

PROCLAIM A MESSAGE OF HOPE

• A HOMILETICS PRACTICUM •

Originally prepared for a homiletics workshop on June 19, 2009, at the Fourth Annual Conference for Priests, Deacons and Seminarians hosted by St. Vincent's Seminary, Latrobe, Pa.

Can you imagine being asked to put together a workshop on preaching for priests and deacons? Initially, it seemed like a daunting venture – speaking to priests about preparing homilies! Following, there was a conference call with the organizers as I tried to dodge the workshop, until one of them said, “Just explain how you weave stories and illustrations into your preaching.” Now that was something with which I was familiar, and easily could talk about.

Frequently, in preparation for a homily or any other pastoral initiative, I begin with a prayer that helps focus my thoughts. It is St. Francis' prayer to discern God's will said before the Crucifix:

Most High, glorious God, enlighten the darkness of my heart, and give me right faith, certain hope, and perfect charity, wisdom and understanding, Lord, that I may carry out your holy and true command¹

Often when asked to speak, I will write out the theme or topic at the top of a page and look at it until a concept begins to emerge. As I was thinking about the term “homiletics practicum,” I considered how words are often thought of without being thought through in their definitions, such as *homily* and *practicum*. Just what do they mean, separately and together?

Fr. Harold Buetow in the introduction to *God Still Speaks, Listen*, his Cycle A book of homilies, writes: “Homily’ comes from the Greek *homilia*, which implies a more personal and conversational form of address...”²

The Random House Dictionary defines *practicum* as “study devoted to practical experience in a field.”³ And, the *Oxford English Dictionary* lists the etymology of *practicum* as from the Greek – *praktikos* – “practical, concerned with action.”⁴

So I determined that such a workshop should be devoted to practical experience regarding preaching, or delivering a homily, that is “concerned with action.” Well, doesn't that make for an interesting adventure – one that is both appealing as well as intimidating.

First Grow Hot Within

My experience of preaching is from within the tradition of the Franciscan Friars, Third Order Regular, so let's hear from St. Francis of Assisi on those who minister the Word of God:

The preacher must first draw from secret prayers what he will later pour out in holy sermons; he must first grow hot within before he speaks words that are in themselves cold.⁵

This is enlightened advice for priests and deacons who have the opportunity to minister the Word of God. That is, before preaching, speaking or teaching one needs to set aside adequate time for prayer to draw in deeply God's inspiration and listen to the Word. It is advice so practical, but how often forgotten in all the busyness of parish life.

St. Francis' desire that those who preach the Word of God *must first grow hot within* is wonderfully illustrated by the story "A Man Whose Spirit Is Hot."

A foreman in a local foundry was guiding a plant tour for some visitors. They came to an area where molten metal was being poured into huge crucibles. Each crucible was made of a translucent material that glowed like fire when hot. The foreman took a heavy sledgehammer and, holding it in both hands, gave a powerful whack against one of the empty, but still hot, crucibles. Again and again he delivered a mighty blow, but he could do no more damage than make tiny dents in the huge container.

Then he picked up a smaller hammer and moved over to a crucible that had completely cooled off. With a quick flick of his wrist, he tapped the cold crucible and shattered it. The foreman explained, "Nothing can break one of those crucibles when they're hot, but anything can break them when they're cold."

Afterward, taking on the role of a philosopher, he added, "It's pretty hard to break a person whose spirit is hot, but when one's spirit is cooled off, even little things will shatter it."⁶

St. Francis Spoke Life-Giving and Profound Words

According to Thomas Celano, an early biographer of St. Francis, the beauty of the preaching of St. Francis flowed from his love of God and an ardent desire to invite others to experience the same thing.

Although the evangelist Francis preached to the simple, in simple, concrete terms, since he knew that virtue is more necessary than words, still, when he was among spiritual people with greater abilities he gave birth to life-giving and profound words. With few words he would suggest what was inexpressible, and weaving movements with fiery gestures, he carried away all his hearers toward the things of heaven.⁷

This is the heart of a Franciscan perspective regarding storytelling in the ministry of the Word – to speak *life-giving and profound words*; to use words and gestures in order to transport the hearers of the Word *toward the things of heaven*.

Picture the Kingdom of God

When I first began my research⁸ on the concept of a Franciscan perspective of the use of storytelling in preaching, I was unsure how I might develop the topic. But through the wonders of computer technology, by simply keying in the search phrase "compare AND kingdom" into my computer bible program, I was able to delve further into the concept.

Let me explain Mark 4:30 is the actual verse containing that phrase, but other translations provide multiple variations. The *New American Standard* translates the word “compare” as “picture.” Bingo! This was the angle or slant I was searching for. Through storytelling the preacher can assist people in picturing, envisioning and comparing a connection among the biblical word, the stories of their lives, and the kingdom of God.

How often have you heard visual learners, like myself, say, “I don’t see what you mean? Or, “Now I get the picture!” Many of us visual learners need a solid image that will assist us to achieve an “Aha” moment: “Now I see it!”

Stories Have Power

Janet Litherland writes in *Storytelling From the Bible*:

Stories have power. They delight, enchant, touch, teach, recall, inspire, motivate, challenge. They help us understand. They imprint a picture on our minds. Consequently, stories often pack more punch than sermons. Want to make a point or raise an issue? Tell a story. Jesus did it. He called his stories ‘parables.’⁹

In fact, the Gospel of Mark (4:34) states, ...”he [Jesus] did not speak to them without a parable...” Jesus refined the rabbinic use of parable as a method of teaching . Parables and stories teach a natural wisdom of morality, of healing, of compassion, of values and ethics. Jesus wanted to *imprint a picture on our minds* that would touch us with a lasting impression in the deepest part of our spirit. Jesus wanted us to get the picture, the bigger picture. Other examples of Jesus’ use of parables and stories are found in Matthew 13, Mark 4, Luke 8 and Luke 13:8.

Frank H. Seilhamer writes: “Parable is the translation...of two Greek terms – *parah* meaning ‘near’ or ‘vicinity’ and *ballo* meaning ‘to throw’ – that mean ‘to throw along side of.’ What is involved is a story created to be thrown along side of a true-life situation to drive home the central point the storyteller is trying to make. As Jesus demonstrated, a good picture is worth a thousand words...which a person can visualize, then pin to their memory.”¹⁰

Stories, parables, fables, anecdotes and illustrations are thrown alongside the biblical word to help us to see the “bigger picture” in life. They help us to understand there is more to life than our own limited and narrow spheres of experience. They create pictures in our minds and enlighten our imagination to comprehend a greater dimension of life than we normally are used to experiencing. Stories are vehicles that take us to far off places, places we’ve never experienced ourselves.

That is what Jesus tried to accomplish with his disciples and with the crowds that flocked to hear him speak: to take them to a place where there is a new way of living, a new way of loving and a new way of healing; a new world that these people never could have imagined on their own. Such is the task for those who preach the Word of God—to open people’s imagination *toward the things of heaven*.

Gifted Communicators Can Tell a Story

Joe Griffith in the Introduction to his book *Speaker's Library of Business Stories, Anecdotes and Humor* writes:

...[G]ifted communicators have one common denominator: They can tell a story. More to the point, they can use a good story to make a point and to fix that point in their listener's minds....

By sprinkling illustrations throughout your presentation, you will grab the imagination of your listeners in a way that films or television are hard pressed to duplicate. Never forget that as a communicator you are appealing to the most powerful image-producing mechanism on earth...the human mind. It thrives on images. Good stories are triggers that release an explosive, powerful, positive form of communication energy.

To quote the late Dr. Carl Winters, for years a popular member of the prestigious General Motors speaking staff, "If you want to be a successful speaker, you've got to have a message with stories for people to remember your message by."¹¹

This is sage advice for each of us who minister God's word, especially for homilists, who want *to make a point and to fix that point in their listener's minds....for people to remember your message by.*

To Have a Great Theme

Consider for a moment: Do you have a scripture power-verse, a personal great theme or an inspiring quotation that provides vision and guidance for your ministry? There are several that motivate my ministry, that are formative in my preaching preparations.

First, the *power verse* that is, a scripture verse that decisively grabs your attention. Mine is from St. Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians (1 Thess. 5:11, 13, 15-18, RSV):

Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing....Be at peace among yourselves....See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. Rejoice always, pray constantly, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.¹²

Clicking on this verse in my computer bible program, I noticed that the Greek word for "encourage" was *parakaleo*. That had a familiar sound to it, as in John 14:16, "I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Paraclete to be with you always..." Other translations use the terms *Advocate*, *Counselor*, or *Comforter*, as well.

I then began to search the Greek text for other verses with the same root word and came across *parakleto* and *paraklesis*. When I clicked on the screen these Greek words produced the English verbs *encourage*, *urge*, *exhort*, *implore*, *counsel*, *comfort*, *console* and *advocate*. Also, St. Paul in his writings used these terms seventy-two times to build up local faith communities.

For a homiletic practicum, I propose considering the role of the priest or deacon as a *coach*. Think about it, what is the role of a coach? Isn't a coach the one who *urges, implores, encourages, exhorts*, as well as *counsels, comforts* and *consoles*? Also, a coach is an *advocate*, that is, one who supports or urges by argument; one who recommends publicly...a person who pleads for, or in behalf of, an intercessor.¹³

The priest or deacon as *coach* becomes a good role model for your preaching and ministry. This is a good way to affect other people's lives, by *encouraging, urging, exhorting, comforting, consoling, comforting*, and *being an advocate for, or interceding on behalf of*. Again, this is just a thought for you to consider.

Proclaim a Message of Hope

My second guiding theme is found throughout the writings of the late Pope John Paul II. Frequently, he would infer that Christians are to give witness to the world as a "sign of joy, proclaiming a message of hope." What a thought to focus on in ministry, and especially through your homilies—a *sign of joy, proclaiming a message of hope!*

John Gardner, an American educator, likewise exhorted: "Keep hope alive!" What an inspiring guiding principle. Isn't that the principle for which every parent, teacher, preacher or coach aspires – to *keep hope alive!*

Furthermore, Pope Francis, in a morning homily during Mass in Santa Marta said: "When God visits His people he restores hope to them. Always. You can preach the Word of God brilliantly: there have been many excellent preachers throughout history. But if these preachers have failed to sow hope, that sermon is useless. It is mere vanity".¹⁴

Our mission in preaching is to "restore hope" to God's people who otherwise undergo so many hope-sucking experiences in their daily lives. *Keep hope alive!*

My third guiding theme that provides clarity in my ministry is the Third Order Regular's charism of *On-Going Conversion*. Daily we are called to re-form our lives and believe in the Good News. That is not just to reform, "to turn back; but to *re-form* (form anew), to take a leap forward"¹⁵ and believe.

Fr. Robert Waznak, S.S., in *Sunday after Sunday: Preaching the Homily as Story*, describes the early Christians...

...as a community of storytellers....The stories were about Jesus of Nazareth who himself offered such spellbinding stories that they were told and retold by people who found in them a key to their own stories of faith and struggle. Stories of the Bible were always retold in a way that noticed the particular needs and concerns of the listeners. Contact with the original story was not lost, but the new listeners found relevance and renewal in the story retold because it involved them in a personal way.¹⁶

As preachers our task is just that—to involve people in a personal way to find *a key to their own stories of faith and struggle*.

A final motivating principle that guides me whenever I prepare a homily, or any speaking engagement, is simply not to be boring! Often a profound idea will fall flat because the speaker puts no energy, no creativity, no enthusiasm into the delivery. Homilies need to be engaging, just not ego-driven.

Invite People to Faith

William White, in *Speaking In Stories*, writes:

The goal of preaching is not to inform...is about inviting people to faith...to help people make a connection between the biblical word and the stories of their lives.¹⁷

Priests and deacons, by way of their preaching ministry, seek *to invite people to faith...to make a connection of the Word with their own life...*

This is illustrated when Arthur Miller, the great playwright, once was asked to describe the difference between an ordinary play and a great drama. The playwright said:

In any successful play there must be something which makes the audience say to themselves, “Good Lord, that’s me! That’s me!”

In any successful preaching, the standard is the same.¹⁸

Quality Preaching Demands Time

Always looming over homily preparation is the time factor – there’s just not enough time. Quality preaching, however, requires time: time to read, time to listen, time to pray, time to research, time to prepare, time to compose. Preparation is not an option for quality preaching, even when priests or deacons are stretched with several churches and all the busyness that ensues.

Time is a valuable resource. Do you realize that there are only **1440** minutes in any twenty-four hour day, no more, no less? Have you ever noticed how they are spent?

Thinking about this homiletic practicum reminded me of a seminary homiletics class where we read in the 1965 *Decree on Ministry and Life of Priests*:

...priests, as co-workers with their bishops, have the primary duty of proclaiming the Gospel of God to all... they establish and build up the People of God.... (Ch. II, 4).¹⁹

During my time as a deacon on the South Side of Pittsburgh, I recalled reading a letter from the late Bishop Leonard of Pittsburgh to his priests:

Homily preparation is one of the main occupations of the priest. It should be considered an integral, necessary aspect of his spiritual life....It demands time for actual composition and some consideration of the style of delivery. In short, the preparation of the Sunday homily holds a priority in his weekly schedule.²⁰

Again, preaching is a priest's or deacon's "primary duty"... "the Sunday homily holds a priority"... and "it demands time for actual composition..."

I hesitate to ask, but in your diocese is preaching ministry recognized as being primary? How are quality homilies appreciated or rewarded? Or, when was the last time a monsignor was named for his preaching ability? There's a law in business that states, "What gets recognized, gets repeated." Conversely, what doesn't get recognized is deemed as not being important.

Available Resources

So where does one come across preaching resources of contemporary stories, metaphors and illustrations? What resources are available to develop, enhance or refine preaching?

Karl Barth, a 20th German theologian, used to say he prepared his sermons with a Bible on one knee and a newspaper on the other. That's a model we need to remember as we prepare. The gathering stage is crucial to the preparation of an effective sermon. It takes creativity and effort. It takes prayer; we need to ask God to open our eyes and our minds to the strongest, most relevant material. And it takes time.

Barth said "...But the triple approach – brainstorming, searching Scripture and scanning the field – should give us a wealth of material for any sermon topic. The hard part should be deciding what great material to leave out."²¹

The first resource is so obvious that most people miss it – **OBSERVATION**.

One of my favorite "Yogisms" from Yogi Berra goes, "You can see a lot just by observing." Life around us abounds with delightful stories, metaphors and illustrations if we would only pick up on them. They are in the people we meet, news sources, movies, sporting events, etc. Yes, indeed, we could learn a lot by observing life.

Observation also provides a lesson for everyday spirituality – to see, not just look; to listen, not just hear. Indeed, the best method of observation is to pay attention to one's surroundings; to see with both eyes and to hear with both ears....just like what Barth meant by *scanning the field*.

A second resource is to invest in an excellent dictionary, thesaurus, or speaker's almanac, which lists major events that occurred on each day during the year. I'm reminded of an admonition by Fr. Walter Burghardt, SJ, "Words are powerful, don't settle for a good word when the right word is better."²²

Another resource is my own six-volume *Sower's Seeds* series published by Paulist Press as resources for preachers, teachers and public speakers. A key feature in these books is the cross-

referenced theme index. In addition, there is my award winning website, “Apple Seeds”[®], especially the “Sermon Resources, Scripture Reflections and Illustrations” section. It can be found on the Internet at <http://www.appleseeds.org/religfav.htm#Sermon>.

Homily Feedback

To shift our focus a bit, let’s consider your own homilies. What kind of comments or feedback have you received about your homilies, your preaching? Check out this one:

There was a pastor out on an Indian reservation who, on getting into the pulpit, noticed the chief of the tribe sitting in the back row. He thought that if he preached a mighty and a powerful sermon that maybe, just maybe, the chief would return with other men from the tribe.

So he gave it a “mighty and a powerful,” and after Mass the pastor waited for the chief. When the chief approached him, the pastor asked him, “Well, chief, how did you like my sermon?”

The chief thought briefly and replied, “High wind, loud thunder, no rain!”²³

As I see it, preaching is more than “high wind” and “loud thunder.” Our homilies should nurture the thirsty spirits sitting in the pews. There’s no need for gloom-n-doom, fire-n-brimstone preaching, telling people they’re all going to hell. Most of them already think that. Our preaching needs to give people hope – as signs of joy proclaiming a message of hope! Preaching that is filled with a passion for God’s Word to transform people’s lives.

The Seed Grows on Its Own

Jesus relates the Parable of the Growing Seed in Mark (4:26-28, NIV):

This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain...²⁴

Storytelling within the preaching ministry is like the farmer scattering the seeds. The stories contain within themselves a dynamic life-force capable of sprouting, growing and bearing fruit in the lives of the listeners without the preacher knowing how it happens.

As well, we read in the Parable of the Sower (Mt. 13:3-9) that some seeds fall on the hardened path, some fall among weeds, some seeds sprout quickly but then die without good roots, and some seeds fall on good soil – to bear abundant fruit in the listeners’ lives. But note, only one out of four seeds bears fruit, just 25 percent; that’s what can be called the *Hard News of the Good News*.

Therefore, it is the primary task of a preacher simply to keep telling the stories, just like the farmer who scatters the seed. You will find that people will begin to grasp a bigger picture as you

help them envision what it would be like to picture the kingdom of God; to imagine a new way of living, a new way of loving and a new way of healing.

Where Have All the Sermons Gone?

So we might wonder, “Where Have All the Sermons Gone?”²⁵

When a preacher died, it was discovered that he had tied together all his sermons and placed a card on top of them with this inscription: “Where has the influence gone of all these sermons I’ve preached?”

Underneath he had scribbled in large letters – “**OVER.**”

On the other side this answer was found: “Where are last year’s sunrays? They have gone into fruits and grain and vegetables to feed people. Where are last year’s raindrops? Forgotten by most people, of course, but they did their refreshing work, and their influence still abides. So, too, my sermons have gone into people’s lives and made them nobler, more Christ-like, and better fitted for Heaven.”

In closing, in this Year of the Priest, let us pray:

MOST HIGH GOD, Father of all,
our faith and life is nourished
through the gift of stories.

WE SEEK to be more like Jesus,
Your Son and our Lord;
to be attentively more aware
of the great gift of life around us,
that we may be signs of joy,
proclaiming a message of hope.

THIS DAY,
may your Spirit of Encouragement
fill our hearts and empower us,
so that we can minister
with a stronger hope
for the possibilities that lie hidden
within things, situations and persons.

AMEN.

Endnotes:

1. Fr. Conrad Harkins, OFM, private translation from the Italian.
2. Harold A. Buetow, Ph.D, JD, *God Still Speaks, Listen*, Cycle A Sunday Homilies. Staten Island, NY: St. Pauls/Alba House (1995) viii.
3. "Practicum," Random House Webster's Electronic Dictionary and Thesaurus, College Edition, ver. 1.0, 1992.
4. "Practicum," Oxford English Dictionary, CD-ROM, ver. 3.0, Oxford University Press, 2002.
5. *St. Francis of Assisi: Omnibus of Sources*. Thomas Celano, "The Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul: Second Life," Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press (1973) 493, §163.
6. Brian Cavanaugh, TOR's personal journals, source unknown.
7. *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents, Vol. II, The Founder*. Thomas Celano, "The Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul: The Second Book," NY: New City Press, 2000, 318, §107.
8. Brian Cavanaugh, TOR, "Storytelling in Ministry of the Word: A Franciscan Perspective." ANALECTA TERTII ORDINIS REGULARIS (Rome, Italy), Vol. 36/174, August 2005 ©
<http://www.appleseeds.org/Fran_Storytelling.htm>.
9. Janet Litherland, *Storytelling from the Bible*. Colorado Springs, CO: Meriwether, 1991, p. 3.
10. Brian Cavanaugh, TOR's personal journals, source unknown.
11. Joseph Griffith, *Speaker's Library of Business Stories, Anecdotes and Humor*. NY, NY: Prentice Hall, 2000, p. ix-xi.
12. *The First Letter of Paul to the Thessalonians*. The Holy Bible, Revised Standard Edition: An Ecumenical Edition. New York: Collins (1973), 5:11, 13, 15-18.
13. "Advocate," Random House Webster's Electronic Dictionary and Thesaurus, College Edition, ver. 1.0, 1992.
14. Pope Francis, morning homily Santa Marta (September 16, 2014). Vatican Radio
<http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2014/09/16/pope_at_santa_marta_closeness_and_compassion/1106615>.
15. Raniero Cantalamessa, OFM, Cap., "Looking at Christ with the Eyes of Francis," Franciscan Chapter of the Mats in Assisi (April 20, 2009) <<http://www.zenit.org/article-25661?l=english>>.
16. Robert Waznak, *Sunday after Sunday: Preaching the Homily as Story*, Ramsey, NJ: Paulist Press (1983) 27.
17. William R. White, *Speaking In Stories*. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Press (1982) 24.
18. William J. Bausch, *Storytelling the Word. Homilies and How to Write Them*. Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications (1996) 40.
19. Pope Paul VI, "Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests, *Presbyterorum Ordinis*," Decrees of II Vatican Council, The Vatican, December 7, 1965
<http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651207_presbyterorum-ordinis_en.html>.

20. Pittsburgh Worship Commission, *The Spirit and Truth* (Pittsburgh: Worship Commission, December 1971) 3.
21. Ralph L. Lewis and Gregg Lewis, *Inductive Preaching*, "Helping People Listen," Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books (1983) 131.
22. Fr. Walter Burghardt, SJ. As told in a personal conversation during a preaching convocation for the Diocese of Scranton, April 1997.
23. Brian Cavanaugh, TOR, *Fresh Packet of Sower's Seeds: Third Planting*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, (1994) 83.
24. Holy Bible, New International Version, (Colorado Springs, CO: International Bible Society 1973, 1978,1984). Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House.
25. Brian Cavanaugh, TOR, *Sower's Seeds of Encouragement: 100 Stories of Hope, Humor and Healing* Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, (199) 52.