

Being Yourself... and More!

Glifton F. Guthrie

I asked a small group of lay preachers in a workshop, "What is your biggest concern about preaching?" One of them said with a chuckle, "How can I preach in my own congregation where people know what a jerk I am?"

Although we laughed with him we also knew what he meant. When you stand in front of a congregation to preach you may suddenly become keenly aware of the familiar faces looking back at you. Especially in a small church you preach not with a blank slate but with a web of relationships that already exist and in which you may be a well-known strand. You are about to launch into a sermon about "loving your neighbor," when you glance to your left and there sits Jim, third row back near the aisle. He is a best friend of the mechanic who botched your car repair last month and made you so angry that you said a few choice words as you stormed out of his shop. Does Jim know about that? Or the sermon subject happens to be Matthew 25, where the Son of Man separates the sheep from the goats based on whether they fed the hungry, welcomed the stranger, visited those in

prison, and took care of the sick. A few rows back is the Martos family. Their son has been in the hospital getting chemotherapy treatments, and you realize that you have not called, sent a card, or brought them a meal as you had intended. We may fantasize about preaching or hearing preaching in a "relationally neutral" context, but to do so regularly would

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miss the deeper possibilities of preaching as two-way conversation about the most important questions and commitments in our lives.

In the book *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer noted that genuine Christian community is only possible when we get out of our dream worlds and encounter one another as the true people we are: "Just as surely as God desires to lead us to a knowledge of genuine Christian fellowship, so surely must we be overwhelmed by a great disillusionment

with others, with Christians in general, and, if we are fortunate, with ourselves."

What would it be like to preach a sermon on "love your neighbor" from the perspective of this "great disillusionment" with oneself and the church? It would not point fingers, but enter into an honest appraisal of just how hard it is to love another person as you love yourself. It

might ask the same question that the lawyer asked of Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?" from the perspective of the refugees or migrant farm workers in your town. By imagining yourself, therefore, not in the position of Jesus giving the new commandment, but in the place of the rich young man for whom the cost of love is just too high, your sermon makes clear to Jim and the Martos family that you are a fellow disciple of Jesus, not a lawgiver from on high and a hypocrite. It explores in this time and in your specific community what it means to love your neighbor.

So think of preaching not as drawing anonymous graffiti with your finger in wet

concrete as wisdom for the ages. Rather, think of it as allowing yourself the freedom to respond to the movement of the Spirit, vibrating enough to be felt by the others on the web, but not so much as to be torn away from it. Let your sermon express deep regard for your hearers, and your sense that you are a part of them, not apart from them. Certainly never be haranguing or judgmental in tone. One of John Wesley's worst preaching moments had to be when, frustrated at the lack of religious ardor among the Methodists in Frederica, Georgia, he told them, "My poor friends, you are the scum of the earth!" Afterwards, Wesley noted that "some of the hearers were profited, and the rest deeply offended." He didn't preach there long.

Risking Yourself

If we take seriously the notion of the sermon as the invitation to a table of faith conversation, then we have to be willing to offer something worth chewing on. But it is disingenuous to open a conversation to which we are close-minded ourselves. It is repulsive only to offer food that is pre-chewed. A good sermon will risk a stance without painting people into corners. It will testify to how the preacher sees God working in the world, but not offer formulas for pinning God down. There is risk-taking with the hearers as well, who will have to decide what to do with your wager of faith or this new way of seeing the world.

A lay member of a local church in New Brunswick offered to speak to a small circle of church members who were talking about the meaning of Christ for them: "If I told you what I really believed you'd kick me out of the church." But simply saying this gave other people in the group permission to speak freely about their personal convictions. Sometimes the best thing a sermon can do is testify to the questions we have, or point to mysteries we don't understand. What a gift a sermon can be when it refuses to give sure answers but names the hard questions and lets us chew on them for a while as people of faith. The fear is that such radical honesty will somehow destroy the church by unhinging it from its traditional doctrines, but in actuality it creates church because it takes faith seriously as something that mature, thinking people do.

Being More than Yourself

"For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake" (2 Corinthians 4:5 CEV).

The well-known preacher and theologian William H. Willimon comments in his book *Pastor* that in preaching, it is not the preacher's task primarily to 'share myself' with the people, certainly not to heed the advice of those who say, "Just be yourself." As Mark Twain said, about the worst advice one can give anybody is, 'Just be yourself.' Willimon stands in a long tradition of preaching among Protestants that believes preachers should get themselves out of the way of the Word of God. Their interpretation of Paul here is that the goal of preaching is to be transparent to the gospel.

I've never fully agreed with this nor even understood it as an ideal. Paul's letters to the Corinthians show that he was always using himself to make his gospel message known: he boasted about his apostleship, he spoke of his love for the church, and he recounted stories of his sufferings for Christ. Paul didn't preach himself, but he used himself to preach. Likewise, preaching always involves your full self: the reality of your body, the timbre of your voice, the culture in which you were raised, the language that you speak, the experiences you have had, the questions you have, the books that you have read, the teachers under whose influence you have come, and the quality of your faith walk.

Does this mean that in a sermon you are to "preach yourself"? By no means. You know from your own experience as a hearer that preachers who spend too much time giving the details of their lives from the pulpit have missed the mark. Good preachers are fully in touch with the limits and gifts of their humanity, but their goal is to use those to point to the gospel. It may be bad advice, according to Twain, to just "be yourself," but how can you do otherwise? Over the long run your preparation and practice as a preacher will change the self that you bring to preaching, and you will be more than what you are now. Christians who believe that God transforms people through the gospel

must affirm that through grace, we will all become more than ourselves.

But for now, simply learn to draw from the well of your personal experience of divine grace and give us your testimony of it. The first Letter of Peter advises, "Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you" (1 Peter 3:15). Congregations do not just want to know that God is out there somewhere working in an abstract way. They want to know how God is at work right here and now, starting with the life of the preacher.

What is your hope right now?

What do you really believe about God, the human condition, the call of Christ in the church today?

In what ways are you able to trace the paths of God's ongoing work in the world?

What have you discovered by paying close attention to the community of hearers, the community of fellow preachers, and the community of saints?

How you answer those questions will be the testimony you have to offer.

Note that the passage above says that you are responsible for being able to name "the hope that is in you." Not the answer for all people and all times; not all the answers to all the questions that are out there, not even the answer you may give in the future as your beliefs and convictions grow, but an accounting of the one thing that drives your life forward in the light of God here and now: your hope. And then comes the kicker: "yet do it with gentleness and reverence" (1 Peter 3:16). You can know your testimony is true when it is offered with love and respect for your hearers, reflects the loving regard of God for all people, and takes us all into a future where we become more than our present selves by grace. □

Glifton F. Guthrie is associate professor of Preaching and Worship at Bangor Theological Seminary in Bangor, Maine. This article is excerpted from *From Pew to Pulpit: A Beginner's Guide to Preaching* (Abingdon Press, 2005). Used by permission. See page 19 to order.

