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Prudentia and Inventio

Faithful Creativity in the Practice of Preaching

Do not remember the former things,
or consider the things of old.
I am about to do a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
Isaiah 43:18-19a

I

To open the pages of scriptures is to open the record of all of God's new things. The story begins when «there was light.» Ours is a creating God bringing light, land, water, stars, and living creatures from darkness and nothingness. Ours is a creating God who made a beloved people out of those who were no people.

The scriptures are also the record of God's creatures seeking to keep up with their creating God. Over and over again we hear the stories of those straining to understand all of God's new things at the same time struggling to let go of their hold on those former things of old. When our God of new life and new possibilities sought to bring a people caught in slavery into a new land and into freedom, their response -

If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt,
when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread. (Ex. 16:3a)

Those who preach are called to open those pages of scripture over and over again to guide the people of God in searching out and understanding the new things that God continues to do in our lives. God continues to bring light to the darkness that surrounds us. God continues to seek to bring people out of slavery and into freedom.

However, like those who went before us, we continue to question the actions of the divine. Moses stood before the bush that burned but was not consumed, «[When] they ask me, «What is his name?» What shall I say to them?» (Ex. 3:13) Mary looked at the face of the divine messenger and asked, «How can this be, since I am a virgin?» (Lk. 1:34) Gabriel may remind us that, «nothing will be impossible with God,» (Lk.1:37) but we all, preachers included, have a difficult time believing that.

We who have been created in God's image have been created to be creating beings. This is no more evident for those who preach. Therefore, a crucial dimension of the practice of preaching, and in the teaching of preaching, is exploring creativity. In this essay I will seek to explore creativity and in particular the intersection of *inventio*, invention, and *prudentia*, wisdom. How are preachers to be faithful to God's revelation while doing «new things»?

In his book, *Pastor: The Theology and Practice of Ordained Ministry*, William Willimon observes that preaching is an art. Like other arts «preaching is an alloy of gifts and training, natural inclination and cultivated dispositions.»¹ Preachers need to learn how to explore and «invent» those new ideas and give shape to those ideas. Homiletics, Willimon believes, «is often the most difficult practice to teach at a seminary.»²

Teaching preaching is about teaching skills and insights, *inventio*, but it is also about forming preachers spiritually, *prudentia*. Who are they in relation to the God who has called them to proclaim this good news? What part of this preaching activity, this practice is God's, and what is the preacher's? How are preachers to learn *prudentia*, the wisdom of knowing when to rely on their creative actions?

The creative dimension of homiletics and preaching is, therefore, both a practice and a theological question. It is about our nature as created beings. It is a question of theological anthropology and the intersection of revelation and human knowledge.

II

It was Augustine who first began to help Christian preachers navigate this tension when he added a fourth and final chapel to his book on the interpretation of scripture. Having found a quiet day a busy bishop, Augustine of Hippo, turned to his writing desk to undertake a task he had not thought probable. Many years earlier he had finished a book describing both the interpretation and teaching of the scriptures. Augustine concluded Book Three, the final book of *De Doctrina Christiana*, with a quote from Proverbs 2:6, «the Lord giveth

1 W. Willimon: *Pastor. The Theology and Practice of Ordained Ministry*, Nashville, TN 2002, 153.

2 *Ibid.*, 154.

wisdom: and out of his mouth cometh prudence and knowledge.»³ Those who read and studied Augustine's work, he believed, would be able to attain not only knowledge, but prudence, that is the wisdom and good sense to know how to apply that knowledge.

Augustine declared, in the opening of the book, that he was undertaking this work, not alone, but with the faithful assistance of the God who had called him.

Just as the loaves increased when they were broken, the Lord has granted these things necessary to the beginning of this work, and when they begin to be given out they will be multiplied by his inspiration, so that in this task of mine I shall not only suffer no poverty of ideas but shall rejoice in wonderful abundance.⁴

Likewise, he believed that those who read the book would also have God's assistance as they sought to interpret the scriptures.

What called for this improbable task, the need for an additional chapter to a book long completed? It would seem that, in his duties as bishop, Augustine had been visiting and attending the worship services of the priests in his charge. We are given a hint of his experience when, in the additional and final chapter of *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine expresses his reasons for writing about the relationship between preaching and rhetoric. Should, he asked, «the defenders of truth speak so that they tire their listeners, make themselves difficult to understand and what they have to say dubious?»⁵ The people of God were being forced to listen to preachers who were «sluggish, cold and somnolent.»⁶ In other words, they were putting people to sleep.

Augustine had been, before his conversion, a teacher of rhetoric. And following his conversion, like many of the Church Fathers, he had abandoned this secular profession. In the *Confessions*, Augustine records how he told the people of Milan, «they must provide someone else to sell the art of words to their students, because I had chosen to serve you.»⁷ Rhetoric was about teaching people

3 Saint Augustine: *On Christian Doctrine*, transl. D.W. Robertson, Jr., Upper Saddle River, NJ 1958, 117.

4 *Ibid.*, 8.

5 *Ibid.*, 118.

6 *Ibid.*

7 «*Confessions*», in: *Augustine of Hippo: Selected Writings*, transl. by M.T. Clark (Classics of Western Spirituality), New York 1984, 107.

the human skills of argument and persuasion. Once one had become a servant of Christ one was to put aside those human sources of reason and persuasion and trust only in God's revelation in Christ and in the Holy Scriptures. But in Book Four of *On Christian Doctrine* we watch Augustine navigate the tension between revelation and reason; between the divine gift of the words to speak, and the recognition that there is a human element of skill and eloquence that can and must be learned.

How does one help those who preach learn and develop to navigate this tension between divine revelation and human skill? How does one help them to open themselves to the knowledge of the scriptures while recognizing that they have an important role in proclaiming those scriptures?

III

It is the rare preacher who does not long for that sermon that arrives, complete, as a gift of the Holy Spirit. Preachers wish to trust in Jesus' assurance:

Do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. (Matthew 10:19-20)

And while there are preachers whose theology of preaching is grounded in just that source of revelation, who do not prepare their sermons before they preach, most have a theology of preaching that recognizes they will need to study for and prepare their sermon before stepping into the pulpit.

Those preachers need to enter a process of learning the practice of preaching. It was this practice that Augustine began to introduce, or rather retrieve, in Book Four of *On Christian Doctrine*. And it is this understanding of preaching as a practice that grounded an approach to pedagogy presented by a team of homileticians recently.

Directed and edited by Thomas G. Long and Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, *Teaching Preaching as a Christian Practice*, a group of preaching teachers and scholars argued that «the focus of homiletical teaching should now fall on the concept of preaching as a *practice* ... *A practice is a constellation of actions that people have performed over time that are common, meaningful, strategic, and purposeful.*»⁸ They believed

8 T.G. Long / L. Tubbs Tisdale (ed.): *Teaching preaching as a Christian Practice. A New Approach to Homiletical Pedagogy*, Louisville, KY 2008, 12.

that, over the previous generations, homiletics and the teaching of preaching had focused too narrowly on various areas, either «a controlling metaphor, such as «storytelling», ... a moment in the preaching process, such as biblical interpretation, the psychology of listener, or the personality of the preacher.» In order to move to a pedagogical method that incorporated all areas of the preaching enterprise, they proposed that preaching and teaching preaching should be viewed as a practice, an activity⁹ that calls for, as James Nieman notes, «much preparation and not a little skill.»¹⁰

Much preparation and skill describes «the complexity of preaching.»¹¹ The goal of the new pedagogical approach was to identify the various elements and teaching methods that combined to make up this practice-based approach. Included in this approach are the various rhetorical elements of invention – interpreting text and context, arrangement – creation of form, style – use of language, and delivery – voice and diction. What’s more, not only are students of the practice to be introduced to the various elements, but there is also the understanding that learning a practice will take time and commitment both on the part of the student and the teacher, «Teaching preaching cannot be reduced to content delivery or skill development . . . [it] leads to teaching that practice as a mutual risk and investment on the part of everyone involved.»¹²

Finally, as Nieman observes, a practice-based approach to preaching and teaching preaching means that the students will not only be learning a skill, but it will also be an occasion of formation. The character of the preacher is an essential element of perfecting a practice, «The repeated tasks need to appropriate the coordinated actions or multiple strategies of effective preaching require long-term effort that shapes how students perceive themselves.»¹³

In his seminal work, *After Virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre argued that an understanding of and participation in practices are essential to the development of the virtues. And I would argue it is at this intersection that we see the meeting of *prudentia* and *inventio*, the connection between skills and wisdom. MacIntyre,

9 Ibid., 11f.

10 J. Nieman: Why the Idea of Practice Matters, in: Long/Tubbs Tisdale: Teaching preaching as a Christian Practice (n. 8), 19.

11 Ibid., 33.

12 Ibid., 36f.

13 Ibid., 37.

in a discussion of the virtues in Aristotle, describes the two types of virtues: the «intellectual virtues acquired through teaching, [and] the virtues of character from habitual exercise.»¹⁴ Character, and intelligence, according to Aristotle, cannot be separated. And this would seem to be the understanding of a practice-based homiletical pedagogy. In the process of teaching the preacher invention, arrangement, style, delivery, the teacher is also helping the preacher to develop as just that, a preacher. Students of preaching are learning how to, as MacIntyre describes a practice, to «achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity,»¹⁵ while at the same time being faithful servants of the God who has called them to preach.

Nieman notes that the formational element of learning to preach is often «the invisible part of preaching instruction.»¹⁶ And yet, as he observes, «students who struggle with the practice of preaching often face deeper issues of faith formation and readiness for ministry.»¹⁷ Formation and the development of character, of the virtues of preaching, will require, according to Nieman, more attention as the practice-based homiletical pedagogy is developed.

IV

I would argue that one important element of formation crucial for all preachers is developing one's creativity. We have been created in the image of a creating God. Creativity, therefore, is an important aspect of our being, our nature, and should be an important element of our approach to preaching.

Week in and week out preachers are given the gift of proclaiming the Good News to those who hunger for God's love and support. Preachers open the scriptures to bring the assurance that God continues to do new things in our world and in the lives of all the people God has created. Yet for many preachers that weekly responsibility is a chore and a burden. The pressures of parish life often overshadow the joy of preaching. There are also those weeks when the preacher opens the scriptures and it would seem that there is no new message to spring forth.

14 A. MacIntyre: *After Virtue*. Notre Dame, IN 1984, 154.

15 *Ibid.*, 187.

16 Nieman: *Why the Idea of Practice Matters* (n. 10), 37.

17 *Ibid.*

As was observed earlier, homiletical instruction most often focuses on the content and structure of the sermon, not on the spirituality and character of the preacher. Helping preaching students understand the creative process, which is not always easy, and develop their creative nature and ability should be a crucial part of preparing preachers for a long and productive preaching life.

The simple definition of creativity is bringing about something new: a work of art, a new approach to architecture, developing an original idea. Creativity is about experimenting, trying new things a new way. It is about the willingness to put the «old» to the test and moving from the known to the unknown. Creativity is about developing new patterns of thinking and doing.

An important part of creativity is accepting the fact that we all have the potential to be creative. It is not an attribute limited only to artists, as so many people believe. A trip to a classroom filled with young children absorbed in painting will reveal a classroom filled with creative people. They are willing to experiment, to try anything. They want to see what happens when they fill that entire paper with red or yellow or blue. They want to find out what happens when one mixes the red and the yellow and the blue. They are not worried about what is right or wrong. They are not concerned about what others will think.

Unfortunately, as we grow older, for a variety of reasons, we lose much our creative attitude. We settle into routine ways of thinking and resist the willingness to try something new or to experiment. A crucial formational aspect, therefore, is to help students and preachers realize their innate creative nature; a nature that can be fostered and developed. I will return to this shortly. First, I would like to recognize another crucial dimension of creativity, understanding the creative process. Awareness of this relatively predictable and useful process will be a helpful dimension of the preaching life.

Aristotle described rhetoric as discovering all available means of persuasion. Invention, or *inventio*, is the first step of the creative process. It is a time of preparation; of identifying the question or problem to be investigated or solved. This is a time of exploration and study. It is a time of investigating and searching. What it is not is a time of judgment. It is a time of searching for solutions not ruling them out.

The writer, artist, or preacher then moves into a period of incubation when the various ideas and thoughts are juggled in one's brain – often at an uncon-

scious level. The fruit of one's investigations and study are reviewed to try out new patterns and make new connections. While this is a predictable and important stage of the creative process, it can also be a frustrating time – for it is in this time of wrestling those new thoughts and ideas germinate. But like seeds it cannot be rushed. Unfortunately, many preachers are not aware that this is a very normal and very predictable stage in the creative process. In their frustration they think that they are not going to come up with anything interesting or engaging. And too many preachers, in this period turn to the Internet and choose to preach another's sermon.

If the writer or preacher is willing to engage and push through this time of incubation there will come a moment of illumination, what is often called the «aha» moment. It is that moment when new ideas fall into place. It is the moment at which a solution is arrived.

The creative process does not end with that satisfying solution. The final step in the creative process is one of judgment, verification, and critical analysis. It is a misunderstanding of creativity and the creative process to think that one can do whatever one wishes. One moves from *inventio* to *prudentia*, from exploration to judgment; from searching to wisdom.

Creativity is more than a process, it is a way of being and a way of approaching life. In his book *Intuition*, David Myers describes the components of creativity: expertise, imaginative thinking skills, a venturesome personality, intrinsic motivation, and a creative environment.¹⁸ The creative person is one who is willing to take risks. They are people who persist, even in the face of frustration and failure. As my colleague at Wesley writes in her book *Sanctifying Art*, Deborah Sokolove, art is a practice in persistence, «the arts both teach and require persistence . . . to keep working through these passages [of uncertainty] ultimately bring the sought-for resolution.»¹⁹

Inviting preaching students into the formation which creativity affords them is an invitation to explore a wide variety of habits that will help shape and guide their future success as preachers. I have already mentioned persistence in the face of frustration. Sokolove also observes that participating in the arts also encourages one in the habit of attending, a «kind of attentiveness . . . to

18 D.G. Myers: *Intuition. Its Powers and Perils*, New Haven, CT 2002, 59f.

19 D. Sokolove: *Sanctifying Art. Inviting Conversation between Artists, Theologians, and the Church*, Eugene, OR 2013, 90.

Scripture, to the world around us, to the quiet prompting of God, are all part of living with integrity and spiritual depth.»²⁰

While there are numerous other habits associated with creativity I will mention but one more and that is resilience. Creativity helps one learn how to fail and carry on. Thomas Edison tried countless materials and elements before discovering a form of bamboo that would allow an electric light to burn for over 1200 hours. When a material failed he did not give up, he tried another. This resilience is crucial for the preaching life. Preachers are well aware that they often fall short of their call. They know that they have not done honor to the God who called them. But if they have been formed to take risks and to try again and again, they will step back into the pulpit week after week.



Like our brother in Christ, Augustine, those who preach, and those who educate and mentor preachers trust in the message of Proverbs –

For the Lord gives wisdom;
from his mouth come knowledge and understanding;
he stores up sound wisdom for the upright; . . .
for wisdom will come into your heart,
and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul.

Proverbs 2:6-7a, 10

We trust in the Lord to be the grounding of all that we do and all that we say as we seek to answer our call to preach.

We also recognize, as did Augustine, that we have much work to do to attain that knowledge and understanding. Developing a practice-based pedagogical approach which seeks to help students and preachers navigate the tension between revelation and reason; between God's message and our contribution to proclaiming that message. To preach is a humbling privilege and it should draw out our best efforts.

20 Ibid., 93.

Abstract

God is calling us forward to see and do new things. Creativity is therefore an important dimension of preaching and the teaching of preachers. This essay seeks to explore creativity and the intersection of teaching skills and spirituality – the forming of wise preachers.

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