Preaching Online

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On October 24, 2005, the Barna Group released a study that showed "new forms of religious experience and expression are growing in popularity, drawing millions of people closer to God but farther away from involvement in a congregational church." The brief article continues, "New ways of experiencing and expressing faith, such as through house churches, marketplace ministries, and cyber churches, are becoming the norm for millions of people."[1] Though it is certainly not as balanced as other sociological reports from the same time, I have held onto this particular report because of the surprise and anxiety expressed by researchers invested in the present and future health of congregational Christianity. In 2005 the organization was attempting to help congregational leaders understand the sociological sea change that is American religious life. This included the impact of digital technology and social media.

Of course, none of this was new in 2005. Various institutions and organizations were wrestling with the implications of digital technology and social media. *Blown to Bits*,[2] a 2000 Harvard Business School publication, made much of the implications on marketing and communication. The authors wrote of the demise of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* as it was rapidly replaced by Wikipedia. If information was a kind of capital, its transmission across social media platforms completely disrupted the information marketplace. This was and still is no less true for traditional Christian communities. In fact, as I write, the Seventy-Ninth General Convention of the Episcopal Church is meeting in Austin, Texas. I have been able to follow along with the

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[1] Barna Group, "Rapid Increase in Alternative Forms of The Church Are Changing the Religious Landscape." https://www.barna.com/research/rapid-increase-in-alternative-forms-of-the-church-are-changing-the-religious-landscape/.

[2] Philip Evans and Thomas S. Wurster, *Blown to Bits: How the New Economics of Information Transforms Strategy* (Boston, Mass.: Harvard Business School, 2000).

proceedings and debate important issues on social media platforms each day. I have witnessed public addresses as well as sermons from the convention on these same platforms both via officially sanctioned social media feeds as well as through the work of individual participants present at the convention.

Also on my desk is the third edition of Tom Long's great book on preaching, *The Witness of Preaching.*[3] Published in 2016, this primer for homiletics says almost nothing about the impact of digital and social media upon the practice of preaching. It is virtually ignored. I offer this not as a negative critique of the rightly admired scholar's work but as an observation. Homiletics is homiletics whether the sermon be broadcast on closed circuit television, a live national broadcast from a stadium, or on a social media platform via smart phone. Long was under no obligation to change his text because of this radically transformative technology. Thorough exegesis, for example, is still important. That said, I desired to know what Long might be able to offer. If, as others have argued, sermons have become more conversational in their creation and in their presentation, does this change our theology of preaching? Does it change the nature of our exegetical work or our spiritual preparation? Perhaps using social media to prepare for one's sermon is a kind of spiritual practice of its own. Last, let's not forget the theological implications of the sacramentality of preaching, its embodiment, and performance. Is an online sermon embodied? How so?

This brief essay is an exploration of "preaching online." I will offer five brief examples of how preachers are using social media to prepare for, present, and share the preaching event. Some preachers simply share the text of their sermons. Some preachers share a video of their sermons after the fact. Some preachers "preach live" on social media and then post that video elsewhere. Some are preaching at a regular Sunday morning service. Some are preaching to "online churches" or, as Barna would have it, cyber churches. I will focus on style more than content except where the content is made possible by virtue of the nature of preaching online. The preachers come from within and without the Episcopal Church. Thus, their theological concerns vary.

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[3] Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016).

The Social Media Platform Sermon

In a sense, each of these sermons is a social media platform sermon. With this particular example, however, I want to use the broader definition because of how the homiletician utilizes her social media presence across platforms. This kind of sermon is preached in a normal worship service, but the preacher shares experiences she has of preparing or preaching with her social media community as a regular part of the practice.

The Rev. Dr. Wil Gafney is a scholar of the Old Testament at Brite Divinity School. She is also an Episcopal priest. She is a respected and well-known scholar and an excellent preacher. What Dr. Gafney does particularly well is utilize her media platform to amplify her voice, her presence as a leader in the church. Like so many other people who exist outside the white male mainstream in the Protestant mainline, she uses social media, specifically Facebook and Twitter, to share her work instead.

For example, on April 15 of this year, she posted this brief reflection on her sermon from the same morning.

> My sermon went well this morning. By well I mean I heard some meaningful responses from folk, white folk, who heard it as prophetic and is making them necessarily uncomfortable. I preached on white supremacy, anti-Semitism, and anti-Judaism—who says I don't preach on the trinity. One man said he wanted to stand up and cheer at the end. I told him to do so next time, Episcopalians are too quiet.[4]

The sermon was preached at Trinity Episcopal Church, Fort Worth. There were twenty-four comments and 189 people reacted to it with a "like" or some other response. The reactions came from those present at the liturgy including parishioners and clergy. This means that the conversation about her sermon continued long after people shook her hand to thank her for the challenging word or during coffee hour in the parish hall. Dr. Gafney's Facebook posts regularly create such a response. Her sermons, specifically their subject matter, and her thoughts about the preaching moment generate much

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[4] Wil Gafney, Facebook post, April 15, 2018. https://www.facebook.com/wil.gafney/posts/10216372086195135.

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conversation well after the event itself is done. The link to the audio[5] for the sermon was shared in the comments as well as on Dr. Gafney's blog.[6]

There is a social media ripple effect to each preaching event. This is typical practice for Dr. Gafney and many other preachers. Dr. Gafney's renown, however, makes this particular strategy quite effective. The benefit of extended conversation is clear as well. The spiritual revelation shared from the pulpit is not lost to the moment nor is the presence of the preacher lost to a listener who might want further conversation. And Dr. Gafney is almost always willing to engage in more thoughtful communication. This is essential to any preacher who wishes to share their sermons similarly.

The Rev. David Hansen is pastor of Spirit of Joy! Lutheran Church in Woodlands, Texas. He also uses social media to amplify his voice. In particular, he shares his sermons via podcast. On June 4 of this year, he shared an astonishing (at least to him) bit of data. He is, apparently, "big in Japan."[7] The statistics from his previous ten podcasts indicated that 22 percent (187) of the downloads were from Tokyo, Japan. Thirty-five percent (304) were from Spring, Texas, and 12 percent (107) were from Ashburn, Virginia. Podcasting can be a surprising tool for sharing the gospel. It is decidedly less social than Facebook or Twitter, but one never knows where such transmission can lead.

Social media is, in the end, social. One does oneself a huge disservice if one posts a sermon and then vanishes into the ether of social media. The entire purpose is to continue the conversation in hopes that further conversation might lead to transformation. Dr. Gafney does this very well and David Hansen has been given an opportunity to discover to where the boundaries of his congregation actually extend.

The Live from the Pulpit Sermon

The Rev. Brian Merritt is a Presbyterian pastor and serves as the interim pastor of Immanuel Presbyterian Church in Albuquerque,

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[5] You can listen to her sermon at Trinity Episcopal Church, Fort Wort, Texas, https://trinityepiscopalfw.podbean.com/e/sermon-april-15-2018-the-rev-dr-wil-gafney/.

[6] Wil Gafney, "The Shadows of Easter," April 16, 2018. http://www.wilgafney.com/2018/04/15/the-shadows-of-easter/.

[7] David Hansen, private Facebook post, June 4, 2018.

New Mexico. He records his sermons via Facebook Live. Just as he's about to read the Gospel passage from the pulpit, he starts his broadcast. The camera (from a smartphone) is on the pulpit facing him. As he reads, he looks at the camera, effectively making eye contact with the viewers. As one watches him preach, he will do this frequently throughout the sermon.

It is an interesting point of view. Pastor Merritt is wearing a preaching alb and a green stole in a recent video.[8] His gaze goes out over the pulpit to the congregation, to the camera, and then to the manuscript he uses as he preaches. It is clear he is comfortable with the manuscript as he doesn't rely on it overly much. Yet, it is still an unusual experience to note how his attention is divided three ways.

I asked him when he started doing this simultaneous social media feed when he preached. In conversation with me, he shared,

> I had already been doing something similar when I was at Mercy Junction and at Renaissance. I was given a lot more freedom to experiment in those two places. Immanuel liked these online sermons and asked me to do them here. At Renaissance we tried to put [the camera] further [away], but it caused all kinds of issues with sound and viewing. The reason I put it there on the pulpit is twofold. First, I can look at the camera, plus I can also see some of the people who are watching and then I feel connected to them. I have had a few that have watched my sermons for about 3 years. Second, the location is not visible to the congregation in the sanctuary. I felt like if I put it on the side of the pulpit it would have been a distraction.[9]

We see here a couple of different concerns coming to the fore. First, there are the simple logistics of where one places the camera. The camera becomes a kind of ritual object that one must take into

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    [8] Immanuel Presbyterian Church, "Rev. Brian Merritt's Sermon 'Losing Control.' Readings: Exodus 20:1–4, 7–9, 12–20 and Matthew 21:33–46." Facebook post, October 9, 2017. https://www.facebook.com/ipcabq/posts/1682366348481416?__xts__[0]=68.ARBDsQUG1A_upgUlfMfTRpm6K8z4asafethaItiNPro5LSX_L9tKFl -27boYwqWzFkFzRC_l5fMnSGiehQmYW9dd7wUpXlWnAC1jO6Jrz3iDxW0z10I VufDyqHa_84r1zkjUcRm-DR60ni2vBPg2NNm7UGy4SbMBE1phqnHiIJhKm TmbX315Ig&__tn__=-R.
    [9] From a conversation with the Rev. Brian Merritt, July 10, 2018.

account when crafting liturgy. Merritt worries that it becomes a distraction rather than an invisible means of broadcasting the sermon online. Second, he then must divide his attention in thirds, if you will. Or at least, be aware that someone is sitting *on* the pulpit rather than in the pews. Preachers often need to make eye contact with people seated in various places in the nave or church. That's not a new dynamic. But it might prove difficult at first to pay attention to people who are placed on the pulpit before you. Last, there is the added pastoral dimension that there are people who have been watching him and "following" him from place to place. The live broadcast begins on his personal Facebook page and then the video is saved to the church's page. This makes sense as he personally has a larger reach than his congregation does at present. Much of his interim work is about revitalizing this particular congregation. It is unclear how he ministers to the people who follow him. But it is clear that some connection has been made as he expects to see them log on and intentionally makes eye contact with the camera to let them know that he sees them.

Merritt also shared,

> I also do [a] sermon teaser the day before. I have not been inviting people as often to watch, but that always helps to post on Facebook ahead of the sermon. I have less viewers [here in Albuquerque] than in Chattanooga, but my sermons are a lot less justice oriented here. Also a different time zone. I know for a fact that I have been able to reach some shut ins and retired clergy for services. That is one of the reasons I love doing it.[10]

Thus, we can see a broader strategy that employs the use of his personal social media platform as well as his congregation's. He has had to be aware of the shifting results depending on the needs of each community and adjust his own expectations accordingly. One community is revitalizing. Another community has an active social justice ministry for which Merritt had much passion. I, however, find his last comment most poignant. It is an act of love to share the sermons online. It is not a thoughtless act of cultural obedience or even the reluctant caving to the pressure to engage the technology because

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10 Conversation with Rev. Merritt.

"that's how we'll get the young people." Rather, making the sermons available online is something he loves to do and serves those who need it.

The Online Sermon for the Online Church

These next instances are more typical of what we think of when we imagine preaching online. These next two preachers have served or are currently serving communities that meet primarily online. There is no corollary physical structure or gathering community. The geography of the "parish" is dispersed. It is wherever the parishioners are. As such, preaching to a specific congregation with specific needs is not always on the forefront of the minds of these two preachers. For these and other reasons, the very idea that these online addresses are considered sermons is problematic to some.

Kimberly Laskowski was the Minister of Digital Community at Extravagance, UCC. Extravagance is located in Cleveland, Ohio. At the time of this sermon, Minister Laskowski was living in Florida. Digital community can, of course, be run from anywhere. During her tenure there, she hosted an online gathering called "Thin Space." You can find one of their events online on Facebook Live, broadcasted and then posted on Facebook on May 31 of 2016. It is an excellent example of the kind of dialogical preaching available online.[11]

Minister Laskowski is on a beach. It is nighttime. Several of her friends and family are gathered behind her. They are sitting in a circle on beach chairs and the like. Laskowski is facing the camera. She is dressed for the beach and not a traditional worship service. This evening she welcomes people who gather online. As they arrive, she encourages them to get comfortable, to silence other electronic devices, light a candle or dim the lights, and perhaps find something to drink like tea or something else soothing. They are to create their own sense of sacred space where they are to better connect to the kind of space she and her friends have created on the beach. This approach is highly individualized. Again and again, congregants are encouraged to do what most works for them. She mentions them by name as they say hello to one another via a chat application. "I'm so glad you're here," she says more than once. "Here" in this instance is within the online

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[11] Extravagance UCC, "This Space," Facebook post, May 31, 2016. https://www
.facebook.com/extravaganceucc/videos/516851715180693/.

environment that includes all the geographic locations in which each participant resides. "Here" becomes an enormous conceptual space, including both online and offline locations.

This evening's sermon is actually a *lectio divina* exercise. She leads the online group as well as the folks who are with her on the beach through a threefold exercise with Psalm 104. Congregants are encouraged to sit, to listen for the Holy Spirit, and to engage with her as well as one another in the chatroom. They are encouraged to share with one another and care for one another. The exercise and conversation lasts more than fifteen minutes. People are clearly engaged in chatting with one another as well as with Laskowski. After this "shared sermon" is ended, Laskowski asks if there are any prayer concerns. Those who have gathered online share their concerns and Laskowski closes their time together with an improvised pastoral prayer in response.

The ministry is designed to serve those who have felt excluded from traditional church communities for some reason. As Laskowski identifies as a partnered lesbian and has been quite public about her struggles with her conservative upbringing on a Patheos blog as well as other venues online and offline, she has intentionally crafted a space with the assumption that those who come are dealing with a spiritual wound of some kind. Her careful and caring presence and her conversational preaching style are founded on this assumption.

The second example of this kind of preaching is Brook Louis Connor, an Episcopal layperson who lives in Berkeley, California. I first met Brook when he was a student in my Introduction to Homiletics class at Church Divinity School of the Pacific two years ago. He had cross-registered from Pacific School of Religion. On the first day of class, I asked all the students what they hoped they would learn. He said that he already had an online preaching ministry and wanted to learn how to better preach online. Keeping his desire in mind, I tried to make sure to point out when I thought a particular insight shared in class would be helpful for him, but mostly, I found my own pedagogy lacking even though I myself have been preaching online via live feeds or a YouTube series for many years. Even I forgot to include preaching online in an introduction to homiletics. Surely, the ubiquity of the technology and the corresponding practices suggest that teaching something about the process of preaching online belongs in an introductory course. And yet, even I was stymied. Brook was only the

first of several students who have asked me for such instruction over these last couple of years teaching homiletics.

Brook's own ministry is rather simple. He is training to be a spiritual director and has a website as well as a YouTube channel. He has been recording sermons and meditations and posting them online. Sometimes people comment. Sometimes they don't. Unlike some of the other examples already examined here, Brook does not have an online community of his own from which to create a worshiping community. The others represent a kind of Christian technorati.[12] Thus, they have followers. Brook's own ministry is therefore not as robust as the others. His preaching style is really rather simple. He sets up the camera on the kitchen table and sits down at the table to discuss the scriptures. His sermons are structured more like a personal journal entry than what one might consider a traditional sermon. He "vlogs," or video blogs.[13]

Conclusions

In such a brief essay as this, one can only begin to scratch the surface of what it means to preach online. What I have tried to do is offer the reader a handful of models that may hopefully prove helpful in beginning to understand more deeply what is actually happening in the lives of believers who offer these sermons as well as those who watch and listen to them. We have seen that preaching online affords certain opportunities that preaching from the traditional pulpit alone cannot.

First, as we saw with Dr. Gafney, sermons can be generated and shared in such a way that the revelations therein are transmitted via a variety of platforms, giving people who are often on the outside of the white mainline mainstream an avenue to be heard and known. Second, and relatedly, transmission is not controlled by the preacher, per se. People from all over the globe may download the sermon and engage with it in unknowable ways. Third, we saw how the practice can augment the preaching moment itself, as with Brian Merritt's locating his camera right on the pulpit, live broadcasting, and then posting on the church's Facebook page. Some online congregants

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[12]   Heidi Campbell, *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds* (London: Routledge, 2013).

[13]   Brook Louis Connor, "Sunday Sermonette: 1st Sunday of Advent," YouTube video December 3, 2017. https://youtu.be/zcuf8y8go9Q.

have been following his preaching for some time. And, perhaps more interestingly, the offline context does impact the online preaching in terms of content. Fourth, we saw through Laskowski's ministry that the disparate geographic locations can be addressed in creative ways to better create sacred space for the individual and thus, for the collective. Fifth and last, we learned that some students like Brook Louis Connor are coming to introductory homiletics classes curious about how to preach online and assuming that they will learn something about the practice in class. There appears to be a need for instructors to become adept at the performative and technological aspects of such preaching.