

Preaching Strategies

Good homilies are usually crockpot not microwave

By Richard J. Hart, O.F.M. Cap.



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No magic formula or quick fixes exist for good preaching but just a lot of hard work.

A few months ago I wrote an article for *The Priest* entitled “Preaching to Multicultural Assemblies” and would like to follow up with a similar article focusing on the preacher. Some preachers

approach their task with reluctance, even paralyzing fear, while others are confident and passionate. Joseph Sittler has written a book on *The Anguish of Preaching*. Those who are uptight need to remember Jesus’ words, “the one who hears you, hears me” (Lk 10:16). No magic formulae or quick fixes exist for good preaching — just a lot of hard work. Keep in mind that Hollywood spends two to three days and some times longer on a 30-second commercial. We mine the purest veins of Scripture. Yet some preachers come up with a microwave homily rather than a crock-pot homily.

When preaching to a multicultural assembly we need to exegete

them first as the USCCB publication *Fulfilled in Your Hearing* emphasizes. This can present a stumbling block, especially when several subcultures make up the congregation. Thomas Long, in *Witness of Preaching*, states that we need to always remember that we come from and represent the assembly. Ask questions they would ask or dare not ask, put ourselves in their places, their hopes, dreams, hurts and concerns.

Emory University professor Fred Craddock maintains that much discipline is involved in this process. It is like peeling an onion or, to change the image, like trying to keep a beach ball under water. Some preachers address their assembly as a whole whereas others focus on individuals. Henry Mitchell in *Black Preaching* maintains that the successful black preachers are those who keep their sub-cultures in mind. Alice Mathews, in *Preaching that Speaks to Women*, states that it is a travesty to disregard women in our assemblies.

How relevant are our homilies? Jesus spoke about the lilies in the field, the birds of the air, weeds and wheat. What are their life issues in light of the Scriptures? We need to keep one eye on the sacred text, the other eye on the world, and our ear primed to the heart of the community. Finding a balance with exegetical insights and making homilies relevant is challenging.

If too much emphasis is placed on the exegesis the assembly might respond “Ho-hum, or so what?” Tap into their common experiences of pain and suffering. Name the demons: greed, jealousy, racism, idola-

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try. Show how to counteract them. What are the parishioners' struggles, doubts, fears, sorrows, joys? All life is a mystery to be lived not solved.

Apply the Balm of Gilead to their wounds. Effort is needed to tune in on their wavelength. We hold up a mirror in which people can see their plight reflected. Simone Weil wrote, "If we are to be relevant, we have to say things that are eternal." Tiny gems of wisdom can instruct and enlighten.

Narrative Approach

Jesus was a master storyteller, something that should be as easy as breathing. We don't have to be a Garrison Keillor or a John Shea. Most assemblies love stories. They can be a goldmine. Help listeners look at things with fresh eyes, but make sure they don't need a jeweler's eyepiece to understand them. Stories can act as a bridge between different cultures and bind them together. Most groups have their own stories or local lore. They invite participation.

Biblical stories can be dynamite because they are powerful and easy to follow. Most people would rather listen to a story or narrative approach than a homily constructed in a didactic way. Deductive or left-brain reasoning involves a declarative statement followed by proof — like moving from the known to the unknown or from the whole to its parts. Inductive or right brain reasoning is just the opposite. Some cultures prefer the more inspirational to the instructional, the emotional rather than the expository.

Jesus also used rich imagery, especially when explaining God's reign: the mustard seed, yeast, pearl of great price, how a hen gathers her chicks, new wineskins. Isaiah speaks of the beautiful feet of those who proclaim the Good News. St. Paul writes about the labor pains of a woman. The Epistle of St. James and the Revelation of St. John both contain powerful imagery.

The psalmist proclaims, "The Lord raises the needy from the dust, lifts


the poor from the ash heap" (113:7). The most frequent image of God in the Hebrew Scriptures is that of rock, a reminder of stability, a place of refuge. The image of Prudential Life Insurance Company is the Rock of Gibraltar, one of the most recognized symbols in the world. Images are like a many faceted diamond display-

ing different aspects of richness. We could say that six million Jews were killed in the Holocaust, or we could describe the roar of gas ovens and the mountains of bones. We could say that we need to work together as a community to reach our goal, or we could use the image of geese in the V-shape that increases their flying

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The difference between the wrong word and the right word is the difference between a lightning bug and lightning.

range 71%. When the lead goose tires, it goes to the rear and another takes over. A metaphor that might be used for evangelization is: do we use a drop line or fly fish? Hans von Balthasar once described the Church as “playing her chords of love.”

Carl Sandburg was asked what he considered the ugliest word in the English language. After a long pause, he said, “Exclusion.” Jesus made efforts to be inclusive, especially to outcasts and sinners. We need to be inclusive whenever various nationalities or subcultures are present by being open to various kinds of music, welcoming visitors, incorporating people into the service as ushers, servers, choir.

Pentecost was a multicultural event. In his letter to the Ephesians, St. Paul wrote that we are no long strangers but fellow citizens (2:9). Revelation states that all were included from “every tribe and tongue, people and nation” (5:9). Establish common ground by using material that resonates with every human being — hunger, poverty, pain, grieving, loneliness, rejoicing.

One Main Idea

Often one of the traps many preachers fall into is trying to convey too many thoughts or ideas. This leads to rambling. Jesus told the Good Samaritan story in 153 words, with the main idea: “Go, and do likewise.” One main idea is challenging. We need a rifle shot not buckshot. Three points are fine if they refer to one main idea. Bishop Kenneth Untener asked a good question, “What’s your pearl?” Is it possible to put your main point into a simple declarative statement? No reason to say more when the assembly will hear less. Less is more! A scalpel might be necessary.

But it is easier to go on with many thoughts than to go deeply into one thought. Easier to go horizontally than vertically. Don’t be too concerned how brief the homily is. One main idea that lives, talks and dances

might have the most lasting effect. We need to resist thoughts that pop into our heads, prompting us to say, “That reminds me, as I said before, I could go on and on.” These sidebars can be distracting.

Jesus used simple, earthy language. About 80% of the New Testament is written with only 314 different words. Simple words are not simplistic or banal. Theological jargon — words such as eschatology, soteriology, salvific, ecclesial and many others — fall on deaf ears. At a preaching workshop in Louisville, John Allen told us in his closing talk how many words he heard during the workshop that would not be understood by congregations. The average adult vocabulary is five to seven thousand words. Terms such as “your neighbor” or “people who are poor” are vague. Why not say, “the newcomer on your block” or “people in need of food stamps”? Avoid over-used expressions such as “last but not least,” “powers that be” or “conspicuous by their absence.”

Elie Wiesel warns that we need to be careful with words; they are dangerous. Walter Burghardt states that the two words “Sieg Heil” changed the lives of millions of people. What words carry the greatest meaning for our assembly? John Updike said that frequently he cannot think of the right word while writing, but he knows that there is one in the jigsaw puzzle of the English language. Eventually he finds it. That takes discipline and hard work. Mark Twain maintained that the difference between the wrong word and the right word is the difference between a lightning bug and lightning.

Listening

Jesus actively listened to others, a forgotten art in our society. To actively listen we have to give our undivided attention to another. In the pro-

cess something has to die. As Jesus said, “Unless the grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it just remains

a grain of wheat.”

When Samuel finally listened he realized that it was not Eli speaking, but God. So he said, “Speak Lord, your servant listens.” We often say, “Listen Lord, your servant speaks.” We can usually tell whether our assembly is listening or not. As in the commercial, we might want to walk around saying, “Do you hear me now?” We might not be able to hold our audience spellbound as Jesus did, but we can involve the assembly through questions. Whom did you identify with in the prodigal son story? What have you found the hardest decision in your life? To drive home the point that a child dies every second, you might ask them to click their fingers a few times and think that with every click, a child dies. In final analysis the effectiveness of the homily rests on how well people listen and on how well we have listened to them.

Jesus is often depicted as a man of sorrows, but He also was a joy-filled person. That is why I like the picture of the laughing Jesus. He probably had a good belly laugh when He saw Zacchaeus perched up in that sycamore tree, or when the men lowered the paralytic in front of Him.

Maybe the question about using humor is: does God have a sense of humor? One comedian said, “Yes, because he created me.” If God could speak through Balaam’s ass to communicate, why not through me? St. Paul remained joyful even when he was in prison. The word “joy” appears over 200 times in the Scriptures. When we have a difficult or challenging message to get across, humor can be used very effectively, especially as an icebreaker. Humor helps us recognize the absurdities in life, but it also has to be appropriate. Some preachers start off every homily with a funny story or insert jokes for the sake of some relief. Some of these are like cotton candy, lots of fluff but

Some preachers start off every homily with a funny story or insert jokes. Some of these are lots of fluff but no substance.

no substance. How you use humor will depend much on your assembly and whether it fits the subject matter.

Jesus was not afraid to preach on money, greed and other related topics. Social issues need to be addressed. Walter Brueggemann advocates that we quote more from Amos, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Don't say, "I am going to step on someone's toes in this homily." Let the text or Jesus' words do it; besides, some people's toes are already hardened. Name the injustices without inflaming or causing division. The best way is to ask questions or to tell them how you have struggled with the text. Invite or let them struggle also with the text. Help them to make a choice of either accepting or rejecting the message. Refrain from bawling them out like they have to shape up or go to hell. Our task is to challenge, inspire, cajole. Above all we have to show them, as St. Augustine did, that the price of silence concerning social issues such as racism or sexism is betrayal.

Preparation

In preparing our homilies we can use the Lone Ranger approach and ignore our Tontos. Jesus sent out His two disciples (Mk 6:7). Moses was instructed by Jethro. Paul traveled with co-workers (Acts 13). A cross-pollination of ideas can be most helpful. Preaching can fall flat, especially when many cultures are present. The assembly consists of fellow travelers, and all of us are on our pilgrimage.

Some preachers meet with fellow priests, deacons or laity. Some use the Internet or texting. Some parishes have Bible groups which discuss the readings for the following Sunday with the presider or deacon. Women can play an important role, especially with a passage such as John 16:21 about a mother in anguish whose hour has arrived. If a homily is to be discussed after Mass, it might be a good idea not to focus so much on the preacher but rather on the message or content. How willing are we

to accept positive evaluation?

To write or not to write, to use a manuscript or not, as well as to stay or not stay at the pulpit are indeed debatable topics. A good case can be made for either one. Some preachers have a facility to read a homily without it sounding like it is being read.

Our delivery needs to be flexible when speaking to African-Americans, Vietnamese, Chinese, or other groups. African-Americans respond verbally to your homily, and initially that can be distracting. Others groups are sedate. Keep in mind that 8% of meaning comes from verbal content, 37% of meaning comes from inflection, volume and rate, and 55% of meaning comes from non-verbal or body language. Nine-tenths of meaning is tied to matters of delivery, so it has to show in our voices, faces and gestures that what we are saying comes from the heart. The rate will also be determined by the different cultures.

Tied closely with delivery is enthusiasm or passion. We don't have to be a Demosthenes or a Bishop Sheen. If we like and believe in what we are doing, it will be rather evident. The opposite is also true. I happened to be in sacristy when a priest just finished giving his homily for another priest. He came back into the sacristy and tore up the homily. Good preaching is prophetic, passionate and challenging. Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, "Nothing great was ever accomplished without enthusiasm." Sam Keen wrote a book entitled *Fire in the Belly*. If only more priests possessed the fire that Jeremiah and Jesus had, we would have better homilies. Homilies are not meant to be sleeping pills. A mother asked her child, "Why do you keep quiet when the priest preaches?" The child responded, "So I don't wake the others who are sleeping." Jesus said, "I have come to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it

were already kindled" (Lk 12:49). Fire means a purification. God purifies us. This enables us to proclaim the Good

News, so that people will say about our preaching, "Were not our hearts burning within us?" (Lk 24:32). **P**

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