

“A house of prayer in the heart”: How homiletics nurtures the church’s spirituality

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Abstract

Prayer, whatever form it takes, represents a living relationship with God. In the article it is argued that the goal of preaching is the vitalizing, nurturing, enriching, deepening, broadening, and heightening of believers’ relationship with God. To participate in this dynamic divine/human relationship, is a form of spirituality. Therefore, if the sermon ends with prayer, it follows that the purpose of preaching is – at least in part – the nurture of spirituality.

Slippery as soap are the two big words in our theme for this year’s meeting of the Academy of Homiletics: “spirituality and preaching.” What is “spirituality?” Go to your local bookstore and find the books shelved under that category. I have done it several times, and I have been astonished by the range of works for sale, everything from finding your true inner self through physical exercise to learned tomes on ancient meditative practices. Nearly all of the books, at least upon a quick perusal, are about individuals attending to their own inner resources. It is as though spirituality were some pure ether unpolluted by our interrelationship as material creatures.

But before we scorn the word “spirituality” because of its imprecision, we need to take stock of the word “preaching.” We who have received Christ through the faithful witness of preachers and who have given our lives to teaching future preachers, consider “preaching” to be a word of honor, delight, wonder and transformation. Yet the word that is treasure to us is poison to others, as in the common phrases: “Quit preaching to me” or “I have had

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enough of your preaching.” At a yet more painful level, we think of those groups of people who have been harmed by preaching that promoted ignorance and hatred in the name of God.

Even when we turn to more learned commentary on preaching, we quickly detect how theological conflicts, cultural differences, philosophical presuppositions, and personal predilections result in a wide spectrum of understandings of why and how we preach.² Of course, conflict about the purposes and means of preaching is nothing new. In the early church there were people who opposed the use of classical rhetoric for proclaiming the gospel, and there were debates between those who favored the plain meaning of scriptural texts and others who sought out the deeper allegorical or spiritual dimensions of sacred writings.

One might then argue “preaching” has always been a slippery word, and its slipperiness is only magnified by a post-modern age that is skeptical about the precision of all language and is wary of the biases and power struggles that we cloak in our various rhetorical strategies.

No matter how inexact language may be, we have no choice but to risk using it. As Stephen Webb has demonstrated: God has spoken and empowered us to speak (Webb 2004). That we may misuse the gift of speech does not relieve us of the obligation to try to use it as faithfully as we can. Therefore, I am going to take these two slippery words – “spirituality” and “preaching” – and attempt to relate them to one another in a way that illumines how they nurture and refine each other when understood in the context of the church gathered to worship God. My approach is functional and contextual: I will consider how preaching nurtures the corporate spirituality of the church at prayer. I am indebted here to George Herbert, the great Anglican poet, pastor, priest who lived from 1593-1633.

Two years ago I re-read Herbert's great collection of poems, entitled “The Temple,” a work that I first encountered forty years ago as a sophomore in college. The poet acknowledges that his poems provide “a picture of the many spiritual conflicts that have passed betwixt God and my soul” (Hecht 1987:10). The individual poems are titled after acts of worship or the architecture and furnishings of a church or the particular seasons of the liturgical year or the sacraments or the struggles of the soul.

To read the temple is to enter the imaginative world of Herbert and to find ourselves in the sacred space of a cavernous soul, a soul that is resonant with the echoes of our own hopes and agonies, a heart and a head that are practicing a strenuous spiritual discipline: distilling the struggles of Christian

² Consider, for example, two recent books presenting a cross range of theories about why and how we preach (Childers 2004 and Wilson 2004).

faith into an intellectually challenging theopoetic idiom. I initially read the work over forty years ago, long before I had preached my first sermon, and longer yet before I started to teach homiletics. Now, after teaching homiletics for twenty-eight years, I open *The Temple* and begin with the first and longest poem, entitled by Herbert "The Church-Porch". The title is significant because it suggests that we are at the point of entry. We are on the verge of sacred space. We are about to move into the depths and heights of encountering the holy, the numinous, the divine, the wonder and mystery that flow from the deep dear core of things.

My eyes read down through the verses and suddenly I stumble upon lines that I never noticed years ago: "Resort to sermons; but to prayers most: Praying's the end of preaching ... " (Herbert 1826:70).

Of course, there are multiple ways we might end the sentence, "The end of preaching is ... " But for the purposes of this paper, I will concentrate solely on Herbert's theopoetic insight.

Prayer, whatever form it takes, represents a living relationship to God. Herbert's statement reminds us that the end of preaching is the vitalizing, the nurturing, the enriching, the deepening, the broadening, the heightening of our relationship to God. I believe that to participate in this dynamic divine/human relationship is a form of spirituality. Therefore, if the end of preaching is prayer, it follows that the purpose of preaching is – at least in part – the nurture of spirituality. It is not, however, the individualistic spirituality that I find featured on the shelves in the bookstore. Herbert makes his statement in the context of "The Temple," the metaphor that holds his collection of poems together. The temple is a house of worship in which public prayer is offered, and Herbert makes it clear that he has in mind public or corporate prayer:

Though private prayer be a brave design,
Yet public hath more promises, more love.
And love's a weight to hearts; to eyes a sign.
We all are but cold suitors; let us move
Where it is warmest. Leave thy six and seven;
Pray with the most; for, where most pray, is heav'n.

(Herbert 1826:70)

Public prayer covers a wide range of different kinds of petition and praise. So when Herbert writes, "Praying's the end of preaching", we need to consider the various types of prayer that find expression in our liturgies and services of worship. Consider, then, six classic kinds of corporate prayer, common to

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most of our traditions of worship, each of them expressing a different dimension in the divine/human relationship:

- Adoration
- Confession
- Supplication
- Intercession
- Thanksgiving
- Lament

To say that the end of preaching is prayer is a deceptively simple statement because prayer, especially in the context of corporate worship, is such a complex, multi-dimensional activity. “Praying’s the end of preaching” means that

- The end of preaching is adoration
- The end of preaching is confession.
- The end of preaching is supplication.
- The end of preaching is intercession.
- The end of preaching is thanksgiving.
- The end of preaching is lament.

The end of preaching is prayer, the richness of prayer, the fullness of prayer, the complexity of prayer – all of them are a part of the multi-dimensionality of our relationship to God. In short, the end of preaching is the nurture of the church’s spirituality as practiced by the gathered community.

If the end of preaching is prayer, then all preachers need to ask: What kind of prayer does their preaching awaken? I am not suggesting every sermon ought to be about prayer or that every sermon will conclude with the preacher offering a prayer. But rather I am asking what kind of living relationship to God does preaching nurture over time? Does it nurture the deep, broad relationship to God that is expressed through the extravagant richness of the church’s corporate life of prayer?

Thomas Long makes a distinction between the “focus” and “function” of a sermon: “What the sermon aims to say can be called its ‘focus,’ and what the sermon aims to do can be called its ‘function’” (Long 1989:86). Although I am drawing on Long’s definition, I am concerned in this article with the function of *preaching* as distinct from the function of any single sermon. What do we hope will be the accumulative effect of preaching in the life of the

gathered community? Taking my cue from Herbert, I am hoping that preaching will nurture a rich relationship to God, a relationship in which people can move through the whole rich range of prayer.

It is possible for preaching to encourage only one kind of prayer. I think of a woman who told me of the preacher she listened to as a child. After every sermon, she always felt the same prayer rising in her heart: "I need to confess my sins to God." It is not wrong for some sermons to lead to confession. But for all sermons to lead to confession is to constrict the wholeness of God and to limit the fullness of our relationship to God.

If the end of preaching is prayer then surely sometimes preaching ought to end in adoration. I think of traditional ascriptions of praise to God:

Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving
and honor and power and might
be to our God forever and ever! Amen.

Joyful, joyful, we adore Thee,
God of glory, Lord of love;
Hearts unfold like flowers before Thee,
Opening to the sun above.

The adoration of God changes nothing. The adoration of God changes everything. If you judge the adoration of God by utilitarian standards, then it changes nothing. The adoration of God does not turn a profit or plant a field or build a house. The adoration of God has no results that you can immediately calculate and quantify. And yet the adoration of God changes everything. For when we give ourselves utterly and completely to the adoration of God, nothing in creation ever looks the same as it did before. All that is becomes charged with meaning. That is why the psalmist's exhortation to praise God flows seamlessly from inanimate natural phenomena to creatures to human beings of every class, gender and age:

Praise the Lord from the earth,
you sea monsters and all deeps,
fire and hail, snow and frost,
stormy wind fulfilling his command!
Mountains and all hills,
fruit trees and all cedars!

Wild animals and all cattle,
creeping things and flying birds.
Kings of the earth and all peoples,
princes and all rulers of the earth!

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Young men and women alike,
old and young together!

(Psalm 148:7-12)

Or to cast the insight of the Psalmist in words closer to our scientific ethos:

Have you not known? Have you not heard?
that from the very start
God is the one whose spirit stirred
each atom, star and heart
From God they draw their energy
to spin and burn and beat
and learn the choreography
of matter, light and heat.

God, since each atom, star and heart
depend and wait on you
and on the powers you impart
and constantly renew,
their being is a form of prayer
that makes of time and space
a temple brimming with your care
where all exist by grace.³

When we adore God we come to realize that the elemental fact of our existence is itself an act of grace. When we adore God we align ourselves with the depth and core of creation as they flow from the wellspring of all that is. The end of preaching is prayer. Therefore, at least sometimes, the end of preaching is the adoration of God.

The wonder and astonishment that accompany the adoration of God, often become the seedbed for our need to confess our sins. Astonished by our existence as a gift from God we become aware of how imperfectly we reciprocate the divine generosity. And the result is that praise often leads to confession, a sequence of prayer common to many Christian traditions. However, in a feel good culture, the call to confession often meets resistance. I think of people who have told me that the very idea of confessing sins makes them feel bad about themselves so they do not want to do it. In some cases, these individuals have suffered under a form of Christianity that concentrates unremittingly on sin, and their resistance is a sign of spiritual health: they are

³ A hymn text to be part of the author's next collection (see Thomas H Troeger 2003. Oxford University Press).

fighting back against oppressive religion. In other cases, sin has been narrowly defined as hubris, as pride and arrogance. This narrow definition of sin does not allow for those whose sin is not pride. As Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza has pointed out, some people's sin is a failure to claim and assert the gifts God has given them. They need not a "theology of relinquishment," but one of "self-affirmation" (Schussler Fiorenza 1984:xv).⁴

In sum, there are often good reasons why people resist prayers of confession. But having allowed for those good reasons, I want to affirm that if the end of preaching is prayer, then the end of preaching is sometimes confession. As I often do, I turn to a poet because of the concision with which she makes the case. Wistawa Szymborska is a living poet who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1996. Born in Poland in 1923, Szymborska is well acquainted with the terror and brutality of the 20th century. She lived through the bloodshed. Her poem is entitled "In Praise of Feeling Bad about Yourself":

The buzzard never says it is to blame.
The panther wouldn't know what scruples mean.
When the piranha strikes, it feels no shame.
If snakes had hands, they'd claim their hands were clean.

A jackal doesn't understand remorse.
Lions and lice don't waver in their course.
Why should they, when they know they're right?

Though hearts of killer whales may weigh a ton,
in every other way they're light.

On this third planet of the sun
among the signs of bestiality
a clear conscience is Number One.

(Szymborska 1998:168)

Feeling bad about ourselves is not always a bad response to those things that we have done and to those things that we have left undone. No matter where we stand on the political spectrum, if we affirm faith in a God of justice and compassion, and if in the presence of that God we look honestly at ourselves, then we will confess that we have not loved God with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. We are truly sorry and we humbly repent.

⁴ Fiorenza is drawing upon the work of Karie Augusta Neal, who, as Fiorenza acknowledges, uses this language "in a different context and sense".

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To confess our sins to God is to come to terms with who we really are. But that process involves much more than confession. It also involves supplication: asking God for what we need. I remember a woman who once told me: "I have never been able to pray for myself. I thought I was being too selfish to pray for me." Her words make me think of scores of other people, who have asked me: "Do you think it's all right for me to pray for this?"

Why all these worries and rules about prayer, especially when we pray for ourselves? I suppose there are some good reasons. People do not want to reduce their spiritual life to narcissism. People, have enough self-awareness that they want to avoid contracting the world down to the circumference of their personal concerns. As valid as these cautions may be, I am struck with how Jesus does not fence prayer in with rubrics and protocols. Instead, he simply urges us to get started: "Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you" (Mt 7:7). Do not worry if your prayer is right or wrong. Even the Bible has prayers whose content is perfectly terrifying: "O that you would kill the wicked, O God ... I hate them with a perfect hatred" (Psalm 139). "Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them on the rock!" (Psalm 137). When Jesus says "ask," he does not specify what we will receive. When he says "seek," he does not predict what we will find. When he says "knock," he does not describe what the open door will disclose. If the end of preaching is prayer, then at least sometimes, the end of preaching is supplication, praying for ourselves.

I believe that if the woman who spoke to me did begin to pray for herself, it would enrich her prayer for others. Christ says "Love your neighbor as *yourself*." Clearly there is a kind of love of self that is healthy and right. Such love puts us in touch with our humanity, with our elemental needs, with our own brokenness and fears, with our deepest questions and struggles, and our highest hopes and dreams. To pray for ourselves out of these profound realities is part of finding our connection to other human beings. Praying for ourselves instructs us in the way of praying for others. If we are to love our neighbors as we love ourselves, then we are to pray for others as we pray for ourselves.

The process can also work in reverse: in praying for others we learn to pray more faithfully for ourselves because compassion for the other awakens a sense of our common humanity. I believe it is this basic dynamic that lies behind Jesus' striking command: "Love your enemies and pray for those persecute you" (Mt 5:44). It is significant that this command is one continuous sentence: "Love your enemies and pray for those persecute you." If the command read only "Love your enemies." Then the command would not point us to the source of grace who can transform how we look at our enemies.

Praying for those who persecute us opens us to a different perception of those from whom we are alienated. When we pray for those who persecute us, the category “enemy” begins to dissolve in the waters of the Spirit, revealing the essential humanness of the other, a humanness that we share in common.

Praying for our enemies reveals in an especially dramatic way the dynamic interaction between praying for ourselves and praying for others. When we pray for those who “are in trouble, sorrow, need, sickness, or any other adversity,” then we open ourselves to the inter-connective tissue of the common creaturehood that we share with the whole human family and with the entire eco-system. We begin to let the reign of God take root in the core of who we are. Such prayer, to draw upon the homiletical work of David Buttrick, helps to create a transformed world in our consciousness, a revised vision of reality that empowers us to act for justice and reconciliation (Buttrick 1987).⁵ If the end of preaching is prayer, then at least sometimes the end of preaching is intercession, praying for others.

Because I preach in many different congregations throughout North America, I have the privilege of participating in a form of corporate prayer that has become common to a great many different traditions. The order of service often calls it “joys and concerns”. Sometimes, the joys and concerns have been collected ahead of time on a tablet of paper or people will speak them aloud prior to praying and the minister or priest writes them down and then offers prayers. No matter what form, these prayers take, I have observed the following pattern to be nearly universally true: when it comes to concerns and prayers for others, the church fills with the sound of the names of particular persons and places and needs. But when it comes time to offer prayers of thanksgiving. Silence often descends. There are a few voices here and there, “Thank you for the lovely day.” “Thank you for the children’s choir.” But the prayer of thanksgiving never rises to the level of the chorus of human need. Why is giving thanks so hard for the human heart? Why is it that we are quick to let God know our need, and reticent with gratitude? Whatever the answers to these questions, if the end of preaching is prayer, then sometimes the end of preaching is thankfulness to God.

When we read the Book of Psalms we discover giving thanks does not preclude the expression of sorrow. The same book that ends: “Let everything that lives praise the Lord!” also contains some of the most anguished prayers of lament ever uttered: “How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?” “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but

⁵ For a fine concise summary of Buttrick’s phenomenological homiletic (see Greenhaw 1996).

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find not rest.” Lament is as essential as every other form of prayer I have named. Prayers of lament allow us to express our anger, our sorrow, our perplexity and desperation in the face of tragedy.

In American culture we often think of lament and praise, sorrow and thanksgiving as polar opposites. This polar opposition sometimes gets translated into congregations who only want sermons and services that are upbeat. They want praise and thanksgiving minus lament. They want joy and peace minus sorrow. Sermons and services that are entirely upbeat destroy the essential interconnection of lament and praise, sorrow and thanksgiving. They block having a full relationship with God.

They damage the soul. The God we praise is the God who bears our anger. The God to whom we give thanks is the God who counts our tears and hears our sighs. Instead of being polar opposites lament and praise, sorrow and thanksgiving are part of the inter-connective tissue of our humanity, of the very way God created us. Furthermore, when we pray and the waters of the Holy Spirit flow over and through us, then our lament and praise, our sorrow and thanksgiving flow together in the same stream.

To return to George Herbert’s metaphor, the temple that preaching builds is a house of prayer in the heart, that profound way of being in the presence of God that embraces the full range of the divine human relationship. To build that temple is to nurture the corporate spirituality of the church. Such an understanding makes spirituality a much less slippery term because it is rooted in the enduring practices of the church at prayer and in those sacred depths of being where we open ourselves to God.

If the end of preaching is prayer, then how will we arrive at that end? The only way to arrive there is to begin there. Preachers who do not pray will never awaken prayer in those to whom they preach. Homiletics does not start with hermeneutics or rhetoric, it starts with God and our relationship to God and the vast repertoire of human prayer. All the scholarly disciplines that converge in homiletics matter greatly, but they are not the beginning nor the end of preaching. The end of preaching is prayer. The beginning of preaching is prayer. So let us pray:

Source of all wonder,
wellspring of living waters,
womb of being,
MotherFather, creator of all,
our beginning and our end,
continually renew our relationship to you,
that we your preachers
and homileticians

may manifest in our sermons,
in our scholarship and teaching
and in our very being and acting.
the fullness of prayer,
the abundance of life,
and the richness of relationship to you
that were perfectly embodied
in Jesus Christ.

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