“Preaching as Confluence” South Africa March 17-19, 2015

I would like to talk today about “Preaching as Confluence.”

We talk about

the confluence, the coming together, of two streams into a river.

Well, I’d like to suggest today that

the preaching event involves the coming together, the confluence,

of five things:

the preacher, the congregation, the sermon,

the world, and the liturgy—

in a particular unity of time, place, circumstance, and worship.

This idea is not original with me.

Conrad Massa set forth this concept of “Preaching as Confluence” in his inaugural address to Princeton Theological Seminary years ago (1978).

I probably read that address 25 years ago,

and it’s been one of those constructs

that has stuck with me and has been helpful for me

in evaluating

not just particular sermons but

the “preaching events” of which the sermon is one piece.

I think all of us instinctively identify with the basic thesis.

One of the assignments I gave students

in a course I taught for years on sermon design

was to write a paragraph entitled,

“The Greatest Sermon I’ve Ever Heard.”

We would briefly discuss what they wrote in class.

Invariably, students end up talking not just about

the sermon that was preached, but about

their life situation

(you gotta understand, my girlfriend had just broken up with me

the night before);

or the preacher

(he told us what it was like to grow up without a father)

and/or the world situation in which the sermon was preached;

(we were in Paris the Sunday after the bombing);

or the worship service in which it was preached

(our child was baptized in this service).

One of the reasons I have this assignment is that

seminarians tend to think of preaching as “delivering a sermon.”

And that it is.

But their papers always make it clear that the preaching event,

what happens from 10:25 to 10:50 every Sunday morning,

is the coming together of these five things.

I want to say a few things about each of these five elements.

And then I want your input into each of them as to

where we find ourselves

in the church and in this culture with respect to these five things.

1. The first element in the confluence is **the preacher**.

Like it or not,

you yourself are inextricably a part of the preaching event.

Phillip Brooks (last part of 19th century)

called preaching “truth through personality.”

Christians make no apology for the fact that

the Christian gospel is communicated

through the person of the preacher.

Preaching is incarnational.

For years I was pastor

in an urban, multi-racial congregation in GR Michigan.

I got into different churches,

particularly African-American churches,

and one of the prayers just before the sermon

that I heard frequently by my African-American colleagues

goes something like this:

“Lord, hide your servant behind the shadow of the cross today

so that your people will see you and you alone.”

Now, there’s something exactly right about that prayer.

We want people to see Christ,

not the preacher.

But the fact is that when we preach people see Christ

*through the preacher*.

Theologically speaking, the person of the preacher

is an integral part of the preaching event.

I’ve never had a student say,

“Now this is the greatest sermon I’ve ever heard.

I don’t remember who preached it. “

My preaching mentor, Haddon Robinson, says,

“People who don’t know anything about their preacher

know a lot about their preacher.”

Not only are you in your person

an integral part of the preaching event.

Your experience of the gospel

is integral to your preaching.

Preachers preach as ones

who themselves have died and risen with Christ.

Years ago, Henri Nouwen wrote that little classic, The Wounded Healer,

in which he argued, correctly I think,

that we minister to the pain and suffering of others

precisely out of our own pain and suffering

and our own experience of the healing, forgiving grace of God.

That doesn’t mean

we talk about ourselves all the time in our preaching.

But we are aware of

how we minister and preach

out of our own journey with God through Christ in the Holy Spirit.

The implication of this is pretty obvious:

As pastors, we must attend to matters of personal identity.

By personal identity, I mean to include

spiritual dimensions,

professional dimensions,

psychological health dimensions,

physical health dimensions,

character and integrity dimensions.

We must seek personal and relational wholeness and integrity

(integration), so that our preaching has integrity—

it is integrated into who we are.

I’ve always said that

one of the great things about being a minister is that

we get paid to grow spiritually.

I think you

either swim in the form of attending

to these matters of personal, spiritual identity,

or you sink.

And I think this is more true today than ever.

For a couple of reasons.

1. First, *increased expectations*.

Churches are more demanding of pastors today

than they have been in the past,

to the point that we

either “have it together” in many of these areas

(or we’re on that road anyway--we never “have it together”)

or we just don’t survive.

It used to be that people were

much more tolerant of a preacher’s weaknesses or eccentricities.

Well, that’s just our preacher.

He’s a little different,

she’s a little eccentric.

We accept that.

We give him or her room.

Not today.

It’s hard to make it without being on all cylinders, integrated.

2. The other factor

that makes it so important for us today

to tend to matters of personal identity

(again, I mean personal in the broadest sense of that word)

has to do with *role confusion*.

We are in the middle of huge changes in our understanding of

who a preacher is and what a preacher does.

When I came into the ministry,

I thought my job was to be a student and a shepherd:

*Preacher as student*, student of God’s word, preaching and teaching,

addressing the Word of God

to the cultural and intellectual powers of the age; and

*preacher as shepherd*, shepherd of God’s people

both inside and outside of the congregation.

I don’t know about you,

but I feel like they changed the job description on me.

Today, the model is increasingly

*preacher as manager*, CEO, congregational leader.

More and more congregations see

the preacher as

the key factor in their organization’s success or failure.

It is hard for us to comprehend

what a huge shift in ministerial role this is.

Certainly, it has always been important

for ministers to know

who they are and

who they aren’t—

personally, spiritually, professionally, relationally.

But I don’t think it’s ever been more important than today.

For we preach

out of a particular self-understanding and role

in the community of faith.

Statistics that suggest that

well over 50% of congregations

are in significant conflict with their pastors

indicate how important

personal spiritual health and

role definition is

for ministry in general and for preaching in particular.

2. The second element in the confluence is **the congregation**.

Now, again, everyone of us can identify with this.

You’ve all had the experience of

being called up by the pulpit supply committee of a neighboring church. They say, Would you please preach for us on such-and-such date?

You say yes because it’s six months out,

but then as the date gets closer,

you go over your sermons to see what to preach,

and you can’t find a good sermon.

Because your sermons

were shaped by your congregation,

the congregation on 5th and Main, and they

were preached on May 15, 2009.

This strong connection of sermon to particular congregation

goes beyond just the references in a particular sermon.

The sermon as a whole is born in a particular womb,

it takes shape in a particular environment,

its purposes and even its mood are defined by this church’s situation.

Humor that works in my church

because they know me and know about Oskaloosa,

the little town I’m from,

doesn’t work in another church.

Robert Mumford,

in analyzing the relationship between preaching and the congregation,

says that preaching

“receives its authentication from the visible existence

of a vital and witnessing community.”

(Mumford says this was especially

a key mark of early Christian preaching.

Sermons weren’t just a bunch of words.

Preaching reflected

and was empowered by

the very Christian community it was instrumental in creating.)

Good preaching reflects

the very community to which it is preached and

the very community it is creating.

(Robinson: Good preachers make good congregations; good congregations also make good preachers.)

Now how does this insight help me analyze the church today?

I think our preaching today is less and less local

because churches are less and less local.

We don’t have parishes.

The suburbanization of America doesn’t just make

the main streets of a city look very similar wherever you go –

Wendys and Barnes & Noble and Home Depot.

Churches also are increasingly homogenized.

(Some churches in my area - no pastor for 2 or 3 years,

fly in preaching star each Sat. night;

is preaching of this sort forming a congregation? a body?

or simply addresssing an audience?)

Conferences can actually be

counterproductive in this regard

if they don’t take into account

that the church is local (Bill Hybels - thumb print).

Years ago, I was on a task force in our denomination

that produced a report on worship:

Authentic Worship in a Changing Culture.

What’s happening in worship?

One of the key predictors

for healthy, edifying worship that was identified

was a strong link between worship and community.

Worship happens in a community.

Changes in worship must be negotiated in community.

And that makes for a certain thickness that’s difficult to negotiate.

And that is good.

(Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon Resident Aliens)

I’ll make a provocative statement and we can maybe discuss it later:

The single factor

that makes authentic Christian Church preaching the most difficult to do

is the individualism of our culture.

I’d like to hear your reflections on

this matter of church and community,

esp. in our current cultural context.

A fascinating question is:

what creates community?

CNN? Facebook? Worship?

And then, what do we do

to help nurture Christian community in the church I serve?

3. The third element is **the sermon** itself.

Now, we all know about sermons and writing sermons.

The only issue I want to raise here is

a very important theological question

that this “Preaching as Confluence” construct raises,

especially in the church today; namely,

How is the unique authority and normativity of “the sermon”

(and the biblical text behind it)

preserved in this model?

(Now, I’m just assuming today that

the Biblical Word does have

a unique authority and normativity.

That’s my theological understanding.)

But one could argue

that this model

threatens that theological understanding and

gives too much weight to these other contextual elements

in determining what finally is the “Word from the Lord;”

that what we have in the end is

this fuzzy melting together of all of these worlds

with no clear, impinging Word of the Lord.

Years ago, I ran this question (this problem, if you will)

by my good friend Neal Plantinga

who’s a fine theologian and homiletician.

He suggested that

we think of these contextual elements

(the preacher, the congregation and the world)

as *the acoustics* of the sermon.

These acoustics are very important for

how the sermon is heard,

how it sounds, and even, to some degree,

what is said and what is heard.

But the message, the idea, the truth

is authoritative because its source is the Word of God.

(A biblical theologian friend of mine gave me

an example of this acoustics idea:

the four gospels (MMLJ) are varied

because each has its own unique *acoustic*.

But each gospel still presents

the same gospel message,

only in different acoustics.)

Now, I think that’s very helpful.

But I also think there is still a lingering concern here.

One of the great threats to the gospel in our world today is

*the threat of syncretism*:

that heresy in which we mix together

elements of the Christian faith with

elements of non-Christian, even anti-Christian faiths

into some kind of hybrid faith

that ultimately vitiates both faiths.

Examples:

1. The Roman Catholic Church in some parts of Latin America

is generally regarded as susceptible to syncretism—

it mixes together elements of the Christian faith

with elements from some of the

nativistic religions and/or political ideologies

to the point that it’s hard to tell sometimes what’s what.

So a Nicaraguan teenager is

an evangelical Christian

who belongs to

a gang

that unapologetically kills people in the name of political ideology,

a gang

that prays to Mary as the matron saint and great protector of

the gang.

In syncretism,

each religion or ideology

can find its own chords, its own notes.

To Christians it sounds pretty Christian;

to natives it sounds pretty native.

But there is arguably

no transformation of people,

no deliverance,

no fire,

no resurrection,

only adaptation and accommodation of the message.

2. Japan Shintoism is a religion

that highly exalts the unique destiny and value of Japanese people

(nationalism, ethnic superiority).

Christian missionaries

find it difficult to make clear

that God has created a new people out of all peoples,

that the wall has been broken down.

American Christianity also runs the danger of being syncretistic.

We live in a therapeutic culture.

Culturally, it’s just axiomatic that self-fulfillment is one’s highest value.

That’s the mantra of a therapeutic culture.

One can argue today that

much preaching in North America mixes together

elements from the Christian religion and

elements from another religion—

a cultural narcissism

that reduces life to self-fulfillment

in a way that is anti- Christian.

So, while I think the acoustics construct is helpful as far as it goes,

I’m not sure it or any other construct

will give us the totally clean lines we’d like to have in this regard

between source and context.

When we take seriously

the acoustics, the contexts of preaching,

we are taking a risk.

When Paul said,

“I have become all things to all people,”

I’m sure there were times he wondered,

“Have I gone too far?”

As preachers, we’re always asking,

Is the message getting through today?

Or have these contextual considerations

become so overbearing

that the gospel isn’t being heard?

Are the acoustics swallowing up the message?

4. That leads us to the fourth element: **the world** (time, place and circumstance).

Now, I think we all were taught and we all know

that we preach

with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other.

We have to relate the gospel to the world.

Preaching is a bridge between

the world of the bible and the modern world.

But I think there are a couple of challenges

especially for us at this point in history.

They both relate to

the issue I brought up under pt. 3 “the sermon”

only now from the world side of it:

First, has the church become preoccupied

with the question of context (world)

to the point that the world wields

too much influence in shaping Christian preaching?

more influence than the Word?

Do we sometimes lose confidence in the word preached

by our preoccupation

with context,

with connecting these elements?

I’m not a Karl Barth expert,

but my sense is that Karl Barth would be

scratching his head

at a lot of what I’m talking about in this lecture and

saying,

Just preach the Word and the text

and forget about all this contextual stuff.

Well, that may be one extreme

that, at the very least, we would want to carefully nuance today.

But the other extreme is to slip into

“preaching the world” instead of the Word,

being drawn away from the power and mystery of the Word

all in the name of relevance and connection.

Now, I know there is a lot of grey here.

But I was very sobered

by something I heard Os Guiness,

the English evangelical writer and missionary,

say years ago.

Guiness was telling of a time

he was lecturing in Australia and

a visiting Japanese CEO came up to him and said,

“When I meet a Buddhist monk,

I meet a holy man who is in touch with another world.

When I meet a western missionary,

I meet a manager who is only in touch with the world I know.”

That sobers me.

All of these pieces of the confluence are important,

but they should not diminish

the power and mystery of the Transcendent Word of God.

A second challenge,

that is even more difficult to get a hold of, I think,

as we think about

the world and

the way it impacts preaching

is the post-modern challenge.

By that I mean, simply,

a view of reality where

there is no single, stable truth out there,

there is just your truth and my truth and that person’s truth.

One of the biggest problems

that preaching in the 21st century faces

is that people

hear us on Sunday and

say, “I agree with that.”

But then on Monday nite at 9:00,

they watch a prime time sit-com,

where the underlying world view is that

there is not even such a thing as TRUTH,

there’s just your truth and my truth.

And our worshippers from Sunday

agree with that too.

Never mind that their world views conflict.

I used to teach a high school catechism class.

Kids there would say, “Yep, I believe all of that.”

But some of their friends are decidedly

not only anti-Christian,

but anti-supernatural, and

totally relativistic when it comes to belief and morality.

And these same catechism kids say,

“Well, they’re right too.

This is what they believe.

This is their truth.”

That is very hard to break through.

The biggest challenge of preaching today

is not getting people to assent to what we say.

It’s getting them to see how

the Christian world view

draws lines in the sand,

(gasp) judges other views of reality to be wrong.

This is so hard because this conflicts so much

with our cultural value of tolerance.

It sounds so oppressive.

The current world situation

of relativism and deep anti-supernaturalism

makes it difficult for preaching to find its way.

5. The fifth element in the confluence is **the liturgy**.

In a prior day and age,

it was easier to think about

the sermon quite independently of the rest of the liturgy.

Today, generally speaking anyway,

the sermon and liturgy are more

woven together in one cloth, one fabric, and

the rest of the worship service

is often an important part of

how the sermon is shaped and experienced.

I used to think of the introduction to the sermon as just that—

the first words I say as I begin the sermon.

Increasingly I find myself saying,

Now, what will be happening in this service?

And what will be happening just before the sermon?

This adult baptism we’re having, or

this presentation by our mission team on their recent visit to El Salvador, or the occasion of celebrating our 50th year of ministry—

all these things are a part of

the broader worship event

of which the preaching event

is one part.

Finally, this concept of “preaching as confluence” would be fatally flawed

if we did not mention one more important element of the confluence.

It’s not really a sixth element; it might be better thought of as

the thread that stitches all thread of these elements together.

That thread is **the Holy Spirit**.

To switch metaphors, the Holy Spirit is

**the grand orchestrator** of this confluence.

One of the humbling, exhilarating mysteries of preaching is that

we don’t control the preaching event.

The Holy Spirit takes all of these different elements and

orchestrates the confluence.

It is the Holy Spirit who works through

**a particular preacher** in **a particular congregation**

who preaches **a particular sermon** on a biblical text

at **a particular time and place in the world** and

in **a particular Sunday worship service**

to create a living encounter between worshipers and the living God.

The Holy Spirit perfects our imperfect sermons and

uses them in ways we don’t begin to understand.

Sermon - Abraham offering up Isaac / Man poured out his heart about how his wife’s former husband this week had died, and after years of hating him, before he died and in the presence of this man, he forgave him. My sermon was the perfect sermon and tied directly to what had happened. The Holy Spirit made that link more than I did.

In conclusion, I find this “preaching as confluence” concept

to be a very helpful concept for capturing

the wonder and power of the preaching event.

There is one implication of this concept that may be disappointing to those

who would like to capture and preserve the preaching event.

By its very nature, the preaching event is unique and unrepeatable,

because the confluence, the coming together of all of these elements,

is unique and unrepeatable.

Sometimes we are like the disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration.

There is this magical, mystical moment when

Jesus and Elijah and Moses appear; Jesus’ face becomes radiant and

his clothes as bright as a flash of lighting!

As Moses and Elijah begin to leave,

Peter offers to build three shelters—

one for Jesus, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.

(Luke adds, “He did not know what he was saying.)

Peter wanted to capture and preserve the moment!

But the moment was over.

Elijah and Moses were gone.

It was a unique and unrepeatable event.

So it is with the preaching event.

The confluence can never be reproduced.

One reason it’s often so disappointing to read the manuscript or even listen to a tape of a “great sermon” from years ago is that

a manuscript or tape can’t capture or reproduce

the confluence of that particular Sunday morning.

So it is.

But that only adds to the wonder and glory of preaching—

a holy moment, only for a moment, orchestrated by the Holy Spirit,

a moment in which we have the privilege of participating.

But a moment that has eternal significance.

God bless you in the high calling that is preaching.

Discussion Introduction

Now, I’ve obviously talked about “Preaching as Confluence”

as I understand that in the North American context.

I’m eager to hear your reflections on this

in your South African context.

What are some of your thoughts

as you listen to me talk about “Preaching as Confluence?”

Discussion

Preaching As Confluence

Duane Kelderman

Preaching as Confluence describes the reality that the preaching event involves the Spirit-directed “flowing together” of several different elements:

1. The preacher

2. The congregation

3. The sermon itself

4. The world

5. The liturgy