

preaching out of pain



By J. Howard Olds

Renowned author Henri Nouwen used the book *In Memoriam* to tell the story of his mother's death and his consuming grief. Somebody asked Nouwen, "Why do you do this? Why are you so public about your personal problems?" Nouwen replied, "I always try to turn my personal struggles into something helpful for others."¹

To live is to struggle, to endure suffering, to come to grips with pain. Pastors are not immune from the common sufferings of humanity. We get sick physically, struggle emotionally, feel the strains of relationships, and work like everyone else to make ends meet. What others don't have to deal with is preaching the good news in the midst of personal pain.

For the past eleven years I have preached every Sunday with the black dog of cancer biting at my heels. It started with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, from which I enjoyed a six-year remission. Then it returned with a vengeance. I underwent a successful autologous stem cell transplant. The cancer returned on the brain. I beat it back with surgery and more chemotherapy. It came back again in a brutal attack on the abdomen. Once

more, the chemotherapy worked. I got the lymphoma in remission only to be diagnosed with colon cancer. For the past year I have fought it with every drug available. The cancer continues to spread and I continue to preach and carry on a relatively normal life.

I know something about preaching in the midst of pain, and it's a valuable lesson for any pastor to learn, whether you are suffering from cancer or just the struggles of daily life. I don't have a formula, but I do have some thoughts.

One thing people tell me again and again about my preaching is that I am AUTHENTIC, real, transparent, believable. When it comes to preaching, we need to be ourselves, and hopefully we know ourselves as loved children of God, redeemed through Jesus Christ, and gifted for ministry through the power of the Holy Spirit. I have simply tried to be honest with people as I ventured along this road of trouble. That means we laugh together, cry together, and often decide to put it all aside so we can enjoy the moments of celebration in the church.

Certainly, authenticity calls for transparency; but a word of

warning is appropriate here. Preaching should not be a therapy session for the preacher. Congregations want their pastors to be real, but they are not interested in being dragged through all the painful details of our personal struggles. So pastors with problems (and you without problems need to be first in line) need to find good therapists, spiritual directors, covenant groups of peers, or other appropriate outlets for their personal health.

The purpose of worship is to glorify God and help people make a vital connection with their maker and one another. Personal sharing of the pastor's pain needs to fit into the context of worship and the sermon of the day. Personal illustrations can assist the sermon, *if* the story supports the overall focus. Authentic people are truthful and honest, but that does not mean blabbing in public every private thing we know about ourselves and others. As Aristotle suggested, we will be wise to speak the right truth at the right time to the right person, for the right reason, in the right way. Such selectivity increases our authenticity. And that is particularly true when we are talking about ourselves in the pulpit.

Effective preaching is RELEVANT. Does what we say make a vital connection with those who listen and meet peo-

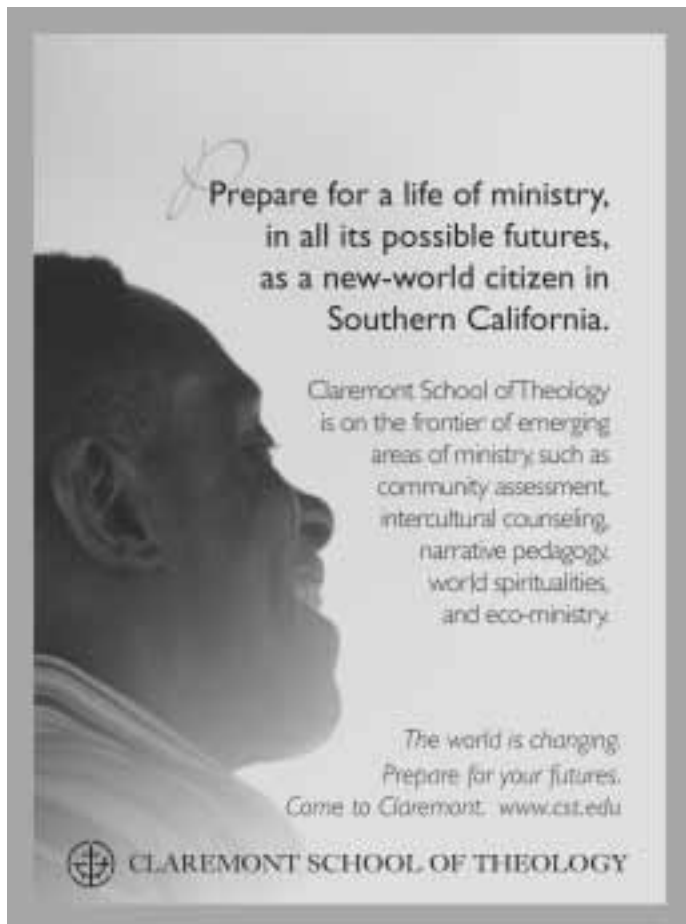
ple where they are? People can identify with our pain faster than they can identify with our joys and successes. There is just something about suffering that binds people together. Spend some time in an Intensive Care waiting room or attend a twelve-step recovery group meeting. The ties that bind people together in these places are the pains they experience. The stories surrounding these pains create a common bond of love, acceptance, and affirmation.

*Take the pain and redeem it,
and let it become a tool of help
to some person along life's way.*

I don't like to be needy or weak, but I am learning that "God's power is made perfect in weakness" (II Cor. 12:9). I prefer to make hospital visits as the healthy one who comes to pray for the sick, but my illness has taught me

something better, something deeper. People connect with your weakness. I can't tell you how many times a person may be in the midst of describing their trouble to me when they stop and suddenly say, "But you know—don't you? You really know."


Such connection carries through to the pulpit. I have a strong voice, and a flair for the dramatic in preaching. But lately I've been learning that people connect more quickly to my weakness than to my strength. Slowly I am learning to use that part of my present reality as a tool for ministry—especially preaching—and people respond by affirming that my humanness makes a con-

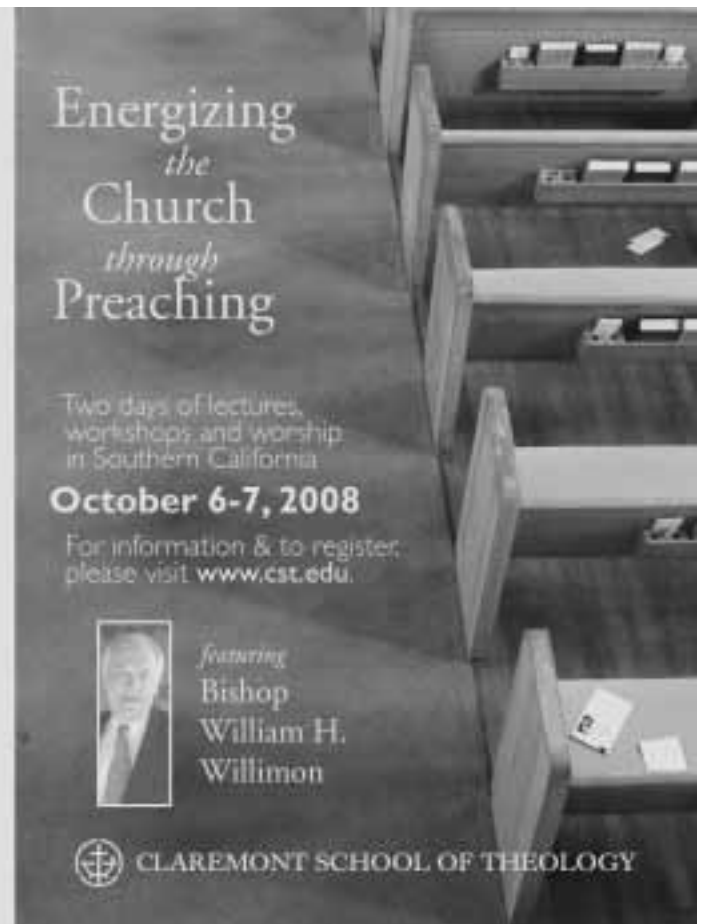


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nection with their humanness and we become one in Christ, who connects with the humanness of us all.

At the center of the Christian faith is the notion of REDEMPTION. At the cross, Jesus took the worst that could happen to a human being and transformed it into a symbol of hope. If God could use such a brutal means of capital punishment as an instrument of salvation for the whole world, can he not also use my little pains and disappointments for something good? That is my daily prayer. I ask the Lord every morning to not let my troubles go to waste. Take the pain and redeem it, and let it become a tool of help to some person along life's way.

I'm not sure I understand the mystery of that prayer any more than I understand the mystery of salvation. But I see its results. When you bear your burdens well, handle your hurt with dignity, look for something helpful in every set-back you experience, then troubles are not wasted. I find people respond to this kind of preaching. By and large we have evolved into a cross-less Christianity. We know more about relativity than redemption—and it shows in our preaching. Preaching out of pain will put the cross back into your theology. And people will notice, as the cross takes on new meaning for them.

A final word that comes to mind is URGENT. A threatened life is an urgent life. You try hard not to let one shining sliver of time go to waste. It's easier to set priorities; many things that seemed urgent before cancer seem irrelevant now.

I preach every sermon keenly aware that it could be my last. I celebrate every Christmas Eve, every Easter, and every Confirmation knowing I may never have another opportunity to lead worship for these occasions. It becomes natural to proclaim "Now is the accepted time; today is the day of salvation." We don't have the luxury of waiting until tomorrow to love our neighbors as ourselves. We are called to love one another today.

Life itself has an implicit urgency. We can hesitate in making up our minds, but we cannot hesitate in making up our lives, for our lives get made up one way or another. We can effectively put some things off until tomorrow, but we must be careful not to extend our tomorrows into eternity.

I started with a reference to Henri Nouwen. Let me conclude with another: "The preacher who is not willing to make his or her understanding of his or her own faith and doubt, anxiety and hope, fear and joy available as a source of recognition for others can never expect to remove the many obstacles which prevent the word of God from bearing fruit."² If we preach out of our pain, as well as our joys and routines, we will discover the stuff of which effective sermons are made. □

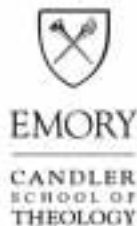


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- 1 Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Creative Ministry*, Image Books edition, February 1978, p. 38.
- 2 Henri J.M. Nouwen, *In Memoriam*. Ave Maria Press, 25th Anniversary edition, 2005.

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