

Enough about me: There is no 'I' in preach

by [William Brosend](#) in the [February 23, 2010](#) issue

The combination is toxic, a perfect homiletical storm. A recent seminary graduate comes to her first parish, moving halfway across the country with her fiancé soon to follow. Sermon after sermon includes a story about a seminary classmate, about how much she loves the place where she used to live and how different “home” is from her new community and, inevitably, about how her wedding plans remind her of something in the epistle. In another pulpit, a preacher approaching retirement has discovered that while he cannot show you pictures of his grandkids from the pulpit, he can tell you about them. So he does—week after week after week. “A funny thing happened to me on the way to the pulpit today” is as familiar a remark in some churches as “It was a quiet week in Lake Wobegon” is on Saturday radio.

What exactly is wrong with sharing one’s life and experience from the pulpit? When I criticize the use of the personal story in preaching, pastors or seminary students inevitably disagree with me. Isn’t it important, they argue, to let the members of the congregation know that pastors don’t think they’re better or more spiritual or more whatever than their congregants? If pastors don’t share their faith in this way, how will worshipers know what their pastors believe? How can pastors witness to the gospel if they don’t tell their stories?

I agree with that last concern: the issue is our witness to the gospel. The question is how much self-reference in preaching strengthens the preacher’s witness. I maintain, on the basis of the example of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels and on my own experience as a preacher and a listener, that self-reference undermines the effectiveness of preaching.

Many first novels are about a fascinating woman or man coming of age who writes a first novel. But what happens when the author pens a second novel, and it’s about a fascinating author writing a second novel? It can work, as Philip Roth has proved. But for every Philip Roth there are a dozen Jay McInerneys. *Bright Lights, Big City* was a

best seller, but that was McInerney's only big hit. Although the preacher is not writing a novel every two or three years, he is in front of a congregation every Sunday, and must find a way to move the focus off of himself.

In addition to practical reasons why one should not indulge in self-reference each Sunday, there are important theological, rhetorical and homiletical reasons, not to mention the example of Jesus himself. Turn to Luke or Matthew or Mark. How frequently does Jesus refer to himself? He almost never uses the first-person pronoun and almost never says, "Let me tell you about what happened to me, who I met, or what I believe." (Yes, the Fourth Gospel is different, but this argument is based on the Synoptics.)

I propose four reasons for using the first-person singular as little as possible. First, there is the law of unintended consequences. A preacher begins the sermon by telling the gathered faithful how much her family disliked her uncle's wife. Using a level of detail captured in the acronym TMI (too much information), the congregation learns everything about this woman that grates on the preacher's family members. After a few minutes, one learns that feelings toward the woman softened when the uncle and aunt's first child was born. But now it's too late. The congregation stopped listening long ago and is wondering about the preacher's disposition. "How does she talk about me when I am not around?" they're asking themselves.

Once the words leave the preacher's lips, they are no longer his or hers. The listeners are the ones who decide what the words finally mean, how they will be understood and in what context they'll be applied. This is neither good nor bad, it just is—but woe to the preacher who does not take into account the possibility that some words will be misunderstood and misapplied.

A pastor who loves to travel frequently prefaces a story or comment with reference to one of the countries or cities he's visited. "Last year when we were in Lucerne, we marveled at the warm hospitality of the Swiss. Their reputation, of course, is quite otherwise—cool and calculating, with their secret bank accounts and military neutrality."

Let's count the ways this offhand reference may come back to haunt that preacher. Someone will think: I wish I could afford to travel as much as he does. Exactly how much are we paying him? Another will say to himself: Switzerland? Why would anyone go to Switzerland when they could visit the Rockies? See America first! Or

perhaps: The Swiss are “cool and calculating”? What does he have against the Swiss? My mother’s family is Swiss. Still another is thinking: How dare he scoff at military neutrality. If we had more real neutrality, we would have a lot less war!

On the way to making a minor point about the surprising places where one may encounter hospitality, the preacher has inadvertently raised questions about his spending habits, his patriotism, his attitude toward the people of a foreign land and his stance on national aggression.

Mention the last movie you saw (or song, TV show or sports team) and it’s the same problem. Half the congregation will question your taste. No matter how important the point you are trying to make, a sentence beginning with “I” invites the congregation to focus on you: your judgment, competence, preferences or experience. It’s not worth it.

A second danger of the first-person sermon is the preposition *to*. When the preacher asks herself, “Who am I to speak to these people?” there are always several people listening to her sermon who are thinking, “Who does she think she is to tell me what to do/feel/believe?” The challenge is to speak not *to* the faithful, but *for* them. A judicious reduction in the number of times one says “I” in the sermon will help.

In our best moments, we who preach are trying not to get the congregation to see things our way, but to help them see things God’s way. It’s bad enough that we may come off sounding as if we think we speak for God. We compound the problem by using the first-person pronoun when we speak. “I believe the most serious issue confronting the church today is _____.” The preacher will lose some listeners at “I.” Better to turn this statement around and ask listeners, “What do you consider the most serious issue confronting the church today?” Offering multiple choices that may have serious and perhaps painful repercussions will allow listeners to consider the question before the preacher adds, “A strong case can be made that . . .” and proceeds to make that strong case.

A third danger of the first-person sermon is a loss of focus. The Buddha reminded his students that when he pointed to the moon, they were not supposed to look at his finger. Preachers are like that finger. They can learn a lot from the Buddha about doing everything in their power to get out of the way. The message is not about us; when it begins to seem as if it’s about us, we must remember that it’s not.

Yes, there is considerable evidence to the contrary. The apostle Paul filled his writing with personal narrative and first-person singular discourse. Personal correspondence, however, is not preaching. Closer to our time are those pastors whose congregations seem to thrive on personality-centered preaching. We may know more about Bill Hybels, Joel Osteen and Rick Warren than we do about our next-door neighbors. Their kind of preaching is their choice. It is not mine.

How the listeners feel about the preacher at any given moment should not be the basis for their receptivity to the preacher's proclamation of the gospel. Intentional and inadvertent use of the first-person singular may make this difficult. It is not necessary, for example, to begin relating the key plot points of a movie by saying, "I saw this incredible movie the other day," or to begin with a reference to oneself when conveying important information from other sources, such as "As my good friend Tom once told me" or "When I saw the riveting performance by what's-her-name in the definitive production of you-know-what I was reminded of the-most-important-thing-I-ever-learned." What matters is what the preacher was told or what she learned; the rest is distracting detail.

Then there's the danger of leading with "Something very important happened to me."

Listeners learn when to tune in for moments of interest and when to tune out. They know what to expect from the rise and fall in the preacher's voice, a familiar gesture or the moment when the preacher steps out from behind the pulpit. This is why it's important to be able to preach with or without notes, from a manuscript or from memory, in or out of the pulpit.

More to the point, the preacher who prefaces every story with a bit of autobiography dulls the ears of the listener. When the time does come to share something important that can be shared only autobiographically—self-disclosure rather than self-reference—the preacher may have already trained the listeners to tune out; the listeners know that the important material won't come until after the mention of self.

Whenever I share these views on self-reference in conferences or in the classroom, I am bombarded from all sides: What am I hiding? What do I have against pulpit honesty? Where do I get off saying never talk about yourself in the pulpit? Not *never*, I tell them—but infrequently. If you're a preacher, you should by all means share your story—your witness—when the sermon calls for it. But don't do this in every

sermon, and don't clutter each sermon with whom you saw, what you watched and where you shopped. If you saw someone that you think the congregation would like to know about, tell them about that person and get yourself out of the way. If a movie illustrates the point you're developing, once again, tell them about it but get out of the way.

Then listeners will be ready and even eager for the self-disclosure you offer in humility and trust. Caution must be the rule here as well. There are many topics that simply have no place in the pulpit, even with the permission of family or friend. Talking about your marriage, your children's struggles or difficult relations with parents or siblings is not self-disclosure but family disclosure. There are ways to share your truth without violating confidences or putting relationships on display.

When should those of us who preach self-disclose? Only when there is no other way to share what you feel called and inspired to share. You self-disclose because you must, not because you want to or find it easier. Self-disclosure is sharing something that has happened to you in your walk of faith that can be shared in no other way. If you can imagine another way, use it. If you cannot, if it is too personal, too specific to who you are and how the congregation understands you, or you realize they will come to understand you, then God be with you.

My own experience may serve as an example. Whether we like it or not, Mark 10:1-12 comes around in the Revised Common Lectionary every three years. In most of our churches these days, the topic of divorce is not discussed much, except perhaps as one experience in a list of unpleasant things that "happen." Divorces, however, do not just happen. Divorces are made—made badly, painfully and sinfully by abuse, neglect and infidelity—and are marked by change, challenge and loss. I know because I helped to make one.

So should I talk about my divorce when the lectionary rolls around to Mark 10? No and yes, I think—on the basis of my experience. My divorce happened a long time ago, a few years after my first marriage and a few years before my second (which is more than 25 years strong and counting). But the in-between years were awful, and the best thing I could do in the pulpit was either change the subject or put on my academic blinders and focus on marriage in scripture and antiquity. Anything personal was much too painful and close to the surface to belong in a sermon. I learned not to let my own experience of divorce become my only touchstone for talking about pain, loss and guilt.

At times our personal stake overwhelms our ability to speak biblically and faithfully. Sometimes we are too qualified to speak, or too invested or engaged to trust ourselves to speak. Step aside or set the issue aside and let another preacher speak or choose another topic. But there are other times—and for me this came more than a decade after my divorce—when what we have to share in faith, humility and love out of our experience is essential. It hurts—it really hurts—but it must be shared. We do it not because we want to, but because we cannot do anything else.

Do this kind of sharing infrequently. Most of the time, your goal is to share your truth without retelling your personal stories. By recasting experience in the third person, you'll make room for others to relate the story to their own experiences. Then, when it is time, you can say, "I have something to tell you, and I don't know quite where to start." Those who have ears to hear will listen.

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