



# Preaching for the Layperson

BY MARILYN SEWELL

**S**o you have been asked to preach. Perhaps you are a layperson from a small church that needs ministerial support, or perhaps your minister is on sabbatical or on vacation, or maybe your church is without professional leadership. You are willing, but your knees begin to shake when you think about preparing and delivering a sermon—an understandable response.

The expectations of people in the pew are daunting. Listening to Listeners, a study of more than 10,000 laypeople by Ronald J. Allen and others, based at Christian Theological Seminary and funded by the Lilly Foundation, lays out what church members hope for in a sermon:

- Laypeople want to grow spiritually, and they want a sermon that inspires them.
- Laypeople are looking for help with the challenges of their own lives and with societal issues.
- Laypeople come to church for serious spiritual content, not advice they could get from reading a personal-growth book or a self-help article.
- Laypeople want to change their lives, not just tinker around the edges or be entertained.

Churchgoers have needs that go beyond hearing a good talk and listening to pleasing music. People come to church for more than community. Many come because they are hurting or lonely or facing an existential crisis. They are longing to find a path of integrity and purpose in a culture that is largely life denying. Anyone of us who dares to claim the power of the pulpit is responsible, in so far as we are able, to present something of substance and high quality.

## What Is a Sermon, Anyway?

As a seminary student learning to preach, I thought nothing could be easier. After all, I was an experienced writer and speaker. Was a sermon not just another speech? I discovered to my surprise that the sermon is a unique genre, and it is a difficult form to master. I am still learning, after 25 years.

A sermon has its peculiar demands and constraints, in terms of length, style, and the special relationship of preacher to people. First, preachers have a specific time limit. You violate this expectation at your own risk. Stylistically, a sermon is not an essay or a lecture. It is more like a conversation over the kitchen table than a systematic argument, proving a point. Congregants do not want to parse the niceties of theology. They want practical spiritual guidance for questions of living. Moreover, the preacher cannot assume that everyone—in particular, visitors searching for a spiritual home—has had a religious upbringing and knows the Bible. For many searchers, scriptural authority is

not persuasive, and scriptural allusions will pass them by. So if you tell a Bible story, you need to tell it as if your listeners have never heard it.

Preaching is a sacred and profound act of relationship. The preacher delivers a carefully considered message, and congregants proceed to hear what they need to hear. All ministers experience people coming through the line after the service, thanking the minister profusely for a sentiment that has never been spoken. This phenomenon occurs, I believe, because of the vulnerability and openness of the listeners. They feel emotionally safe and psychologically receptive. After all, what is a *sanctuary*, but a place of refuge and protection? A sermon *makes space* for the movement of the Spirit.

## Preparing Spiritually

Because preaching is so much grounded in relationship and the message comes from your person as much from your words, preparing spiritually is essential. We are always called upon to examine our own lives when we preach. If I am speaking on the topic of forgiveness, I have to ask myself, “How are you doing with forgiveness in your own life?” If I am going to talk about consumerism, I must question how I deal with my own tendency to buy things I do not really need. If I fail to ask the question, “Where are you in this sermon?” I can all too easily move into projection and judging. The preacher is not “above” congregants, but is a fellow pilgrim trying to live by core values and often not succeeding. Humility goes a long way towards winning trust.

If your sermon is grounded in a particular Scripture passage, you might well meditate on those words every day the week before you preach. In fact, you may even want to memorize a key verse or two. This discipline will allow the essence of your message to seep into your subconscious and will deepen both your cognitive understanding and your heart sense of the passage.

You may have to confront your fear of stepping into the pulpit. For me, fear includes excitement and anticipation, but whether I am preaching to 15 or 1,000 people, I am always nervous beforehand. After all, when we preach, we are being asked to address the most profound and troubling issues of human life. It is a sacred task. Anxiety is an appropriate response.

## The Pastoral Dimension

Every preaching event has a strong pastoral dimension. I have a painful memory of a church service I attended when I was on sabbatical leave. I sought out church that Sunday because I had broken off a significant relationship, and I was grieving deeply. The sermon topic happened to be “The Adverse Effects of Television.” The preaching, preceded by a long list of in-crowd announcements sprinkled with acronyms, left me feeling bereft. I slipped out quietly after the service, never to return.

The preacher cannot know everything congregants are bringing to the service. But you can assume that those attending will include people who have serious illnesses, those who have lost jobs or relationships, those who are depressed, even suicidal. How will they receive what you have chosen to say? The sermon event is not about what you need to tell others, but what others need to hear.

Congregations these days are diverse, as never before. In order to be welcoming, the preacher must be inclusive of gender, of race, of sexual orientation. If you are speaking about family issues, speak with the understanding that there are many different forms of family these days. You do not want to make anyone feel invisible in a church service.

If you have been asked to preach in a congregation you are not familiar with, talk with the minister or lay leaders to educate yourself about recent events of significance in that community. These events will form the context of your presentation. For example, if a founding member of the church has just died, you would need to know that. On one occasion when I was a guest preacher, I asked the called minister if there were any issues I should be aware of, and he told me that their beloved music director had been on a leave of absence for a month, having been charged with sharing child pornography on the Internet. The congregation was in various stages of shock, disbelief, anger, and grief. While I did not speak directly to the issue, I did understand that congregants needed to be comforted and reassured.

If you are preaching on a social justice topic, remember to include positive, concrete steps congregants may take to address the issue. People can be invited to sign a petition or to write letters to members of Congress, for example, or can be enlisted as volunteers for works of

compassion. Hearing about a problem but being left with no way to act is depressing.

## Choosing the Topic and the Title

When choosing a topic for your sermon, consider the larger culture. What is currently capturing the attention of your listeners? What issues have an ethical or moral dimension that might be addressed? You do not need to focus the entire sermon on current issues, of course, but alluding to them and using examples from news stories will ground your sermon in the present and make it relevant.

There may be a special occasion or holiday occurring on or near the day of your sermon that you will need to acknowledge. Certain times of the year require that the theme relate to the date. Obviously, Christmas and Easter are high on the list. But also beware of preaching on Memorial Day weekend without mentioning the sacrifice of veterans somewhere in the service. If it is Mother's Day, you would be remiss to ignore mothering in some form or other.

Think of specific individuals who will be sitting in the pews—the woman newly widowed, the young wife who just miscarried, the 55-year-old man who cannot find work. Try to say something genuinely useful to people where they live every day. At the same time, choose a topic for which you have passion. You may be sure that if you are bored with the topic, the congregants will be bored. Choose the topic at the place where the needs of the congregation and your passion as the preacher meet.

As for titles, I have always found it difficult to come up with just the right one. I try for something that seems ahead of its time and not just another worn-out expression. I think “irony,” I think “postmodern.” In other words, I try to suggest that I will be reappraising the ordinary, upending the expected. I consider a few of my titles relatively successful: “Threatened with Resurrection” (Easter), “Repression of the Sublime” (seeking truth and beauty), “The Necessity of Despair” (redeeming suffering and loss). On the other hand, I hope that the following sermons were better than their titles: “Spiritual Maturity,” “Paths to Forgiveness,” “Making Marriage Work,” “Sources of Thanksgiving.” These titles say to the potential listener, “I’ve heard it all before.”

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## Researching the Subject

Once you have chosen your subject, keep a folder in which you collect concepts, images, stories, facts, humor, and the like. The “homiletic eye” will kick in. Everything is fodder for the sermon. Newspapers are full of moving accounts, for example, and we hear stories every day about how people are coping or not coping with the exigencies of living. But sometimes we just need to do additional research.

A few years into my called ministry, I began to sense that my sermons were becoming shallow and superficial. I realized that I was skimming the surface and even repeating the same stories, for want of new material. Rhetoric cannot substitute for substance. I knew I had to bring more depth to my preaching, or risk becoming boring and irrelevant. I decided to ask for help from volunteer researchers. I chose a team of congregants who had backgrounds in research. Some were librarians, others were academics, and still others were simply curious, intelligent people who read widely. This was the single smartest thing I ever did to improve my preaching. My sermons began to show new depth. I was better able to explore the complexities of my subjects, to the human struggles underneath the truisms.

Often my researchers brought me stories to include. Telling stories is the single most important thing you can do to make a sermon compelling and memorable. Illustrations should not be strung on like colorful ornaments on a Christmas tree, however, but should be integral to the text. Use humor when you can. It is invaluable for several reasons: it acts as a foil and a balance for intense subject matter, and it also keeps us preachers from taking ourselves too seriously, an occupational hazard.

When doing research, we often come across quotations that are inspiring or “just right,” and we might be tempted to overuse quotations in the sermon. They should be used sparingly—and only if the exact wording

must be retained in order to capture the power of the concept. Remember: congregants want to know what you think, rather than hearing you quote from authorities. Try to put concepts into your own language, capturing your own style and personality.

## Organizing the Sermon

A sermon should take the listener over a carefully prepared path that is intentionally organized for clarity and rhetorical power. Because of the brevity of the form, unity is much to be desired. Choose one main idea and stay with it throughout the sermon. Better go into depth on one concept rather than touching lightly on several. You can also achieve unity in various other ways: using a key analogy, repeating a word or phrase, paying attention to transitions, ending by echoing the beginning.

Although every preacher has her own approach, the following is one way to go about organizing the sermon:

- Choose your main idea, and write one short sentence expressing that concept. Keep it ever before you.
- Look over your gathered materials and personal notes, and make a list of concepts and stories that will support your main idea. Leave out everything that does not adhere to this concept.
- Make an outline of major points, with supporting materials underneath.
- Create an introduction and a conclusion.

## Writing and Editing the Sermon

The purpose of the sermon is transformation. If the preacher has been successful, when congregants leave the sanctuary, their consciousness has been shifted, their hearts opened. How does the preacher achieve such transformation? Many preachers believe they can move people simply with facts and logic. They make an argument, support that argument with

statistics, quotations from Holy Scripture, the words of learned persons, and generalizations, and expect congregants to listen, to consider, and to agree. “They will see the logic of my argument and will persuaded,” the minister thinks. They will not.

The fact is that people are not persuaded to change by cognitive processes alone. People are transformed by experience—actual and vicarious. The preacher can bring vicarious experience to congregants by telling stories that compel and by using imaginative language that appeals to the senses. The best preparation for using language well is to read a poem every day.

Your preaching style will emerge from your unique personality, but remember that you are working with an oral form, and so your language should be intimate and down to earth. Pay attention to transitions, and lead your listeners along with words like “because” and phrases such as “on the other hand.”

You may very well come to a point when you feel stuck—that the sermon is not working. That may be the time to put the text aside and take a walk or a shower. Allow the subconscious to do its work in the creative process. Doing nothing will often make space for the most profound ideas to emerge.

The first step in editing a sermon is to read it out loud. Do not omit this step. You will discover needless repetition and awkward phrasing. You may find some sentences that are too long and circuitous. Remember that with the spoken word, short sentences are best. You will also likely discover that some parts of the sermon are not engaging. If you are boring yourself, you can be sure you will bore your listeners.

Work for a balance of abstractions and concrete sensory words and phrases. If your sermon is too heavily loaded with abstraction and generalization, you will lose your listeners. For example, instead of talking about courage, tell a story about someone who did something courageous. When you have a first draft, you might go through the text with a felt-tip pen, marking abstractions with one color and concrete sensory expressions with another.

Check the text for trite or overused words or phrases, such as “faith journey,” “embracing,” “sharing,” “outreach.” Such language no longer carries much weight or meaning. Try to come up with expressions that are original and fresh.

The next step is cutting judiciously. Remove every word or phrase you can

do without. Be relentless. You might be tempted to include a favorite passage because you believe it is meaningful or colorful, but if it does not contribute to the whole, omit it.

## Crafting Effective Introductions and Conclusions

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The opening of the sermon is the point at which the preacher has the complete attention of the congregation—and perhaps the only such point. As the sermon proceeds, individuals will no doubt leave you, for variety of reasons: some will be sleepy, others will be thinking about a personal problem, and still others will be distracted by movement or noise. But when you begin, you have them with you. Make the first sentence one that will awaken their interest and encourage them to follow your remarks. You could begin, for example, by telling a story, asking a question, or making a statement that seems, on the surface, improbable.

After the introduction, the conclusion is the most important part of the sermon. This is the thought that people will be left with as they exit the sanctuary. It may be a call to action or an invitation for people to change the way they live, or a statement of encouragement and blessing. One of the most effective conclusions is one that unifies the sermon by returning to an image or idea you introduced at the beginning. One of the weakest ways to conclude is to summarize your main points. The conclusion is a chance to address not reason, but imagination and the possibility of transformation. End only once, not multiple times, and be sure listeners know by your tone and content that you are done.

If your congregation does not follow a set liturgy, consider how the service will proceed just after the sermon. You may want to follow with a prayer that focuses on the theme of the sermon. You may want to end with silence or with music.

## Practicing Your Delivery

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Those of you who speak regularly will not need most of the following advice, but here are some practical suggestions that will ensure a successful preaching event. First, before you print your manuscript, enlarge the type to 14 or 16 points, so you can easily read it. Be sure you know

how to pronounce all of the words in your sermon, including names of people and places. Read the sermon out loud, and mark the text with accents on the words you want to emphasize and slash marks where you want to pause. Practice reading the sermon aloud until you are so familiar with the text that when you preach, you will be able to make eye contact with your listeners. If possible, listen to a tape of your practice session, and notice your use of techniques such as varying your speaking rate and intonation, pausing, and emphasizing significant words and phrase. Decide what you would like to change about your delivery. Try again.

If you have a chance to practice your sermon in the place it will be delivered, do so. Familiarizing yourself with the space will make you more relaxed when you preach. If a practice session is not feasible, arrive on the morning of your sermon at least 45 minutes early. Go over the order of service. Check the height of the pulpit desk and lighting, making sure you can see your text. Get comfortable with the type of microphone you will be using, and do a sound check with whoever is handling sound.

Be sure that early in the service, someone asks people to turn off their cell phones. Nothing could be more distracting than a cell phone playing “Sweet Caroline” when you are trying to speak about someone’s immortal soul. Make eye contact as much as possible when you speak, lest you find yourself in relationship with the manuscript rather than the people. If you find looking into the eyes of your listeners distracting, then look in the space just above their heads.

Never apologize, and never refer to the process. Never say, “I’m nervous about doing this!” or “I’m sorry” (about anything). If you make a mistake, chances are no one will notice except you, so just carry on.

When I am about to preach, what I find most helpful is to remind myself that I am not doing this alone. I have a partner in the Spirit. Sometimes I pray silently: “May the words of my mouth and meditations of my heart be acceptable in thy sight, O God, my strength and my Redeemer,” a Scripture passage (Psalm 19:14) that has long been a comfort to ministers as they prepare to speak. I recall that the word *spirit* comes from the Latin *spiritus*, which means “breath,” so when anxiety threatens, I try to remember to breathe deeply, to breathe in the Spirit that is ever my comfort and support. My job is simply to be a conduit of God’s love. It is not about me. ♦