

Three challenges I experience in preaching—and four opportunities

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At the door of the church on a recent Sunday, I was talking to a parent of a younger boy. She said to me, "my son has finally connected with what you do! He asked me [about your preaching]: 'Is that his job?' I answered, 'yes, it is.' And then he said, '... what does he do *the rest of the week?*'"

Exactly. The answer—only partially tongue-in-cheek—is 'he thinks about preaching.'

**Preaching is bizarre.** Each week, a woman or man stands up in front of a group of other people and talks to them. Some preachers stand behind a desk and read. Some preachers jump and shout and don't have a written text anywhere nearby. Some preachers say what they need to say in 5 minutes or less—and it takes too long. Others go for 45 minutes or more and no one bats an eye.

What are we preachers *doing* in that moment? Teaching? Exhorting? Comforting? Encouraging? Moralizing? Energizing? Theorizing? Rhapsodizing? Yup.

I admit to loving the act of preaching. It is the only art form I create during the rhythm of my life. I also admit to believing what I preach. If my Sunday words are anything—artful or hackneyed, effective or ill-chosen—they are true, at least for me.

A few weeks ago, I was asked to reflect on what makes preaching interesting and challenging in the present day.

Here are the **three main challenges** I experience in my preaching:

- **[TED talks](#) are raising the bar for all forms of public speaking.** They are all awesome, informative, entertaining. They are better than just about everything I do. Why should someone come to hear me preach? Why shouldn't I just put a TED talk on as the sermon?

- **The Bible is feeling remote as a trustworthy referent.** Many people in the pews don't feel like they "need" scripture to help them navigate their lives. If that's true, how is a preacher supposed to use it? The [lectionary](#) (which is a "schedule" of

readings that is actually quite modern) *feels* like an ancient relic. But selectively choosing sermon topics according to my own sensibilities feels capricious. How should a preacher shape a year-long or season-long preaching agenda in a way that not only plumbs the biblical story but, in the telling, demonstrates how the Bible is irreplaceable as a narrative accompaniment to a human life? It ain't easy, and it keeps me up nights.

- **Salvation—which, in the end, is the "goal" of Christianity—is really, really hard to communicate.** Saved? From what? From hell? Nobody believes in a literal afterlife called hell anymore (except, apparently, [Antonin Scalia](#)). Is "hell" an existential condition? Does anyone even think that way? And if people don't generally feel a need to be saved from much of anything, it's just bizarre to preach toward salvation. In American culture, "hell" is often interpreted as "failure." But if hell is failure in life, we end up with the prosperity gospel, which may be a kind of gospel to folks who are failing, but it's not the gospel of Jesus Christ. It's hard to know what's at stake—what's the drama?—in the preaching moment.

Lest that list be depressing, here are **four opportunities** I see in the preaching task that keep me energized week in and week out:

- We all have too much information in our lives. No one needs a sermon that fails to touch us at our intellectual and emotional core. **Preachers are stewards of language, judicious in which words we use, so that our words strike a resonant chord with the human spirit** and don't just pile on words on top of the surfeit of words in life.

- There is a working tension with the relationship between the congregation and the preacher—where is the power in that relationship? Is the power shifting toward or away from the pews? Are we moving toward a participatory mode of engagement with proclamation, or will there always remain a place for a teacher/preacher who assumes an "authoritative voice" in the community? **How the question of power and authority gets answered—by speaker and listener—profoundly shapes the experience of the sermon.** I am always trying to engage the power dynamic between listener and preacher so that people, in the act of hearing the sermon, feel the power moving back and forth between them and the preacher. Preaching should be an experience of power.

- **The earth is burning up, and the church's preaching hasn't been able to muster a strong-enough response to match the scope of the problem.** If it can't, the church—and the God to whom it points—is irrelevant to contemporary life.

- Similarly, the free-market moment has embedded a consumer mentality into the cultural mind—**most church folks don't know whether, why or how to challenge the individualistic logic of capitalism that permeates every aspect of life**, nor has the church expressed a coherent response to the relentless warfare between capital and labor that seems to be endemic to capitalism. The church's theological tradition *does* have strong-enough responses to the scope of these problems—but preachers who invoke them end up marginalized in small, leftist congregations. Jesus gets neutered—he's capable of saving souls, but not societies.

I'd be very curious to hear: what's your experience of preaching, as a practitioner or consumer of preaching? What do you need preaching to be or to do for your life?