances and dangers are the daily bread of most. What are people at worship seeking? Here are some sample responses: I want to forget day-to-day sufferings for a while. I am looking for strength for the coming week. I would like to get out of the rat race and find a little quietness. No more arguments. I want a little peace now. Someone has to talk kindly to us once in a while, too, and give us courage.

Is worship simply a comforter? Is there not also a disturbing side of the gospel? To be sure. But, as van der Geest points out, what he is advocating is not simply an affirmation of the status quo. There is more to worship than the renewal of primal trust, but for anything positive to result, it is essential that the people of God come into contact with the living God, the God in whose love they rest.

How can this happen through preaching? Van der Geest's research reveals that feelings of security are aroused only if love is expressed. "Whenever people go into a worship service to find feelings of security, they are seeking love, clear signs of love." This happens where the preacher is perceived to be sincere and genuine in his or her concern for the congregation as individuals. The use of first-person singular pronouns signals the preacher's personal commitment.

Body language is important, at least as important as the verbal language of content. A cool, distant preacher signals a lack of emotional involvement. Rhetorical skill is desirable, but it will never make up for authentic caring and sincerity.

Colloquial language gives the congregation the sense of being addressed personally. Pulpit language and any affectation of manner or tone build a wall between pulpit and pew.

To achieve a renewal of basic trust, a sense of being loved of God, the congregation's members must sense that they are taken seriously. Just as the preacher must express personal commitment through the use of the first person pronoun, so the people must be addressed as "you" and invited to participate in the proclamation. The sense of participation is heightened by the avoidance of heavy dependence on a manuscript or written notes, according to van der Geest.

There is much more at stake than those who support the writing down and reading from notes believe. The personal style, the direct address indispensable for awakening trust, is in general seriously impaired by

reading from notes. This is the case because not only the content, but precisely the presentation—including the visible—is essential for gaining access to the realm of emotion. But what does such reading from notes show us, no matter how sophisticated it's done? The sermon does not *emerge*; it comes from yesterday. The preacher misses the "act of restructuring during the moment of speaking."

The sermon should be as natural as conversation. This, of course, does not mean less preparation, but more. Preaching personally is speaking in the name of God; it is not delivering a treatise about God.

Finally, the preacher must communicate a clear expectation of the mystery of God. From his research van der Geest concludes that "the real mystery of encounter occurs for the experience of the congregation in the relationship between the preacher and the listeners."

Deliverance

From the analysis of listener reaction, van der Geest found not only the need for security but also for a sense of release, of deliverance from the anguish of the human experience. Deliverance cannot come through a denial of the darkness. If the dark side of life is not taken seriously, if life's tragic dimension is rendered harmless, the congregation will be disappointed and leave dissatisfied. Rather, van der Geest argues:

The people in a worship service want to have light offered to them in the darkness of their lives; they want to see the hopelessness of day-to-day life surpassed by a perspective which can't be found in that day-to-day life itself. They yearn for a deliverance from the misfortune, oppression, and the misery which are, after all, a part of life. In this dimension the key is the encounter with that aspect of the message which awakens hope, the words about the beyond. This is the message the worshipers are waiting for, the language of release.

The congregation looks to the preacher to communicate a hope that is incredible and that becomes believable only as the preacher manifests a personal wonder that such a hope should be true. What is sought here are not simplistic solutions to life's complexity. The reality of darkness must be acknowledged on the one side and, on the other side, the preacher himself or herself must have sifted through the results of the modern critical study of the biblical text. But finally the preacher must take responsibility for the text as it appears relevant to him or her and then proclaim the incredibly hopeful news of the gospel in the face of the real anguish of the human situation.

The yearning for release or deliverance presupposes that there is nothing within the framework of human possibility that can effect transformation. It is into such a situation of human impossibility that the "nevertheless" of the gospel is spoken,

thus arousing wonder. The preacher's own astonishment is fundamental. "For the mediation of this improbable thing preachers must themselves be struck by the miraculous."

When a preacher unconsciously ceases to feel the joy and freedom of the gospel or, even worse, has never really personally experienced the grace of God, preaching becomes legalistic and moralistic, burdening the congregation with the tyranny of "we must," "we should," "we ought." Still, the obligation of the gospel must be made clear, recognizing the reality of guilt and calling for commitment to a higher standard.

Understanding

If in a sermon trust is awakened and the message of deliverance through the gospel clearly proclaimed, there remains yet a decisive element. Listener responses point to that missing element: He was too sure about God and the beyond for my taste. It's too bad she turned away from the difficult things so quickly. I don't really know what to do with this unquestionable faith. My unbelief wasn't taken into consideration.

Listeners are not always ready or able to accept the message. The hymns and prayers are easier to receive with trust; much greater demands are made of the sermons. The analysis of listeners' responses reveals that the congregation both challenges the sermon's claims and, at the same time, hopes to be convinced and persuaded of its truth. The preacher must reckon with the rhythm of human experience that is never static, but always moving between the poles of trust and doubt. It looks like a game, but it is no malicious game; doubts are spread out and the preacher is tested, but the listener does not want to win the game; he hopes in fact to lose, to be overcome.

The listener wants to be convinced of the truth of the gospel, but the problem the preacher faces is that persuasion is being required in an area of life in which logical arguments have almost no value. Discursive reasoning does not suffice; rather, it is the preacher's own deep, warm, and living faith that persuades. Says van der Geest:

The truth sought again by the people in a worship service is not an objective one, but is rather an existential truth precipitating engagement and participation, not cool ascertainment...: in the act of persuasion itself the emotional effect of the renewal of trust is inseparably connected with cognitive understanding. That process of being persuaded is thus a total experience, not just an intellectual comprehension.

Sermons must be planned with the temptation to doubt in mind, but the doubt raised by the text, not the doubt raised by the great religious-existential questions of life. These questions arising out of tragedy, pain, and human anguish are not

helpfully addressed in preaching. The Christian proclamation does not solve life's inscrutable mysteries but rather announces the reign of God.

The doubts aroused by the text and the resistance of the listener to the proclamation of the gospel are not removed by logical, conceptual speech of discursive reasoning. Rather, it is through story, image, and graphic speech that persuasion is achieved. Narrative preaching is widely advocated today and preaching as story is in vogue. Van der Geest's research would indicate that this is more than a fad, the swing of the pendulum. He points out:

In contrast to the more conceptual approach, something graphic causes the listeners themselves to become active. Concepts are finished products which the listeners simply register. They need only to think, to think abstractly. But if the preacher tells a story, the listeners themselves construct the forms of the people, the appearances of the events. Now they can experience something.

Images and stories are suited to the Christian proclamation; concepts are not. The sermon must activate the listeners' imaginations. Existential truth is grasped through metaphorical language. As the imagination is stimulated, a person's own creativity is engaged. Such preaching becomes dialogue. The listeners find themselves in the story and re-experience their own joy and pain, disappointment and hope. They are able to identify with the story's situation and characters.

Graphic speech touches more than the cognitive level of our understanding; it reaches to the subconscious level of inner vision where truth is grasped as a whole.

In this kind of evidence precisely the apparently impossible happens: The unseen becomes seen. This occurrence is always impressive and precipitates intense surprise. People are encountering their life's truth.

Rational, objective truth does not require this kind of evidence; sense perception and logical argumentation are sufficient. In the worship service and the sermon, existential truth is being sought. The one who thus perceives is engaged, "struck at the very roots, and his or her whole life is affected: feeling, thinking, inner vision and will."

The goal of preaching is not to get something said, but to get something heard. The experience of the worshiper is thus critical for the evaluation of preaching. The people have cried out, this is who we are, and this is what we need. Effective preaching will renew their basic trust, give them a sense of deliverance, and provide a new perspective, a fresh insight to the understanding. Where these three dimensions are present, the listener will feel spoken to by the preacher and by God.

Reference:

Hans Van der Geest. *Presence in the Pulpit: The Impact of Personality in Preaching*. John Knox Press, 1st English edition, 1981.