

Preaching for Congregational Vitality

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What role does preaching play in leading a congregation toward vitality? Given that a priest's best opportunity to communicate with most parishioners each week is a ten to fifteen minute sermon, how does preaching inform the task and charism of leadership?

Congregational Vitality

Before we can address these questions, we need to consider what "congregational vitality" is. Is it numerical growth? Numerous well-attended programs? Many members involved in various ministries? A vital congregation will likely have all of the above, but they are generally results, not causes, of congregational vitality. I believe that congregational vitality arises out of two factors:

- A committed core of Christian disciples, with most members growing continually in discipleship
- A strong sense of congregational identity that sends members out on individual and communal Christian mission

Preaching for congregational vitality, then, grows congregation members as disciples and strengthens them as missionaries. It reflects the nature of the church as the gathered and scattered community of Christ. In our gathering each week, we are nurtured in discipleship, experiencing Christ's love in scripture, music, fellowship, and sacrament, and growing in faith. But that faith becomes action as we are scattered once more to live our lives as Christian disciples in our wider communities, participating in God's mission in the world.

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Preaching for Discipleship

St. Paul instructs us, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Rom. 12:2, NRSV). Early Christianity was a countercultural faith, opposing the powers of empire with the good news of God’s love for all of creation and the divine mission to reconcile the world to God in Christ. Arguably, the advent of Christendom meant that Christianity lost its countercultural edge, as Christian leaders aligned themselves with the sources of power and influence. Nevertheless, leaders like Francis of Assisi and Teresa of Avila arose from time to time to call the church back to its roots, and the patterns of worship and Christian festivals meant that most people received basic Christian formation.

Twenty-first century Western culture, however, is no longer culturally Christian, as more and more people claim no religious faith and Christianity is merely one option among many for discovering meaning in life. We cannot rely on Christian culture to do the work of forming Christian disciples. We cannot even assume that people who attend our churches know the basics of our religious tradition. We certainly cannot assume that they have chosen to align themselves with the mission of Christ, if they have little understanding of that tradition.

The work of Christian formation in our world, then, is a call to conversion away from the values and goals of our world, toward a radical reorientation of personal and communal vocation. As St. Paul says, we are not to conform to this world; instead, we are to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. In Christ, we gain a new identity, in the words of Dwight Zscheile:

Life “in Christ” means the decentering of the self in a re-ordering of identity in which our relationship with God is primary. . . . No longer are we at the center of our own universes. . . . Instead, we live *with* and *for* others, just as God, in Christ, gave himself to be with and for us.¹

¹ Dwight J. Zscheile, “A Missional Theology of Spiritual Formation,” in Dwight J. Zscheile, ed., *Cultivating Sent Communities: Missional Spiritual Formation* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 2012), 19.

This profoundly countercultural task of forming congregation members in a new identity in Christ would be formidable in any context. In our busy world, when few people make it to church on a weekly basis, and even fewer participate in Bible study or other Christian formation, it becomes even more challenging. In a practical sense, the most important Christian formation that most people receive can be found in the scriptures they read and the sermons they hear in Sunday worship. Therefore, a huge burden falls on the sermon to equip and inspire people to become Christian disciples.

Preaching for Christian formation requires, first, deep engagement with the scriptures, with which many members will be unfamiliar. The preacher serves as teacher, setting the scripture story for a particular Sunday in the larger context of salvation history, and relating what the protagonists are saying and doing to God's larger mission of reconciliation with creation.

"We live in a biblically illiterate culture," says the Rev. Joseph Alsay, rector of St. Augustine of Canterbury Episcopal Church in Oklahoma City.

You can no longer assume that when you mention Noah or Moses, people in the pew know who you're talking about. So you have a duty, a responsibility, an obligation to start from square one. You have to go all the way back and say, "There was this man named Noah. . . ." It affects the way you preach—you have to simplify, you have to be great at painting the picture.²

Alsay, who is African-American, continues that this teaching function has strong roots in the black church tradition. "The preaching moment is the teaching moment," he says. "In the African-American church, it was the teacher and the preacher who had education in the community. That's why preaching was so vitally important. It was a way to not only educate, but also to disseminate information. That's why the Civil Rights movement had its genesis in the church."³ The teaching function led to a strong ethical imperative to make a difference in a world of broken and unjust relationships.

² Author interview with Joseph Alsay, May 25, 2018.

³ Alsay interview.

As people gain an understanding of the story of God's mission to humankind related in the scriptures, the preacher's next task is to help them figure out how their personal stories and the story of their congregation continue God's story. The book of Acts, whose main characters are the church and the Holy Spirit, has no real ending, implying that the story of God's mission through the church still goes on. The preacher's ministry in carrying on the Christian tradition is to help the congregation not only gain knowledge of the scriptural story and understanding of Christian theology, but also recognize the continuing activity and inspiration of the Holy Spirit in their own lives.

The preacher therefore becomes a spiritual guide, helping people understand their relationship with God by demonstrating the preacher's own relationship with the divine. The congregation that knows its pastor well over a long period of time understands the depth to which the preacher's words are grounded in prayer, Bible study, and experience of God's action in the pastor's own life. The Rev. Gil Stafford, rector of St. Peter's Episcopal Church, Litchfield Park, Arizona, writes,

Of course, God is always the central character of the sermonic story. Incarnational preaching implies that the preacher, to the best of his or her ability, is constantly showing, not telling, how God is the center of his or her life and how the hearer might likewise gain from the experience of this incarnational union with God. Incarnational preaching is heard, at is best, when the hearer is witness to the communication going on between the preacher and God.⁴

This communication is a work of the Holy Spirit. As the congregation witnesses the relationship between the preacher and God, they also experience an invitation to enter into or deepen their own relationships with God. Listening to congregational preaching over a long period of time helps the Christian in her task of not being conformed to this world, but being transformed by the renewing of her mind (in Paul's words). Through continual shaping of understanding that leads to stronger relationship with God, listeners are invited to share ever

⁴ Gil W. Stafford, *When Leadership and Spiritual Direction Meet: Stories and Reflections for Congregational Life* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014), 165.

more deeply in the new identity in Christ that the Holy Spirit gives us at our baptism.

The Rev. Megan Castellan, rector of St. John's Episcopal Church in Ithaca, New York, talks about developing discipleship through preaching. Preaching for congregational vitality, she says, is

preaching in a way that the congregation is changed a little bit. It moves them forward in their path. This assumes a couple of things: first, that you know your congregation well enough to know what their path is or should be, and second, that you know how to move them a little bit. When done right, you're always moving the hearer a little bit, never leaving them the same way you found them. You try to move them to a more empowered place where they are more confident in their faith and who they are as disciples, and are ready to go out and proclaim the gospel in the world.

Castellan continues,

Frequently the sermon is like a pep talk you give the team in the locker room at halftime. The coach has to say we're losing by a lot. There's dignity in defeat, but sometimes you have to name the emotion in the room and give them space to feel that so they can move on to something more empowering. Sometimes you have to remind them what their job is, to go out into the world and proclaim the gospel, and follow in the footsteps of Christ.⁵

Following Christ encourages us to grow in love of God, as we experience God's presence in worship within the gathered congregation. But love of God always leads to love of neighbor. As God has loved us, so we are commanded to love the world. The shaping of personal and communal identity that happens through the sermon calls us to put our love into action in the community around us. This love is not a feel-good sentiment. As Presiding Bishop Michael Curry put it in his electrifying sermon at the wedding of Britain's Prince Harry and Meghan Markle, "There's power in love. Don't underestimate it. Don't even over-sentimentalize it. . . . Imagine our homes and families

⁵ Author interview with Megan Castellan, May 5, 2018.

when love is the way. Imagine neighborhoods and communities when love is the way. . . . Imagine this tired old world when love is the way.”⁶

Christian spiritual formation is not a private experience; it is a team experience. It is something that happens communally as the congregation experiences the movement of the Holy Spirit together in sermon and sacrament. The new identity we receive in Christ always has an ethical dimension as we are led to greater love of God and neighbor. This ethical dimension leads the gathered church to become the scattered church, the church with a mission to its community.

Preaching for Mission

The preacher who pastors a congregation is a teacher, a spiritual guide, and an interpreter of God’s relationship with the world and with individuals within it. That is the individual dimension of the preaching task. But the congregational preacher is also the leader of an organization that has an identity and a mission. Congregational preaching shapes the communal identity in accordance with the preacher’s discernment of the Holy Spirit’s calling, and inspires the congregation to fulfill its collective mission in its own time and place.

The word *mission* is used in various ways in the Episcopal Church, often in vague and confusing ways. In defining mission here, I am guided by the “missional church” movement, which sees the church’s mission as an outgrowth of God’s mission to the world. As Dwight Zscheile says,

By “missional church” I mean a church whose identity lies in its *participation in the triune God’s mission* in all of creation. In the view of missional ecclesiology, it is God’s mission that has a church, not the church that has a mission. . . . Missional church views mission as definitive of what the church is because the church is a *product of* and *participant in* God’s mission. It exists to share meaningfully in the triune

⁶ Michael B. Curry, May 19, 2018, sermon transcript found at <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2018/05/20/612798691/bishop-michael-currys-royal-wedding-sermon-full-text-of-the-power-of-love>.

God's creative, reconciling, healing, restoring movement in the world.⁷

This missional theology is rooted in the concept of the Trinity as a perfect community of both oneness and difference. The trinitarian God is fully relational, not only within and among the persons of the Trinity, but also in its openness to creation. Zscheile continues,

At its Trinitarian heart, God's mission begins with the generation of others to share in loving communion: the Father's begetting of the Son and Spirit, and the creation of the cosmos itself out of nothing (*ex nihilo*). The Trinitarian life is not closed in on itself, but rather it is open, generative, and outward-reaching.⁸

Because God is a *sending* God, sending Jesus to us to reconcile divinity and humanity within himself, and sending the Holy Spirit to continue that reconciliation work with all of creation, and especially through the church, the church becomes God's agent in reconciliation. We, too, are sent to do the work of reconciliation. Each Christian is called to take on a new identity in Christ and then live out that incarnate identity in the world as well as the church, through loving service to our neighbors. This means that the preacher must help listeners understand their own identity in Christ and their place in the continuing story of God's gracious mission to humankind, and help people discern their individual missions within God's larger mission.

The pastor in a congregation, however, takes on a wider task than simply helping people discover God's love for them and the fact that they are therefore called to love their neighbors. As a leader of an organization, the preacher is a primary shaper of congregational, communal identity. Not only individual Christians, but also Christian communities should have clear identities and vocations. Since the sermon is the congregational leader's most important opportunity to communicate with the congregation, it becomes the primary vehicle for shaping a congregational identity.

⁷ Zscheile, "A Missional Theology," 6.

⁸ Zscheile, "A Missional Theology," 14–15.

The Episcopal Church of the Nativity, Scottsdale, Arizona, is a church plant that started in 2006. It grew from a handful of people meeting in a living room to a full program-size parish, and went through a number of size and location transitions. As its leader, I found that my sermon each week allowed me to not only preach for Christian formation, but also preach for the formation of a congregation whose identity grew and changed over time. Each size transition and location change required us to take on new ways of being. At each stage in the congregation's journey, I found that my leadership style needed to take new forms.

Likewise, my preaching pointed toward mission, encouraging the congregation to answer God's call to it as a newly formed community. Why did we exist? What were we called to become that was distinctive from other churches or other service organizations? How were we to live out that calling in our congregational life and in our community? A pastor who is thinking about questions of identity will use stories, reflections, and illustrations that point out where God is working, in the congregation and in the wider community, to form congregational identity and purpose. Of the many angles that scriptural interpretation can take in any given sermon, a preacher who is a congregational leader will look for the ways scripture is calling God's hope for the congregation into being, and speak to the congregation to encourage that hope to take shape.

The Rev. Adam Trambley, rector of St. John's Episcopal Church, Sharon, Pennsylvania, says that pastors should think of their preaching over a multiyear period as one long sermon, "trying to create in effect a continuous sermon that weaves through an extended period of time. You're not just thinking about what the readings say this morning. You're thinking about where you want your congregation to go, and what to say about today's lectionary, this congregation, and this community that will move you toward that place." Any individual sermon will not be enough to move the congregation toward the identity and mission God has called it to, because people don't change that quickly. But, he says, if you identify the most vital areas where you believe the congregation needs to grow, you can touch on those areas in each sermon.

It's about slowly changing their language and their thinking so they come to expect that's what we're talking about. You describe the ways scripture talks about this issue until it sinks

in. You choose stories and illustrations that speak about that issue. When you preach, you're constantly looking at ways you can give examples of where this is done in the community or the congregation, things you can lift up as ways you saw God at work this week.⁹

The question of where a leader wants a congregation to go requires pastoral discernment, based in Bible study, prayer, and discussion with other congregational leaders. This discernment is deeply rooted in a particular context—the neighborhood and community within which the congregation ministers. A leader who preaches for congregational mission will be carefully attentive to the realities of the wider community around the church, because Christian mission is always incarnate in the world. A congregation's location is not simply a matter of convenience for members who want short drives to church; it is also the school where Christians can learn about their vocation. The trinitarian God is a sending God, and we who gather in churches each week are sent out from those churches to accomplish God's mission in a particular place.

That mission will look very different in a suburban church full of comfortable professionals than it does in an inner-city church surrounded by people in a multitude of social conditions. In each case, preaching for congregational mission means helping the congregation form a Christian identity that is formed by its own context, and that helps the congregation discern its own place in that context. As we interact with the world outside our doors, that community begins to teach us more about our Christian identity.

Missional theology insists on the importance of the curriculum of the world in spiritual formation, not as a place to be shunned, rejected, or withdrawn from, but rather as a place to encounter God—especially in those who have been shunned or rejected. . . . A Trinitarian theology of otherness and communion invites us to recognize that our neighbors, in all their difference, are integral to our growth in Christ. It is through encounters with strangers, especially those unlike

⁹ Author interview with Adam Trambley, April 14, 2018.

us, that we come to know the richness of the image of God and learn new insights into the gospel.¹⁰

Through our experience of the world and our interaction with our neighbors in Christian love, we find our own faith strengthened and deepened. The people with whom we interact demonstrate to us where God is active in our community. In our proclamation of the gospel outside of the church, the church discovers its own identity and vocation.

Preaching as Leadership

How is preaching as a long-term leader of a congregation different from preaching, say, as an occasional guest preacher? The task of leading a church to vitality by calling it to discipleship and mission is a formidable one, especially in our post-Christendom context. But I would argue that there are particular aspects of being a congregational leader, preaching to the same people week after week, that make this preaching task possible.

Crafting a sermon in the Anglican tradition, of course, requires us to follow the lectionary, allow the scriptures to speak to us, and interpret what the scriptures might be saying in our context. In this sense, a lectionary-based tradition often leads us to treat each sermon as a disparate creation, to which we apply techniques and strategies to get our point across.

But preaching as the leader in a congregation, with the intent of leading that congregation to vitality, has a wider purpose in view. Several aspects of such preaching stand out as distinct from simply crafting a series of individual sermons.

First, preaching for congregational vitality arises out of relationship—a long-term, intimate relationship between pastor and congregation. While a guest preacher can offer inspiration and a new perspective on the scriptures in a single sermon, the pastor of a congregation preaches out of her personal identity, which is well known to the congregation. She has visited people in the hospital, conducted meetings, expressed opinions in classes, baptized children, led prominent ministries, called forth spiritual gifts in the congregation, and been the visible representative of Christ at the altar, week after week. Even members who have not interacted personally with the pastor to

¹⁰ Zscheile, "A Missional Theology," 20.

any great extent have observed his mannerisms, his tone of voice, the stories he tells, the way he smiles, the scriptures he struggles with, and his outlook on the Christian faith, and they hear his sermons out of their interpretation of all those factors.

Second, while a guest preacher might not know very much about the congregation to whom she is preaching, a congregational leader is deeply familiar with not only the people in the congregation, but its history, its most pressing challenges, and the wider community in which it takes a part. A pastor always preaches in a particular context, to a particular group of people, at a particular point in its ongoing story. When done appropriately, congregational preaching considers the community that surrounds the congregation, and speaks to issues that are vital to that community. Mary sings in Luke 1:52–53 that God casts down the mighty from their thrones and lifts up the lowly; God fills the hungry with good things but sends the rich away empty. The Magnificat will, or should, be heard very differently by a congregation full of undocumented immigrants than it is by a group of comfortably well-off suburbanites. The gifted preacher will focus on the perspective the congregation needs to hear in its context.

Third, a congregational leader may have only ten to fifteen minutes a week to speak to the congregation, but that speaking occurs not once, but weekly over a long period of time. A congregational preacher, therefore, can achieve her preaching goals through the arc of her preaching over time rather than attempting to somehow convert a congregation to vitality in each individual sermon. The long-term nature of congregational preaching takes into account not only the ebb and flow of liturgical time, considering the themes appropriate to the liturgical season, but also the ebb and flow of congregational life. Even without preaching sermon series on selected topics or favorite biblical books the way non-lectionary preachers are free to do, the congregational preacher can set goals for the congregation's development, and tailor each sermon toward a long-term goal. In doing that, each sermon becomes a part of a wider body of work that informs members' understanding of the gospel and their own place in the continuing story of God's interactions with humankind.

Conclusion

The pastor of a congregation is more than a crafter and speaker of individual sermons. She is the leader of a congregation that is called to love God and the surrounding community, in all its particularity.

Therefore, the pastor who wants to lead the congregation to vitality is called to preach in a way that first educates and inspires the members to develop as disciples of Jesus Christ who have a clear understanding of scripture and of their own place within God's continuing story of reconciliation with creation. Second, the pastor must help the congregation form a clear identity and sense of mission, so that both individually and communally, they go out from the church to serve their community. It is a challenging task, but one that is made possible by the preacher's deep relationship with and long-term leadership of the congregation. For the pastor, preaching for congregational vitality requires immersing oneself in prayer, Bible study, and discernment of who God is calling the congregation to become, and how it is called to love the world in Jesus' name.