Preaching in Bilingual and Multicultural Contexts

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One of the key challenges for preachers in the church of the twenty-first century has little to do with theological competence, exegesis, or biblical hermeneutics. All these elements are and will always continue to be essential to good and effective preaching; however, our present-day reality calls us to be sensitive to the fact that we live in a world and in a time where large numbers of people are on the move, and the impact of immigration is a growing pastoral reality for a great number of provinces and dioceses throughout the Anglican Communion. Consequently, for many of us, the craft of preaching will naturally become more and more an exercise that will include a new kind of enculturation of the gospel. It necessitates that we grow in our awareness of the various implications that come with seeking to connect the biblical message with all hearers of the word in our evermore diverse pastoral settings, especially where multilingual and multicultural congregations and/or special ministries are present.

In our present-day pluralistic context, it is increasingly vital to be sensitive to the reality that the craft of preaching is always deeply impacted by the community of hearers, and the cultural makeup of the congregation receiving the message. Understanding the meaning and depth of the preached word is not just a theological or technical reality, but something that must be at the very heart of the message the preacher wishes to communicate. As Thomas Long observes, "Decisions about manner, language, style, structure, and so on are not just technical matters, but matters of meaning."[1]

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[1] Thomas Long and Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, *Teaching Preaching as a Christian Practice: A New Approach to Homiletical Pedagogy* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 13–14.

After living and serving in several vastly pluralistic multilingual and multicultural communities, I hope to assist in identifying just a few of the practical pastoral challenges for preachers who may wonder what kind of obstacles lie ahead. The growing diversity in the cultural makeup of many of our worshiping communities and ministries is an unstoppable and ongoing wave and evolution. Surely our globalized and ever-shifting cultural contexts will require preachers to possess the distinct ability and flexibility needed to connect with a variety of "congregations within their congregation" if we are to be truly effective ministers of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The alternative would be to adopt a sort of ghetto mentality, which requires newcomers to adopt not just to our creeds, polity, liturgy, and way of being church, but also our particular national culture and understanding of life and the world. This is practically impossible for most people to accomplish—and an exercise that does not encompass the mission Jesus entrusted to the church at all. The good news is that, in so many ways, the present reality allows us to fulfill the Great Commission without ever leaving our cities and neighborhoods. We can easily "preach the gospel to all nations" right where we are. Yet, for this to happen, we must be willing to identify, invite, welcome, and connect with the world that is living around us and beyond our lovely church buildings. Therefore, effective evangelism and culturally relevant preaching go hand in hand.

One Size Does Not Fit All

Those of us who preach regularly often spend significant amounts of time making sure we have a well thought-out and meaningful sermon. We seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit in preparing something that brings the word of God to life and becomes incarnate in the life of the congregation, group, or special ministry we find ourselves preaching in. It would be fair to say that, while we quickly recognize the need to adapt the message to particular age groups (that is, services for children, youth, seniors, and so on) we seldom hear of the implications of sermon preparation and preaching to diverse cultural groups in a multicultural setting. Missionaries and those who have a special ability to adapt to cultural contexts different from their own may possess this special gift or charism.

However, in order to meet the present challenge, all preachers should strive to seek to develop a special sensitivity to the specific

audience in the worshiping community, consciously avoiding the "one-size-fits-all" mentality. Anyone who has spent any time at all preaching has reached that moment when one says, "I wonder if I can use or recycle that sermon again?" This is particularly true of those who must preach multiple services on any given Sunday. Yet, if one is attentive to the cultural implications of the message, it is almost impossible to use the same anecdotes, images, humor, and illustrations from everyday life in different services. What worked for the early morning Rite I, almost completely Anglo congregation, would prove to be almost totally ineffective at the noon Spanish-language Latino service. In these cases, it is more than simply translating from English to Spanish. Preaching in this context requires a truly cultural translation and connection that only someone who possesses a true interest in making such a connection will be able to adequately deliver. In many ways, the message must be tailored to the cultural sensitivities and ears of those before us, if we are to effectively deliver God's message.

Speaking the Language Is Not as Effective as Speaking the Culture

Often, clergy who work in areas with significant numbers of immigrant populations justifiably feel unprepared to deal with faithful who speak a language other than their own. My observation has been that when they are not fluent in the native language of a particular population of newcomers to their communities, it causes many clergy to feel pressured to learn the language. That has certainly been the case for many who serve in the United States and have experienced the influx of Latinos from South and Central America, as well as Mexico and the Caribbean. As a matter of fact, the United States is often recognized as being "among the largest Spanish-speaking countries" in the hemisphere, since there are close to forty million people living in the United States who consider Spanish their first language. When it comes to church, a significant number of first- and second-generation Latinos often prefer to worship in Spanish, because it is the language in which they learned to pray. Yet, as surprising as this might seem, pastorally speaking, being fluent or knowing the language and having the ability to preach in it may not be the best or most effective way to connect with multicultural groups.

Years ago, as a young seminarian, I had the privilege of ministering to migrant workers who worked in the fields of my home state of

Florida picking strawberries and peppers. Most of the migrants were from Mexico and some came from Central America. I remember how there were two very active area churches of the same denomination that offered a Spanish service on Sundays. Many other area churches had English services with translators or translating devices. One of the churches that offered a Spanish service was totally Latino in its makeup. It was a Spanish-language mission and it was directed and led by a priest from Spain—who obviously spoke Spanish—but did little else but host a service. This clergyperson spoke the language but did not really connect culturally. One could say he spoke the language but was unable to speak the culture. On the other hand, the other nearby church with a Spanish-language service was a mostly Anglo parish led by all Anglo clergy and leaders, but they had a heart for the Spanish-speaking immigrant community; it was a booming ministry. While the priest barely spoke Spanish, he got up on Sundays and led the service, read the prayers with a heavy accent, and often read his sermons. At times, the priest allowed a fluent Spanish-speaking layperson, seminarian, or deacon to preach. What was significant is how everyone in that community treated newcomers with a sense of dignity, smiled, and ate their food, and shared in their unique cultural celebrations. As a result of that generous pastoral presence, there were actually more people who preferred the Anglo church and priest, because the people at that church were authentically welcoming and had a heart for immigrants. They also invested in resources to have an effective migrant ministry.

Daniel L. Wong has spent years researching the impact and practice of preaching in a multicultural world, and he maintains that a preacher must be like a missionary who is fully immersed in getting to know local customs and culture. A preacher in this context cannot settle for the capacity to exegete the text but must be able to exegete the people. He contends, "Understanding the people in and surrounding one's ministry locale resembles a missionary who spends time prayerfully considering and seeking the Holy Spirit's guidance to approach a community. It is as important to exegete the people as it is to exegete the text."[2]

Oftentimes, cultural openness and sensibility do more for newcomers than all the language skills in the world. When people sense

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[2] Daniel L. Wong, "Preaching in a Multicultural World," *Preaching*, https://www.preaching.com/articles/preaching-in-a-multicultural-world/.

the church—and individual church leaders—care for them, this goes a long way in making people feel that they really do belong and are being welcomed. Even just a few simple words uttered in that other language here and there, the reading of a lesson in the newcomer's native tongue or a simple phrase of welcome, can be transformative in creating a sense of community so many potentially new members are looking for. So, does learning the language help? Of course, it does. Is it the only factor in connecting with those sitting in the pews seeking to be fed by the word of God? No, it is not. Lay leaders and clergy in a congregation who show authentic concern and care for the cultural needs of new immigrant populations will do more than the most proficient speaker of the new language. An open and pastoral approach that employs the language of love will often be the most effective outreach tool.

The Impact of Slang, Idioms, and Usage in Multicultural Pastoral Settings

In October 1998, I became the first member of the clergy of any tradition or denomination to be invited to serve as a talk-show host for a daily show on a nonreligious American television network. The talk show was in Spanish and it was on at prime-time alongside Oprah Winfrey, Rosie O'Donnell, and other popular talk-show hosts of the day. It was a radically new television experiment for the producers and television executives that came up with the idea—and equally nerve-racking and totally new for me. A few days after the official launch in 1999, I was entering the homes of millions of people in twenty-one Spanish-speaking countries, not including the millions of Latinos in the United States. While the audience was mostly Spanish-speaking, it was as diverse as can be. I learned a great deal from this unique experience, which deeply enriched my ministry to multicultural and multilingual congregations.

Words, even within the same language, can sometimes have radically different meanings—or several meanings. For instance, as a Cuban-American I think of a "Guagua" as a bus. The origin of this term among Cubans, Puerto Ricans, and Dominicans was due to the impact of a popular American company that imported buses into the Spanish-speaking countries of the Caribbean, which was Washington, Walton and Company—or "Wa & Wa Co. Inc." for short. For natives of Chile and other regions of South America, a "Guagua" is a small child, due to the sound made by a crying baby. And that same

word "Guagua" is also used by children in parts of Mexico to refer to a puppy—or a small dog. I can think of several other words in Spanish that mean totally different things according to nationality and cultural usage. Of course, this radically changes the meaning of what the speaker intends to say and what the listener may or may not be able to clearly understand.

Regionalisms, idioms, and slang are a very important part of communicating with multicultural listeners. Of course, this is also a significant challenge for preaching. When using illustrations, even biblical images, the preacher must be particularly careful to make sure that what is being said can be clearly grasped by the broad spectrum of congregants and that the language used is not something understood by those from the Caribbean versus those from Central America, for instance. It can be a real challenge and an exercise that requires a process of real understanding and a certain degree of enculturation for the preacher. Just because we are saying something in Spanish, it does not mean that everyone from the potentially twenty-two countries sitting in front of us will understand it the same way.

The Importance of Religion as Perceived by Diverse Cultural Groups

Pew Research Center has conducted and published several studies in the past few years about shifting attitudes toward religion, and even some very detailed studies that break down differences by country of origin. These studies can prove to be very helpful and telling, especially to those who are actively preaching in culturally diverse congregations and for those interested in future multicultural ministry. The information provided by one of these surveys is very revealing, because it exposes the great disparity of thinking that exists among Latinos of different nations when it comes to religion.[3] We tend to think of Latinos as a monolithic group. But that is far from true, especially when it comes to religious attitudes and practices.

This type of information and awareness is invaluable to begin to understand the specific idiosyncrasies and cultural religious values immigrant populations bring with them when they become part of our local parishes. Knowing and seeking to appreciate these important cultural realities will make us more effective, not just in the

[3] Michael Lipka, "Seven Key Takeaways about Religion in Latin America," Fact-tank: News in the Numbers, November, 13, 2014, http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/11/13/7-key-takeaways-about-religion-in-latin-america/.

pulpit, but in the daily living of the Christian life in our communities of faith. For example, in the multicultural Latino reality present in the United States, Canada, and other parts of the world, a challenge for church leaders will be to try to understand the historical implications of religion—and some of the generalized cultural attitudes toward religion—present in those very different countries and regions of origin.

The place and importance of religion within the historical context of each region and nation has a huge impact on how open people are and how they tend to respond to religious faith. It is also a good thermometer that can potentially measure how interested they will potentially be to receive the message preached in the here and now. An effective preacher in a multicultural setting will need to take some time to explore where the congregation stands culturally when it comes to faith, knowledge of scripture, and religious practice, before being able to make a true connection with those receiving the message preached.

Proposed Models for Preaching in Two or More Languages

In places where there are new multicultural ministries, we often see the presence of very effective lay leaders, deacons, and priests who serve as very effective preachers. Yet, other congregations often depend on a translator, who stands near the preacher and spontaneously translates every phrase or two. Those of us who grew up in the United States may remember the image of a young Billy Graham preaching all over the world with a nearby translator at his famous revivals. That model is still used today and found to be effective within our liturgical setting.

In other places, we observe how a bilingual service can have one preacher who uses a text and delivers the entire sermon in one language first, which is then followed by the second language. Of course, for those who happen to be fully bilingual, this becomes an exercise in frustration, because one hears the same sermon twice—and back to back. Not a very appealing proposition for most worshipers. I have also experienced bilingual sermons that are half and half, and this works when a significant number of worshipers are fluent in both languages being used, but it can be considered unfair to those who do not fully function in both languages.

Another very viable, and perhaps less painful option, is for a bilingual preacher to spontaneously go back and forth from one language to the other, keeping everyone more engaged and not having to sit

there until the message comes in the language they can actually understand. This tends to be the most practical approach when there is a bilingual liturgical celebration and the officiant seeks to engage the entire community at once.

Every model contains its variety of strengths and weaknesses. As a matter of fact, I have often wondered if we will ever find any real, practical, creative, and functional way to produce bilingual and multicultural celebrations that are able to truly embrace and engage everyone—truly making every person feel as if they "totally got it." Experience has taught me that there is no functional way to always make every person of every cultural or language group feel totally connected during the entire time of these celebrations. There are always moments when one "loses something" and that seems to be the sacrifice most multilingual and multicultural congregations are willing to make in order to gather together, even if it is only occasionally.

Understanding the Gift of Our Diversity

Most of my references in this article have been particular to my primary cultural experience with Latinos and people from all over the world present in Southeast Florida, the Caribbean, and Latin America: places where I have lived, visited, and have been privileged to work in. These experiences have been an enriching avalanche of ongoing life lessons, given to me by real people, among whom I have been blessed to carry out my ministry as a layperson, deacon, and priest, and ultimately as one who attempts to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ. Yet I am very sensitive to the fact that many of the issues I have expanded and reflected on also impact Asians, Asian Americans, and countless other immigrant groups from all over the world. And it is ultimately because we believe in the Incarnate Word—Jesus—that we must do all we can to preach the gospel, without allowing the limitations of language and culture to hold us back. Rather, today's church can only be richer, better, and broader when we welcome the entire body of Christ with open arms, to hear God's word proclaimed, to be present around God's table, and when we do all that we can to make the message of God's love known to all—without borders or obstacles of any kind.