

WÖRSHIP 2000

Preaching: Rooted in Scripture, Living and Contemporary

Whatever else preaching is—introducing Jesus to the unchurched, milk for infants in the faith, or strong food for the faithful—Christian preaching is the proclamation of Christ crucified. Saint Paul writes, “For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Corinthians 1:22-24). The Church preaches Christ crucified, not as something that happened long ago, but as God’s saving activity in our midst. “Preaching,” says the ELCA’s *The Use of the Means of Grace: A Statement on the Practice of Word and Sacrament*, “is the living and contemporary voice of one who interprets in all the Scriptures the things concerning Jesus Christ.”¹ By being both rooted in Scripture and living and contemporary,

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Christian preaching is the power of God to bring people from death to new life.

When we say that preaching is rooted in Scripture, we mean that the sermon connects the biblical world of “there and then” to our world of “here and now.” We do not preach Scripture as the telling of events that happened long ago and far away. We preach the events of Scripture as models or paradigms or prototypes that reveal how God has dealt with God’s people and is dealing with God’s people now. The task in preaching is to help God’s people move from



how God is communicating with us in the events of the Bible to how God is communicating with us here and now in the events of the world in which we live. For Christians, the events of the Bible are united with the events of today. The connection is the love of God made known in the life, death, and resurrection

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of Christ Jesus. The sermon penetrates Scripture in order to proclaim the central act of God in Christ. Luther would say that the one and only theme in preaching is Christ and all sermons are variations on this great theme.

“The preaching of the Gospel of the crucified and risen Christ is rooted in the readings of the Scriptures in the assemblies for worship.”² The public reading of Scripture in worship forms the basis for the public proclamation of the

Gospel. Using an ELCA approved lectionary, a system of readings, such as the *Revised Common Lectionary* and the lectionaries in *Lutheran Book of Worship*, to determine the Scripture lessons to be read in worship brings several

benefits to preaching. First, the lectionary assures that the congregation hears much of the Bible. An Old Testament reading, a psalm, a second reading and a portion of a gospel are heard each week. The more familiar people are with the Bible, the better able they are to actively participate in preaching. Second, using a lectionary provides a greater breadth for preaching. The assigned readings push the preacher and assembly into areas of Scripture where they might prefer not to go. The lectionary leads them into topics like money, divorce and remarriage, what it means to forgive, and our responsibility to the poor. From another perspective, the lectionary furnishes the opportunity, or even the obligation, to address critical, sometimes explosive issues. Rather than the lone voice of the preacher, such sermons are the Church confronting itself with its own Scripture. Using a lectionary also promotes Christian unity as the same lessons are read and proclaimed in congregations throughout a local community and around the

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world. Finally, the lectionary protects the Church against those whom Luther described as preaching whatever they like; instead of the Gospel and its exposition, they preach about blue ducks.³

In addition to being rooted in Scripture, preaching is also living and contemporary. It is God’s Word for today addressed to a particular Christian community. As a living and contem-

porary proclamation of the Gospel, preaching is not concerned with getting the Gospel said, but with getting the Gospel *heard*. If the Gospel is to be heard, the congregation must trust the preacher as a messenger from God and the preacher must trust the congregation to actively participate in preaching. This trust

requires that both preacher and congregation regard the sermon as a word sent by God in which everyone participates. The preacher speaks this word and the hearers listen to this word attentively and expectantly. By their participation in the sermon, the entire assembly makes an offering to God.

Living and contemporary preaching has several characteristics. First, as a word sent from God, preaching is good news. This does not mean that the word preached is cheap or easy. In preaching we name with equal vigor sin and grace, cross and resurrection, Law and Gospel, judgment and mercy. Then we fall on the side of grace. Christian preaching convicts the hearers of their sin, but then convinces them of God’s grace. People need to experience both sides of this coin. More importantly, they need to hear an explicit statement of the Gospel. Second, to fully express the good news of the Gospel, sermons should be applicable to life today. Preaching is concrete and reflects the community’s experience. We express

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theological concepts such as salvation in terms of what is happening in people's lives and in the life of the community. Third, if the Gospel is to be heard, sermons need to be preached using language that people understand. Preachers do well to explain theological language and do even better to avoid using it. Rather than concepts and definitions, good preaching seeks to follow Jesus' example and use stories and examples. Finally, sermons are urgent and missional, leading the assembly to *do* something *in the coming week*. Despite our best efforts and urgent desires, preaching rarely brings about earth shattering, lifelong change. Preaching works over time, forming the faithful gradually like water polishing rocks in an ever-moving stream. Leading God's people to respond to the Gospel by doing something concrete in the coming week is an admirable goal for any sermon. The assembly's initial response to the sermon is participation in the liturgy. We do not applaud or give the preacher a standing ovation. Instead, the assembly gives God thanks and praise within the context of worship. We might say that preaching Christ crucified leaves the hearers with a *eucharistic attitude*—"I want to give God thanks and praise." This is distinct from "I want to feel good." We can come away from a sermon keenly aware of our failure to be God's people, but still thanking and praising God for our new life in Christ.

In preparation for their response in the world, the assembled people of God respond in worship to the good news they hear in the sermon. The liturgy—the context of worship—both shows us how to give God thanks and praise and offers us the chance to do so. In the

Liturgy of the Word, the Spirit gathers a diverse group of individuals and forms them into a worshipping body. When Scripture is read and preached, God speaks to God's people. In faithfulness to the readings appointed for the day, the preacher proclaims our need for God's grace and freely offers that grace. The Word of God that is preached elicits a response from those who hear it. When the Gospel is preached, that response is one of thanks and

praise for God's love in Christ. Liturgical elements—hymns, creed, prayers, peace, offering, and Holy Communion—reinforce the message of the sermon and provide the assembly with the words, actions and opportunity to respond to the

message in faith. Special care should therefore be taken to coordinate all the elements of worship to insure that they support each other.

Preaching also equips the community to respond in thanks and praise by explaining the liturgy. Luther called preaching the exposition of the mass. In the sermon the Word is proclaimed publicly, while in the Lord's Supper the promise is given to each person individually. In this way the Lord's Supper confirms what the sermon proclaims—Christ crucified and risen, his body and blood, given and shed, for you—and empowers those assembled to live the new life to which the sermon calls them.



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Preaching prepares the assembly to celebrate and receive the sacrament by guaranteeing that God's word of promise is proclaimed and heard. In this way, the fixed forms of the liturgy become the expression of the spirit and freedom of a particular people. Thus, preaching helps us to understand what we are doing in worship and why we do it.

Yet, the relationship of sermon and liturgy is not one-sided. Just as preaching prepares the assembly to celebrate the liturgy, so, too, the liturgy shapes preaching in several ways. First, festivals and seasons help us to hear the Gospel from different perspectives and with different emphases. For example, in

Advent we celebrate the good news that Christ will come again and on Pentecost we hear of the Spirit of the risen Christ being poured out upon us. Second, the language of prayer and Scripture, ritual action, physical environment, and structures of ministry all cooperate to form a specific style that influences the style and content of the sermon.⁴ The shape of the liturgy suggests constraints on the form of preaching (for example, the sermon cannot be two hours long!) and the liturgy itself teaches the preacher how to image theological concepts such as praise, salvation, grace, sin, and repentance. Geoffrey Wainwright asserts that the constant features and qualitative wholeness of the liturgy also provide preaching with a certain freedom.⁵ Surrounded as it is by the stable elements of Scripture readings, creed,

and Eucharistic Prayer, the unrepeatable sermon can afford a certain boldness of mind and heart as it seeks to bring home the Christian message imaginatively and penetratingly to a particular group of people at a particular time and place. As long as the traditional actions of the liturgy keep the classical expression of the faith before the people, the preacher may attempt new ways of communicating the Gospel. These ways may change as culture may demand. Thus, preaching

may occasionally take an alternative form such as music, drama, dialogue or multimedia.

The point: Rather than being either an interruption of the liturgical action or the main event for which everything else in worship is but window dressing, preaching is integral to the liturgy. The freshness of the sermon and the stability of the liturgy

complete each other. While preaching speaks through the ears to the mind and heart, the lessons contained in the objects, gestures and outward signs of the liturgy have great power because truths reach us through all of the senses. Gordon Lathrop describes this relationship of Word and Sacrament in another way. Lathrop rightly observes that speaking about God with just one "word"—one connected and logical discourse, for example--almost inevitably means speaking a distortion because it suggests that God is a consequent idea, not a mysterious presence.⁶ For this reason, in the liturgy, side by side with the "proclaimed word," there is also the "visible word" of the table. Without Scripture readings and preaching, the "visible word" of the table may be



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experienced as a sacred encounter with God in the present time, but without any history or any future. Similarly, without the table, the “proclaimed word” may easily become a lecture, a conjecture, a distant history with no “for you” that anchors it in present experience. The table requires the preacher to move toward saying in words what the bread and cup will say. And the sermon calls us to make our celebration around the table larger, “begging God to bring the time of the great universal feast, giving a name and a history and a future to our eating and drinking.”⁷ Thus, *The Use of the Means of Grace* declares that “the two principal parts of the liturgy of Holy Communion, the proclamation of the Word of God and the celebration of the sacramental meal, are so intimately connected as to form one act of worship.”⁸

Notes

¹Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, *The Use of the Means of Grace: A Statement on the Practice of Word and*

Sacrament (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997), 9A. Cf. Luke 24:27.

²*Ibid.*, 9.

³Martin Luther, “The German Mass and Order of Divine Service, Jan. 1526,” *Luther’s Works*, ed. Ulrich S. Leupold (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965), Vol. 53, p. 78.

⁴John Allyn Melloh, “Preaching and Liturgy,” *Worship* 65 (1991): 415f.

⁵Geoffrey Wainwright, “The Sermon and the Liturgy,” *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 28 (Winter 1983): 346.

⁶Gordon Lathrop, “At Least Two Words: The Liturgy as Proclamation” in *The Landscape of Praise: Reading in Liturgical Renewal*, ed. Blair Gilmer Meeks (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996), pp. 183.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 184.

⁸Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, *The Use of the Means of Grace: A Statement on the Practice of Word and Sacrament*, 34.

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