Collaborative Preaching from the Margins

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Reading the Bible from the margins enriches biblical interpretation for preaching. It overcomes the narrowness imposed by our social location, loosens the hegemony of the center, and helps "uninitiated readers...find their way into the texts."[1]

We do not need to travel to distant places in order to learn how to read/hear from the margins. We can begin this kind of interpretive practice within our own congregations, by moving the site of biblical/theological reflection and the discernment of God's Word from the center of the congregation to its boundaries, from the pastor's study to the sanctuary door.

Once we de-center preaching in this way, we begin to hear from the "strangers" in our midst.[2] According to Patrick Kiefert, these strangers may be outsiders who come from beyond the church itself, or they may be "inside strangers" who remain outside the intimate group that usually makes up most of the leadership in a congregation.[3] The word "stranger" may also be used metaphorically and philosophically to represent the "other" or the irreducible "otherness" of anyone whom we encounter.[4] It is a theological concept having deep roots in biblical notions of hospitality that find their culmination in the New Testament concept of "neighbor." Christian life is built around loving the holy Other, God, and the human other, the stranger/neighbor.

Initially, our congregations and these strangers/neighbors share in at least two common efforts: 1) to *resist* what Jürgen Habermas calls the "colonization" of our "lifeworld(s)" by the impersonal system of power and money and 2) to *support* each other by nurturing communication, ethical deliberation, and hope.[5]

Preaching from the margins, therefore, is designed to accomplish four ends: 1) overcome the narrowness imposed by our social locations as preachers, 2) help uninitiated readers/hearers find their way into the biblical text, 3) welcome the stranger/neighbor in our midst and beyond the church doors, and 4) forge bonds of resistance and hope between our congregations and persons from other lifeworlds.

In order to accomplish these ends, I suggest that we adopt two practical strategies for communication in our congregations. First, I encourage us to form critical, core-conversations at the margins of congregations, where lifeworlds meet, so that a word of resistance and support can be discerned. Second, I suggest that we proclaim this word in a public place, the pulpit.

How to do Collaborative Preaching from the Margins

There are three main components to collaborative preaching from the margins.

1. *The Sermon Roundtable*

Once a week, prior to sermon preparation, I encourage preachers to meet with a five- to seven-member group of laity. Their responsibility is to discuss together the biblical sermon text for the week in light of public concerns and the ministry and mission of the congregation. This roundtable discussion is open to all church members. Not only are those at the center of congregational life included, but also those at the

margins. Persons of all ages, infrequent attendees, and new members are invited. As time goes on, the roundtable can expand to include members of the connectional church: missionaries, workers at ecumenical urban or rural mission agencies, local or regional staff, or members of other churches.

After about a year of getting this process going, the roundtable can begin to include those beyond the congregation. This might involve nonchurch members - folk in the neighborhood who perceive the church and its mission from the outside, recipients of church aid, or nonchurched friends or relatives.

When the sermon roundtable meets at the church, it helps to keep interpretation de-centered by convening the group in places other than the boardroom. The group might meet in the youth room, a children's Sunday school room, the fellowship hall, or kitchen. At other times, in order to engage other lifeworlds, the roundtable might meet in the homes of parishioners or nonmembers, at the homeless shelter, at a nursing home, at another church, in the corporate office building, at the mall, at a school or in the public library.

So that an "in-group" of interpreters does not form, members of the roundtable commit to attend for only six to ten weeks. Three or four members rotate on and off at a time, so that the group changes regularly while continuity is maintained. A co-host or facilitator can help to manage this process.

Participants are invited to attend worship, if possible. This fosters accountability and increases the crossing of boundaries between congregation and culture. I suggest that names of roundtable participants be published in the bulletin or another prominent place. Members of the congregation can be invited to offer feedback to these people as well as the preacher. This feedback can be discussed at the beginning of roundtable meetings.

2. *Collaborative Brainstorming*

At the margins, we cannot assume that we are able to identify with people. We cannot know what they think and experience when confronted by this odd biblical text in the context of their lives. It is crucial, therefore, to listen to others and to be instructed by otherness. This means that we need to *ask* participants constantly what they hear, think, or feel. At the same time, we must work to make the Bible a strong and clear conversation partner.

Placing a biblical text at the center of the conversation is not an attempt to skew the conversation or to make it narrowly "textual." It takes seriously the biblical vision as fundamental for Christian preaching, and brings the particular and peculiar language of the Bible into focused interaction with the actual realities of our inner, public, and social lives. It also tacitly recognizes the Bible as a symbol of, and a particular strategic language for, resistance and hope.

Collaborative brainstorming at the margins is a unique form of Bible study. As one of my students pointed out, it is not "neat and tidy." This is true especially when those beyond the church are involved. The process of interpretation can be complicated by varying assumptions regarding the authority of biblical texts, interpretive practice, and sense of group purpose. We may find ourselves quickly revising our assumptions about what happens when the odd language of biblical faith enters into and engages the public marketplace. We might discover, for instance, more reverence for the Bible and less reverence for the church than we have formerly noticed. It is likely that we will

begin to identify an entire subset of commonly held general understandings of the person and work of Christ that pervade both the culture and the congregation. We may also note a depth of spiritual insight and imagination that we had not expected.

Throughout this brainstorming, the most difficult task for seminary educated preachers is to be generous. It is hard to keep our suspicions that interpretations are "wrong" from getting in the way of listening to others. It is a constant struggle to avoid importing topics and agendas from "the experts" as a way to turn a conversation in an "appropriate" direction. It takes effort to appreciate and deepen another person's interpretation of the Bible and of life.

The primary strategy in roundtable conversations consists of raising questions that make what each participant says accessible for group conversation and critique in light of the biblical witness and their own experience. Our primary task is not to "judge" but to "clarify": to confront the group with the deeper implications of their interpretations. As we do this, we need to listen carefully for words of resistance and hope. When we hear these words, our task is to help the group to name and interpret them. Our final task is to invite group members to make decisions for certain forms of action based on what they have said.[6]

Sometimes, we may feel that it is necessary to speak a bold, oppositional word. When this is the case, it is best to speak out during the group's meeting. It is important not to allow ourselves to become disempowered as stewards of the tradition and the gospel message. We are participants, not merely facilitators of sermon brainstorming.

In most instances, however, a word of clarification and re-framing is all that is required. It is enough to *name for the group the hard reality and implications of what is being said.* The group will find a way to respond.

During this meeting, it helps to listen for, and try to promote, these five things that are fundamental to collaborative conversations:

1) Topic-setting - the group establishing what it is talking about and how they will talk about it.

2) Interpretation - the group trying to understand and make sense of the topics they choose to talk about.

3) Empowerment - the group including alternative or repaired perspectives on the topics at hand.

4) Coming-to-terms - the group identifying or imagining what should or could be done in light of what has been discussed.

5) Practice - the group making practical suggestions and commitments for living.

3. *Conversational homiletic*

A conversational homiletic will ensure that collaborative preaching is as true as possible to the dynamics and content of the marginal conversation in which the word was pursued. The language of the sermon springs forth from the dynamics of the core-conversation and strives to be faithful to these dynamics. While the sermon remains a noninteractive, single-party communication event, *it is embedded within, and re-presents an actual interactive, multiple-party communication event (the sermon roundtable).* The language of the sermon both describes and imitates in the pulpit the collaborative process of brainstorming that took place at the sermon roundtable.

After the group meets, I suggest spending thirty minutes or so identifying the fundamental dynamics and content of the conversation. A myriad of new rhetorical

opportunities present themselves during this time of reflection. Each of these could be used to develop a sermon "move" or "sequence." Some of these, that I explore elsewhere,[7] are: *summoning* parties to talk, *announcing* topics, *questioning* the adequacy of experiences or interpretations, *narrating* one's story, *revising* positions, *clarifying* points of view, *interrupting* to bring in crucial information or to play devil's advocate, *qualifying* opinions or beliefs, *agreeing* with and *supporting* others, presenting *proposals* for thought or action, *projecting* future possibilities or problems, *committing* to certain projects, *instructing* in appropriate skills, *arranging* details, and *monitoring* behaviors or practices.

Collaborative preachers will not employ a single form of logic such as deduction, induction, or plot. Sometimes *entire* sermons will be ruled by only one or two of the dynamics of roundtable conversation that occur during sermon brainstorming. On other occasions, several conversational dynamics will be covered in the course of a sermon. Sermons, therefore, can focus on one interactive dynamic or can incorporate a back and forth movement between several dynamics.

When writing the collaborative sermon, it is possible to expand or embellish any of these lines of conversation. It is important, however, not to add anything, or to trump the group's conversation with new or special insights. Remember, if we, as preachers, have something "prophetic" or contrary to say, it is best to say it *first* during the group's meeting. This will communicate that we trust (and expect) the *group* (which includes us) to find a word of resistance and hope. We do not need to import it from "outside" the collaborative process. It is necessary to speak our minds in these groups, not just in the pulpit.

The Marginal Word

By now it should be clear that collaborative preaching from the margins requires a significant change in traditional homiletic practice. The rewards are rich, however, both for congregations and for the communities in which we live. By moving the locus of our preaching to the margins, where lifeworlds meet, we will both clarify and open the boundary that exists between the church and the many subcultures in which it is embedded. We will broaden and deepen our hearing of the gospel, and help uninitiated readers find their way into the worlds of the biblical text and our congregations. Finally, we will empower our congregations, and many others, to discern a word of resistance and hope to share across lifeworlds.

Notes

1 R. S. Sugirtharajah, (ed.) *Voices From The Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis/SPCK, 1995), 2-3. According to Sugirtharajah, the word "margin" does not signify a position of "weakness and self-depreciation," a "site opposed to the centre or ... a state of peripherality." He sees the margin as the place where "actual reader/hearers meet" and try "to make sense of their context and texts." It is a place where "innovation can be easier," because "the centre's hegemony is less fierce."

2 Parker Palmer, *A Company of Strangers: Christians and the Renewal of America's Public Life* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1992).

3 *Welcoming the Stranger: A Public Theology of Worship and Evangelism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 8-9.

4 See Edward Farley, *Good and Evil: Interpreting a Human Condition* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press,

1990), 39

5 The writings of several philosophers and theologians of communication suggest at least five axioms that can contribute to a redefinition of "the margins" and provide further reasons for communicating the gospel collaboratively from this place

Axiom 1 According to Jurgen Habermas, we are all part of a variety of "lifeworlds" or "publics " *The Theory of Communicative Action* vol 2 *Lifeworld and System a Critique of Functionalist Reason*, trans Thomas McCarthy (Boston Beacon Press, 1987) The idea of "lifeworld" is directly parallel to Parker Palmer's idea of the "public" in *A Company of Strangers Christians and the Renewal of America's Public Life* A lifeworld is an arena of everyday, ordinary communication, a world of discourse where we negotiate and share common meanings and values Sometimes, lifeworlds are *places*, such as the church, the ballpark, the shopping mall, or the neighborhood Lifeworlds can also be *public associations of common interest* such as the lifeworlds of the elderly, grunge-youth culture, the homeless, welfare recipients, or the middle class These lifeworlds are constituted by face-to-face interaction of many types, and are regulated and maintained by a mixture of informal conversation and deliberative decision making Strong and thriving lifeworlds are necessary so that moral, ethical, and religious discourse can play significant roles in shaping behavior and human history At a deeper and more profound level, lifeworlds spring forth, and are energized by what Emmanuel Levinas calls "the-one-for-the-other," which is "a point outside of being," the point of being "face-to-face" with the other *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans Alphonso Lingis (The Hague/Boston/ London Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1981), 136-7 I argue for multiple lifeworlds in interaction, rather than for Habermas' abstract, singular lifeworld, in order to account for both the variety of life situations and communities of communicative practice This also encourages a *solidarity* of consciousness at the level of resistance to "the system" and support of lifeworlds themselves

Axiom 2 According to Habermas, in postmodern society, all of these lifeworlds are being invaded and "colonized" by the self-regulating "system" of exchange (money) and control (power) This system, necessary for survival in a complex society, is a "good servant" that is becoming "a very bad ruler " Paul Lakeland, *Theology and Critical Theory The Discourse of the Church* (Nashville Abingdon Press, 1990), 69 One sin of postmodern society is that we have made money and power into values "in and of themselves *in the lifeworld(s)*, rather than tools to be used for realizing values that we agree should be achieved "(italics mine) Terrence W Tilley, "Toward a Theology of the Practice of Communicative Action," in *Postmodern Theologies The Challenge of Religious Diversity,* ed Terrence W Tilley (Maryknoll, NY Orbis Press, 1995), 101 The result of this is that the lifeworlds are being weakened and depleted of their natural, interactive modes of regulation, renewal, and change The balance between the communication-regulated lifeworlds and the (relatively) self-regulated system of power and capital is upset Face-to-face communication is co-opted by impersonal patterns of exchange and control

Axiom 3 Redemptive communication in the churches will "promote a vigorous communication community dedicated to a public ethic that will win back control for the lifeworld(s) " Lakeland, *Theology and Critical Theory*, 69 I do not agree wholeheartedly with Habermas' rationalistic solution to this problem I do agree with his basic agenda his call for communicative action and resistance My practical, strategic commitments are closer to theologians of communal practice such as Gustavo Gutierrez, Sharon Welsh, or J W McClendon, Jr In contradistinction to Lindbeck's work, it is possible to say that "no one can play only the 'Christian language game ' We are embedded in other forms of life as well, e g commerce, education, elective politics, etc , which are independent of religious forms of life " Stuart Kendall, "Intratextual Theology in a Postmodern World" in Terrence W Tilley, ed , *Postmodern Theologies,* 101

Axiom 4 The biblical/theological lifeworld of the Christian congregation is unique and particular as a traditional and eschatological community of religious experience, language, and symbols Therefore, congregations should critique, supplement, and challenge the language and symbols of other lifeworlds *as a partner in this resistance and support*

Axiom 5 It is at the margins of the community's life that this integrative and critical

conversation between and on behalf of lifeworlds takes place. The margin of a lifeworld is the place where participants become aware of other lifeworlds and of their common plight. The margins are where we are most aware of the breadth and depth of the dangerous colonization by the system of money and power, and the need for strategies of resistance and hope.

6 It is simply false to argue that this collaboration only accomodates the Christian story to prevailing cultures. Those who have done this testify that the uniqueness of Christian identity is heightened in such conversations.

7 For examples of how these sound in preaching see chapter five of *The Roundtable Pulpit: Where Leadership and Preaching Meet* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995). These dynamics are derived from empirical studies of conversation in group settings. The field of "conversation analysis" is fertile soil for continued homiletic reflection. See Wolfram Bublitz, *Supportive Fellow-Speakers and Cooperative Conversations* (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Co., 1988), Michael Moerman, *Talking Culture: Ethnology and Conversation Analysis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988), Deborah Tannen, *That's Not What I Meant! How Conversational Style Makes or Breaks Relationships* (New York: Ballentine Books, 1987).