

Preaching as Faith Practice
in the Land of Liminality

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INTRODUCTION: Preaching as Faith Practice: What does this mean?

The identity of the Pastor as preacher is a given with the rite of ordination. I well remember a seminary classmate's mother saying, "I don't know why you think you need a license to preach doesn't that come automatically with parenthood?" Ah, the insight in that question! Are preachers to be the parental figure cajoling, instructing, coaching, inspiring, correcting and leading by example? Have congregations had the expectation that the Pastor as preacher is the mature Christian in the pulpit as opposed to the less mature Christian in the pew? But the Pastor has little time to consider his/her identity as preacher. There is some authority given with ordination and a letter of call.

Outside my window there is a construction crew of three men. They have the second story of a house to build. They are not considering their identity as construction workers but busy about the task. They have developed certain necessary skills. So too, the preacher in building a sermon employs all the learned skills of exegesis, composition, and oratory. There is some skill given.

The identity of the Pastor as preacher is given to us in the course of our training as the exercise of Pastoral authority and the employment of exegetical and oratorical skill. This "given" identity as the gift and burden of the first call Pastor, Richard Lischer describes out of his own experience:

When I thought of preaching, I did not consider it to be a congregation's reception of the word of God, but a speaker's command of the Bible's hidden meanings and applications, which were served up in a way to showcase the authority and skill of the preacher. In those days the gospel lived or died by my personal performance. My preaching was a small cloud of glory that followed me around and hung like a canopy over the pulpit whenever I occupied it.¹

¹Richard Lischer, *Open Secrets* (New York: Doubleday, 2001) 73.

The authority of ordination and the skill of exegete and orator are involved in the practice of preaching. The authority of ordination may serve to legitimize a professional clergy and the skill of the exegete impress those who share the same expertise, and some look to the orator for inspiration, Biblical education, diverting entertainment or coping therapy. The “givens” of the pastor as preacher are being challenged by a larger society that is not impressed by authority, is visual rather than auditory in learning and communication styles, is Biblically illiterate, has access to hundreds of cable channels for an incredible variety of entertainment and offers non-threatening, non-anxious self-help via the internet. The “givens” of the Pastor as preacher are changing. In such a changing society what is the identity of the preacher going to become?

Alan Roxburgh describes this kind of moment of change for Pastors as “liminality”

Liminality...is a threshold experience, a paradoxical state of both death and renewal, confusion and opportunity. Groups and pastors, for example, find themselves betwixt and between: their roles no longer fit the classifications of society. What pastors? What do they do? Where do they fit?...the further one moves into liminality the greater the cognitive confusion about ..the role ‘pastor.’ (but) ...liminality is also a phase of opportunity for creativity and transformation....liminality requires leaders who listen to voices from the edge...where the *apostle, the poet, and the prophet* are found.²

The role confusion is more than Lischer’s experience of the split between the academy and the daily life, it is greater than the battle between immature self-centered arrogance and more mature attentiveness to the flock. The role confusion of the Pastor as preacher can best be addressed by approaching preaching as a faith practice.

²Alan J. Roxburgh, “Pastoral Role in a Missionary Congregation” in George R. Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder, *The Church Between Gospel and Culture*(Eerdmans, 1996) 325.

What is meant by the term faith practice? Miroslav Volf explains:

Christian beliefs shape Christian practices...Christian practices have what we may call an 'as-so' structure (or correspondence structure): *as* God has received us in Christ, *so* we ought to receive our fellow human beings...to be a Christian *is* to explicitly believe in Christ and commit oneself to follow his way of life. Thus the internal constitution of a *Christian* practice points to the story of Christ as its external norm³.

Preaching as faith practice is Christ-shaped and Christ-centered. It is first and foremost not a human work but the work of the Holy Spirit in us as the Spirit conforms us to Christ. In this project I invite you to listen with me for the work of the Spirit in conforming the Pastor and faith community to Christ so that preaching becomes practicing the faith together. The five parts of this project are I. Conformation to Christ Part II. Giftedness and Struggle; Part III. Speaking the Truth in Love: Part IV: Hungering and Thirsting Together ; Part V: Foretaste of the Feast to Come.

PART ONE: CONFORMATION TO CHRIST

In preparing to preach, it is usual to begin with reading the text in several versions including the original Greek or Hebrew, consulting commentaries and Bible dictionaries to understand the historical setting of the text and the intent of its redactors. Phrases, images, ideas catch the attention and live in the prayerful imagination of the preacher as the daily tasks of pastoral ministry and human life unfold. Often, I have thought about some "main idea" or "scriptural theme" and searched for illustrations that are true to daily experience. One of the most insightful comments on this approach to preaching came in my first call. A woman who had suffered episodes of manic-depression with

³Miroslav Volf, "Theology as a Way of Life" in *Practicing Theology*, ed. Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass, 250.

paranoid schizoid tendencies had just returned home after her hospitalization. I had not really wanted to go visit this time as during the hospital visit she had thrown something at me and accused me of having an affair with her husband. When I arrived, she was calm and reasonable. She asked, “how do you come up with all those ideas when you give us your opinions on Sundays?” I must have looked confused, because then she continued, “you know, when you preach.” Is that what people think we do give our own ideas and opinions? Surely, I wasn’t doing that? Or was I? I understood some things about preaching as exegetical work and as oratory, but I did not have any understanding of preaching as faith practice, especially preaching as the work of the Spirit in us to conform us to Christ.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes:

The Holy Scriptures speak of formation...not with the forming of a world by a means of plans and programmes. Whenever they speak of forming they are concerned only with the one form which has overcome the world, the form of Jesus Christ...formation comes only as formation in his likeness, as conformation with unique form of Him who was made man, was crucified, and rose again...It is not Christian men who shape the world with their ideas, but it is Christ who shapes men in conformity with himself.⁴

If preaching is not a faith practice, we preach our ideas, our opinions, even our pious insights. In his lectures on Romans, Martin Luther counsels us that our “old man” that is the “old Adam/Eve” is subject to the flesh all the more “when he acts righteously and practices wisdom and exercises himself in all spiritual good works, even to the point of loving and worshiping God Himself. The reason for this is that in all these things he ‘enjoys’ the gifts of God and ‘uses’ God.”⁵ God is then an idea is a tool in the toolbox of the practicing preacher who has not yet been given over to preaching as a faith practice.

⁴Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (New York: Touchstone, 1995) 81, 82.

⁵Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works: Lectures on Romans* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1972) 313.

Preaching as faith practice comes only as a gift of the grace of God through the Holy Spirit conforming us to Christ. The elevated pulpit looking down on the congregation was once meant to convey the rule of God's Word over our lives, but it also has at times, cultivated the illusion of there being a higher Christian occupying it, or one who strives to be more committed, more faithful, more disciplined. To be conformed to Christ is to be conformed to the one who came down, became flesh, took the form of a servant, and did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped. (Philippians 2). Bonhoeffer expands on this theme:

To be conformed with the Incarnate is to have the right to be the man one really is. Now there is no more pretence, no more hypocrisy or self-violence, no more compulsion to be something other, better and more ideal than what one is. God loves the real man. God became a real man.⁶

The false striving to which we are subject is what is given to us by the world, the devil and our sinful self. It is such false striving that torments us with questions about how well we preached and finds our energies rising and falling on the basis of public approbation. To be conformed to Christ is for this false striving self, the "old Adam/Eve" to be put death, surrendered to God's judgment, justified in Christ, and raised to new life. The faith practice of preaching is to be caught by the Word in the power of the Spirit and see in oneself this false striving, to be condemned, to be put to death. The faith practice of preaching is to be raised to new life so we no longer "attach importance to distinguishing" ourselves "but only to distinguishing Christ for the sake of" our brothers and sisters.⁷

⁶Ibid., 82.

⁷Ibid, 83.

This “conformation” to Christ is a life-long process begun in our baptism and continued in the daily renewal of it. We do not “achieve” conformation; we practice faith, trust in Christ, that by the power of the Holy Spirit we will be conformed to Christ as promised. We often fall back into “false striving” and need to be reawakened to the activity of God in the life of pastor as preacher. As we grow in faith, we become more aware of this activity, usually in retrospect. Such a moment came for me during the Ash Wednesday service this year.

Ash Wednesday morning began with an early morning phone call from the neighboring interim Pastor who was too sick with a cold to preach. Just what I need, I thought groggily, another sermon besides the funeral at the end of the week and Sunday.

Besides, I really don’t like Ash Wednesday, my father was buried on Ash Wednesday, and I thought for once I wouldn’t deal with the whole subject of Lent. Then we are introducing the series about Abraham as the father of 3 faiths. Lent, Dust, death, Muslims, Jews and Christians, the threat of war and the numerous funerals in our area in recent weeks what a great combination! I sat down in front of the blank computer screen and began to pray. I don’t get this, I don’t want to do this, I get the guilt, the death, the sin, the repentance, but what is the good news of this dusty old day?

Ash Wednesday, 2003 Gilman, Spring Lake, St. John’s

Ps. 51:1-13; Is. 58:1-12;; 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10; Matt. 6:1-6

A SOMETHING OUT OF NOTHING GOD

Genesis 2:7—The Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.

The experience of CREATION

Genesis 3:19: By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust and to dust you shall return.

The experience of FALL

Romans 6:23: For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

The experience of REDEMPTION

These three great movements in the life of faith come together on this night, this Ash Wednesday.

Our life is received as gift, a gift of the Spirit, the breath of God. God makes something out of nothing—the nothing of death, the nothing of sin... God takes them and makes something out of nothing.

This is a holy and certain hope about God---God can take what looks like nothing—insignificant “failures” and transform them by his grace. Certainly in Jesus we see the “failure” of his parents even to find adequate lodging at the time of his birth, the “failure” of many to welcome or recognize him; the insignificance of a stable in a little town. God transformed these “failures” into sources of hope for the world—God makes room for the homeless and the refugee, God declares the tiniest infant and the smallest town can serve God’s purposes. Even the small town of Spring Valley can serve God’s purposes. God takes what is nothing, less than nothing, the failure of the cross—the criminal seeking acceptance by Jesus is promised Paradise—something comes out of nothing of his life even at such a moment; the failure of the cross—no palace for Jesus who had been greeted as a King a few days before---only mockery, injustice, torture and death. God takes what is less than nothing, and makes room for failed lives, victims of injustice, those who suffer and die, God makes room at the cross—and we who are marked by this cross are not abandoned in suffering, nor do we abandon those who suffer. The old St. Anne’s rectory in Somerset that once housed nuns—was empty, but now is a shelter for the homeless in Pierce and St. Croix Counties. We do not abandon those who suffer because God takes that suffering into the cross, and finally empties it, raises Jesus to new life by the power of the Holy Spirit.

At that joyful moment when parents’ bring a new creation, a new life to the baptismal font, the child is marked with this cross of Christ.

A five year old being baptized, asked, “Can you still see the cross on my forehead?”

Tonight we see the ashes. We are reminded of sin and death. But these ashes are in the shape of a cross, because in Jesus our sin and death are taken on, and in the power of the Spirit new life, resurrection happens.

This new life out of the ashes of death and sin, happens for you, this happens to you, this happens among you.

This new life does not come from you or me. It comes from Christ alone, from the power of his cross, from his giving of his righteousness to be our own.

The season of Lent is 40 days long. Forty days like the forty Jesus spent in the wilderness being tested by Satan; forty days like the forty Noah spent on the ark waiting for new, dry land and a new beginning; forty like the forty years in the wilderness

wandering after deliverance from slavery in Egypt before the promised land was reached. The Christian community focuses on fasting, prayer, repentance, and forgiveness in preparation for the Easter feast.

The fast we read about in the book of Isaiah is a fasting from injustice—not about self-deprivation, but about better sharing of ourselves—our wealth, our time, our food, our homes with others in our families, our community and our world. The Jesus who lifted up the five loaves and two fish, took what was next to nothing and in the power of the Spirit of God by which he was led, there was more than enough for sharing.

This Lent, you are invited to focus on the God who makes something out of what looks like nothing. You are invited to focus on the transforming power of his cross. By the presence of the life-giving Spirit of God, you are invited to grow in trust of what God can do in and with your life as individuals and as congregations of Christians. As you pray during this season, know this life-giving Spirit is praying in you, shaping your life in the life of this cross, upward toward God, outward toward the neighbor. As you pray you share with God as with a friend, all the struggles within against what is harmful and evil to yourself or others. This is a struggle you do not fight alone or in vain, it is a struggle which is taken up into Christ. The Christ within you, will go with you through everything, and raise you up to new life daily and eternally.

When St. John's was reduced to ashes, Gilman offered a home during a wilderness time. When it looked like nothing, God was still doing something and in the power of the Spirit among the people of God, new life came. As Gilman and Spring Lake go through the call process, it is another kind of wilderness time. Be assured that you are not abandoned and that St. John's congregation is praying for you.

As the world is on the brink of a war it is yet another kind of wilderness time. At the United Nations Building in NYC right in front of where the security council meets hangs a famous artwork by Pablo Picasso entitled, *Guernica*.⁸ It depicts the horrible pain and suffering of victims of the Spanish civil war. At the request of our government that picture has been covered with a blue cloth so it cannot be seen by the world's policymakers. In our churches we do not cover up the reality of sin, death or evil. It is clearly visible on our foreheads this night, but it takes the shape of a cross.

Marked with the cross of Christ and in the reality of his suffering and death and in strength of his resurrected life taken into our hands at communion we live together the promise: "neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁸ Information re "Guernica" from Dr. Walter Bouman's sermon accessed on -line through Textweek.com

PART TWO: GIFTEDNESS AND STRUGGLE

Preaching is a public task. It is done in the gathered assembly. Yet, our culture is one in which religion is increasingly privatized and gatherings are often seen as collections of individual selves sharing a common need or goal. In preparing to preach, the task of sermon preparation is done in the privacy of the Pastor's study, the lone individual envisioning the common need for redemption through Christ and the goal of salvation. Although we are captive to the culture in such patterns of privatization and individual visioning, the Spirit of the Lord is always at work to bring us together and to prepare the sermon through the shared interactions as other member of the community "open up the text" in the context of life together. There is a temptation to see all meetings as business tasks of the non-profit organization blessed by an opening devotion. There is a temptation to see teaching confirmation or Bible study classes as task completion by the individual professional Pastor serving the voluntary association of like-minded individuals. But for a pastor who is preaching as faith practice, he/she needs to be attentive to God's Word in the context of the community, s/he needs to be seeking to open up opportunities for listening to God together. As baptized persons we are all being conformed to Christ, we are "communities of spiritual formation."

How are our congregations communities of spiritual formation? Much of our congregational life centers on worship. We teach children and adults the practice of faith. The church provides support in Christ's name during times of crisis and need. We engage in visible and public activities, such as offering assistance to people who are homeless, or hungry, or survivors of abuse, as a way of both serving God and proclaiming God's mercy and justice. The most important value in a community of spiritual formation is authenticity. There is no room for pretense, no room for manipulation, and no room for power games. The goals we establish must be clearly directed to outcomes in people's spiritual lives. The fundamental question for self-evaluation is this: 'How has our ministry brought people closer to God?'⁹

⁹David P. Mayer, *Our Gifts* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002) 9.

If we are looking at preaching as a faith practice we are engaged in spiritual formation as an individual in and with the faith community. To listen for God means listening together. Often the preacher overhears God's Word as the "unseen guest" at shut-in or nursing home communion visits or in meetings with families to make funeral arrangements. Less often, does the business of the organization allow time together for deliberately listening to God and to one another as people practicing the faith together. When I asked Joann Nesser of Christos Prayer Center to come and do a Saturday morning workshop with our church council, I asked her to address the question of "spiritual leadership." I began preparing the ground for this workshop by having the council do a quick checklist of things that each of them enjoy and are skilled at or are willing to learn, what they are called to, and then do interviews in groups of two around three beginning questions from Chapter 4 in "Our Gifts: Identifying and Developing Leaders" quoted from above. The three beginning questions were:

1. Tell me about a time when you accomplished something that really made you proud. It doesn't have to be a "church thing." What made your accomplishment special? What made you proud?
2. Some people really enjoy working with other people on a team. Some people enjoy working alone. Which of those settings appeals to you most? In which setting are you most productive? Why?
3. Tell me about three skills or talents that you are glad you have. Don't be shy.¹⁰

In these conversations, we learned together that we had several shy people who liked to alone, a couple of very outgoing people who could talk to anyone about anything, a few who liked being on a team, a senior citizen guy who loved cooking, and a woman who confessed to volunteering for everything when asked "out of guilt." This very limited discussion allowed us to see the possibilities and the differences among us. So much

¹⁰Ibid.,95, 97

focusing on common tasks at a business meeting does not usually allow for a celebration of differences but rather consensus to “move the question.” I deliberately “mixed up” the twosomes so that the new 29 year old young married was with the 70 year old man about to celebrate his 40th wedding anniversary; the somewhat cynical older banker was paired with the education chairperson who is expecting her fourth child. Usually these people sit at opposite ends of the table and don’t really know each other very well either as persons or as Christians. Preaching as faith practice also means practicing what is preached in terms of inclusive community in Christ as we make ourselves vulnerable to one another for the sake of the work of the kin-dom. The education chairperson had checked off “visiting” and “nursery” and “planning parties” as things she enjoyed. In the weeks ahead, God provided opportunity for us to work together in reaching out to the family whose little child was dying of cancer with her visit, Sunday School valentines, and videotaped birthday greetings. The good news of a Jesus who accompanies his people, who brings joy in the midst of sorrow, is proclaimed together. That is preaching as a faith practice in our shared life.

The Sunday immediately preceding the planned council workshop on Spiritual Leadership was the “Feast of the Transfiguration.” Several weeks earlier, I had a wonderful conversation with a woman who had grown up at St. John’s and is a professional interior decorator in Minneapolis. She had done a lot in the rebuilding of St. John’s after its fire. I asked her as a person of faith to speak about “the transfigured face of Jesus and the transfigured face of St. John’s” what the experience had been like of “seeing the face of St. John’s” changed. She spoke about the difficulty of change, and the yearning for continuity, for the people of God being more than a building but

expressing the love of God in the re-building. Some persons had made comments to me about “why does she have to tell us what to do” “she doesn’t belong here any more” discovered that “belonging” was not about an address but about who addresses us. The two older “opposing factions” in the congregation have always gotten on each other’s nerves and tried to pull the Pastor into one camp or the other. Preaching as faith practice means honoring the gifts of both families and seeking opportunities for new people to use their gifts to proclaim the gospel. Despite all the tensions that arise, preaching as faith practice means keeping all of our eyes on the Jesus in our midst. The transfiguration Sunday sermon tries to address keeping our eyes on Jesus, the primary faith practice for the preacher and the faith community.

THEY SAW ONLY JESUS

What is your reaction to conversations about suffering and death? For most of us—this is a topic we would like to avoid it hurts us to imagine those we love having to die and so we usually try to end such conversations---No, grandma you’re young yet! No, I’m sure you’ll make a full recovery! And move on. Jesus and his disciples had just a conversation like that. Jesus was speaking about his own suffering and death and his disciples cut off the conversation. Jesus essentially said, denying suffering and death is the work of the devil—and when you cut off the conversation about it you are doing the devil’s work.

After that conversation, things were a little tense, a little confused. 6 days after that conversation, Jesus takes 3 of his tensest, most confused but committed followers and friends up the mountain.

There, instead of having a “downer” experience—they have one of life’s highs---a moment where everything is clear and certain---Yes, this JESUS is the glorious Messiah. God’s goodness and truth and justice will prevail! The hopelessness we felt a few days ago is gone! We see clearly the changing power of God’s presence in this Jesus!

But then fear creeps in. And fear wants safety. 3 booths: THE LAW; MOSES; THE PROPHETS: ELIJAH THE MESSIAH: JESUS. Out in Western North Dakota there is a high mountain, called a butte----sentinel butte. Sentinel means “the one who watches” From the top you can watch for miles around a nearly treeless landscape and see what is coming. When ranchers are down below herding cattle it is this mountaintop that gives them their bearings. They find their way home by seeing the mountain.

This mountain of transfiguration is a little like that too. From the top, the sweeping plan of God to lead God's people is obvious. From down below where the storms will come up suddenly, the mountaintop will offer a sense of direction---whatever is going on---we are moving God-ward and will be led home.

There is a part of us that would like to be in control and keep the mountaintop. It is the commanding position for the military. At Gettysburg Battlefield, it is taking the high ground, the command of Cemetery Ridge and Little Round Top that turn the battle for the Union. There is something about that control to which we are attracted. But the glory of God and control are not the same thing. That is what the first disciples have trouble with—it's what most of us have trouble with, too.

An in control God, we think would be all sufficient---needing nothing, wanting nothing. An in control God, would be perfectly at peace and perfectly in charge and changeless. So, if we are like such a God, we would need nothing from anyone, be perfectly at peace, in charge and keep everything from changing as much as we could.

JESUS TOTALLY SHATTERS THIS IDEA OF GOD...

Jesus, born as a baby---NEEDS love and attention as any child.

Jesus, a young man NEEDS find direction, and seeks baptism and wrestles with his vocation in the desert--

Jesus, a teacher gathers followers around him—a teacher NEEDS disciples.

Jesus on the cross NEEDS something to drink—he thirsts, he is abandoned, dies.

LISTEN TO THIS JESUS, LISTEN TO HOW HE LIVES AND DIES

LISTEN TO HOW HE IS RISEN AMONG YOU...HOW HE COMES TO YOU IN BREAD AND WINE...

What if he had been changeless and stayed in a booth? What if he conformed his life to human expectations about God? The mountaintop would have been a popular religious pilgrimage site, a tourist destination perhaps.

I think about the tourist destination of St. Augustine, Florida the oldest city in America. It has the old Spanish fort where you can see a play recounting the founding of the city by the conquistadors with lots of theatrical lighting in the outdoor warmth of a summer night. It has little bottles of water from Ponce de Leon's fountain of youth for sale. You can visit a miniature reproduction of the Al Alhambra palace. But St. Augustine is a dead town which makes no real difference to life today. The mountaintop could have been a tourist destination.

Has your Christian faith ever been a tourist destination? Going to an "old familiar place" with the glow of past glorious moments enshrined in your memory—the warm glow of Christmases past; the glow of wedding memories, the glow of Sunday School programs? Has your faith life, been a booth on a mountain top or in this valley?

If it ever has, hear this morning's invitation—THIS IS ABOUT JESUS, GOD'S BELOVED SON, LISTEN TO HIM....

The Word of the Lord from 1 Peter 2: Come to Jesus, a living stone and like living stones, let yourselves be build into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. By the power of the Holy Spirit, let it be said of us, (congregation repeats phrase THEY SAW ONLY JESUS)

THEY SAW ONLY JESUS.

Rather than avoiding those who suffer, listen and live according to God's Word in Matthew 25: Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was sit that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" And the king will answer them, "Truly, I tell you just as you did it to the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me. Our World Hunger Appeal, our local food pantry, prayer chain ministry, acts of caring... in our relationship to those who suffer: the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the sick, the imprisoned, let it be said of us,

THEY SAW ONLY JESUS

When others are annoyed by the challenge of living with energetic and eager children, listen and live according to God's Word in Matthew 18: Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? Jesus called a child, and said, "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me. In our relationship to our children in the church, let it be said of us, THEY SAW ONLY JESUS.

When people grate on our nerves and we feel we have been unappreciated or wronged and are tempted to give up on community or to pout in the corner resentfully, or to carp behind one another's backs critically, we hear the word of Jesus to those who crucified him, Father, forgive them they know not what they do. In our relationship to those who hurt us in this community, the church, let it be said of us,

THEY SAW ONLY JESUS.

When others' don't keep up their end of things and we feel let down and betrayed, we hear the words of Jesus at the altar once again, On the night in which he was betrayed, our Lord took bread, broke it and gave it to his disciples ALL OF THEM. When in moments of betrayal we gather at the altar, let it be said of us

THEY SAW ONLY JESUS.

When no one wants to talk about suffering and death, we hear the words of Jesus, “Whoever wants to be my follower, take up his cross, deny himself and follow me.” In times of suffering and struggle, let it be said of us,

THEY SAW ONLY JESUS.

When budgets worry us, war threatens us, and economic times make us wonder what’s next, we hear the words of Jesus, “Seek first the kingdom of heaven and his righteousness and all these things shall be added unto you.” In times of material worry, let it always be said of us,

THEY SAW ONLY JESUS.

When the whole world separates people by class, education, race, and gender, we hear GOD’S WORD: In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, but we are all one in Christ Jesus. When we come together for communion this day, with all our differences in the larger world, when we look at one another, let it be said of us.

THEY SAW ONLY JESUS.

THEY SAW ONLY JESUS. And after the resurrection those disciples could really see what the goodness and grace were about and tell others about it. After the resurrection at St. John’s I thank Kaye this morning for telling others about the goodness and grace of God. Continue that conversation here and in daily life.

Amen.

We continued the conversation about the goodness and grace of God as 12 of us gathered for the workshop on Spiritual Leadership on Saturday, March 8. The opening began with Romans 12 and a time of “lectio divina” followed by some sharing of words or images that had surfaced during the reading. A brief presentation about “God’s call” and “spiritual gifts” was followed by time for individuals to listen and pray about what they were most called to do if they were free to do anything. Small groups shared what was on each person’s heart. Then we returned to the larger group for a presentation about “Congregational Life” using John Ackerman’s book “Listening to God”: Spiritual Formation in Congregations.” A good discussion took place surrounding

Chart 2: Growth of Community¹¹

	1. Dependence	2. Counterdependence	3. Mutual	4. Independence	5. Interdependence
Jesus & Disciples	Jesus' call	Arguments rivalry	Disciples are mature	Jesus leaves emptiness	The Spirit comes
Our Experience	wonderful excitement	Whose will is supreme?	we have by—laws Tradition, Scripture	God may be calling in the darkness	Christ is in me. We are the Body of Christ
God's self Revelation	Honeymoon will you give thanks	Ego willfulness vs. God's will	The Kingdom	Why have you forsaken me?	Abide in me, I in you. It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and us.
Salvation	Belonging	Deliverance	Being justified	Reconciliation	Working with others and God

These build on each other and we go back and forth. The most important thing is the vertical dimension and where God is at each stage.

Conversation around this chart could be braved better after there had been more relaxed shared and some trust-building in groups. The majority seemed to agree that they had experienced many arguments and rivalries and that the last few years they had been in stage 4. The series of events: a Pastor mishandling funds and forced to resign followed by a Pastor having a mental breakdown and going on permanent disability followed by a Pastor who drove many away with lots of rigid rule giving and articulating a negative view of youth, followed by the burning of the old church building. Some discussion followed as to where they were moving now as the re-building and the change of Pastors had occurred. Some thought they had seen some evidence of stage 5, some felt the congregation was more comfortable with where they have been during stable periods in the past, Stage 3. I have felt that they have some inkling of moving to stage 5, that the possibilities are there, but that stage 3 would be the comfortable regression, though of course it has its helpful points it is certainly not the direction of growth. One woman

¹¹John Ackerman, *Listening to God* (The Alban Institute, 2001) 33.

mentioned how she envied her catholic neighbors who would always attend mass regardless of who the priest was, even now when they had a priest from India no could understand, they were loyal. So many St John's people came and went when anything got uncomfortable. Certainly, she had the ability to voice her own discomfort in a healthier way in the workshop! Despite those comments, the conversation did not take a negative turn and dwell on the past but opened up to the new possibilities of a new time. We closed the workshop singing together "Come, Holy Spirit."

It had been several years since there had been any leadership training or council retreat workshop. They had always been on Saturday mornings at the church with just their own people. Now, I raised one additional challenge and 4 people committed to going to the Synod workshops for church councils on March 22 in Eau Claire. The hands-on help they received excited them. They learned about the shared tools at the on-line Synod Resource Center (nwsynod-wisconsin.org), the meaning of stewardship and possible program helps; estate planning and gifts; congregations dealing with change and conflict. They discovered other people from other congregations and what the Synod and churchwide had to offer.

Often in preaching I may speak about the work of the whole church. But if they do not get to see the whole church it is very difficult for them to celebrate its existence.

Preaching as a faith practice, means to walk by faith into new situations of learning along with congregational members, situations in which participation in the whole body of Christ energizes people for ministry together. Preaching cannot be reduced to proclamation from the pulpit. If we do not practice what we preach, how shall we preach

what we practice? If we do not practice being the whole body of Christ, how shall we preach what the real life work of that living body is?

PART THREE: SPEAKING THE TRUTH IN LOVE

Preaching as a faith practice means speaking the truth in love. That is to tell the truth, because Jesus is himself the truth; and to tell the truth in love, because love builds up the whole body of Christ. Some, like Walter Brueggeman, might call this “prophetic ministry” and he has an excellent description of what this entails:

...to evoke an alternative community that knows it is about different things in different ways. ...a stance and a posture or a hermeneutic about the world of death and the word of life that can be brought to light in every context...to penetrate the numbness to face the body of death in which we are caught...death does not require indignation as much as it requires anguish and the sharing in pain. The public sharing of pain is one way to let the reality sink in and let the death go...to penetrate despair so that new futures can be believed in and embraced by us¹²

There are lots of challenges to speaking the truth in love in our changing community. Like many churches, there is an older, dedicated core of leaders that has kept things going for years. When it comes time for electing officers to serve on the church council, to attend the annual meeting, enthusiasm often wanes. The tensions between certain parties makes them avoid serving on council together. Newer members have a willingness to serve but aren't sure they can leap into work on the council. Then, there are the people new to the community. Three new houses are being built around me as I type this. Who will their occupants be? I visited the new neighbors across the street last week. A young couple with 2 children relocated from Stevens Point here two weeks and they hadn't met any neighbors except one at the re-cycling bin (not that I'm that brave it took me two weeks!) The school is wrestling with state funding cutbacks and the

¹² Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978) 110-111

grocery store will re-open under new management after the previous owner went bankrupt. The elementary school is engaged in a public campaign to fund a new playground as the old one is unsafe. Next year, the school will try offering a pre-school program.

These are just a few obvious challenges and changes in community.

How does preaching as a faith practice “speak the truth in love” in such changes and challenges? As we held the annual meeting and there would be changes on the church council, I reflected on this question. I thought about how we asked people to do things they didn’t want to do, especially asking other people to do things. I thought about how we value our personal time and interests and rights and find it difficult to take on more and more projects. I thought about all the excuses I’d ever used. I know how sick I sometimes of going to meetings. I know how hard it got to ask people their names that you didn’t know or couldn’t remember. I could sympathize with the plight of the community. Then I read the gospel. It was one of those moment when God did the Word to the preacher through Jesus. The text was the story of the call of Peter and Andrew, James and John to leave their fishing nets and follow Jesus. They died to their old way of life. They followed Jesus. What is it that the gospel does to the hearer in the Jesus we preach?

Christ cannot merely be talked about, he must finally be done to us. Christ has been explained to us endlessly, dressed and re-dressed in everybody’s clothes, painted in everybody’s color and likeness, fashioned and re-fashioned into everybody’s hero. The explanations never seem to stick. If he is to be our Lord and Christ he must finally be proclaimed so as to do us in and make us new.¹³

¹³Gerhard O. Forde, *Theology is for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990) 105.

The sermon “Christ-shaped Christians” was one in which preaching as faith practice became a moment of deepening awareness of the split between the culture in which I live under the flesh and the call of God to follow and “fish for people.”

CHRIST-SHAPED CHRISTIANS: Mark 1: 14-19

This sermon starts IMMEDIATELY...and Jesus said...Follow me and I will make you fish for people. And IMMEDIATELY Peter and Andrew left their nets and followed him. And IMMEDIATELY Jesus called James and John...and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

IMMEDIATELY...there is no procrastination in the gospel of Mark, everything is happening IMMEDIATELY. Kind of like that saying, “if you’re not part of the solution, you’re part of the problem.” Do something IMMEDIATELY!...Is it time to eat? Oh, yes, fellow microwavers, let’s eat IMMEDIATELY! Have some problems? Dial up Dr. Laura or watch Dr. Phil who answer IMMEDIATELY!

The IMMEDIATELY of Jesus is NOT the quick fix, not fast food, not easy answer. But the IMMEDIATELY of Jesus is URGENT. Jesus asks his disciples to FOLLOW NOW. They do. WHY?

Why didn’t they think about questions we might have: what will my family do? What about my business partners and clients? What’s the plan here? Didn’t they even want to ask the good Lutheran catechism question: What does this mean to “follow me” immediately? The first step in relationship with Jesus is not what disciples know, the first step in relationship with Jesus is the disciples’ OBEDIENT response to the one who knows them. OBEDIENT response.

As much as I like IMMEDIATELY, I don’t like the word OBEDIENCE. I have my reasons. I am a good American and I remember my American History. The slogan of the American Revolution: “DON’T TREAD ON ME”- we’re not obeying Old King George; to say nothing of the use of the word obedience in wedding vows in which men once promised to love and cherish and women promised to love and obey and all the stress of that subject of “submissive women.” OBEDIENCE is NOT my favorite topic. Is it yours?

Once in a while in confirmation class, I’ll throw out a question, because I wonder how young minds and hearts are being shaped today, so when I once asked ...”Agree or Disagree with this statement: I like what I like, you like what you like. Each of us should be able to do what we want to do.” IMMEDIATELY..many hands were raised. We AGREE! Why?

Commitment to the individual self as the center of the universe. It’s our primary way we are shaped in our thinking and acting in our country. In my early growing up years, blind obedience to authority was usual. Our authorities were our teachers and parents and we did what we were told to do. Later, as authority figures in the years of Vietnam and

Watergate were increasingly lying to the public, everywhere the bumper sticker popped up, "Question authority." We began negotiating more in families and relationships. We asked our children, now what would you like to do? Choose between these activities, which would you like better? Valuing the rights of the individual and questioning authority are a big part of my thinking. No wonder, that for me and maybe for many of you, we don't know what to make of this claim of JESUS follow me and I will MAKE YOU fish for people. MAKE ME do something? Somebody is going to make me do something? Isn't it enough already that the government makes adults file taxes, the law makes children go to school. ...I will MAKE you fish for people. Now isn't that Billy Graham's job at one of his crusades, but you, and you, and each person here, Jesus issues this invitation to you...COME FOLLOW ME AND IW WILL MAKE YOU FISH FOR PEOPLE.

FOLLOW ME. That first step is a step of obedience, of placing ourselves under the authority of Jesus as THE GUIDE for our life as individuals and our life together.

I recently adopted a cat. In our life together, in the morning when my cat wants food and company she FOLLOWS ME to get filled up and she FOLLOW ME everywhere until she gets what she wants. She often walks in front of me and is so underfoot in her demands that I often trip and nearly fall down while trying to get to the cupboard for her food. My cat acknowledges her dependence on me, but my cat doesn't know a darn thing about obedience.

In times of hunger, of neediness, I know about following God in dependence...but what do I know of obedience...to listen and to follow not based on my need, but just responding to God's call, God's claim on the purpose of our lives and our life together?

The scriptures tell us the Jesus was an OBEDIENT SERVANT...Jesus, Son of God, had rights, had claims to power, claims to attention, but he emptied himself, rather than seeking to fill himself up, he emptied himself taking the form of a slave and became OBEDIENT TO THE POINT OF DEATH even death on a cross.

We might not like it or always be conscious of it, but we are being shape into obedient servants of someone or something. The biggest new commercial day of the year on this Sunday tries to shape us into obedient servants of the consumer society. Budweiser frogs and do the Dew., Obedience means to "give ear to, to listen." We are listening and being shaped into serving something or someone!

An old Bob Dylan song puts it this way:

You may be an ambassador to England or France,
 You may like to gamble, you might like to dance,
 You may be a heavyweight champion of the world,
 You might be a socialite with a long string of pearls.

But you're gonna have to serve somebody, yes, indeed,

You're gonna have to serve somebody.
It may be the devil, it may the Lord,
But you're gonna have to serve somebody.

It may be the school system, the job, the family, the government, the consumer society,
but you're gonna have to serve somebody...

This Jesus issues an ultimate call to serve. "Come follow me and I will make you fish for people.

They didn't have a clue how it would all play out. Neither do we. St. John's is in a growing phase. A new member agreed to take on working on the bulletin board. When we discussed this—I was reminded how much we do to in being led to really fish for people.

The new member offered certain things which came to her mind that should be on the bulletin board to pull people in and make them welcome:

What are all the activities at St. John's?

If you wanted to join the choir, who do you call?

If you have kids in Sunday School, when is Christmas program practice?

What Bible study groups are going on when and who's running them?

Does Joseph's coats only want coats?

What about the food bank, who do I call?

How can I sign up to help with worship?

All these things are "obvious" to people who've been "on board" for several generations! They are not obvious to those new to our community. I am thankful for new members who Jesus send to MAKE US fish for people so all who come here are really included in the net of community.

How is Jesus calling St. John's to be servants of the servant Jesus: to be made to fish for people? Jesus doesn't give us an option and say: well it would be nice, if you could find the time to reach out to newcomers, but if you're just comfortable with your in-group stay there. He says if you follow me, I'm gonna MAKE you reach out.

I am by personality type an introvert. I never looked up for the first years of school unless the teacher made me, and when I did, I blushed. I dreaded "show and tell" and hoped they would never get to my row. JESUS HAS HAD TO MAKE ME FISH FOR PEOPLE. The Jesus who has IN LOVE reached out to me THROUGH other people has led me to thankfully reach out. NOT because I'm comfortable or because it's natural. Being shaped by the servant Jesus through the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives, being servants of the servant, we empty ourselves of our right to have it our way, we empty ourselves of this pretense to keeping ourselves secure, and we are caught up in the net of God's grace together with others, continually surprised by the call of Jesus to move on and reach out to a wider and wider circle of people.

I had work to do one day recently after a class, but then I saw him come in and sit down, just coming in from the severe cold. I didn't know him, but no one else seemed to know

or see him either, everyone was busy. Did he want some coffee, I asked. Yes, please. One minute, one day, a stranger in a strange place. He didn't look very washed. A part of me would rather have avoided him, someone else can deal with this in a big place like this. But I was the one who saw. The nudge of Jesus, his Spirit speaking to my spirit, "Come follow me, and I will make you fishers of people." Today his Spirit speaks to your spirit in this community of believers Jesus is continually saying: "Come, follow me and I will make you fishers of people. Caught in the net of his gracious love, he will equip us to work as he works, graciously, lovingly, for the sake of all God's people. Thanks be to God. Amen.

PART IV. HUNGERING AND THIRSTING TOGETHER

Ninth grade art class assignment: Class will read the poem by Carl Sandburg "Fog" and respond to it with a work of art. "The fog comes on little cat feet, sits on silent haunches, and then moves on." I painted at least 8 or 10 fog pictures trying to perfect the grays of skyscraper and cloud and it always seemed to elude me. When I got the art award at ninth grade graduation it was not for excellence but for persistence. Our art teacher stressed "the biggest mistake, is to try to do too much, to over-paint the scene." Only a good artist knows when to stop. Why is Schubert's "Unfinished Symphony" more popular than so many of his longer, more complete works?

There can be tendency in preaching to over-explain, to fill in all the details, to cover all the theological bases. This in itself is a denial of preaching as a faith practice. When I think I have proclaimed Christ, I have too often proclaimed myself. When I think I need to give more explanation, I discover I have gotten in the way of the proclamation of God's grace. When I have tried to tie up all the loose ends of a carefully crafted argument, I have left nothing to be opened up in prayer later for anyone including myself. When I have answered every question, I have not led the struggling sinner to the question mark of the cross. Preaching as a faith practice should feed our God hunger and not satiate our appetite with over fattening scripts of junk food that will last a short time and

ultimately not satisfy. Preaching as a faith practice should not merely applaud the accomplishments of the saints, but drive us sinners to thirst for more of God's righteousness and justice to be caught and sought and taught in our world. When worship hour is over will the service begin? Only if preaching as a faith practice stimulates our God hunger and whets our appetite for justice in all the earth.

In preaching as a faith practice, we preachers in humility trust the work of the Spirit with what cannot be said, with what is beyond the limits of language, the uncertainties of our human understanding

The Spirit brings peoples uncertainties before God. The Spirit brings before God the human expectations that do not attain the divine kindness and glory. The Spirit brings before God the human expectations that are not adequate to and not in accord with the powers of divine deliverance. With 'sighs too deep for words,' the Spirit represents human beings before God—human beings who do not know how they ought to call upon the divinity who is near; human beings who do not know for what they ought right to pray for the sake of their deliverance (Rom. 8:26)¹⁴

The final temptation and testing in practicing preaching is thus to "resolve" what cannot be resolved, to eliminate all tension by offering the peace Christ alone can offer and to which we can only point. The unresolved tension of the incomplete work of the preaching as a faith practice is the "cross of inner conflict" described this way by Regin Prenter:

Through the cross of inner conflict God wants to teach us to hope only in his pure mercy. Like every other cross and all other work of wrath in the believer, the inner conflicts are God's *opus alienum*, which prepares the way for his *opus proprium*. He takes all peace away from the conscience in order to give it peace. This is the order of the salvation of God. He puts to death before he can make alive. Our will cannot be made to conform to the will of God unless it is first put to death. Therefore it becomes even more pronounced here than before that the love to God which yields itself to his will is not an active yearning and is not like the Augustinian *caritas* a continuation of our *appetites boni*, but a process of suffering and endurance as God establishes his work. When the work of God is the cross, pleasing God becomes the same as enduring the marvelous

Michael Welker, *God the Spirit*, trans. John F. Hoffmeyer (Minneapolis: Fortress Press 1994), 334.

work of God in his saints. As the mystics put it faith , hope, and love to God mean walking into darkness, being driven and led by the Word of God, persistent suffering a narrow and strait way, a steady and increasing impotence. But it is a way on which the sinner is gladly led, because it is God’s way, which Christ has dedicated and hallowed by traveling it first himself.¹⁵

After the sermon is over, the preaching continues as a faith practice. After the Word is heard, we trust the promise of God that the “Spirit will come.” We get out of the way and so make “room for prayer, for expectation, and for the motion of faith.”¹⁶

PART FIVE: FORETASTE OF THE FEAST TO COME

One Easter Sunday, a woman threw arms around me and said, “I made it. I quit smoking after that sermon at the start of Lent, and I’ve talked to Jesus every day and he helped me through it.” I had not ever mentioned the evils of smoking, drinking and cussing as a centerpiece of sermon. I could not imagine what sermon she possibly meant. But she clearly looked healthier, happier, and openly enthusiastic about Jesus. It was not my work that had done this. The transforming work of the Spirit creating new life where it was least expected and making use of the vehicle of a sermon for doing that is amazing. A letter arrived from Marquette University. It stated how wonderful it was to have one of the recent graduates as an active member of the campus youth group run by the Catholic church and what a fine job had been done in encouraging this young man’s faith. That a small congregation with its first call preacher would receive such a letter is further evidence of the work of the Spirit making use of the gifts of the church’s preachers and teachers.

Regin Prenter, *Spiritus Creator*, trans. John M. Jensen (Eugene OR: Wipf and Stock, 2001 reprint previously published by Augsburg Fortress, 1953), 16.

¹⁶Ibid., 127

Such moments of renewal are truly gifts of God, and they herald the expectation of the renewal of the whole earth in the new creation of a lasting health, a lasting peace, an all inclusive banquet table of all the redeemed at the marriage feast of the lamb.

Week by week and year by year, preaching as a faith practice continues to trust in this work of the Spirit down the road in people's lives, trusting that

In the midst of massive self-endangerment, destruction and hopelessness, God's reality is present: the power of God that works renewal and that persistently changes the process of decay. In diverse, often seemingly insignificant concreteness, in concreteness that sometimes comes across as miraculous, the power of God acts against the powers of sin, despair, cynicism and death.¹⁷

¹⁷ Welker, 340

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