

CREATIVITY, IMAGINATION AND PREACHING

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A sermon must be created. It is not something that grows by itself and ripens to maturity, like an apple or a cherry, waiting to be picked and eaten. If a sermon must be created by someone, is the creation of a sermon an act of creativity? The answer, it seems to me, must be a qualified "yes." The reason the answer is a qualified yes is that there are degrees of creativity. Other questions then come to mind: What is creativity? Who judges the amount of creativity that is displayed? By what criteria should creativity be measured? In attempting to relate all this to preaching, we discover other questions that must be considered. What is a sermon? What is the relationship of the preaching event to the creation of the sermon? Must we strive for creativity in delivery as well as construction of the sermon?

Exploring the relationship of creativity and preaching seems to open a Pandora's box of questions. They are intriguing questions that are not easily answered.

DEFINITIONS

The compact edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the verb "create" as "to produce or make." Creation is "the action or process of creating; the action of bringing into existence by divine power or its equivalent; the fact of being so created. "Creative" is defined as having the quality of creating;

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of or pertaining to creation; originitive."¹ No definition is given for the word "creativity."

Sidney Parnes, Ruth Noller and Angelo Biondi, in their book, *Guide to Creative Action*, make the following statement:

The essence of the concept of creativity might be considered to be the association of thoughts, ideas, etc., into a new and relevant configuration - one that has meaning beyond the sum of the parts - that provides a synergistic effect.²

They go on further to say that "Creativity can be considered a function of knowledge, imagination and evaluation. Without knowledge there can be no productive creativity."³

Again, turning to the dictionary, we find this definition of the word "imagination:" "Imagination is the action of imagining, or forming a mental concept of what is not actually present to the senses; the result of this process; a mental image or idea, often with implication that the conception does not correspond to the reality of things."⁴

Two other words that need to be defined for purposes of clarification are "sermon" and "preaching." Numerous definitions are given in the *20th Century Oxford Dictionary*, but the most appropriate for our purposes is this: "A sermon is a discourse, usually delivered from a pulpit and based upon a text of Scripture, for the purpose of giving religious instruction or exhortation."⁵ However, it must be noted that the dictionary also says that, contemptuously, the word "sermon" is sometimes used to refer to "a long or tedious discourse or harangue."⁶ Does that definition suggest the importance of thinking about creativity and preaching?

1 *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1971, Vol. I, p. 598.

2 Parnes, Noller and Biondi, *Guide to Creative Action*.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 14.

4 *Op. cit.*, p. 1397.

5 *Ibid.*, Vol. II., p. 2737-2738.

6 *Ibid.*, Vol. II., p. 2738.

One more word deserves consideration and that is "preaching." The *Oxford Dictionary* refers us to the verb and states that to preach is "to pronounce a public discourse upon sacred subjects; to deliver a sermon or religious address (now usually from or on a text of Scripture)." ⁷ The distinction between the sermon and preaching, at least in my mind, is that the sermon is essentially the content of the message, whereas the preaching is the oral communication of that content to the listeners.

LEFT BRAIN/RIGHT BRAIN DIFFERENCES

Some new insights into creativity have come from fairly recent brain research. Marilee Zdenek, in her book, *The Right Brain Experience*, notes that "split brain research on human subjects began in the 1960's at the California Institute of Technology." ⁸ In fact, psychologist Roger Perry of Cal Tech won the 1981 Nobel Prize for Physiology and Medicine for his studies on the two hemispheres of the brain.

To summarize, "researchers discovered that each side of the brain has its own areas of specialization and processes information in its own way." ⁹ In a normally functioning brain, there is a mass of nerve fibers called the "corpus callosum" which bridges the two hemispheres of the brain. Thus, the two sides of the brain work together for almost every activity, although one hemisphere or the other usually predominates for a particular task. Zdenek points out that:

In 95% of the population, it is the left hemisphere that remembers names, adds columns of numbers, computes time and works in a logical, linear fashion. The right hemisphere is the mysterious, artistic side of the brain where metaphors are understood and emotions are realized. It's where dreams and imagery occur and fantasies are born. ¹⁰

7 *Ibid.*, Vol. II., p. 2269.

8 Zdenek, Marilee, *The Right Brain Experience*, p. 11.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 12.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 12.

Our society, it seems, has placed the greater value on the "left brain" functions. We tend to reward persons who are efficient and orderly more than day dreamers. We are more comfortable with people who conform than we are with those people who question the status quo by being "creative."

Actually, the two halves of our brain are meant to complement each other, to work together in harmony, even though they process information differently. Zdenek states her strong conviction that in many persons their creative gifts are underdeveloped because the right side of the brain is underused. In her book, she offers a variety of exercises that help stimulate right-brain use.

THE CREATIVE PROCESS

Only recently are researchers seeing the connection between the right brain function and the creative process. Obviously, there is such a connection.

Zdenek reports her interviews with a number of famous, creative persons. One of the persons she interviewed was Charles Schulz, the cartoonist who created Charlie Brown, Lucy, Snoopy and the other characters of "Peanuts." Zdenek asks Mr. Schulz where he gets the ideas for his comic strip. He replies, "When I'm partaking in any sport or activity I'll almost always get some kind of idea. Attending a symphony, playing tennis. I'm always coining little phrases." He adds a few more comments, and Zdenek says, "Relax the left hemisphere enough and unconscious ideas begin to surface."¹¹

Her comment seems significant to me. In order to be creative, we need to de-emphasize the left brain functions and allow the intuitive ideas and thoughts to surface to our consciousness. We may need to dream and fantasize a bit -- use our imagination.

Ideas for sermons can come from a great variety of places and experiences. While I was a seminary student, in a Chicago

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

suburb, several of us drove into Chicago for an evening program. We were short of funds, as students usually are, and didn't want to pay for commercial parking. But every place we tried to park, we found a "No Parking" sign. Finally, we pulled into an alley and parked in what seemed to be an acceptable place, only to discover a parking ticket on the windshield because we had parked under a fire escape. Perhaps trying to get something positive out of the experience, I dreamed up a sermon title, "No Parking." My thesis was that too many persons just park after becoming Christians. The text that came to mind was II Peter 3:18, "But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ."

In working with the lectionary, I think it is very important for the preacher to interact with the passage before consulting commentaries or other resources. I encourage my students to take a blank piece of paper and jot down all the ideas that come to them as they read through the text slowly several times. At this point, they should not worry about any sequence of ideas or outline, but simply "brain storm" or do "free association" with the text. The items written down may be another scripture passage, a quotation, a cartoon, a personal experience, a hymn -- anything at all that pops into one's mind. Later, of course, the preacher will want to turn to commentaries and the thoughts of others to help evaluate what was written. A process of pruning and discarding then needs to take place as a thesis is developed and ideas are arranged in a meaningful order.

Rollo May, in his book, *The Courage to Create*, distinguishes between creativity in its pseudo form (a superficial aestheticism) and in its authentic form ("the process of bringing something new into being").¹² He talks about the creative process as encounter, intensity, and as an inter-relationship between the person and his or her world.

For the preacher, the creative process involves an encounter with the Word as the preacher tries to discover the truths that

12 May, Rollo, *The Courage to Create*, p. 39.

are relevant to the needs of the people to whom s/he will preach. When the preacher becomes totally absorbed, "caught up," in this encounter with truth, there is "an intensity of awareness, and heightened consciousness."¹³ To use "God Language," we might say the Holy Spirit is at work, intensifying this encounter with biblical truth. Zdenek, in her book, speaks of the Muse within each of us, but for the Christian preacher to speak of the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit seems more appropriate. When this deep absorption occurs, real creativity can take place. Merrill Abbey in the title of one of his books, says "The Word Interprets Us," and that somewhat describes the intensity of the preacher creatively engaged in sermon preparation.

Rollo May notes that an artist (or you and I) in moments of intensive encounter experience neurological changes such as quickened heart beat; higher blood pressure; increased intensity and constriction of vision. We may become oblivious of things around us, even the passage of time. While these may seem like the symptoms of anxiety, May says that what the creative person is feeling is joy, "defined as the emotion that goes with heightened consciousness, the mood that accompanies the experience of actualizing one's own potentialities."¹⁵

Similarly, it seems to me, in the process of preaching the sermon, when the preacher is totally absorbed in the experience and genuine encounter is taking place, the preacher should be experiencing some of that same kind of joy. If that really happens, the act of preaching becomes a truly creative experience and afterward the preacher will be tired, but at the same time exhilarated and joyous. Rollo May uses the word "ecstasy" to describe this intensely creative involvement, not in the sense of hysteria, but in the sense of being "freed from the usual split between subject and object which is a perpetual dichotomy in most human activity."¹⁶

13 *Ibid.*, p. 44.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 44.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 44-45.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 48.

BARRIERS TO CREATIVE PREACHING

We have already noted the emphasis of our society upon rewarding left brain thinking more than right brain use. This means that most members of a congregation are likely to be more pleased with traditional preaching than they are with anything that is innovative. Thus, the preacher who "dreams up" new ways of communicating the Gospel may find an unresponsive and even critical congregation.

Halford Luccock, who was for many years Professor of Preaching at Yale, used a little refrain to remind his students of how difficult it is to make changes in the church. This was before the emphasis on using inclusive language, which, incidentally, is having a difficult time gaining acceptance.

Our fathers have been churchmen
For 1900 years or so
And to every new proposal
They have always answered NO.

As someone has remarked, rearranging the chancel of any local church is like rearranging the furniture in heaven. One of our problems is that we tend to absolutize the forms of worship, instead of seeing them as means to an end.

One barrier to more creative preaching is that both the congregation and the preacher are likely to be uncomfortable with innovative approaches or methods. Education of both the pastor and congregation can help diminish this resistance to new ways of communication.

A second barrier is that the preacher may not think of himself or herself as a truly creative person. Through the educational process, we are so strongly indoctrinated with the ideas of others that our own creativity is stifled. We may not sufficiently trust our own intuition and feelings. There are so many helps and resources available that we turn to them too readily.

The authors of *Guide to Creative Action* state that "The creative process involves the refinement of originality. Originality is the raw material, the crude oil. Creativity is

the gasoline." ¹⁷ It is this aspect of originality that frightens us. Oftentimes, we think somebody else's ideas expressed in print are better than our own. We need to think creatively and think positively about our creativity.

A third barrier to creativity in preaching is lack of preparation time. Ministers constantly complain about lack of time for reading and sermon preparation. The demands upon a pastor are enormous, but the minister must recognize the possibility that it may be poor time management or it may be a matter of re-thinking priorities. It may require some education of the congregation as to how sermons are created. Lay people usually place great importance upon preaching but often have no clear idea of the amount of time involved in preparing the sermon.

The minister who wishes to be a creative preacher must have a place and a time where this creative process can have a chance of happening. He or she needs also to receive the stimulus of new ideas and thoughts. Such ideas can come from a variety of experiences, including reading, that may not be specifically classified as "religious."

A period of incubation can be helpful in bringing about creativity. This means that if an idea is present in one's mind, over a period of time the principle of serendipity can come into play. The word is attributed to the princes of Serendip, who had the ability to make unexpected discoveries of things they were not looking for while they were looking for something else. Thus, the preacher who has a sermon idea in mind will come across other ideas and experiences that are related to the sermon topic. This only happens if there is a sufficient amount of time between the initial idea and the actual writing and delivery of the sermon.

One pastor talked to me about his sermon preparation in terms of a garden. He called it his sermon garden, using a metaphor (which is a helpful creativity technique). He said that for some of his sermons he had just planted a seed, while he had

¹⁷ *Op.cit.*, p. 9.

other sermons almost ready to harvest. He kept folders of sermon ideas in various stages of development. For some, he had only a text or a quotation or illustration. To change the metaphor, he constantly added material to these embryo sermons until some were nearly ready to be born into the world.

What I have stated as barriers to creative preaching can be restated positively as suggestions for creative preaching.

1. Congregation and preacher need to be helped to open themselves to the possibility of new ways of communicating the Gospel.

2. The preacher needs to study some of the theories of creativity and begin to exercise his or her own creative ability.

3. The preacher needs to allow time for the creative process to take place in the preparation and delivery of the sermon.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE TEACHING OF PREACHING

William James said, "Most people make use of a very small portion of their possible consciousness, much like a man who out of his whole body organism should get into a habit of using and moving only his little finger." ¹⁸

If this is true, then the potential for creativity on the part of the preacher is vast indeed. One cannot help but wonder about the ineffectiveness of education if so little of our human potential is fully realized.

Perhaps one of our problems in education in general and even in the teaching of preaching is that we over-emphasize methods to the detriment of objectives. The authors of *Guide to Creative Action* warn against this possibility. They use an interesting example to make their point.

Suppose someone wanted to teach you to enjoy the countryside. You could be taught to ride a bicycle in order to travel more easily to spots of exquisite beauty you might not otherwise reach. The instructor would not want you to confuse the bicycle with the exquisite beauty you are

¹⁸ *Op.cit.*, p. 9.

trying to reach. Otherwise you might overlook the idea that you can reach the countryside by horse, car or some new invention you yourself might create.¹⁹

Isn't there a danger that in the teaching of preaching we can get so caught up in the techniques that we fail to hold high the reason why we preach?

At the same time we must surely work on improving both writing and speaking skills. Another problem in preaching is that the preacher fails to make a clear distinction between written language and spoken language. We ask a student to write out a full manuscript (and I believe this is appropriate.) But the student has previously written essays or term papers, not sermons. The long, involved sentences, the choice of words, and the general style of writing do not approximate oral communication. We need to do a much better job of helping preachers learn to write written language for speaking.

Another way of helping preachers become more creative is to encourage the use of metaphors. Jesus did this all the time, especially in the parables he told. The metaphor is "a figure of speech in which a word or phrase literally denoting one kind of object or idea is used in place of another by suggesting likeness or analogy between them." (*Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary*.) Some remarkable solutions to problems have been achieved through the use of analogies and metaphors. Although it is not always done consciously, people generally "make analogies over their problem and another object or idea."²⁰ Can we find a way to teach students intentionally to think metaphorically? The authors of *The Practice of Creativity* suggest three steps in problem-solving. They are "(1) Mull the facts over. (2) Speculate. (3) Develop ideas."²¹ These are similar to the procedure of the pastor wrestling with a passage of Scripture in anticipation of a helpful sermon.

In our attempt to teach preaching creatively and to free

19 Quoted in *Guide to Creative Action*, p. 16.

20 Prince, George, *The Practice of Creativity*, p. 4.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 56.

the student to be a creative preacher, we need not downplay knowledge. Alfred North Whitehead more than 50 years ago stressed the fact that education should aim at the effective utilization of knowledge. He said, "Fools act on imagination without knowledge; pedants act on knowledge without imagination. The task of a university is to weld together imagination and experience." ²²

Likewise the theological seminary, as it trains its students to preach, should help each of them bring together imagination and experience. In the words of Rollo May, who used them as the title of his book, we who teach preaching should be inspiring in our students "the courage to create."

The following lines provide a fitting close to these comments on creativity. They were written by James Russell Lowell in his poem, "To an Autograph."

Grandly begin.
Though thou have time
But for a line
Be that sublime.
Not failure, but low aim is the crime.

22 Whitehead, Alfred, *The Aims of Education*.

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