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# Preaching A Liturgical Act

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During my childhood and youth, the Sunday service in the Methodist church I attended followed a defined structure. It included the singing of many hymns, reading of Scripture, chanting of Canticles and listening to the sermon. On Communion Sunday, everyone knew that the Nicene Creed and the Ten Commandments were included in the ritual. The preaching of the sermon was simply a part of the Sunday worship service, receiving no special attention or emphasis. Of course good preaching was expected but was not regarded in a way that would make the preaching moment particularly special or noteworthy in the structure of the service. Trinidad, my birthplace, was a British colony and British Methodism was liturgical. Of course, no one that I knew spoke in those terms. "Liturgy" was not a part of my vocabulary, and "ritual" spoke of dark deeds in hidden and similarly dark places.

The word *liturgy* comes from the Greek word *leitourgia*, which is created from words for work (*érgon*) and people

(*laos*). The liturgy is the content, the elements, the acts that comprise and order the service of Christian worship. Christian worship is God's self-revelation and the people's response. Christian worship happens when people gather in community in Christ's name and participate in the rituals that have been developed for them to meet and respond to God and each other. The late James F. White, renowned liturgical scholar, describes liturgy as "the quintessence of the priesthood of all believers that the whole priestly community of Christians shares."<sup>1</sup> Worship is not the result of human initiative. It is God who initiates the action in God's self-giving, made present to us in the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. Just as God initiated the original covenant, so in our worship, at God's initiative, the community recognizes and affirms the everlasting covenant between God and the people of God.

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rhythm of worship, the preacher participates with the congregation in receiving and responding to the message of God's love. Preaching as an act of worship involves both divine revelation and human response. To speak of "preaching and worship" is to force an unnatural separation of a singular event. Preaching is the human proclamation of God's Word, and in and through it God is revealed. The dialogue of the sermon involves not only preacher and congregation but also God and preacher and God and congregation. The preacher is not the only one in possession of some divine secret that must be imparted to the people. Rather, it is the people's proclamation of God's ongoing salvation that enables the preaching. This happens best in the context of worship. The sermon must find its rest in the community as part of the liturgy, which as the order of worship is the corporate experience of the presence of Christ.

As a pastor in New York, the experiences of developing the liturgy and preaching in the rural, suburban and

urban contexts of the congregations I served were both similar and different. The similarities lay in the expectation of all the congregations that the flow of the service would be orderly and would follow a familiar pattern. All the congregations expected to participate in the action of the service and that the preaching of the sermon would be relevant to their context. The major difference lay in the way that the congregations

understood the nature of the service and its liturgy. Both the rural and the suburban

churches were cross-racial appointments, and for them time was the key. The service had to be completed in one hour. There was little understanding of the sacramental nature of worship, and Communion Sundays saw the lowest attendance. The urban congregation consisted mainly of Caribbean persons, and for them both order and content of the liturgy were important. One of the matriarchs informed me of her liturgical expectations and “requested” the singing of the Canticles from the British Methodist worship hymnal. Good liturgy was respected and the sacraments were observed seriously and with dignity. Holy Communion was an important ritual celebration and its celebration on the first Sunday of each month resulted in the largest attendance of each month. The community gathered to experience God’s revealed presence and preaching of the word contributed to the experience.

Preaching as a part of the action wherein the community gathers to celebrate and participate in the dialogue of proclaiming the work of God experienced in their redemption by Jesus Christ is inherently liturgical. The preacher stands among the people and is charged with the sermonic task of enabling the congregation to hear and to see what God has done and is doing in the world. By addressing the reality of the congregation’s situation, the sermon makes God’s presence visible and audible to the people. Authentic preaching takes place where Christ reveals himself, namely in the context of worship. It is the place of proclamation of the whole people of God, the place of remembering and renewal of God’s covenant of love, the place where, by God’s grace, Christ meets us through his word lived in community.

Preaching is dialogical and it is contex-

tual. The gathered community is of primary importance for the preacher and for preaching. The same issues of society, the world, theology, and doctrine affect both preacher and congregation. Both are shaped by the norms of their cultures. And when they gather in worship, they come together to experience the revealed presence of God and to make the response of their lives. It is God who initiates the

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action of revelation and bridges the gap between the human and the divine. It is God who in self-revelation joins with the spoken words of proclamation to make of preaching an act of revelation. The church at worship provides the setting for God’s revelation and in the same way that the Incarnation of Jesus Christ was God’s action, so also in preaching, through the Holy Spirit, the human words of the preacher are united with the eternal revelation of God to become a revelatory act. As in the Incarnation, the word of preaching must become flesh and live among the people of God. Thus not only must preaching be contextual for the lives of the congregation, it must fit the context of the worship service.

We celebrate the sacraments in worship. As a liturgical act preaching is also sacramental. At font and table the people are brought into the foreground of God’s action of grace. Through the sacraments we remember who God is and what God has done for us and given us in Jesus Christ. There can be no authentic preaching outside the context of the sacramental community. When the pulpit stands in full view of table and font, the preacher is less likely to place her/himself above the congregation. Addressing the sacramental nature of the preached word, homiletician Charles Rice suggests that the connection between preaching and the community may be strengthened liturgically. He says “placing preaching firmly in the liturgy is more likely to keep us close to the gospel and away from chauvinism, moralism, parochialism, and the unworthy agendas that crowd in upon us.”<sup>2</sup>

As many congregations eliminate the breaking and sharing of bread in favor of pre-packaged Communion elements, and as preachers buy and sell one-size-fits-all

sermons, recognizing the liturgical and sacramental natures of preaching is of critical importance. As the church consorts with society in supporting racism, classism, sexism, war mongering, greed, economic repression, apathy, ageism, homophobia and other forms of discrimination, preaching must claim or reclaim its identity within the liturgy of the Sunday service. Preaching, in its liturgical

context, close to the table and with the baptistery in view, reminds the preacher that as part of the

called, forgiven, healed, redeemed community, the sermon must offer the same word of God’s grace that brought the preacher to that time and place.

When we understand that preaching belongs in the context of worship, then we can understand also that preaching is not under the ownership of the preacher; it is imbedded in community action. Preaching happens only in the place where God reveals God’s self, where the people of God, sometimes barely understanding but gladly accepting the covenantal grace of God, gather, to be re-established in that same covenant for the sake of the world. It is only in this context that we can truly understand that preaching is not humanity’s word to God; it is God’s gracious word to frail, fickle, faulty yet forgiven humanity. Preaching replicates and dances to the rhythm of worship. It engages the rhythm of the service. It calls forth grateful response from a redeemed people to a divine presence. It is an act of the gathered people of God. It is liturgy. □

1. James F. White, *Introduction to Christian Worship* Third Edition Revised and Expanded. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 26.

2. Charles L. Rice, *The Embodied Word: Preaching as Art And Liturgy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991).



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