

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life



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Thinking about sermons

Sermons—a strange subject for a lay person to write about? I don't think so. Lay churchgoers are the audience for most sermons, so who can better evaluate them? Lay people may not hear many different preachers, but they tend to hear more than most clergy, who apparently hear mainly themselves.

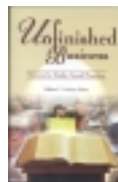


When I was on a regional board that evaluates candidates for ordination, I was often surprised by the response from those who were told to work on improving their preaching. Most replied, "I will get some of the experienced pastors in my area to help me." My response to this was, "Why not get lay people to help you instead? They're the people your sermons need to reach."

A book that surprised me

I was reluctant when a magazine editor asked me recently to write a review of a book of sermons, but my reluctance wasn't because I'm lay. It was because I so often find sermons boring. And even when a sermon is gripping in its spoken form, reading it is usually much less gripping. So I was pleasantly surprised when part of the book turned out to be quite thought-provoking. I'm writing about that part here because, whether we're lay or clergy, it could help us look at sermons in useful new ways.

The book is *Unfinished Business* (North Berwick, ME: Boston Wesleyan Press, 2001). What interested me was its introduction and its first chapter, "Some Reflections on Sermon Development."



I have no occasion or desire to develop sermons, so finding that chapter interesting surprised me. The author of these two parts is the book's editor, William C. Coleman, a retired United Methodist clergy-

Dialogues that answer important questions

Pastors often portray sermons as dialogues with congregation members. I'm never sure whether these pastors are referring to members' mental dialogues with the pastor during the sermon, or to their comments to the pastor afterwards. Maybe it's both. The dialogue can also include the silent responses members make by dropping out or continuing to attend. Becoming aware of members' side of the dialogue is likely to answer some questions about their spiritual condition that pastors need to consider, says editor Coleman in the book *Unfinished Business*.



Do members base their everyday decisions on the faith perspective of their religious tradition, or merely on their personal opinions and experience?

Do the members have a capacity for gratitude and for forgiving themselves and others?

Do they have a clear sense of calling or vocation, beyond the occupation that furnishes their livelihood?

Does their faith perspective encourage them to reach out and care for others, and to let others care for them? Or is their care-giving merely a disguised self-serving wish to control others or gain acceptance from them?

What do members consider holy or sacred? What do they revere? Who and what do they trust? What do they consider untouchable or unmentionable?



How do they deal with ambiguity? Are they aware of their finitude and personal limits?

What do they think God's purpose is? What do they think the church's purpose is?

What help do they expect from God? What do they want a savior to save them from?

We all could benefit from asking these questions about ourselves. And when sermons serve their true purpose, they motivate us to ask such questions. Faithful sermons also nudge us toward better answers.

man. Considering what he says, even if we disagree with it, can help us take a fresh look at sermons.

Evangelical and prophetic preaching



The rest of *Unfinished Business* is composed of sermons by clergy in the UMC's New England Annual Conference—recipients of the annual Wilbur C. Ziegler Award in Preaching, and Ziegler himself. Some of the sermons are excellent, but some make me wonder why their authors won a preaching award. I suspect it was because the pastors were likeable, not because their sermons were good. I'll say more about that subject in next month's *Connections*.

In Ziegler's preaching, editor Coleman saw two qualities he believes preaching must have in order to be effective.

- It was evangelical, calling people to “a robust faith in God through Jesus Christ.”
- It was prophetic, calling people “to embody in themselves the life and faith of Jesus in matters of justice, peace and compassion.”

A distinctive purpose and style



Sermons' purpose, Coleman reminds us, isn't to enhance the preacher's scholarly reputation. (Nor, I wish he had added, the preacher's reputation as a uniquely pious person, an all-around good guy, or a comedian.) Instead, sermons are for accomplishing God's purpose, which Coleman describes as “transformation, renewal and reformation of a people who humbly declare themselves to be God's people.” (Can that declaration be humble? I doubt it.) They're people whose mission, says Coleman (claiming to quote John Wesley but not quite doing so), is “bringing scriptural holiness to the social order of the world.”

Sermons usually have a distinctive style, too, says Coleman. They aren't essays or articles, and they aren't private as reading is. Instead, preaching by its very nature is a public event. The distinctiveness of the sermon form, says Coleman, also comes from



being part of worship, in which “music, art, symbols, architecture, physical gestures, voice tone and pattern, spiritual preparation, spiritual readiness and human need all

combine for a unique event.” In addition, a long-established trust between a preacher and congregation often gives a sermon important unspoken meanings, and in sermons the preacher's personality flavors the words.



Even though sermons are more than literary documents, Coleman sees good reasons for reading them sometimes. In print, he finds, “we can see, review, ponder, ingest or reject the thought, insight and faith of the preacher at a *different pace* [his italics] than in the listening/worship mode.” In written form the sermon lets us return to it over and over. We have the necessary reflection time that isn't available when



we're hearing a sermon. Besides, people who didn't hear the sermon have access to it when it's in print.

Does the lectionary hurt or help?

I hesitate to mention this next subject, because when I said in *Connections* a few years ago that using the lectionary wasn't necessarily desirable, to my amazement I got more responses than to any other topic I'd ever written about, and most responders insisted that I was wrong. I could hardly believe that so many people felt so strongly about the lectionary. I'm daring to mention it again here, but even though I usually love hearing from *Connections* readers, if you think using the lectionary is essential please don't write and tell me why. I think I already know all the reasons. I just don't find them totally convincing.



William Coleman emphasizes that using the lectionary encourages considering the sermon topic weeks in advance, which gives themes and insights time to emerge from a filtering process in the preacher. It also lets the preacher study and discuss sermon topics in advance with other clergy or with laity, which can trigger helpful interpretations and insights that wouldn't otherwise come to mind.



I'm sorry that most of the pastors pictured in this issue are white males, but clip art showing female and non-Anglo pastors is scarce. If you know where to find more, especially in color, please tell me.



For readers who aren't familiar with lectionaries, let me explain. A lectionary is a list of scripture passages that assigns three or four scriptures to each week of the year. Each week's scriptures usually include one from Psalms, one from elsewhere in the Old Testament, one from a Gospel, and one from elsewhere in the New Testament. Often at least one of the week's readings relates directly to the current time in the church year, such as Advent or Easter or Pentecost, but the week's readings don't always have an obvious connection to the calendar or to each other.

Many mainline churches use the same lectionary, called the Common Lectionary, which covers much of the Bible in a three-year cycle. When a church uses a lectionary, the sermon topic comes from the week's lectionary scriptures, and at least one of them is read aloud during worship. They may also be the basis for the week's study materials for church-school classes and other groups. Using a lectionary for sermon topics keeps the pastor from preaching only on a few pet topics, and it lets worshipers prepare by reading the day's scripture in advance. Using the Common Lectionary also provides a connection with other Christians. By not using a lectionary, the preacher can choose topics that relate directly to current concerns of the congregation or events in the local community or wider world. However, many lectionary preachers say they often find uncanny ties between the week's lectionary scriptures and current happenings.



Delivery matters

Coleman gives little attention to sermon delivery, maybe because he's introducing a book of sermons in print. But especially in today's world, delivery seems crucial. For good or for ill, today's potential sermon hearers are used to fast-moving, skillfully delivered presentations that are lively, interesting, and even entertaining. Churches that are still offering only a wordy "talking head" on Sunday mornings may find that few people show up.



At a minimum, every sermon, like every other kind of formal public speech, needs an attention-getting opening, a clear statement of its topic, a recognizably logical and concise development of the topic, and a memorably expressed conclusion. We may complain about how prevalent "sound bites"



have become, but they're evidently prevalent because they work. They hook hearers' attention and make hearers more likely to remember what they've heard.

Some effective preachers use drama and guided imagery in their sermons. Many also use video and other visual aids. Using those is harder and more expensive than just talking, but in today's image-oriented culture it can mean the difference between having an audience and not having one.

Concerns, needs, and language matter

Coleman emphasizes that sermons must reflect concerns of the congregation, the surrounding community, and the world. Pastors need to learn of those not only by listening to church members and non-churchgoers, but also by staying informed about what's in newspapers, magazines, books, and movies, and on TV and the Internet. Coleman mentions one pastor who says he has written sermons in a truckstop diner. Being there kept him aware of the need to speak the language and address the real needs of people God wanted him to reach with the gospel message.



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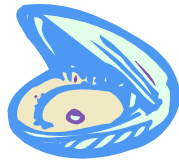


I'm a United Methodist lay woman, and neither a church employee nor a clergyman's wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Some readers make voluntary financial contributions, but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all 50 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico—laity and clergy in at least 12 church denominations and some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I believe our churches need to address.

Searching for the valuables

“Preachers are like beach-combers,” Coleman concludes, “sorting through the flotsam and jetsam of human life, examining and searching for valuables.” After the combing, sorting, and reflecting, then, says Coleman, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit the sermon “becomes discernment of what it all means, what we should keep, and what we should do.” It becomes a public offering to a gathered worshiping community.

In William Coleman’s view, “Christian preachers are called, even mandated, to talk to us about



Jesus’ unfinished business with us and with the world.” If you’re a hearer of sermons, are the preachers you hear talking about that? If you’re a preacher, are you talking about it?



Next month’s *Connections* will feature other views about sermons, including some observations from a recent conversation I had with a seminary professor who has taught preaching for many years. In the meantime, whether you’re a preacher or a hearer of sermons I urge you to reconsider your own views about what makes a sermon effective.

Barbara



Jesus called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal.

—Luke 9:2

Some proclaim Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from goodwill. These proclaim Christ out of love ...
—Philippians 1:15-16



Proclaim the message; be consistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching.

—2 Timothy 4:2

[Jesus] said to them, “Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation.”

—Mark 16:15

How are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? ... Faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ.

—Romans 10:14-17

