

Table of Contents

Chapter 1 “Let’s talk!”	1
The Blessing of Talk.....	2
The Genesis of Interpersonal Communications Theory	8
Interpersonal Communications Model.....	11
Context.....	12
Sender-Receiver Competence.....	13
Messages and Channels of Communication	15
Noise	16
Feedback	16
Jesus, Preaching and Talk.....	17
Preaching and Communication.....	18
Chapter 2 Noise: The Blocking of Communication Channels.....	21
Physical Noise.....	22
Semantic Noise	23
Psychological Noise.....	24
Politics.....	25
Politics and the Poor	25
Past Religious Experiences.....	30
The Noise of Faith Underdevelopment.....	34
Cognitive Dissonance	40
Chapter 3 Creating a language for talking about God	48
The Role of Teacher.....	53
Liturgy and Ritual as Language.....	55
Preaching as Artistry and Performance.....	58
Chapter 4 Feedback What it is and how to use it!	62
Soliciting Feedback.....	65
Learning to give and receive feedback	66
Feedback as Seed for Future Sermons	68

Chapter 5 Conversational Preaching A Preaching Model Based on Interpersonal Communication Skills.....	70
Defining Conversational Preaching	71
First Conversation.....	71
Second Conversation	72
Third Conversation	72
Fourth Conversation.....	73
Conversational Preaching Model.....	75
Storytelling and the art of Preaching	75
Conveying the Holy	83
Chapter 6 Integration and Adoption of the Conversational Preaching Model.....	87
Developing a formula for the conversational preaching method.....	89
Chapter 7 Life-long Practices of Interpersonal Communication Skills and Conversational Preaching.....	99
Preaching.....	99
Public Speaking	100
Drama.....	101
Storytelling.....	101
Dance	103
Prayer Practices.....	104
Chapter 8 Summary and Conclusion	106
Appendix A Sermons.....	108
Bibliography	132

Chapter 1

“Let’s Talk!”

One of the hallmarks of Christianity is the assertion that God desires to be and is in a relationship with humanity. The Hebrew Scriptures attest to this relationship with the story of God “talking” to man. In Genesis, God is walking through the Garden of Eden, and God calls out to the man, “Where are you?”¹ Adam, the first man, answers God, and the conversation leads to Adam and Eve’s disobedience being revealed and their subsequent banishment from the Garden. Later, God “talks” to Moses from a burning bush and commissions him to deliver God’s people from slavery in Egypt. Moses asks God questions, and God answers Moses. Moses and God are “talking”—having a conversation. This “talking” with God is also found in the Christian scriptures: the New Testament. The man who would become the Apostle Paul (Saul) is making his way to Damascus intent on rooting out the believers in Christ from his Jewish religion. While on his way, Saul is struck down on the road, and he hears a voice: – “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” He answers with a question—“Who are you, Lord?”—and Saul gets his answer: “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.”² God, in Christ Jesus, talks to the Jewish Zealot Saul, and a conversation is initiated. God desires to “talk” and be in relationship with humanity and thereby transform us in that relationship. The act of talking to God and being transformed by that talk is at the very heart of the activity we know as preaching. I contend that the precepts and principles of how we communicate, how we “talk” with God and each other, can be of great use to those whose job it is to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The skills and competencies acquired can lead us to

1. Gen. 3:9 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

2. Acts 9:3–5 NRSV.

“conversational preaching,” a way of preaching that utilizes and employs the principles and guidelines of interpersonal communications theory.

So if talk is so important to God and to our having a relationship with God, one needs to answer the question: *What does it mean to “talk” to someone?* The act of communicating with, “talking” to, someone might seem automatic and easily done. The fact that there are people in this world who seem to “talk” with ease or that there are those who are known as expert communicators might give the impression that “talking” is something that most humans are born able to do. However, as many of us can attest from our own experiences, the facts that a sender of a message can form audible words that are recognizable and that you can receive those words do not ensure that people are communicating. How many times have we asked: *What was he/she talking about?*

I believe that, as preachers of God’s Word, we would do well to familiarize ourselves with the fundamentals of how humans “talk” to each other and the skills and practices involved in effectively conveying ideas. I propose that knowing some of the basics of interpersonal communications theory can lead to a conversational model of preaching: a style and motif of preaching that can produce more effective sermons in which the Word of God is spoken more effectively and understood more readily, in order to bring about spiritual transformation.

The Blessing of Talk

Why do humans talk? Dr. Dalton A. Kehoe, a professor of Communications at York University in Toronto, Canada, has written extensively on interpersonal communications theory and practice. His answer as to why people talk is quite illuminating. Dr. Kehoe writes:

The answer to the question lies in the fact that as human beings we don't come equipped with very much information in our genes and in our neural systems when we are born. We are the most open-ended animals on the face of the earth at birth. We spend longer in our parent's tutelage and that of institutions of our society focused on making us "human" than any other creature on the planet. We also work at a much higher level of complexity than other creatures. To do this we have to work out conversational relationships to take care of our most fundamental human needs, virtually from the moment we're born.³

From the moment we take our first breath, we humans begin learning how to communicate our wants and needs. All parents of newborns know the frustration of trying to decipher the cries of an infant. Are they hungry? Cold? Wet? Lonely? The list can be endless. One of the early innovators in the study of the development of children and how they acquire language skills was the Swiss-born biologist-psychologist-philosopher Jean Piaget. Best known as a clinical psychologist for his pioneering work in child development, he wrote extensively about intellectual development from birth through adolescence. Piaget was interested in studying cognitive development and the succession of intellectual structures that a child develops in order to interact with its environment.⁴

Piaget theorized that there were four distinct stages of development. The four developmental stages are described in Piaget's theory as the sensorimotor stage, preoperational stage, concrete operational stage, and formal operational stage.⁵

In the first stage, the sensorimotor stage, which covers an approximate time span between birth and age two, children begin the process of developing intelligence. Children learn to experience the world through movement and their five senses. It is in this stage that the basic building blocks of language begin to form. In the latter part of

3. Dalton A. Kehoe, *Communication in Everyday Life*, 5th ed. (Boston: Pearson Learning Solutions, 2013), 3.

4. Sonia G. Austrian, ed. *Developmental Theories Through the Life Cycle* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 50.

5. *Ibid.*, 52–56.

this stage, approximately between the ages of 12 and 18 months, objects become infused with meaning. Words and phrases start coming to the forefront of the child's consciousness, and the rudimentary building blocks for language are formed. By the time a child is two years old until he/she is approximately four years old, the child is vulnerable to having his/her education and language skills stunted if he/she is not properly exposed to adequate language stimuli. Dr. Sonia G. Austrian, a noted author and professional social worker, captured the seriousness of this level of development in Piaget when she wrote

Piaget felt that the stage from ages two to four is a very vulnerable period, especially with respect to language. The child, who still has a limited vocabulary, must respond to commands it may not fully understand and is unable to verbalize its own feelings and needs. These difficulties result in feelings of inadequacy, frustration, and conflict with significant others.⁶

In my house, my wife and I are currently blessed to have my daughter and her husband living with us, along with their daughter, Scarlett, our granddaughter, who is currently 19 months old. She is learning two- and three-word sentences, with her favorite being "Iwandat" (I want that). I have seen her so frustrated as she points to something across the room, clearly telling the adults *Iwandat, Iwandat, Iwandat*, as the adults pick up one item after another in a vain attempt to find the one she wants. I have watched Scarlett learn and practice her language skills, and I can attest that it is hard work for her, as I am sure it was hard work for all of us to acquire enough language skills to get our wants and desires fulfilled. As we grow and mature, the nature of our talk changes from the basic necessities of life, food, clothing, and shelter to a more complex need to know ourselves by knowing others. Using the noted American psychologist Abraham Maslow's

6. Sonia G. Austrian, ed. *Developmental Theories Through the Life Cycle* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 57.

hierarchy of needs, Dr. Kehoe succinctly shows how our need to “talk” helps us grow both within a group and as an individual. He states:

From the beginning, we bring our needs to every conversation—to connect, to belong and to enjoy the company of other people. We need to share information in order to belong, because generally speaking, human beings do not function well outside of social groups. When human beings have their physical and safety needs taken care of, when they realize that they are an accepted member of a group, . . . Maslow argued that they also need to be recognized as individuals within the group and valued for their *individuality*. Self-recognition and self-esteem issues come to the fore at this point. . . . Finally, when we have our basic needs taken care of, when we belong, when others recognize us as a unique entity, and when we feel good about that, we allow something else to happen to us. We grow internally—psychologically, emotionally and spiritually. Maslow calls this *self-actualization*.⁷

Although it might seem self-evident to some, many adults have a hard time adjusting how they talk when dealing with small children. Children’s sermons and Sunday school lessons need to be developed with the knowledge of the cognitive development of the age that is being addressed. The esteemed child psychologist Eric Erickson noted that play was the “work” of children.⁸ Erickson’s observations of children at play caused him to see the importance of the activity. Austrian wrote:

Play initially is based on the infant’s exploration of its own body and to a lesser extent on objects it can reach. This self-centered form of play, which orientates it to its environment, Erickson called *autocosmic* play. The infant then moves into a world of surrounding toys, which Erickson termed the *microsphere*, where activities are shared and the child’s imagination allows it to take whatever materials are available and “make” them into something else.⁹

Many Episcopal churches have used the curriculum called Godly Play, a Montessori method of teaching young children in a way that engages their imagination through the

7. Kehoe, *Communication*, 4.

8. Austrian, *Developmental*, 49.

9. *Ibid.*

telling of biblical stories. Godly Play was developed by the Episcopal priest and theologian Jerome W. Berryman and can be a great resource for any church looking to engage young children in learning the great stories of the Bible.¹⁰ As children progress from early childhood to what Jean Piaget termed “middle childhood,” between the ages of seven and twelve, their cognitive ability increases and changes, so the need to communicate with them also changes.¹¹ Pastors who familiarize themselves with some basic tenets of child development and how children’s communication changes through the various stages of development will be able to develop and communicate God’s Word and love in a more effective way.

In order to help those in our cure to grow spiritually, we need to facilitate talk and allow individuals to be heard and have their talk valued. Although the preacher delivering a sermon is being active and it might appear that those listening are being inactive, I can assure you that this is not the case. One of my goals in exploring interpersonal communications theory is to help preachers solicit feedback from their congregations on their sermons and allow the “talk” of God and God’s people to help the individuals in their congregations to grow spiritually.

As we grow and mature, another one of our needs that helps to facilitate our ability to talk is the need to know and to understand. As we become more sophisticated in our thought processes and as we acquire new words to express our thoughts, we turn our attention to philosophical concerns: *Is there a God? What happens to me when I die? Is there life after death?* Dr. Kehoe posits that “human beings talk because they need to

10. For more information about Godly Play, please see *Young Children and Worship* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989) by Jerome W. Berryman and Sonja M. Stewart and also *Godly Play: An Imaginative Approach to Religious Education* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991) by Jerome W. Berryman.

11. Austrian, *Developmental*, 94.

reduce their fundamental uncertainty about the world around them. . . . Behind the fundamental truth that human beings are driven ‘to know things’ lays the complementary notion that uncertainty in any situation makes us uncomfortable and deeply fearful.”¹²

The Gospel accounts of the disciples’ encounters with their resurrected Lord are masterful in making this point. The disciples must contend with the possibility of life after death when they are confronted by their Master, who still bears the stigmata of his crucifixion on his body, and the first “talk” of the resurrected Jesus with these frightened followers is to “fear not,” thereby reducing their uncertainty and reestablishing their connection with each other. How we talk to each other and about each other establishes our identity and defines us.

Human beings learn about themselves and others in a corporate fashion. Preachers within the liturgical tradition need to be cognizant of the “talk” of the liturgy. The liturgy speaks about God and to God in a very corporate way. If preachers in a liturgical tradition are wise, they will allow the message of the liturgy and the hymns to inform their sermon preparation. The preacher is not just preaching at the appointed homiletical time. The preacher’s actions, speech, and deportment all preach a message to his/her cure. This notion is explored in more depth in chapter 3, “Creating a Language for Talking about God,” but for now, I want to encourage preachers who deliver sermons within the context of a liturgical setting to be intimately involved in the development of the weekly liturgy. By choosing the hymns and readings with respect to the sermon being prepared, there will be uniformity between what the liturgy is saying and what the sermon is saying. In other words, the corporate “talk” should be congruent.

12. Kehoe, *Communication*, 5.

The Genesis of Interpersonal Communications Theory

The first image with regard to communication studies was that of a “bow and arrow.” This was the “dominant image in communication studies for a long time” and is illustrated in the following process:

- The speaker “discovers” an idea and begins to organize material.
- The speaker finds a recognizable form and begins to shape the message.
- The speaker employs devices to “illustrate” the discourse in order to enhance its effect and impact of the listener.
- The message is “delivered” in ways that make competent use of the speaker’s character, command of voice, emotional expression, and gesture.¹³

This model conjures an image of the sender of a message as an archer, holding a bow with which he intends to send a message, represented as an arrow, to an intended listener, who is represented as the target. The object of the archer is to “hit the target” with his message. The bow-and-arrow model of communications has implications with regard to preaching in that it suggests, in a discomfotingly militaristic way, that “in the preaching event, the archer’s arrow carry God’s Word to the target, with the effect of changing the listener’s attitudes, beliefs and behaviors.”¹⁴

Thankfully the bow-and-arrow model was replaced by a new model with the development of interpersonal communications theory. In this new model, most researchers began to view “talk” between individuals as a sort of “tennis match,” in which one person would lob a thought or statement to another and then that person would

13. Richard F., Ward, *Speaking of the Holy: The Art of Communications in Preaching* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2001), 20.

14. Ibid.

return that message or statement in a way that told the server that he or she was understood. In the 1950s, researchers were revising the tennis-match model to include “channels” of communications that considered our human sensory systems. What are the things a person hears? Sees? Smells? Feels? How do these sensory sensations cooperate or hinder the message that is being communicated? Are they congruent, or do our senses give us feedback that is not in harmony with what is being said? Researchers also began to delve into questions about why the intended message of a sender might not be received. What are the things that can block the reception of a message? How does the receiver of a message decode it? Are the words and incoming symbols mutually understood? These questions led researchers to the concept of “noise” as an impediment to effective communication and talk. Dr. Kehoe posits that “[t]he concept of noise added a whole new series of insights and layers of understanding to why messages do and do not get through.”¹⁵ Later in this work, I will return to the concept of noise and how it can be understood and overcome with respect to preaching and the communication of God’s Word.

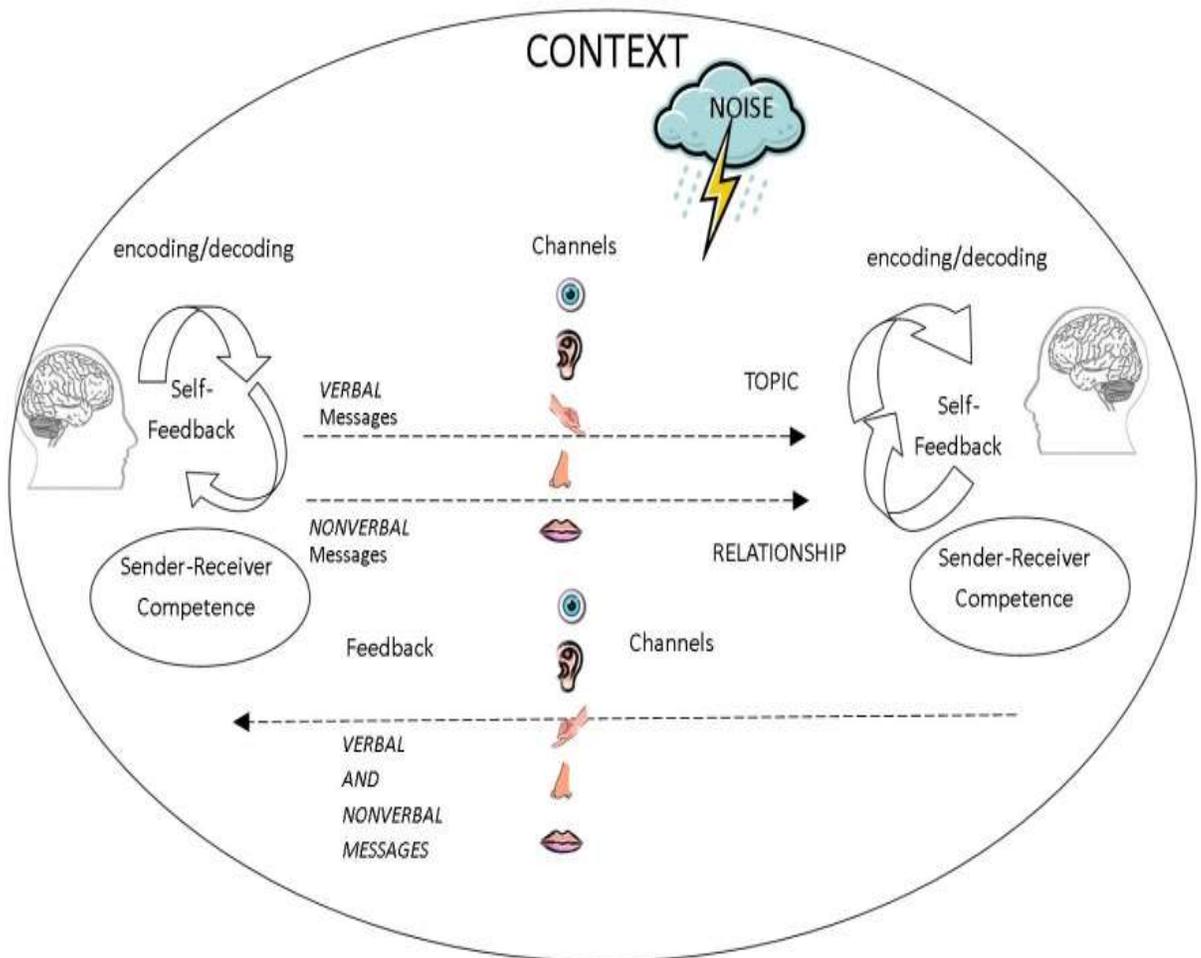
With the concept of noise also came the revelation that interpersonal communications are more complex than originally thought. Dr. Kehoe has offered a very complex interpersonal model of talk, as depicted in figure 1. This model differs from and is more expansive than the one he presented in his book *Communication for Everyday Life*.¹⁶ This is the diagram that will appear in his new book that will be published soon. Dr. Kehoe has graciously shared this information with me, and his diagram provides the

15. Kehoe, *Communication*, 15.

16. *Ibid.*, 16.

model that I will use to investigate the relationship between interpersonal communications theory and preaching.

Figure 1. Interpersonal Communications Model



Interpersonal Communications Model

What is readily apparent upon first examination of the interpersonal communications model in figure 1 is the level of complexity in the act of “talking.” Ideas such as context, chosen channels of communication, sender and receiver competencies, verbal and nonverbal feedback, and noise all contribute to and can be supportive of or detrimental to the communication process. Preachers who develop competencies and understandings in the various facets of the interpersonal communications model will be more effective communicators and will thus be able to transfer these competencies into the use of a conversational preaching style.

Now, let us turn our attention to the many facets of Dr. Kehoe’s model and explore their implications for the development and delivery of a sermon.

Context

The context of “talk” is defined as follows:

[Context] is the environment in which communication occurs. Often ignored, context influences the content and form of communication. It refers to *where* (the physical) and *when* (temporal) the talk occurs, and most importantly, *with whom it is occurring* (the social-psychological context—the relationship between participants).¹⁷

When considering this definition of context and relating the concept to preaching, it is obvious that the environment of a sermon is within the confines of the churches in which we serve. The temporal aspect of preaching is self-evident in that it occurs within the framework of our weekly worship service. There are also temporal clues within the weekly service that the congregation readily understands. Worship within a liturgical

17. Kehoe, *Communication*, 19.

setting has an even more temporal aspect to it in that the sermon will be delivered after the reading of the Gospel and before the recitation of the Nicene Creed. When the preacher makes his/her way to the pulpit or some designated preaching spot, a psychological signal is sent to the participants in the service that it is time to “talk” about God. The form of communication being used in the preaching event is unique to itself. Unlike a lecture or an artistic performance, the preaching event is designed to stimulate people to action and transformation. The desire to inform and/or to entertain people during a sermon can be a part of the event, but it is not the goal of a sermon. The relational aspect between the participants in a preaching event is also quite distinctive. The preacher is most likely to have a pastoral relationship with those hearing the sermon. The hearers of a sermon will also assign referent power to a preacher in that they expect a competent and coherent message to be delivered by the preacher whom they hired to be the resident expert and theologian for their parish. This relational characteristic between a preacher and his/her congregation should compel preachers to take their craft seriously and to always do the work of preparation that is necessary when developing a sermon.

Now, let us turn our attention to the sender–receiver competence feature of the interpersonal communications model.

Sender–Receiver Competence

This aspect of the interpersonal communications model is perhaps the most complex of all of the various parts. It encompasses the internal action of sending and receiving verbal and nonverbal messages, as well as the ability to form messages that can be transmitted and received. Dr. Kehoe succinctly pointed out the complexity of communications when he wrote

The [interpersonal communications] model portrays the true complexity of communication. It shows that we communicate through a variety of channels (our five senses) and that “noise” can alter the messages we are sending (first level of complexity). It also shows that while we are exchanging messages about topics and providing feedback to each other with our words, we are exchanging relational messages through our nonverbal responses (second level of complexity). Finally, it also portrays the reality that we respond emotionally to ourselves while we’re talking with another through a process of “self-feedback” (third level of complexity). This internal communication process affects how we respond to the other person.

In a nutshell: we have external communication happening between people as well as internal feedback. There are messages working at two levels—topic and relationship—happening instantaneously also at two levels—verbal and nonverbal. People are senders and receivers at the same time—simultaneously encoding and decoding—and talking to themselves while they’re talking to somebody else. If it seems complicated, it is!¹⁸

I believe that the complexity is enhanced when one relates these ideas to the development of a sermon. The competency of the preacher is utilized in his/her ability to read a portion of scripture; have a conversation with the tradition of the church with regard to a given portion of scripture; and then have a conversation with God, through the inner working of the Holy Spirit, in choosing a topic that is relevant to the people to whom she or he is preaching. Dr. Bill Brosend, a professor of New Testament and Preaching at the Sewanee School of Theology at the University of the South, has posited in his lectures and in his writings that a preacher should always begin a sermon by asking him- or herself what he calls the homiletical question: “What does the Holy Spirit want to say to the people of God from the assigned texts on this occasion?”¹⁹ What is implicit in this question is the role of the listener in the development and delivery of God’s Word. The complexity of this task is enormous! Once a preacher has settled on a concept or message to be

18. Kehoe, *Communication*, 17.

19. William Brosend, *The Preaching of Jesus: Gospel Proclamation, Then and Now* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 48.

conveyed, then he/she must pick a “language” and/or a set of symbols that will accomplish the task. The preacher must pick these symbols and language with the hope that they are a shared set of symbols and language known and used by those receiving the sermon. The preacher must go through several encoding–decoding processes to ensure that the message is coherent and that the receiver will receive what was intended. Dr. Kehoe’s model depicts a communication event that is between two individuals and has rightly pointed out the complexities involved. Now consider the typical preaching event, where the complexities are multiplied 30, 50, 100, or more times depending on the number of congregants gathered to hear the sermon. It is no wonder that all preaching text and sermon preparation materials tell those who are about to be engaged in the act of preaching to *PRAY!!!* Once the preacher has decided on the intended message and has answered the homiletical question, then he/she must turn his/her attention to the conveyance of that message and to the utilization of the channels of communication.

Messages and Channels of Communication

Messages are defined as “[a]ny symbols or actions to which people pay attention.”²⁰ People use verbal signals, namely, words, and display nonverbal messages through the use of the body’s sensory systems. Referring again to the model depicted on page 8, one can see that Dr. Kehoe depicts the channels of communication with symbols that refer to the human body’s sensory systems. He uses visual representations of body parts to convey the various senses: the visual (eye), auditory (ear), olfactory (nose), gustatory (lips), and tactile (hand) bodily systems. Humans communicate with more than words and the meanings of words. Our facial expressions and hand gestures all communicate messages, some intended and some not intended. These sensory channels

20. Kehoe, *Communication*, 17.

of communication are explored in more depth in chapter 4: “Feedback: What It Is and How to Use It.”

Noise

Noise is defined as “anything that distorts or interferes with message reception.”²¹ There are three main categories of noise: physical, psychological, and semantic. I will explore this concept in great detail in the next chapter, entitled “Noise: The Blocking of Communication Channels.”

Feedback

Feedback is a very important concept with respect to interpersonal communications. Dr. Kehoe defines feedback as

[m]essages created, displayed and sent back by the receiver, in response to a message already sent. These [messages] give the speaker some sense of the effect on the receiver of their sent messages.²²

That is, the sender can receive and interpret such messages to gauge how effective he/she was in the communication process. The importance of this aspect in the interpersonal communications model cannot be understated. I will explore the importance of feedback and its relation to the preaching event in depth in chapter 4: “Feedback: What It Is and How to Use It.”

Now that we have reviewed the interpersonal communications model and its many aspects and facets, let us turn our attention to using the concepts and definitions of this model within the context of preaching.

21. Kehoe, *Communication*, 18.

22. *Ibid.* 18.

Jesus, Preaching, and Talk

We began this exploration with the concept that God is and wants to be in a relationship with humanity. This relationship is most evident in the Incarnation of God's self in the man Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus arrived speaking to the people and proclaiming to them that the Kingdom of God had come. The fact that Jesus was a preacher is undebatable, but I also contend that Jesus was a great communicator. The late theologian Marcus Borg so aptly described the communicative power of Jesus' speech when he wrote

The forms of speech most frequently used by Jesus as an oral teacher were aphorisms and parables. Aphorisms are short, memorable sayings, great "one-liners." Parables, of course, are short stories. Together aphorisms and parables are the bedrock of the Jesus tradition, and they put us most directly in touch with the voice of the pre-Easter Jesus. Strikingly, the most certain thing we know about Jesus is that he was a story teller and speaker of great one-liners.²³

Jesus' message was a message of love, a message he aptly communicated with people using all the tools of communication at his disposal. Dr. Fred Craddock, the great homiletician, explained that "[p]reaching is the concerted engagement of one's faculties of body, mind and spirit. It is, then, skilled activity."²⁴ Jesus most perfectly fits this definition in that he was in constant communication and dialogue with the people with whom he had contact. Dr. Brosend reminds us that Jesus' preaching was dialogical in that Jesus is "depicted as teaching and preaching in response to challenges, questions, and traditions."²⁵ In other words, Jesus was "talking" to people and engaging in effective communication with them. Dr. Brosend describes Jesus as a dialogical preacher in that his style incorporated the following elements: Jesus' message was one of proclamation. He proclaimed to the people the "good news" of God. Jesus' style was to be "occasionally self-referential" but to be "[p]ersistently figurative."²⁶ The fact that Jesus used these techniques attests to the fact that Jesus was concerned about his listeners and

23. Marcus J. Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 70, quoted in Brosend, *Preaching*, 4.

24. Fred B. Craddock, *Preaching*, 25th Anniversary ed. (Nashville, TN: Abington Press, 2010), 17

25. Brosend, *Preaching*, 23.

26. Ibid.23.

how they would receive the intended message. Jesus used story and figurative language to hold the attention of his audience and therefore ensure that the message of God's love for the people was communicated.

The idea that preaching should be a discipline that holds the needs and concerns of those receiving the sermon was one of the principle concerns of Dr. Craddock. Dr.

Craddock wrote:

Giving disciplined time and attention to the interpretation of one's listeners is critical for preaching. It in no way diminishes the importance of careful exegesis of texts, but then neither does any amount of work in a text make a sermon apart from this understanding. No book of theology, even if it is addressed to the modern mind; no biblical commentary, even if it moves the text toward the pulpit; no volume of sermons, packaged and ready for delivery, has the Word winged for the hearts and minds of a particular group of listeners. Only the minister there can properly do that.²⁷

Jesus understood that, for his message to be received, he needed to "talk" to the people in a way they understood and comprehended. I contend that preachers who familiarize themselves with the knowledge of how people talk and communicate will naturally develop sermons with the ear of their congregation in mind. Now, let us turn to the concept of preaching and communication and explore how interpersonal communications theory can be utilized in the delivery of sermons.

Preaching and Communication

As preachers of God's Word, we are engaging in an intentional act of communication when we preach. We must always remind ourselves that communication can be intentional or unintentional. When a preacher delivers a sermon, he or she has a specific goal in mind. That goal might be to inform or teach something that the preacher deems important for the people to know. The preacher might be trying to change people's

27. Craddock, *Preaching*, (Nashville, TN: Abington Press, 2010), 98.

behavior: to persuade people to be more loving, more generous, more Christ-like. Gerald Miller, an interpersonal communications expert, believes that changing people's patterns of behavior is the essence of communications. He has defined communication as "those behavioral situations in which a source transmits a message to a receiver(s) with a conscious intent to affect the latter's behavior."²⁸ I can think of no better definition for the type of communication that is taking place in the act of delivering a sermon. In addition to the preacher's choice of words for a sermon, there are actions and demeanors that also communicate messages, many times unintentionally. This concept was brought home to me in a very meaningful way in an encounter between my son and me as we visited my mother-in-law's Pentecostal church. Both my wife and I were raised in the Pentecostal Church. I met my wife at a Pentecostal church in Clarksburg, West Virginia, and we were married there. We both found the Episcopal Church early in our marriage and fell in love with its liturgy and theology. Consequently, we raised both of our children in the Episcopal Church, and on the occasion of visiting my mother-in-law's church, I failed to realize that this was my son's first experience with another tradition and/or denomination. When it came time for the sermon, the resident preacher began his sermon by pounding on the pulpit and raising and lowering his voice. My son turned to me and asked me why the pastor was so angry and what we had done to upset him. I tried to explain that this was just the style that the preacher employed, but it so upset my four-year-old son that I eventually had to take him out of the service.

28. Gerald R. Miller, "On Defining Communications, Another Stab," quoted in Ronald L. Smith, "Theories and Models of Communication Processes," *Speech Communication Behavior: Perspectives and Principles*, ed. Larry Barker and R. Kibler (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1971), 24, and cited in Myron R. Chartier, *Preaching as Communication: An Interpersonal Perspective*, ed. William D. Thompson (Nashville, TN: Abington Press, 1981), 19.

Our facial features, our tone of voice, our theatrics, all communicate messages to others, and many times, they do so in unintentional ways. A wise seminary professor and mentor of mine, The Rev. Dr. Tony Lewis, once encouraged me to remember what I was ordained to do. I had called Tony because I was struggling in my first year as a priest and I was frustrated that I felt that I was not making a difference. In our telephone conversation, Tony told me to write the following down. He told me to remember that I was ordained to do three things:

1. celebrate the sacraments reverently,
2. preach the Gospel faithfully, and
3. love your people.

These three precepts are engraved on a plaque that sits facing me on my desk in my office. They remind me of my call, and I believe that they help me to consciously remember to intentionally communicate God's love to my people both in and out of the pulpit.

I believe that I have made the argument that knowing how humans communicate with each other can be of use to those engaged in preaching God's Word. Now, having explored the basics of interpersonal communications theory and mined the characteristics of the interpersonal communications model, let us turn to the concept of noise and how it can impede the process of communication.

Chapter 2

Noise: The Blocking of Communication Channels

A single moment of misunderstanding can be so poisonous that it can make us forget the many loveable moments we spent together.

—Anonymous

The world is full of noise! Some of these noises are made for our pleasure, such as music, laughter, and song, whereas others are tolerated, like the noise made by a passing truck. No one can deny that noise is a part of living in a postmodern society. In chapter 1, I introduced the concept of noise with respect to interpersonal communications theory as those things that block channels of communication. There are three categories of noise that can hamper effective interpersonal communication. Those categories and their definitions are as follows:²⁹

- *Physical noise* is any aspect of the material world that can get between two people and interrupt a message. This can be anything from the sound of a truck going by while you are trying to talk to someone on a sidewalk to the shadow of an overpass interrupting a cell phone signal in the car. Physical interruption of the sender's message can cause the receiver to miss the message or to get a different message.
- *Semantic noise* is the noise in the sender's head. One example is if the sender picked the wrong set of symbols or used words that were too abstract or too complicated or required a different level of education in the receiver.
- *Psychological noise* is the noise in the head of the receiver. A receiver could fail to unpack a message the way it was meant because he/she has biases, prejudices, and preconceptions—any number of things that can get in the way of their thoughts—as they try to figure out what was said.

29. Kehoe, *Communication*, 14–15.

Physical Noise

Anyone who has had the privilege of delivering a sermon knows well the problem of physical noise. From babies crying to cell phones ringing to excessive exuberance of the young adult's class located next to the sanctuary, physical noise is something with which all preachers have to contend. Yes, there are ways to try to eliminate physical noise: We can inform visitors and newcomers of the location of our nursery when they visit with young children. We can insulate walls or move classrooms of rowdy teenagers away from the worship space. We can do many things to help relieve the problem of physical noise, but we will never eliminate it completely. One of the strategies I use when there are interruptions in the worship service is to acknowledge the interruption. If a loud noise is heard during my sermon, I usually stop and acknowledge it and then go back and repeat myself so that I can be sure that my message was not lost due as a result of the distraction. Many times, when a baby cries out or makes some kind of noise, I try to make a joke about it and say that the child was in agreement with what I was saying and was trying to say "Amen." I believe that this is a helpful strategy because it also communicates to the parents of the child causing the distraction that they are valued and that their child is not ruining the worship experience for everyone. Every once in a while, a child becomes so unruly that a parent has to take the child out of the sanctuary. When this happens, I always pause and allow time for the parent to accomplish the task. If the parent is a long-time parishioner, I might make a joke, but if the family is visiting, I make it a point to search out that parent after the service and tell him or her how valuable his/her child is to our community.

Of course, the other main source of physical noise in any church is electronic noise. Cell phones always seem to ring at the most inappropriate times. Early in my ministry, I forgot to turn my cell phone to silent during a service and had my phone in my pocket when I received a call from my son. I quickly turned the ringer off and went on with the service, but I was horrified by the fact that I had not modeled the behavior that I was asking of others, mainly turning off their cell phones. When I called my son later and accosted him for calling me during church, he said to me, “Dad, I knew you were in church; I was leaving you a message.” From that day on, I have left my cell phone in my office before processing into the church. This incident is a reminder to me that we preachers must model the behavior we ask others to exhibit.

Semantic Noise

The next type of noise to consider is semantic noise. This is the noise that is in the sender’s head. The earlier definition of semantic noise includes an example of a sender who picked the wrong set of symbols or used words that were too abstract or too complicated or that required a different level of education in the receiver. In other words, the sender must ensure that he/she shares a common language base and/or a common meaning of words with the receiver. Remember that semantic noise is the noise that is in the sender’s (preacher’s) head.

One of the basic causes of semantic noise in preachers is the problem of assuming. Everyone knows about Thomas Aquinas or the four-source Gospel writer theory, right? Many of us who belong to mainline denominations could not have completed our ordination processes without the benefit of a seminary education. Seminary educations are wonderful things. They give us the tools we need to think and convey complicated

ideas with regard to theology, ecclesiology, and soteriology. All of us who have benefited from a theological education must remember that many of our congregants hear about such ideas only from their pastors/preachers either at the homiletical time or in Christian Education/Formation classes. In order for there to be effective communication of ideas between a preacher and his/her congregation, there must be a common set of symbols and language that they both share. I will explore the concept of creating a common set of symbols in more depth in chapter 3, “Creating a Language for Talking about God.”

Another aspect of semantic noise is the preconceived notions a preacher has of his/her congregation: for example, that it is tight-fisted or unloving or that it is unwelcoming and/or dismissive. Not everyone in a congregation is one way or another. Preachers would do well not to let the actions of a few allow them to make reference to the whole group. It is never wise to begin a sermon trying to “fix” a problem you have with one parishioner or another. If there is some behavioral change you wish to accomplish, make sure that the anger at the situation has departed and deal with the behavioral change in a positive way. I have found that humor and creating caricatures of exaggerated behavior you wish to stop are effective ways of getting your message across.

All preachers have biases, and all tend to support one Gospel writer over another or to have a favorite Epistle. That is just being human. Knowing your prejudices and biases can help you understand and overcome your own semantic noise and make you a more effective communicator.

Psychological Noise

Remember that psychological noise is the noise that is in the head of the receiver. Returning to the definition, we are reminded that psychological noise occurs when the

receiver does not understand a message because of his/her own biases, prejudices, and preconceptions. This type of noise blocks channels of communication by creating internal interference, interference that is “in the head,” because the receiver holds competing thoughts, schemas, and prejudices.³⁰ There are many things that fall into the category of psychological noise, and I discuss here some that I feel have an effect on whether a sermon is received and/or acted upon.

Politics

Everyone interprets the world around them in particular ways. One of the ways in which people interpret their world is within the context of their political belief systems. Today, Americans seem to be more divided politically than at any time in our history. As one who holds a bachelor’s degree in U.S. history, I know that this is not the case, yet our culture of 24-hour news cycles and instant social media outlets does definitively indicate that we are not a nation that holds universal political beliefs. I have often quipped that I do not need to preach politics in the pulpit because the Gospel of Christ is radical enough. Although I never think it is appropriate to declare from the pulpit one political side over another, I do realize that the diverse political viewpoints of the congregation can affect how my sermon is received.

Politics and the Poor

One of the greatest obstacles I have encountered is the beliefs some people hold concerning the plight of the poor. In his book *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs To Know—And Doesn’t*, Stephen Prothero tells of how many Americans think that the Ben Franklin quote “God helps those who help themselves” is actually a biblical

30. Kehoe, *Communication*, 18.

verse.³¹ This is such a part of our culture that many believe that it is the victims of poverty who are to blame for their plight. The following are just some of the quotes I have heard from parishioners with regard to the poor: “Why do they need any more help? They get food stamps don’t they?” “Who is looking out for the working man?” “I’m tired of giving my hard-earned money away to people that refuse to work.” “It’s their fault that they are in this mess.” “Nobody ever gave me anything.” “I’m sick of your always talking about the poor.” These quotes are all indicative of psychological noise and can cause the message of the Gospel to be ignored or distorted. We, as preachers of God’s Word, are charged with reminding ourselves and our congregations of the place the poor have in our sacred texts. The Bible is full of stories and tales about the plight of the poor. In the book *The Soul of Politics*, Jim Wallis tells of a poignant moment in his spiritual development when, as a seminarian, he and others explored all of the references to the poor and the downtrodden in both the Old Testament and the New Testament. This is what they found:

The Bible, we discovered, was full of poor people. And even more startling to discover, God is portrayed throughout the Bible as the deliverer of the oppressed. . . . In the Old Testament, the subject of the poor is the second most prominent theme. Idolatry is the first, and the two are often connected. In the New Testament, one out of every sixteen verses is about the poor! In the Gospels, the number is one out of every ten verses; in Luke’s Gospel one of every seven, and in the book of James one of every five.³²

So if the poor hold such a valued place in our sacred literature, why is there often such a disconnect with that message in our churches? How could people who claim to be God’s

31. Stephen Prothero, *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs To Know—And Doesn’t*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers, 2007), 28.

32. Jim Wallis, *The Soul of Politics: Beyond “Religious Right” and “Secular Left”*, (New York: The New Press and Orbis Books, 1994), 149.

redeemed hold such dismissive opinions about those in need? I think that one need look no further than the institution of the Church itself to see where we have gone astray.

Wallis, upon his discovery of the special place the poor has among scripture, decried “I wondered how I could have heard nothing about such a great biblical theme while I was growing up in the churches. How could such a central biblical teaching be so disregarded, especially among those whose religion is supposedly rooted in the Bible?”³³

One of the ways in which we, as communicators of God’s Word, can overcome the psychological noise concerning the poor is to get back to the basics. We must preach the Gospel faithfully with regard to the biblical mandate to help those around us. We cannot treat questions concerning the poor and the oppressed as simply matters of politics or the responsibility of social service agencies. Again, it is here where those who have been given the sacred trust of ordination must remember the promises made at their ordination. In the Episcopal Church, at the rite of ordination, the Bishop addresses the ordinands as follows:

As a priest, it will be your task to proclaim by word and deed the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and to fashion your life in accordance with its precepts. You are to love and serve the people among whom you work, caring alike for young and old, strong and weak, rich and poor. You are to preach, to declare God’s forgiveness to penitent sinners, to pronounce God’s blessing, to share in the administration of Holy Baptism and in the celebration of the mysteries of Christ’s Body and Blood, and to perform the other ministrations entrusted to you.³⁴

We cannot abrogate our responsibility! We must proclaim boldly the Good News of God in Christ and the role that we, as followers of Christ, have in proclaiming and facilitating change for those who are marginalized in our society. One of the ways in which I try to

33. Jim Wallis, *The Soul of Politics*, 151.

34. *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), 531.

accomplish this is by reminding people of their baptismal covenant vows. I take every chance I have to renew our baptismal covenant corporately. We cannot overlook the plight of the poor if we endeavor to “seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself” or if we “strive for justice and peace and respect the dignity of every human being.”³⁵ All people who have been ordained into the ministry of Christ at their baptism are called to be faithful to the teachings of Christ and to bring about a world where the hungry are fed and the naked are clothed. Wallis summarized the need for returning to our biblical roots when he wrote

Fidelity to Scripture is finally tested not by dogma and doctrine but by how one’s life demonstrates that he or she believes the Bible. Belief results in obedience. In wealthy nations, that fidelity will be tested by our relationship to the poor.

Jesus is not a blue-eyed right-winger, as some have implied; nor is he a guilt-ridden liberal or compromising centrist. Jesus is the one who entered the world among the dispossessed and the outcast to announce an entirely new way of thinking and living. The way of Jesus and the prophets isn’t just a welfare program; it calls for a change in heart, a revolution of the spirit, a transformation of our consciousness. It moves us beyond the familiar options of abandoning the poor, controlling the poor, or even “helping” the poor from places of isolation and comfort. Instead, it leads us to a new relationship with one another, a deep reconnection, a restoration of the shattered covenant.³⁶

The stakes are high! We must not continue the policy of avoidance! We must do our best to teach and proclaim the Good News of God in Christ despite the noise we encounter. Just understanding that the resistance that we are encountering is a byproduct of deeply held political beliefs manifesting themselves as noise should help us to develop strategies to overcome them and become better communicators and preachers.

35. *The Book of Common Prayer*, 305.

36. Wallis, *The Soul of Politics*, 152.

Views on poverty are not the only place where a preacher will encounter resistance due to entrenched political beliefs. Ideas with regard to immigration, the death penalty, abortion, and capitalism versus socialism are all influenced by our deeply held political beliefs and all have influence in how we interpret the Gospel message and the preaching of that message. The one common denominator with regard to the political discourse in our society today is anger. Anger is a huge barrier to effective communication. The Pulitzer Prize-winning author and satirical commentator Russell Wayne Baker wrote a piece in his column, the “Observer,” in the *New York Times* some 20 years ago about the problem of anger and how it has pervaded American society. Baker wrote:

America is angry at Washington, angry at the press, angry at immigrants, angry at television, angry at traffic, angry at people who are well off, angry at people who are poor, angry at blacks and angry at whites. The old are angry at the young, the young angry at the old. Suburbs are angry at cities, cities are angry at suburbs, and rustic America is angry at both whenever urban and suburban intruders threaten the peaceful rustic sense of having escaped from God’s angry land.³⁷

Baker went on to posit that anger in America was “a new national habit.”³⁸ As I am writing this work, both the Democratic and Republican primaries of 2016 are in full swing, and I would contend that Russell’s words are more poignant today than they were when he wrote them. A preacher would do well to acknowledge the fact that anger can be an impediment to effective communication. One way to combat the effects of anger is to recognize it in the world around us, give voice to each person’s sense of isolation and

37. Peter J. Gomes, *The Good Book; Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart* (New York: Avon Books, 1996), 62. Russell is quoted from his New York Times column entitled “God’s Angry Land: A New National Habit.” The edition and time of the column was not cited.

38. Ibid.

helplessness, and then teach and preach in such a way as to empower them to overcome those barriers.

Past Religious Experiences

Another great contributor to psychological noise and an inhibitor of effective communication is the noise of past religious experiences. The majority of people that are members of my congregation at St. James' Episcopal Church in Collegeville, Pennsylvania, are not what we would call "cradle Episcopalians." The congregation is composed of many individuals from a wide variety of Christendom. I and my spouse came to the Episcopal Church from the United Pentecostal Church denomination. When we first started attending the Episcopal Church, there were many things happening in worship that were foreign to us. Although I have found no research to verify my suspicions, I would speculate that the majority of the people that inhabit the Episcopal Church in America in the twenty-first century were not born into the denomination. It seems that, when I ask folks about how they came to the Episcopal Church, they often did so as a compromise between spouses from different backgrounds, such as one Roman Catholic and one Methodist. The Anglican tradition of *via media*, the "middle way" provides a nice bridge between committed partners with differing denominational traditions. I believe that the people who inhabit our pews are diverse religiously, and this has an effect on how we communicate with them. The author B. J. Neblett wrote:

We are the sum total of our experiences. Those experiences—be they positive or negative—make us the person we are, at any given point in our lives. And, like a flowing river, those same experiences, and those yet to come, continue to influence and reshape the person we are, and the person

we become. None of us are the same as we were yesterday, nor will be tomorrow.³⁹

Being that we are the “sum total of our experiences,” the way information is received and filtered depends a lot on the “noise” inherent in the receiver. How does our religious past create biases, prejudices, and preconceptions with regard to the Bible and theology? This is most apparent when it comes to the role the Bible plays in our faith and society. I propose that there two types of people with prior religious baggage who become the “new” members of the Episcopal Church. The first type is those who have already had some experience with the Almighty within the confines of another Christian denomination. The second are those who come as a *tabula rasa* with no religious experience and no language with which to converse about God and theology. In this section, I will deal with those who have had a “religious” past and who might or might not be scarred from their experience. The latter, those with no religious experience, are considered in the next chapter, “Creating a Language for Talking about God,” where the teaching aspect of a priest’s ordination vow is most apparent.

As stated earlier, the noise of past religious experience is most obvious in how people view and use the scriptures. The place of the Bible in American culture cannot be understated. In *The Good Book: Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart*, the late Reverend Peter J. Gomes theorizes about the Bible and its place in American culture.

Gomes asked:

39. B. J. Neblett. In an e-mail message to the author, Neblett wrote: “The quote you refer to is from a short story I wrote titled ‘George.’ It will be included in a collection of my stories to be published late this year or early next titled *Wouldn't It Be Funny If...* Presently the story can be found on my blog bjneblett.blogspot.com. It is serialized in three parts dated 2/26/13, 3/3/13 and 3/11/13. You may mention both sources including the blog.”

Is the Bible, then, an American book? Does it “belong” to us in the same way that *The Scarlett Letter*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *Gone with the Wind*, and *The Great Gatsby* belong to us? If the Bible does belong to the American experience and defines and is defined by that experience, is there then an American way of reading the Bible? These are inter-related questions. One can argue that the Bible is an American book because it defines the American experience, and one can also argue that the American experience is biblical because only an understanding of the place of the Bible in American culture will help in trying to understand that culture.⁴⁰

Gomes also contends that “[t]o fail to understand or appreciate the religious dimensions of the American culture is to be unable to read that culture or its nuances in an effective way.”⁴¹ Not understanding a culture or having differing experiences in that culture causes noise and leads to less effective communication. So, how is the Bible used and defined in our American religious context? I contend that there are two fundamental ways in which past religious experiences define one’s interpretation and position of the Bible in American society. The first stems from the teachings of biblical literalism/fundamentalism, which filters everything that comes over the pulpit in terms of a scriptural black-and-white mandate. The second corresponds to the teaching that the function of religion and the mandate of scripture are to upset the social norms and the status quo.

In the biblical fundamentalist/literalist group are those who belong to the “Bible says it and I believe it” crowd. People holding this view of scripture tend to have an “us versus them” worldview. They have been taught that, if their lives and deportment adhere to a certain set of rules, then they will be “in” God’s grace and all others who do not conform are cast out and deprived of that grace. Of course, many who grew up with that fundamentalist worldview who are sitting in our pews today have left that kind of

40. Gomes, *The Good Book*, 55.

41. *Ibid.*

thinking behind. Yet, I believe that some of the miscommunication that occurs during the preaching event is a direct result of those past religious experiences, causing noise when a much different interpretation of the Bible and/or the biblical narrative is presented. Preachers will find great fodder for future sermons by listening intently to the cry of confusion that inevitably occurs when new interpretations meet ingrained ways of viewing scripture. By trying to understand the experience and/or background behind a certain inquiry and then realizing that there are probably others who share in the confusion, one can go a long way toward crafting sermons that can be communicated effectively.

Those who see the Bible in terms of advocating for change and upsetting the social norm can be equally challenging. Whereas the biblical fundamentalist/literalist group tends to separate themselves from the dominant secular culture, the social activist biblical interpreters tends to be right in the middle of conflict and change and to advocate strongly that others join with them in their struggles. This latter group has a passion for social justice and will receive and critique all sermons within the light of that passion. Many holding this biblical worldview are intolerant of others whose opinions differ from theirs. They see chaos and change as proof of the in-breaking of God's kingdom and are quick to point out anything that they feel is thwarting or inhibiting that welcome change. Many in this group are extremely political and have little tolerance or patience for others who are not. Members of this group tend to be action-oriented and to believe that a lack of action is paramount to condoning sinful behavior.

Understanding that there are many in our pews with many diverse religious and denominational views will help a preacher develop and deliver more effective sermons.

Preachers and effective communicators of God's Word and love must remember that they were ordained for all of God's people. Let the words of the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Galatians be always in your forethought. "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."⁴² I would add to the Apostle's list: fundamentalist and social activist, Democrat and Republican, black and white . . . all are one in Christ Jesus!

The Noise of Underdeveloped Faith

Another source of noise that can inhibit the transmission of a preacher's signals is the noise due to a person having an undeveloped faith. The late American theologian and Methodist minister Dr. James Fowler dedicated his life to understanding and writing about faith development. One of the tenets of Fowler's theory was in how he defined the concept of faith:

Fowler [understood] faith as "meaning making." Faith "has to do with making, maintenance, and transformation of human meaning." He uses the word "faith" to denote the way in which all people make meaning in life. . . . To Fowler the focus is on faith as a process and therefore on such aspects as human thinking, rational capacities, moral judging, personal relationships, and social awareness.⁴³

He posited that faith develops within a person in six distinct phases and theorized that one had to progress through these stages in a linear fashion, with each preceding stage setting up the next. Table 1 helps to describe the stages in a helpful way.⁴⁴ Please note that the stages move from the least complex at the top of the table and progress

42. Gal. 3:27–28 NRSV

43. Fred Hughes, "James Fowler's Concept of Faith Development - An Evangelical Perspective." *Whitefield Briefing*, November 1977 (Vol. 2 No. 5).
<http://www.klice.co.uk/uploads/whitfield/Vol%202.5%20Hughes.pdf>.

44. Table derived from a series of images found through a Google Images search on "Fowler Stages of Faith and Spiritual Direction".

downward toward stage 6, which is a universalizing faith. When one begins to peruse the table, it becomes obvious that an underdeveloped faith can inhibit the reception of the signals and thoughts that a preacher might be trying to convey in a sermon. With the exception of a children's sermon or a Sunday school lesson, the pre-stage and stage 1 levels should have little impact on the reception of a sermon.

Table 1. Fowler’s Stages of Faith

Stage	Typical Age	Defining Qualities	Influences	Major Antecedents to Transition
Pre-stage	Infancy	Mutuality, trust, and preimages of the background of life	Interactions with important adults and environment	Development of language and imagination
1. Intuitive-projective faith	3–7	Fantasy-filled, imitative phase; free of logic; focus on episodic interactions	Interactions with important adults through stories, role playing, etc. providing episodic knowledge	Development of concrete operational thinking
2. Mythic-literal	7–15, although some adults remain in this stage	Concrete operational interpretation of beliefs and observances of community; worldview of good and bad	Authorities including parents, teachers, and religious and community leaders	Development of critical thinking
3. Synthetic-conventional	15–21 plus some adults	Formation of personal identity and shaping of personal definition of faith	External sources such as school, work, friends, media, and personal reflection	Internal conflicts between personal beliefs and social expectations
4. Individuative-reflective	Young adult	Unique, individualistic world view	Independent critical thinking; beginning of balance of self, others, and higher power	Desire to integrate worldviews of self and others
5. Conjunctive	Midlife and beyond	Value direct experience while affirming other’s beliefs	Increasing appreciation of symbol and myths; meaningful learning experiences	Desire to reconcile the untransformed world and the personally developed transforming vision and loyalties
6. Universalizing faith	Few ever reach	Disciplined activist seeking to make tangible impact on transforming the social order	Consciousness of complex universal issues; loss of egocentric focus	

It is very likely that a large percentage of each congregation will fall squarely in the synthetic-conventional mode of faith (stage 3). This stage has also been described as the “interpersonal self” phase, in which “meaning comes largely from relationships and roles.”⁴⁵ It is with parishioners in this stage that the noise of politics can be most readily noticed: for example, I am a Democrat so I have to think this way, or I am a Libertarian so I think this way. People in this stage develop their meaning for life depending on the group with which they associate. As table 1 suggests, this stage is often associated with teenagers ages 12–17 in which “the desire to go with the crowd, to conform, is strong. . . . [T]hose at this stage are embedded in their stance and there is little ability to reflect on it or think for themselves.”⁴⁶ It might be obvious to many pastors, from the above description, why Fowler included many adults in this stage. I also believe that the inability of some people to think for themselves can cause those in this stage to have a conflict between what they know and understand and the incongruent nature of their actions. This can lead to cognitive dissonance, which I will discuss in the next section. What is apparent is that people stuck in this stage of faith development can have internal psychological noise that can block the reception of a sermon’s message and lead to misunderstanding and a lack of communication.

In the next stage, stage 4, the individuative-reflective faith stage, a person is less defined by his/her relationships and his/her own individuality can begin to emerge. “Beliefs and commitments [that were] previously somewhat unexamined are now becoming more consciously adopted.”⁴⁷ We are warned that this stage can be “long and difficult” and that, with the “conscious choosing” of a worldview, there is the “danger of

45. Hughes, *Whitefield*.

46. *Ibid.*

47. *Ibid.*

a conceited autonomy and pretended independence.”⁴⁸ With the beginnings of independent critical thinking also come challenges to previously held positions. I believe that the majority of the people who inhabit our pews on any given Sunday morning can be squarely placed in this stage of faith development. I also contend that the majority of the pushback that preachers receive from their sermons is from people stuck in this stage. I further contend that people in stage 4 who are doing the difficult internal work of self-differentiation are often those who are the most passionate with regard to giving feedback about a sermon. Pastors and preachers would do well to acquaint themselves with the work of Dr. James Fowler so that feedback received can be seen in the light of an opportunity to help someone on their faith journey and not be taken as a particular attack on their personhood.

In the next stage, stage 5, conjunctive faith, also described as a “balanced faith” or an “inclusive faith,” an appreciation of others’ faith journeys and interpretations begins to emerge. There is also an increased incorporation of the use of symbols and mythology in one’s desire to make meaning of scripture and the surrounding world. I conjecture that this is the stage and mode of operation of most seminary-trained Christian clergy. Because this stage is considered rare, it is no wonder why those who find themselves in the midst of the hard work of stage 4 might not grasp much of the imaginary and symbolic preaching of a clergyperson who is developing and writing sermons from a stage 5 faith perspective. Another problem is that the Bible itself is full of symbols, imagery, and mythology that cannot be fully grasped by those who have a stunted faith development. In the next chapter, “Creating a Language for Talking about God,” I will

48. Jeff Astley, *How Faith Grows: Faith Development and Christian Education* (London: National Society/Church House Publishing, 1991), 28, quoted in Hughes, *Whitefield*.

explore in more detail the symbolic and cultural-linguistic traditions of our sacred Christian texts and how we can help people to incorporate that tradition in developing a language to talk about God.

The final stage in Fowler's faith development taxonomy is stage 6, a universalizing faith. This is an exceedingly rare stage and is thought to occur in later life, if at all. In this stage, there is a "relinquishing or abandoning of the self."⁴⁹ This stage is characterized by a "burning desire to love everyone, help others and give one's self even through self-sacrifice."⁵⁰ When I read this definition, people like Mother Theresa of Calcutta, Henri Nouwen, and Archbishop Desmond Tutu come to mind. One might find someone in his or her parish who exhibits some of these extraordinary qualities, but the chances are rare. Far from being noise generators, those holding a universalizing faith will be great confidants and teachers. They will be the people to whom you can turn to find inspiration and seed for new sermons.

What is obvious is that there are many opportunities for noise to be generated as a result of a lack of faith development. Those who preach the Gospel and have a desire to be effective communicators need to familiarize themselves with the work of Dr. James Fowler and the stages of faith development. Once familiar with this material, they will then be able to develop sermons and teaching series to help those in their care with their faith development and thus reduce this type of psychological noise blocking the channels of communication.

49. Hughes, *Whitefield*.

50. *Ibid*.

Cognitive Dissonance

Another type of psychological noise that can be a great hindrance to effective communication is the noise created through cognitive dissonance. Cognitive dissonance is defined as “a state of tension and discomfort that occurs whenever a person holds two cognitions (perceptions of self and behavior) that are psychologically inconsistent.”⁵¹

As humans, we attempt to lead lives that are stable and meaningful, and to do so, we must make sense of conflicting ideas and notions. As an example, many people continue to smoke cigarettes despite the fact that they believe that cigarettes are doing them harm. A person who holds the view that cigarettes are harmful yet continues to smoke is exhibiting cognitive dissonance. This dissonance can produce mental discomfort ranging from minor pangs of guilt to deep anguish. It can also manifest itself as extreme defensiveness and hostility toward anyone who points out the inconsistency between a person’s action and his/her belief. Because dissonance can cause mental anguish, people develop rationales to justify and reconcile the conflict. For example, a person who smokes despite the fact that they believe that smoking is harming their health will develop rationalizing statements to justify the behavior. The following are some typical rationalizing statements one might hear from a smoker with cognitive dissonance:

- Smoking is not really that harmful; I had relatives who smoked and lived into their 90s.
- Smoking is worth the risk because it helps me relax or prevents me from gaining weight (and after all, that’s a health risk too).⁵²

51. Kehoe, *Communication*, 94.

52. *Ibid.*, 94.

I believe that there are many in our pews today who are suffering cognitive dissonance that creates noise in the receiver's head that does not allow for effective communication. Some of the areas in which I believe our parishioners are exhibiting this dissonance are the realm of wealth and money and the treatment of our neighbors.

Cognitive Dissonance and Money

“No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.”⁵³

No subject elicits a more passionate response than does the subject of money! Yet, there seems to be some dissonance in people between what the Gospel is saying about money and wealth and the actions of those who claim to be followers of Christ. The American Family Association spent some considerable time examining some of the recent research (2008–2015) of various groups who were interested in understanding the decline of church membership and attendance in America's Protestant denominations. They summarized all of the research material and noticed that the reasons for leaving organized religion coalesced around three main areas: (1) my needs were not being met, (2) religion is too political and materialistic, and (3) I wanted or needed a break from church. Those who offered the second reason tended to elaborate that “Christians are judgmental and hypocritical” and that “churches are always asking for money.”⁵⁴ Apparently, those who leave the church for this reason do not believe that the money the church collects is used to build the kingdom of God as Jesus describes it. The question that these statements raise is how can we communicate the way the church accomplishes

53. Matt. 6:24 NRSV.

54. Stacy Long, “Why Are People Leaving the Church?” *The Stand* (blog).

Jesus' gospel message "to bring good news to the poor . . . to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor"⁵⁵ (assuming that is what the particular parish is involved in doing)? Or have people rationalized their feelings about money and giving to a point that, as for the smoker and his/her habit, they have created excuses to justify their cognitive dissonance?

I believe that the best starting point for any conversation about money is to ask oneself "What did Jesus say?" The Gospels are full of parables and stories concerning money and wealth that Jesus told his listeners. In the story of the rich young man/ruler found in all three synoptic Gospels (Matthew 19:16–26, Mark 10:17–27, and Luke 18:18–26), Jesus remarks on the difficulty for people who are possessed of great wealth to enter the Kingdom of God. In all three accounts, Jesus states, "it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."⁵⁶ Jesus also goes on to say that "What is impossible for mortals is possible for God."⁵⁷ The late Reverend Peter Gomes stated succinctly the problem of wealth and the Bible when he wrote

Wealth is not a sin, but it is a problem. . . . It is not a problem only in this particular vivid story [the rich young man/ruler], but is problematic throughout all scripture. . . . It is not as if there is a biblical view on wealth; there really could not be a systematized philosophy of economy in the Bible, for this is after all a collection of books written over the course of a thousand years under widely diverging social and economic circumstances. The problem of wealth is common to all of them, but the variety of ways in which wealth is addressed requires more than a simpleminded statement that the Bible either is for it or against it.⁵⁸

55. Luke 4:18–19 NRSV.

56. Luke 18:25 NRSV.

57. Luke 18:26 NRSV.

58. Gomes, *The Good Book*, 293.

Even a cursory search of the scriptures will yield a divergence of opinions about the role of money and wealth in one's spiritual well-being. The Old Testament is full of passages suggesting that riches and wealth are all blessings from the Almighty and sure signs of God's grace being bestowed. These passages are in stark contrast to the New Testament writings in which the Gospel of Luke definitely favors those who are poor and parables such as those of the rich young man/ruler and the widow's mite make it clear that the Kingdom of God is not found in the possession of material wealth. In order to foster good communication, those engaged in preaching about money need to understand what deterrents they might find in their parishioners that will manifest themselves in cognitive dissonance. Here are a few of the rationalizing statements that I have heard in my ministry:

- I know that I need to give, but aren't I supposed to provide for my family first?
- Why should I give you my hard-earned money when all you are going to do is turn around and give it away?
- My money is my business! I have worked hard for it and how much I make or give is none of your business!

I have experienced the problem of cognitive dissonance regarding money and preaching first hand. When I was being interviewed for my position as Rector of St. James' Episcopal Church in Collegeville, Pennsylvania, I was asked to preach a sermon at another local area church so that the search committee could get a sense of my preaching style. I contacted the Rector of this church and told him that I would be preaching a stewardship sermon based on the widow's mite because it was Proper 27, Year B, in the lectionary. The Rector informed me that he thought that would be great

considering that they were in the middle of their yearly stewardship campaign. I built my sermon around the collect for purity: “Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid. Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy Name; through Christ our Lord.” *Amen.*⁵⁹ I spoke of how God knows of our sacrifice when we give. I talked of how people are always trying to hide things from God: their wants and desires as well as their pocketbooks. After I had delivered my sermon and after the passing of the peace, there came the usual point in the service for announcements. The local Rector invited the chair of the stewardship committee to come forward and give a report on how well the campaign was progressing. The stewardship chair was a very properly dressed woman, and she ascended the steps to the pulpit to make her remarks. The first thing she said was: “Unlike Father Mike and his sermon on first-century Palestine, we give in secret here, and we expect you to send your pledge to this church in a secure and discrete manner.” You could have knocked me down with a feather. Luckily for me, the search committee approved of my sermon, and there was a lot of lively conversation at lunch with the committee following the service regarding that chairperson’s remarks.

Preachers need to be aware of their congregants’ preconceived notions about money and wealth in order to develop sermons that break through the noise and cognitive dissonance. Sermons on money and wealth that are more in the teaching vein might help to foster greater communication, not only between the preacher and congregant but also between the congregant and God.

59. *The Book of Common Prayer*, 355.

Cognitive Dissonance and Our Neighbors

Another area in which I find that people exhibit a fair amount of cognitive dissonance is in the area of defining who their neighbor is. It is obvious from the Gospels that Jesus sees everyone as our neighbor. Of course, this is pointed out most succinctly in the tenth chapter of Luke's Gospel in the parable of the Good Samaritan. The gospel writer wrote:

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. 'Teacher,' he said, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?' He said to him, 'What is written in the law? What do you read there?' He answered, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.' And he said to him, 'You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.' But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor?' Jesus replied, 'A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, "Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend." Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?' He said, 'The one who showed him mercy.' Jesus said to him, 'Go and do likewise.'⁶⁰

What has always fascinated me in this parable is the fact that the lawyer cannot utter the word "Samaritan." To him, the Samaritan and his "kind" are the other—not worthy of God's attention and surely not worthy of the attention of God's chosen as portrayed by the priest and the Levite. The lawyer's answer is telling; he answers the question put to him by Jesus concerning who was the neighbor to the man who was beaten, stripped, robbed, and left for dead by saying "the one who showed him mercy." Jesus then

60. Luke 10: 25–37 NRSV.

instructs him to do likewise: to show mercy to those who are in need, to be neighborly to the other. This is a vow all Episcopalians take at their baptism and confirmation when we answer in the affirmative to the prompt “Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself.”⁶¹ Yet, despite these promises, which have been affirmed and reaffirmed in liturgical practice, I still see copious amounts of cognitive dissonance in this area. Here are a few of the rationalizing statements that I have heard with regard to who is my neighbor:

- I am all for public housing, but do they have to plan it in my neighborhood? What about my property value?
- I am tired of the government spending my hard-earned tax dollars on all those foreigners. I want to help, but let’s take care of our own first!
- I understand that they need some help, but why can’t they be more like us! At least they could learn to speak English!

There is possibly no other issue where the NIMBY (“not in my back yard”) crowd is most vocal. What happened to Jesus’ injunction to go and do likewise in terms of showing mercy? I, like many rectors I’m sure, have at my disposal a revolving checking account known as the Rector’s discretionary fund. I use this account and monies given to me by the parishioners to help those in need. There are too many times when people come to me seeking assistance after they have been turned down by other Christian churches and social services agencies because of their address or their religious affiliation. My default mode is to help all who come through the door. I do not do this out of some naiveté but in order to fulfill my vows made at my baptism, confirmation, and

61. *The Book of Common Prayer*, 305.

ordination. We must teach the concepts of compassion and mercy to our cure. It is obvious to me that the culture of the United States as a whole is sorely lacking in this area. We as preachers must confront this cognitive dissonance through prayer, preaching, and teaching. We must communicate to those in our charge that ALL are our neighbors and that all deserve mercy!

We began this chapter with a reintroduction to interpersonal communications theory and the concept of noise as being obstacles that block channels of communication. We have explored the three main types of noise, namely, physical noise, semantic noise, and psychological noise. Recall that semantic noise is noise within the head of the sender, namely, the preacher, whereas psychological noise is noise that is in the head of the receiver. We have explored the role that politics plays in generating noise in the minds of the receivers of our sermons and how one's political beliefs can affect the reception of the Gospel message. We especially investigated the role of politics and political beliefs in terms of the problems that a preacher might encounter in handling the topic of the poor. Finally, we introduced the concept of cognitive dissonance, and we explored two main areas where cognitive dissonance is most apparent: the issue of money and wealth and the question of who is our neighbor. Now, I turn my attention to the idea of creating a language for talking about God and thereby facilitating clear channels for the preacher to communicate God's love.

Chapter 3

Creating a Language for Talking about God

If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart.

—Nelson Mandela

The noted twentieth-century theologian John Macquarrie stated the importance of language in communication when he wrote

What happens when something is said? It would seem that the typical act of saying belongs to a situation constituted by at least three factors: the person who does the saying, the person to whom something is said, and the matter about which something is said. The language (what is said, the words and sentences) becomes the link that brings together the three factors.⁶²

There is a language that is used in the study of theology that has helped people throughout the ages to know and “talk” about God. It is this language, this channel of verbal symbols and meanings, that help humans transfer information to one another. The problem of speaking of God and Christianity is that many of our symbols and words have lost their meaning in today’s postmodern, millennial society. The late noted theologian Marcus Borg wrote extensively on this problem and posited that the lack of understanding concerning Christian language and symbols has plunged Christianity into a crisis. Borg wrote:

Speaking Christian, by which I mean knowing and understanding Christian Language, is in a state of crisis in North America. . . . The crisis is two-fold. For many, an increasing number, Christianity has become an unfamiliar language. . . . But Christian illiteracy is only the first part of the crisis. Even more seriously, even for those who think they speak

62. John Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1977), 126.

“Christian” fluently, the faith itself is often misunderstood and distorted by many to whom it is seemingly very familiar. They think they are speaking the language as it has always been understood, but what they mean by the words and concepts is so different from what these things have meant historically, that they would have trouble communicating with the very authors of the past they honor.⁶³

Borg further described the situation as a crisis of language in that “language is the medium through which people participate in their religion.”⁶⁴ It should be self-evident that every major religious, philosophical, or political movement has a special language that defines and interprets the entity. Christianity has a rich history and vocabulary that has helped define its precepts for over two thousand years. The importance of having a language for God, a common set of agreed-upon symbols and word definitions, is that it allows those practicing the Christian faith to “use the concepts and ideas from their religion as a lens through which to see the world. . . . [To] use them to connect their religion to their life in the world.”⁶⁵ Borg further illustrated the point when he posited that all religions have a “cultural-linguistic tradition.” He declared:

Every religion originated in a particular culture and thus used the language of that culture, even in ways that radically challenged it. If a religion survived over time, it became a cultural-linguistic tradition in its own right, with its own language, its basic vocabulary, sacred texts and stories, rituals and practices. These are often organized into comprehensive systems of thought—what Christians call theology, including doctrines and dogmas.⁶⁶

Our Christian cultural-linguistic tradition and language is grounded in our sacred text, the Bible. This language for God includes not only words and phrases but hymns, prayers,

63. Marcus J. Borg, *Speaking Christian: Why Christian Words Have Lost Their Meaning and Power—and How They Can Be Restored* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), 5.

64. *Ibid.*

65. *Ibid.*, 6.

66. *Ibid.*

creeds, and liturgy. All of these are used in our Christian worship and are central to defining what it means to be Christian. In other words, “[t]o be Christian is to know, use, and be shaped by this language—to live one’s life with God within the framework of this language.”⁶⁷ The need for a language that is common and agreed upon is universally recognized by all who seek to communicate God’s love to those who have not yet experienced that love. Many have argued that the way in which Christianity has spoken historically needs to be scrapped in favor of a new, modern way of speaking and telling the story. Borg advocated for reclaiming Christianity’s sacred language. Instead of losing the meanings of our most sacred language or abrogating their definitions to biblical literalism, we must combat the ignorance by preaching and teaching in such a way as to build up in each believer a repository of terms and definitions. As pointed out earlier in this dissertation, the majority of the people living in our midst today are biblically illiterate. I believe that we can take advantage of that fact if we are willing to understand where misconceptions and deceptions arise and occur and then do the hard work to teach our people the rich tradition that has been handed down through the wisdom of the Church over the centuries.

We must rescue some of our most sacred terms and combat the encroachment of the interpretation of biblical literalism. To better illustrate this point, let us examine the use of the term “born again” and how the traditional Christian meaning has been obscured. Many of us have a positive response to the term. We think of our baptism and sharing with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection. Others see the term “born again” as a demarcation denoting those of us who are saved over against the rest of humanity, which is going to hell. In his book *Speaking Christian*, Borg pointed out that those who

67. Borg, *Speaking Christian*, 7.

most identify with the term “born again” are those who hold biblical literalist views, views not congruent with the traditions of Christianity held throughout the ages. Borg suggested that this rigidity of a definition has caused a negative association with those who self-proclaim the “born again” moniker. He wrote:

The reason for its negative association today is that *born again* has been virtually identified with a particular way of being Christian. Polls indicate that Christians who self-identified as *born again* most often believe that:

- The Bible is inerrant. . . .
- Creation happened as narrated in Genesis, and evolution should be rejected.
- Abortion is a sin, maybe even as bad a murder, and should not be legal.
- Homosexuality is sinful, and the extension of equal moral and legal standing to homosexuals is wrong and to be resisted. . . .
- Supporting a militaristic foreign policy is compatible with being Christian. Christianity’s goal is going to heaven, not avoiding wars or seeking peace through justice on earth. (For example, in 2003, shortly before the American invasion of Iraq, the demographic group most in favor of going to war, indeed starting a war, was “white evangelicals” [84 percent]. Most of these, at least a strong majority, self-identify as born again).⁶⁸

Borg rightly pointed out that the negative association with the term “born again” is indeed unfortunate. The concept of being “born again” is rich with meaning and is a “powerful metaphor for transformation which is at the center of the Christian life.”⁶⁹ The phrase “born again” comes from the story of Nicodemus and his encounter with Jesus in the third chapter of John. The passage reads

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell

68. Borg, *Speaking Christian* 165–166.

69. *Ibid.*, 167.

you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, “You must be born from above.” The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?”⁷⁰

In this powerful encounter, the Pharisee leader and teacher Nicodemus is having a hard time with the imagery with which Jesus is confronting him. Nicodemus is a literalist. He rightly asks how one can be born again once they have grown old. Jesus is trying to get Nicodemus to look with spiritual eyes, but Nicodemus is having none of it. The metaphors of rebirth, of being born again, and of being born of the Spirit are all images of a deep-seated conversion, of leaving behind an old life and entering into a new life in Christ. Terms such as “new creation” and even “resurrection” are all metaphorical equivalents to this term “born again.” Borg stated the importance of the use of the term “born again” succinctly when he wrote

Thus being *born again* is utterly central to Christianity, one of the main images for the goal and promise of the Christian life. It describes our transformation and, ultimately, the transformation of the world, for those who are born of the Spirit of God as known in Jesus share God’s passion for a more just and peaceful world.⁷¹

The same argument can be made for terms such as “righteousness”; “salvation”; “grace”; and, most assuredly, “sin.” I highly recommend Borg’s book in which he devotes a chapter to each of the above terms and also investigates twenty other words and sayings.

70. John 3: 1–9 NRSV.

71. Borg, *Speaking Christian*, 169.

To adequately teach our people, we need to be familiar with the treasure trove of Christian scholarship that is available. One can only fight ignorance with knowledge, and a good preacher and communicator should arm him- or herself with the wisdom of those who have helped define our literary and cultural heritage.

The Role of Teacher

As an Episcopal priest, I am reminded in my ordination vows of the responsibility that I have to teach my people. In the ordination service, the consecrating Bishop addresses the ordinand as follows:

My brother (or sister), the Church is the family of God, the body of Christ, and the temple of the Holy Spirit. All baptized people are called to make Christ known as Savior and Lord, and to share in the renewing of his world. Now you are called to work as pastor, priest, and teacher, together with your bishop and fellow presbyters, and to take your share in the councils of the Church.⁷²

What is the priest's role as teacher? Are we abrogating our responsibilities and our vows by not giving our people the theological language tools to talk about God? I have sat through many homiletics classes in which I was told not to use theological language and terms, but I was never taught that I should teach my people the language skills that would enable them to articulate their own experience of God in a more profound way. I was also castigated once by a classmate who said that all God's people are theologians and that everybody who talks about God is a practicing theologian. Well, it should be obvious that I do not accept that argument. I believe that preachers of God's Word have the responsibility to teach and educate their people on the theological language of God. Of course, this is hard to do with the time constraints placed on the

72. *The Book of Common Prayer*. 531.

preacher with respect to delivering a sermon. The late Bishop Frank Juhan, the fourth Bishop of the Diocese of Florida, who was the youngest Diocesan Bishop in the Episcopal Church upon his consecration in 1924, was fond of telling newly minted priests his axiom on preaching. When asked, Bishop Juhan is said to have remarked “preach about God and preach about 15 minutes.”⁷³

So how do we teach the language of God and theology within the time constraints allowed for a sermon? One of the things that I have found helpful is to not introduce too much information at one time. For example, if I were going to use a word like “periscope,” because I wanted to point out that the lectionary failed to give the reader the full picture of what was happening in a particular Gospel story, then I would ensure that I introduced the word and defined it for the congregation. If I used the word again in another sermon, I might say something like “you might remember us talking about a pericope in the past,” and I would define it again to ensure that any new people who were not at the original introduction to the word would not feel left out. If done correctly, these teachable moments can have wonderful consequences for your congregation. They show that you value them and trust them with new knowledge. My other rule is to never introduce more than two new concepts or words in a single sermon and never at every sermon. A wise preacher will let the Gospel message and the Holy Spirit inform him or her of the teachable moments and when to introduce a new concept or term. Do not fall into the sin of assumption in assuming either that everyone understands your language or that no one will understand or appreciate a new idea or word for his/her theological tool bag.

73. This was related to me by the Rev. Richard Corry (age 98), who was ordained a priest by Bishop Juhan in 1941.

Liturgy and Ritual as Language

Another tool at the preacher's disposal to help facilitate a language for talking about God is to connect the spiritual and liturgical practices of the tradition to the preaching event. As discussed earlier, the linguistic-cultural tradition of Christianity is not confined to Christian words and phrases and their meanings. Music, liturgy, creeds, and prayers all contribute to the development of a language for talking about God. All of these things can be used in a pedagogical way to convey the tenets of the Christian faith. I stated earlier in the second chapter that wise preachers would be smart to be involved in the designing and character of the worship services in which they are to preach. From the songs chosen to enter into worship to the choice of readings one selects for any given Sunday, all are consciously communicating something about God to those who are in attendance.

When one contemplates the idea of language and channels with regard to communications and interpersonal communications theory, one is reminded that the channels of communication are more than the language spoken or the words used. Referring back to our interpersonal communications model found on page 8 of this text, it is clear that the channels of communications involve all of the sensory systems of the human body. Communication is conveyed through the visual, the auditory, the olfactory (smell), the gustatory (taste) and the tactile (touch) bodily systems. In other words, effective communication is a whole-body endeavor. One of the wonderful aspects of the Bible is that it is replete with a treasure trove of sensory images. The Bible conveys its message about God and God's relationship of love with humanity in a multidimensional fashion. The Bible is full of stories, allegories, metaphors, histories, dialogs, narratives,

parables, poetry and much more. Because of this multidimensional aspect of the Bible, the scriptures are very much symbol laden. The Bible contains many symbols and phrases that have deep theological meanings which have been a part of the Christian cultural-linguistic tradition for over two centuries. The symbolic nature of the sacred Christian text cannot be overstated. The noted Canadian Jesuit, Bernard Lonergan wrote extensively on the connection between symbols and scripture. Lonergan defined a symbol as “an image of a real or imaginary object that evokes a feeling or is evoked by a feeling.”⁷⁴ What is obvious is that symbols are not static things, they spark imagination and thought. Symbols and symbolic language affect the sensory systems of the human body and are therefore channels to effective communications.

There is a strong connection between liturgy and symbol. In liturgy, words and action come together to communicate the Holy to those who are participating. When participating in liturgical worship, “we use our capacity to make, understand, appreciate, and enjoy symbols . . . (t)his capacity is one of the bases of liturgy.”⁷⁵ It should be apparent that language alone is inadequate to describe a Holy God. As we have pointed out earlier, even the sacred text used as the primary conveyance of the Christian faith is highly symbolic so it would make sense that our worship vehicles, the use of Christian liturgy, should also incorporate symbolic ritual and actions. It has been said that “[a]ny attempt to communicate or mediate the truth about God involves symbols.”⁷⁶ The following illustration points out succinctly the inadequacies of a language of words alone:

74. Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd., 1972), 64.

75. Charles P. Price and Louis Weil, *Liturgy for Living: The Church's Teaching Series* (New York: HarperCollins, 1979), 34.

76. *Ibid.*

Words also, on the whole, are arbitrary symbols. The word *table* is not a table. It is a sound uttered, and then a mark on a piece of paper. But the word *table* stands for a table, and has the significant additional property of being able to be spoken and thought about. Words summarize experience. The word *table* means the totality of a person's experience with objects to write on, eat on, pile things on. When a community shares those experiences, the word *table* is a common possession. When it is written or spoken, that experience is transmitted. These symbols make verbal communication possible.⁷⁷

Anyone who has ever experienced participating in a liturgy spoken in a different language can testify to the symbolic nature of ritual and ritual action. In the Book of Common Prayer, there are rubrics listed for certain liturgical actions. One does not need to speak the common tongue to know where one is at any part of the Eucharistic celebration. When the celebrant elevates the paten with the host then you know he/she is talking about the bread as the body of Christ. Likewise the same holds true when the chalice is elevated and we know that the talk is about the wine as the blood of Christ. If one is steeped in the liturgical tradition the epiclesis is obvious with the making of the sign of the cross or the symbolic gesture of the laying on of hands. One also knows that when the consecrated bread is placed in your hands, the words being spoken to you is communicating that what is being received is the body of Christ whether you are versed in the language being spoken or not. All of our actions and gestures within a liturgical setting are communicating to others the tenets of our Christian faith and tradition in a very corporate way. These worship tools and rituals become a "common possession" and reinforce our sense of God's presence among us and our place in God's kingdom.

One of the ways in which I have attempted to integrate the spoken words of the Episcopal liturgy with the symbolic and ritual actions incorporated in the rite is in the use of an instructed Eucharist. In an instructed Eucharist, all actions and parts of the liturgy

77. Price and Weil, *Liturgy for Living*., 35.

are explained in a teaching manner, which helps to facilitate integration. At my home church of St. James', I have used an instructed Eucharist to teach the teenagers who are about to be confirmed in the Journey to Adulthood class about the deep meaning and actions of the liturgy. I also plan an instructed Eucharist periodically depending on the influx of new members to the parish. I have found that many who come to the Episcopal Church from a non-liturgical tradition have found this enlightening and it has made their participation in the weekly Eucharist more meaningful. You can find an electronic version of an instructed Eucharist for the Episcopal Church at <http://www.instructedeucharist.org>.

Preaching as Artistry and Performance

The artistic aspect of preaching and communicating God's Word cannot be overstated. Through the use of symbols, ritual, and artistry, humans "experience [what] cannot readily be summarized and symbolized in a word."⁷⁸ It has been said that preaching is poetry. Art and poetry are "extended means of communication, made possible by means of symbols."⁷⁹ In fact, the Greek origin of the word "poet" includes the meaning "one who makes," one who deploys symbols to evoke feelings.

Unfortunately, many sermons delivered today lack an artistic nature in communications.

This viewpoint was concisely stated by Elizabeth Achtemeier as follows:

It is true to say that preaching at the present time is rarely artistic, because many preachers, while good journeymen, have not become true masters of the English language. Involved in the artistic use of English are timing and rhythm and sound, and many preachers have no knowledge of the importance of these characteristics of speech for riveting attention and

78. Price and Weil, *Liturgy for Living*:,35.

79. Ibid.

carrying along a congregation and touching their hearts as well as their minds.⁸⁰

Not only is our mastery of the English language important but so is our delivery and our voice cadence and modulation. No actor can perfect the craft without learning to use both facial expressions and vocal inflections in his or her performances. The creator of the interpersonal communications model, Dr. Dalton Kehoe, states that “[t]he face is the primary site for the communication of emotional states and is the primary signal system for communicating emotions.”⁸¹ Our faces have the capability to transmit many emotional responses. Our facial expressions can convey happiness, sadness, fear, anger, surprise, and disgust. The ways in which such signals are transmitted and received vary between cultures, but these six basic categories seem to be universal.⁸² Dr. Kehoe also notes that the voice “is second only to the face in its power to instantly communicate emotional meaning by changing sound.”⁸³ Understanding pitch and modulation can help a preacher communicate the intended message and avoid unintended ones.

Not all of us have time to be trained as actors or have any desire to be participants in acting endeavors, but I do believe that some rudimentary training in this area can be of great value. I was lucky enough to have two classmates in my seminary class at Virginia Theological Seminary who are experts in using acting skills in the delivery of a sermon. The Rev. Ann Gillespie is a retired actress who is best known for her role in *Beverly Hills, 90210*. She was also a cast member in several movies, and her acting career stretched over three decades. I was fortunate enough to be in a homiletics class with her

80. Ward, *Speaking of the Holy*, 7.

81. Kehoe, *Communication*, 40.

82. *Ibid.*

83. *Ibid.*

and was able to watch her first hand as she employed her acting skills in the performance of a sermon. She is a gifted speaker and a master of using voice inflection and facial gestures to get a point across. The second classmate of mine with acting experience was the Rev. Peter Ackerman. Peter is the son of the great Hollywood producer Harry Ackerman, and his mother is the actress Elinor Donahue. Peter grew up in Hollywood and around actors. Like Ann, he had learned to modulate his voice and use facial gestures in a manner that was simply mesmerizing. Anyone who has had the privilege of listening to our current Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, the Rt. Reverend Michal Curry, preach has also been exposed to a master of voice inflection and the use of facial expressions to communicate.

The performance aspect of preaching cannot be minimized. in his book *Speaking of the Holy*, Dr. Richard Ward made the following assertion:

I have come to believe that preaching is a performance, a complex of creative processes that punctuate the preparation, enactment, and embodiment of sermons. Preaching calls on inspiration, but also depends on a variety of competencies and skills. There are a number of windows open in the homiletical household that are letting fresh breezes in. . . . I was trained in the discipline of performance studies, a discipline that also exhibits expansionist tendencies.

. . . Performance studies is based on the concept that human beings are *homo performans*, that is, those creatures who define themselves to themselves and to one another through an infinite array of verbal and gestural enactments within and throughout individual and collective ritual and aesthetic acts.⁸⁴

To be effective communicators and to develop a language for talking about God, we need to embrace the performance aspect of our craft and acquire the skills and competencies to enable us to better communicate the love of God and the traditions of the Christian faith.

84. Ward, *Speaking of the Holy*, 5.

In this chapter, we have focused on the process of creating a language to talk about God in order to open up channels of communications so that our sermons might be better received and understood. We began our exploration with the notion that the Christian faith and tradition has a rich and deep heritage and a cultural linguistic tradition. We were implored by the late Christian author Marcus Borg to rediscover our Christian cultural linguistic traditions and then teach those traditions to the next generation of believers. We next explored the Episcopal ordination vow; how we are charged at our ordination to be pastor, priest, and teacher; and how it is the preacher's responsibility to teach the tenets of the faith. We then turned our attention to the different channels of interpersonal communications theory and how effective communication embodies all of our human sensory systems. We explored the concept of symbols and how the Bible is a text steeped in symbols, myths, poetry, and other artistic forms. We considered the connection between liturgy and ritual action and how their use can also convey a sense of the Holy and communicate God's love. We examined the idea of an instructed Eucharist and how it might be utilized to integrate both language and ritual in a pedagogical manner. Finally, we explored the performance aspect of sermon delivery and how one's facial gestures and voice inflection are channels that need to be employed to become an effective communicator. Now, let us turn our attention to the concept of feedback and the role that feedback plays in effective interpersonal communications and the act of preaching.

Chapter 4

Feedback:

What It Is and How to Use It!

What is the shortest word in the English language that contains the letters: abcdef? Answer: feedback. Don't forget that feedback is one of the essential elements of good communication.

—Anonymous

We all need people who will give us feedback. That's how we improve.

—Bill Gates

So, what is feedback, and how is it important to effective communication? The very definition of feedback confirms its importance. Dr. Kehoe, whose model of interpersonal communications is used throughout this work, defines feedback as

[m]essages created, displayed and sent back by the receiver, in response to a message already sent. These give the speaker some sense of the effect on the receiver of their sent messages.⁸⁵

In other words, feedback is the response or reaction of the receiver after perceiving or understanding the message. It enables the sender to evaluate the effectiveness of the message and is thus an essential component of interpersonal communication. Without feedback, all communication is either ineffective or incomplete. Feedback is the only way for the sender to obtain the receiver's response and, depending on the feedback, determine whether further steps and actions are needed to ensure that the intended message is received. In all forms of communication, the feedback process is extremely

85. Kehoe, *Communication*, 18.

important. In providing feedback, the receiver uses the same channels of sensory systems and language to respond to a message are used by the sender to transmit the original message. All preachers have had the experience of preaching a dud sermon. The feedback received from such a sermon is normally instantaneous and includes parishioners yawning; excusing themselves from the service; and/or distracting themselves with forms of literature such as the Book of Common Prayer, the service bulletin, or the Bible to avoid having to participate in the reception and communication of a sermon. There are certainly also times when the preacher feels on a roll and can sense his/her parishioners hanging on every word and confirm from their facial gestures and body language that the message that was intended is being received. As discussed in the last chapter with regard to performance and preaching and the role of facial expressions, those same facial expressions can be transmitted back to a preacher in a nonverbal way and can be indicative of how a message has been received. Recall that there are six basic categories of facial expressions, which correspond to the emotions of happiness, sadness, fear, anger, surprise, and disgust. It is clear that the wrong message has been conveyed if the intended emotion was surprise but the facial expression received in response was one of disgust. There have been very few times when I have received or witnessed a negative verbal outburst during a sermon I have given or heard, but there have been many times when the facial gestures of the people in the pews have told me that I sent the wrong or unintended message. At the same time, remember that not all feedback is negative. Rather, we as preachers strive to see our people tracking us with their eyes, nodding assent to our well-thought-out and well-delivered points, and showing us love and respect through the warmth of their smiles.

The use of verbal feedback during a sermon is something common in the African-American and Charismatic/Pentecostal traditions. The well-timed “Amen” can be a gift to a preacher to ensure that their message is resonating. As I stated earlier in this work, I grew up attending a Pentecostal church, and I remember fondly how the Pentecostal preacher used a singsong cadence as he whipped the people into a frenzy with the delivery of his words and how the congregation seemed to be a willing participant in the drama. The performance aspect of the preaching act is not lost on our Charismatic and African-American brothers and sisters who have an evangelical ilk. I remember the first time I shouted an “Amen” in an Episcopal service. My response called a halt to the sermon, and my rector, the Rev. Dr. Jim Cooper, looked over at me and, after a long pregnant pause, said “Thank you.” I appreciated the recognition of my assent to the truth he was delivering, but I knew for sure that I had interrupted the flow of the service and his sermon. At my current church, the parishioners have gotten used to my frequent call and request for an “Amen.” It has now become part of our culture. In fact, I was told that, on one Sunday when I was away, the Worship Leader asked for a congregational “Amen” in my honor. This, of course, made me feel good and let me know that the congregation appreciated being part of the homiletical time.

The most common time for a preacher to receive verbal feedback is immediately after the service as he or she greets the parishioners on their way out the door. Many times, this feedback is shallow and full of seemingly trivial responses, such as “Thanks for the message, Reverend” or “Good sermon.” I recognize that these responses are not very helpful in terms of directly helping a preacher hone his or her craft, but I also

recognize the attempt given by those in our cure to affirm our ministry and our priestly vocation.

There are times, however, when something was said or conveyed that struck a raw nerve with someone, and the preacher is apt to hear about it at the departing greeting. Instead of engaging the person in line who really wants to get something off his/her proverbial chest and is thus holding everyone else in line hostage, my strategy is to ask if we can talk in my office after I have finished greeting everyone. I have found that this almost always works. The first point is that you recognized his/her concern and showed a genuine interest in what the person had to say. The second is that you affirmed this person's autonomy as an independent thinker and a valuable part of the community.

There are also other times when a preacher might receive feedback from a sermon he or she delivered. Those times can be at the coffee hour, at the next meeting of the Vestry, the Christian Education committee, or even at the grocery store. Many times, feedback comes to the preacher in the form of written correspondence, e-mails, voice mails, and note cards. The main point to remember is that feedback is an indication that people have been engaged in the delivery of your sermon. A preacher interested in being a more effective communicator will welcome feedback and use it as a chance to master his or her craft or to clear up misconceptions of any intended messages.

Soliciting Feedback

In addition to receiving feedback from those in our pews, preachers interested in becoming better communicators can also enlist the help of colleagues and peers. One approach is to form a preaching colloquy. A preaching colloquy consists of fellow preachers who are willing to give each other feedback on their sermons. The same group

can also be used to generate ideas for sermons and then evaluate the effectiveness of the sermons each week. A good way to do this is to record a sermon on video and then send it to the members of the preaching colloquy for feedback. However, participating in a preaching colloquy takes time and commitment to really get something out of the process. If one happens to be part of a preaching rota at a multistaffed parish, feedback can be solicited from your colleagues on a weekly basis. Remember that, for this to work, you have to learn to be an attentive listener and to give feedback as well as receive it. Another approach that I have seen used successfully is to create a preaching feedback group who will meet with the preacher weekly and help the preacher evaluate his/her sermons. This strategy works well at smaller churches where there is only one clergy person on staff who must develop and deliver a sermon each and every week.

Learning to Give and Receive Feedback

In order to receive feedback or give others effective feedback, one must understand the dynamics involved. Negative comments and criticisms of a preacher's words and sermons can be off-putting. When one thinks about feedback, the question arises as to how one can effectively and politely tell someone about their mistakes and shortcomings so that it leads to improvement instead of bitterness and demoralization. Unfortunately, feedback can have the opposite effect from what was intended. Instead of leading to better performance and more effective communication, it can lead to acrimony and resentment if not given in a proper manner. Ian Tuhovsky, an author of positive psychology coaching material and an expert in communication skills, asserts that, if you want someone to receive feedback and learn something, then the "person must be in a

positive emotional state.”⁸⁶ Tuhovsky states that, in order to be motivated to change or improve, one must have a positive emotion, so that the person receiving the feedback should “associate the feedback containing information about what should be done differently with positive emotions.”⁸⁷ One of the ways to accomplish the task of giving feedback within the context of positive emotions is to use what Tuhovsky calls the “sandwich” model of feedback. This model was written for feedback on job performance but can easily be transferred to the preaching event. The model consists of the following three stages:

1. *A positive emotion.* At the beginning of giving feedback, you must show the person you give it to that they did well. You can say, “This is what should have been done, congrats”; “Good job, you did great!”; “A great performance”. If this person’s performance was obviously poor, then of course you will not say, “Wow! What a revelation!”, because they will simply think [you] are making fun of them. In that case, you can just say: “Good job, congrats on your first try!” *After the initial approval, tell them about two or three things that they’ve done well.* Provide specific examples! You can say, “You really knew the topic well!” or “It’s great that you spoke loud enough!” Appreciate their effort. It is about making them feel great at the start. Joy and relaxation are states conducive for learning and motivation.
2. *What to improve?* On the second stage, you tell them all those things they did wrong, but in a positive overtone. So, you do not say what they did wrong but *what can they do better.* You do not say: “You were talking too fast!”, but: “You could have spoken a little bit more slowly, the audience would have understood you much better then.” Instead of, “You were ill-mannered” you should say “You could have been a little more polite.” And so on.
3. *Positive emotion.* You end the conversation by evoking joy and relaxation again. You could say “Well, like I said though, generally you did great!” At the end, you need a little praise again.⁸⁸

86. Ian Tuhovsky, *Communication Skills Training: A Practical Guide to Improving Your Social Intelligence, Presentation, Persuasion and Public Speaking*, Positive Psychology Coaching Series (Ian Tuhovsky, 2015), 74.

87. *Ibid.*, 74.

88. *Ibid.*, 75–76.

As stated earlier, this model is based primarily on giving feedback concerning job performance, but it can easily be applied for giving feedback on preaching. The approach of starting with positive statements will elicit a positive emotion and thereby put the person in the right frame of mind to receive the constructive comments on their performance. The sandwich aspect of the method is to start with the positive and then discuss areas that you think need to be improved couched in a positive light, always ending on a positive note. Preachers interested in becoming better communicators will learn to give feedback and teach others how to do likewise.

Feedback as a Seed for Future Sermons

Not all feedback that a preacher receives will be designed for the preacher's well-being. Many times, feedback is given by those who have an underdeveloped faith or by those exhibiting cognitive dissonance. Practitioners who desire to motivate and correct bad theology and misconceptions about the Christian faith would do well to listen intently to all of the feedback that they are given. Remember that, if one person thinks a particular way, then there are probably more who do also. A preacher who desires to be an effective communicator of God's Word and God's love will practice the art of giving and receiving feedback.

We began this chapter by defining the concept of feedback and stressing its importance in achieving effective interpersonal communications. We then recalled that the channels of communications between the sender and receiver of a message are not limited to the language being spoken but also include the human sensory systems. We then turned our attention to how facial expressions can be a conduit for sermon feedback. Next, we looked at some of the ways in which feedback is verbally given to preachers

and some strategies for ensuring the proper place and time to receive such feedback. We also discussed ways to solicit feedback through the use of preaching colloquies and the creation of preaching feedback groups. We followed up the section on preaching colloquies and preaching feedback groups with a section on the proper way to give feedback, in which we examined Tuhovsky's sandwich model of giving feedback, which emphasizes the importance of sandwiching our constructive criticism between positive comments designed to elicit positive emotions, thereby ensuring the feedback is received. Finally, we turned our attention to the fact that feedback can be used as a seed for future sermons and teaching series.

Now, let us turn our attention to the concept of "conversational preaching" and how we can use what we have learned about interpersonal communication skills in the act of being a conversational preacher.

Chapter 5

Conversational Preaching: A Preaching Model Based on Interpersonal Communication Skills

We all need someone to talk to, someone who listens, someone who understands.

—Anonymous

Preachers err by trying to talk people into belief; better they reveal the radiance of their own discovery.

—Joseph Campbell

So, what do I mean by the term conversational preaching? When searching for a distinct definition of this term, I found that there is none. The best quote about conversational preaching that I could find came from an online forum called NazNet. There, a participant commented: “I don’t know the definition of ‘conversational preaching’ but I know the sound of it.”⁸⁹ In 1981, Myron Raymond Chartier penned a book entitled *Preaching as Communication: An Interpersonal Perspective*. In this book, he used the prevailing theory on interpersonal communications at that time and applied it to the craft of preaching. Despite being one of the pioneers to advocate integrating communications theory and preaching, nowhere within the 111 pages of his book did he attempt to define what is meant by conversational preaching. In this chapter, I provide my definition of the term conversational preaching and propose a model to be used with conversational preaching that integrates the interpersonal communications model of Dr. Kehoe with my definition of the term. I then explore the use of storytelling and see how aspects of good storytelling can be used effectively in conversational preaching. Finally, I

89. Marsha Lynn, “Re: Conversational preaching.” *NazNet.com* (online forum), December 21, 2010 (8:10 p.m.), www.naznet.com/community/showthread.php/3161-Conversational-preaching.

turn my attention to the responsibility of the preacher to “convey the Holy” and how he/she can use the tenets of conversational preaching to accomplish this task.

Defining Conversational Preaching

My definition of conversational preaching is as follows:

- Conversational preaching is the act of communicating the divine to another in a manner that is congruent with normal patterns of human speech and communication techniques. It has a two-fold purpose: to ensure effective transmission and reception of an intended sermon and to spark additional conversation between the sender of the sermon and the one who receives it and also between both the sender and receiver and God.

This is the definition I will use throughout our investigation of this topic. What I envision in this definition is a four-way action of conversation. The description of that four-way conversation is as follows:

First Conversation

The first communication that needs to take place is between the preacher, that is, the sender of the message, and God. All sermons should begin at this level. The preacher should approach the text each week in a prayerful manner asking God to reveal the message God wants God’s people to hear. God speaks to the preacher in a variety of ways. The preacher must always do the hard work of study and reflection but must not forget to also bring prayer to the task. Preachers would do well to develop a discipline in how they approach the task of developing sermons. If you have a specific day on which you prepare your sermon, then you should take time out of the other days to read and meditate on the scripture in a prayerful manner. Remember that the channels of human communication involve the sensory systems. Be aware of what you see, hear, smell, taste, and feel during the week. All of our sensory organs are vehicles God uses to speak to us.

Second Conversation

The second conversation that takes place is between the preacher, that is, the sender of God's message, and the people of God who have gathered to be nourished and fed by God's Word. The preacher must remember to use all of the channels of communications at her or his disposal. An effective preacher will use facial expressions and will modulate his/her voice to open as many channels of communication as possible, giving the message God a chance to be received. Remember that preaching is a performance and a whole-body experience. The old adage "practice makes perfect" can and does apply to the art of delivering a sermon.

Third Conversation

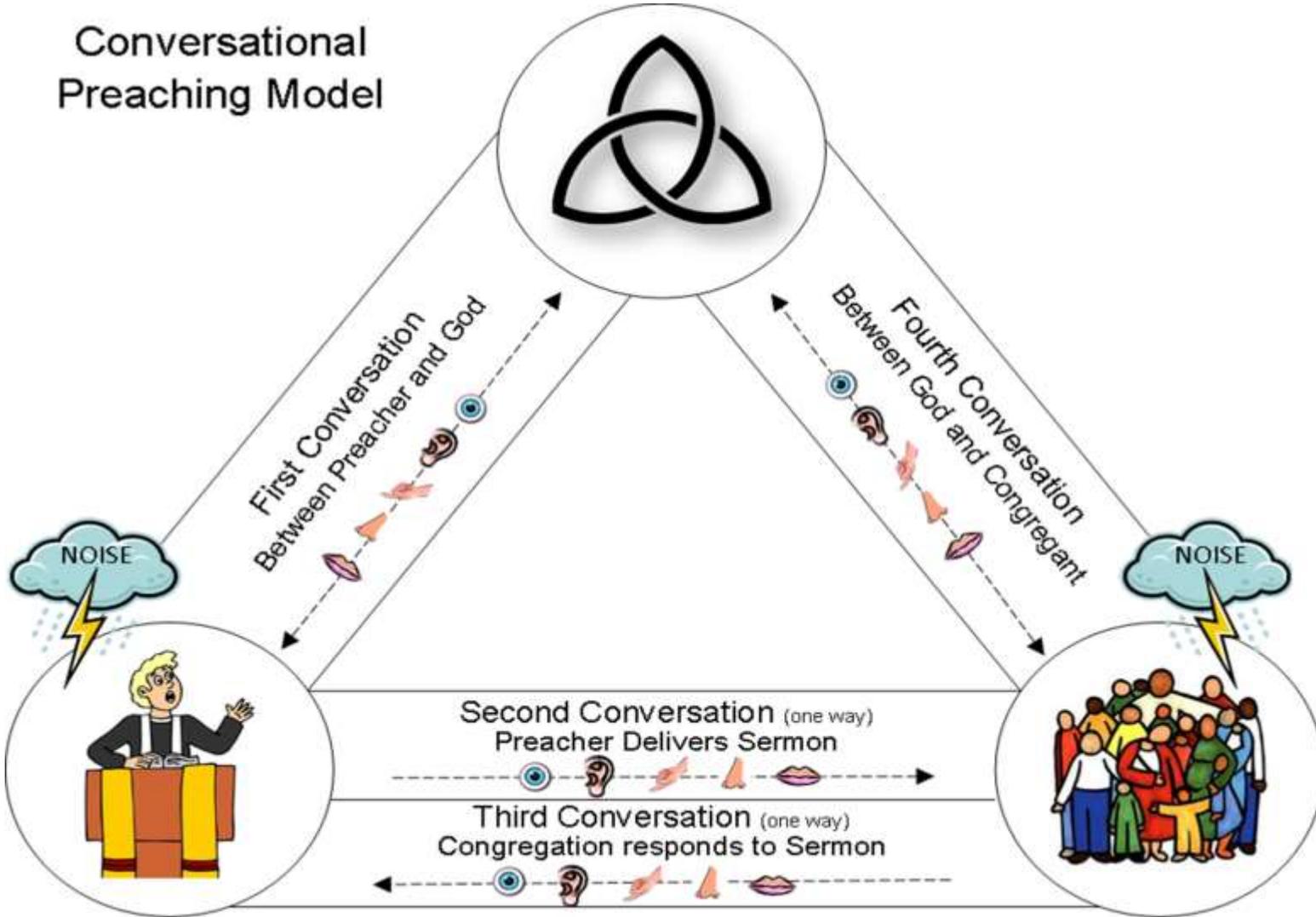
The third conversation is the one that takes place between the receiver of the message, namely, the congregation, and the sender of the message, that is, the preacher. The preacher should always be receptive to the nonverbal signals of feedback that the congregation is giving, paying particular attention to facial signals and the nodding and/or shaking of the head. This is one of the reasons that I am not a fan of manuscript preaching. Preachers who constantly have their head down to read a manuscript are apt to miss these important feedback signals. If your congregation is comfortable with giving verbal feedback in the forms of amens and affirmations, then by all means use those verbal cues to ensure that the message is being received. Preachers who have practiced a sermon and who are comfortable in what they are going to say are more apt to give themselves space to look for all of the nonverbal feedback a congregation is providing.

Fourth Conversation

The fourth conversation, which I feel is the most important, is the conversation that takes place between God's people and God during and after the preaching event. It is in this conversation, this prayer to God, where true transformation takes place and the real effectiveness of a sermon can be made most tangible. It is in this conversation where the reconciling work of the Holy Spirit takes root and lives are changed, relationships restored, and forgiveness given and received. I believe that any attempt at conversational preaching that does not lead someone to have this conversation with God has been ineffectual.

Now, let us investigate how my definition for conversational preaching and how the four-way act of communication associated with conversational preaching can be integrated with Dr. Kehoe's interpersonal communications model to produce a conversational preaching model (see fig. 2).

Conversational Preaching Model



Conversational Preaching Model

This model uses all of the aspects of Dr. Kehoe's interpersonal communications model and also reflects the action of God represented in triune form. I believe it also adequately represents the four-way conversational aspect that we discussed in the definition. The open spaces within the trinity symbol are conduits of communication, the place for "God Talk," through the action of the Holy Spirit, between God and the preacher, the preacher and the congregant, the congregant and the preacher, and finally the congregant and God. Now that we have adequately defined conversational preaching and created a usable model to represent its various aspects, let us turn our attention to the use of storytelling in preaching and how it might be integrated into conversational preaching.

Storytelling and the Art of Preaching

The Bible as we know it began as a story. We know that the first five books of the Bible, the Pentateuch, only began to take written form around the tenth century B.C.E., after centuries of being told, changed, and adapted from the oral tradition. Stories are just one of the many types of genres that can be found in Christian scripture. The Bible also contains poetry, history, laws, genealogies, wisdom literature, prophesy, parables, and apocalyptic writings, to name a few. However, storytelling holds a special place in the character of the Bible, and effective retelling of those stories can have a powerful effect on people. It has been said that "storytellers are indispensable agents of socialization."⁹⁰ Stories teach and codify societal values, which are transferred to each succeeding

90. David Reisman, *The Lonely Crowd*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press Nota Bene, 2001), 84.

generation through the telling and retelling of stories. Neuroscience has demonstrated that our brains seem to be “uniquely adapted to making sense of experience through stories.”⁹¹ Dr. Adriane Leveen In her article “Storytelling in the Bible,” published in *The Jewish Bible: A JPS Guide*, expanded on the place of storytelling in sacred text when she wrote

Even a sacred text such as the Bible seeks to make sense of the world through stories. . . . Biblical stories aim to have an effect on the reader, and we know they have succeeded when they stick with us. Eve chooses wisdom over Paradise and is expelled from the Garden of Eden. Cain kills Abel, whose blood cries out from the ground to accuse him. Abraham prepares to sacrifice his son at God’s request. The Egyptian-raised Moses becomes the greatest prophet of ancient Israel.⁹²

All with a rudimentary amount of Sunday school education can remember vividly the accounts of the stories mentioned by Dr. Leveen. She goes on to posit that the gift of the story is not just for children but can have positive effects on adults:

As children, we’re entertained by such biblical stories; returning to them as adults, we discover their power anew. They offer us a mirror into both a distant time and our own time. Perhaps even more than the stories we tell in our daily lives, a biblical story invites us to reflect on our deepest experiences, whether of God, of our families, of our community, or of the terrors and pleasures of life. In other words, these stories aim to make us think about important, even urgent matters. But rather than telling us how or what to think, they force us to find out what we think and how to respond. If we’re lucky, we are rewarded with insight and perspective we would otherwise miss, engrossed as we usually are in more commonplace matters. Such stories, when studied together or chanted aloud, help join us to others and shape our identity as a community.⁹³

91. Adriane Leveen, “Storytelling in the Bible.” *The Jewish Bible: A JPS Guide*, ed. Shalom Paul, Fred Greenspahn, and Ziony Zevit (Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society, 2008), 57.

92. Ibid.

93. Ibid.

For the Christian, of course, Jesus Christ represents the highlight of history with respect to storytelling. The use of stories by our Lord was such a prominent feature that, on one occasion, Mark records in his Gospel, “He did not speak to them except in parables.”⁹⁴ The Christian teacher who looks to the Lord for a model will neither minimize the value of storytelling as a teaching technique nor relegate it to the world of children. Adults enjoy stories just as children do. Stories have an intrinsic value because they can bring pleasure, develop a feeling of fellowship and community, and foster attitudes of appreciation. Stories can arouse enthusiasm, inspire flights of imagination, and accomplish all this while inculcating us with our Christian heritage. In her book *Telling the Gospel through Story*, Christine Dillon emphasizes that stories change people, writing

People who are hostile to the gospel may become sympathetic. Those who see Jesus as a non-factor in their lives may begin to give him some consideration. Those distant from one another may gather into communities because of stories. Small groups may form around storytellers that eventually can lead to the development of new churches. People may develop new ways of understanding God, life, and the world.⁹⁵

94. Mark 4:34 NRSV

95. Christine Dillon, *Telling the Gospel Through Story* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 23–30.

Biblical stories have the power to change people's lives, to create community, and to transmit God's love. Any preacher wanting to use the tenets of conversational preaching and interested in effectiveness would be wise to add the skill of storytelling to his or her repertoire. In order to foster the skill of storytelling, there are some techniques one should understand and employ. I have adapted the following techniques from an online article by Doris Day that can be found at <http://www.biblestorytelling.org/devotions/W%20Storytelling%20Techniques%20PDF%207-24-13.pdf>.

Storytelling Techniques Guide

Be true to the Bible story when you tell it. Do not embellish the story. The Bible story you tell will be the oral Bible that the listeners hear and learn. Be yourself as you tell the story: God created you very special, so use your uniqueness and be natural. Seek to improve your storytelling. Gradually add some new techniques to improve your storytelling. Also, gain new insights as you listen and observe other storytellers. Here are some suggestions on storytelling techniques.

1. Storytelling Adventure

- Take your listeners on a storytelling adventure, without embellishing a story.
- Example: For the story of Jesus calming the storm, tell the story in such a way that the listeners mentally visualize the disciples on the boat terrified as the waves hit against the boat, all while Jesus lay asleep on a cushion at the stern of the boat. So the disciples woke Jesus up to save them from the storm.

2. Eyes

- Look at your listeners' faces, especially their eyes, as you tell the story.
- Stand where you can see all of the listeners and observe their reactions as you tell the story.
- Direct your eyes to show a character's social position in the story.
 - Examples: Look upward (praying to God, speaking to someone in authority, etc.); look downward (God speaking to man, ruler speaking to servant, etc.).

3. Facial Expressions and Body Position

- Show the mood of the character through your facial expressions.

- Use body positions and hand gestures to express the character’s attitude.
 - Examples: for happiness, smile on face, eyes alert, body relaxed; for sadness, frown on lips and forehead, shoulders hunched downward; for anger, stern look, clenched fists, body rigid.
- Do not let your gestures distract from the story.
 - Example: Waving your hands too much and constantly walking rapidly back and forth can distract the listeners from giving their full attention to hearing the story.
- Avoid having your back to the listeners. Listeners need to see your facial expressions, and people who have difficulty hearing will need to read your lips.

4. Voice

- Use a conversational tone.
- Speak loud enough that all of your listeners can hear you tell the story.
- Speak slowly enough to be understood. Speaking too fast will lose the listeners’ attention.
- Use tones to reflect a character’s attitude: sadness, happiness, bewilderment, anger, etc.
 - Example: For the story of Jonah, the captain went and woke him up. The captain asked Jonah, “How can you be sleeping during this terrible storm?” (Speak the captain’s question with firmness, authority, and a strong tone of voice.)

5. Pause

- Use a pause after a phrase to give emphasis to that particular phrase.

- Pauses can serve as oral quotation marks.
- Use a pause between an action and/or a change in location, so your listeners can catch up with that part of the story before starting another part of the story.
 - Example: For the story of the creation, pause between the end of one day's creation and the beginning of the next day's creation.

6. Dialogue

- Limit a dialogue to two characters at a time.
- Tell who is speaking and to whom he is speaking before each dialogue exchange.
 - Example: After Jesus' resurrection, Peter and six other disciples went fishing. Jesus appeared and prepared breakfast for His disciples. After eating, Jesus spoke to Peter. Jesus asked, "Peter, do you love Me more than these?" Peter replied, "Yes, my Lord, you know that I love You."
- Use the Storytelling V. What is the Storytelling V? During a dialogue, remain in one location but turn slightly to the right as a character speaks to someone. Then turn slightly to the left as the other character looks at the speaker and responds. Continue this movement throughout the dialogue.
- Keep the same position for each character throughout the dialogue.
 - Example: For the story of Jesus talking to Peter after His resurrection: Turn slightly to the right as Jesus looks at Peter and says, "Peter, do you love Me more than these?" Then turn slightly to the left as Peter looks at Jesus and responds, "Yes, my Lord, you know that I love You."
 - Continue this movement during the entire dialogue.

- Be careful to always look in the same direction when Jesus is speaking to Peter, and when Peter is speaking to Jesus.

7. Names of the Characters

- Limit the names of main characters in the story. Too many names distract the listeners.
- Change pronouns to proper names for main characters.
- Give role, position, or relationship for minor characters.
 - Example: For the story of David and Goliath,
 - the main characters are David, King Saul, and Goliath;
 - the minor characters are David's father, the enemy (Philistines), and David's brothers.

8. Scenery

- Stay within the vision of your listeners as you tell the story.
- Visualize stage scenes for the area where you will tell the story; then, within your stage, mark off scenes for locations, people, and events.
- Walk to or look at a particular area (scene) when telling that part of the story.
- Always keep the same location for a scene throughout the telling of the story.

Confusion results when you switch locations, especially for deaf people.

- Examples: For the creation story, decide where each scene is located on stage (water, land, etc.). Be sure to put the fish in the water and animals on dry land.
- For the story of Jesus and His seven disciples after His resurrection, decide where each scene is located on stage: the disciples fishing in the

boat, Jesus standing on the shore, eating breakfast, and Jesus speaking to Peter.

- Some people are very expressive and walk around as they tell the story. Other storytellers remain still, using their facial expressions and slight hand motions as they tell the story. Be yourself.

By using the expansive list denoted in the storytelling techniques guide, one can learn to be more expressive and tap into the multiple sensory channels of interpersonal communication, thereby ensuring the effectiveness of your message. Now, let us turn our attention to the idea of conveying the Holy within the context of conversational preaching.

Conveying the Holy

One of the most awesome tasks assigned to the ordained clergy is that of leading worship. Within the context of Episcopal liturgy and worship, the role of Presbyter or Celebrant is two-fold. The major service of weekly worship in the Episcopal Church is that of the celebration of Holy Eucharist each Sunday. The liturgical rite of Holy Eucharist is composed of two parts: the liturgy of the word and the liturgy of the table or sacrament. In both parts of the liturgy, it is the priestly duty to create an atmosphere conducive for worship. All aspects of interpersonal communications theory are in play for a leader of worship as they are in preaching the Gospel. The Celebrant's actions, facial expressions, and voice inflections can send the message loud and clear that what we are doing is part of the serious business of God. When a preacher takes his or her place within the midst of the congregation at the appointed homiletical time, many verbal

and nonverbal acts of communication have already taken place. Dr. Richard F. Ward spoke of this process concisely when he wrote

When a preacher stands alone to speak before a congregation, he or she is standing within an expanding swirl of ritual activity. . . . What the preacher is there to do is to bear public witness to God's ongoing communication and self-disclosure through Jesus Christ. . . . [to be the] mediator of God's grace. As a form of human expressive speech, preaching itself can be viewed as oral, visual, and kinesthetic action; full of meaning; and a punctuation mark within a "sacred ceremony that draws persons together in fellowship and commonality."⁹⁶

The idea to "bear public witness to God" is just an alternative expression for conveying the Holy. So how does one accomplish this feat to convey the Holy and/or bear witness to God in their preaching? Again, Dr. Ward's words are illuminating:

The preacher does this by lending human voice, body, personality, intellect, and attitude to make the oral text (sermon) visible, audible, intelligible, and evocative, *Preaching is "enfleshed" speech; it is a performed utterance. . . . It is the embodiment through speech and gesture of a Word that God has entrusted to that preacher for a given occasion*⁹⁷

In other words, this task, to convey the Holy and to bear witness to Christ, is a whole-body endeavor. The one called to this sacred trust must be more than proficient in speaking words, he or she must be able to "enflesh" the Word of God for the people of God and to be an expert at all the channels of nonverbal communications. Dr. Ward gives voice to these precepts when he writes

"Being present" to God, to the congregation, and to the message itself presses a preacher beyond mere display of vocal technique. . . . The one who preaches and who leads a congregation through the performance of liturgy, biblical text, and sermon does so in the presence of Christ and

96. Ward, *Speaking of the Holy*, 18.

97. *Ibid.*, 18–19.

therefore does so with reverence, love, and humility. One cultivates a style for speaking and leadership by maintaining a life of prayerful presence before God, understanding the purpose and intention of each act of worship, and becoming aware of the roles of posture, gesture, and eye contact in leading congregations through those acts of worship.⁹⁸

Dr. Ward encourages preachers to use the “dramatic character of human communication” to enliven their leading of worship and the delivery of God’s Word.⁹⁹ Dr. Ward is rightly calling us to use the tenets we learned in interpersonal communications theory and to become conversational preachers.

In this chapter, I began by defining what I mean by the term conversational preaching. Specifically, I defined the term as follows:

- Conversational preaching is the act of communicating the divine to another in a manner that is congruent with normal patterns of human speech and communication techniques. It has a two-fold purpose: to ensure effective transmission and reception of an intended sermon and to spark additional conversation between the sender of the sermon and the one who receives it and also between both the sender and receiver and God.

We next looked at the idea of a four-way conversation between the sender and God, between the sender and the receiver, between the receiver and the sender, and then hopefully between the receiver and God. We stated that the ultimate goal in conversational preaching is for those who receive the sermon message to have a conversation with God that leads to a change of heart, mind, or action. I next presented a new model for conversational preaching in which all of the tenets of interpersonal communications theory are present, along with the actions of a triune God and a God who communicates with us using channels of communication. We then turned our attention to the importance of storytelling within the Biblical text and how stories, properly told, have

98. Ward, *Speaking of the Holy*, 19.

99. *Ibid.*, 22.

the power to change people's lives, to create community, and to transmit God's love. We then examined a storytelling techniques guide that provided great insight into how to practice the art of storytelling. Finally, we looked at the concept of conveying the Holy and how the dramatic character of human communication can enliven the leading of worship and the delivery of God's Word. Now, let us turn our attention to ways to adopt and integrate the conversational preaching model.

Chapter 6

Adoption and Integration of the Conversational Preaching Model

To study communication is to examine the actual social process wherein significant symbolic forms are created and used.

—James Carey

Returning to our model for conversational preaching, it is clear that this is a method of preaching that is steeped in prayer. In conversational preaching, we tap into the divine eternal conversation between the creator God and God's most privilege creation, humanity. I contend that preaching is prayer! This is made implicit in the definition I have given for conversational preaching:

- Conversational preaching is the act of communicating the divine to another in a manner that is congruent with normal patterns of human speech and communication techniques. It has a two-fold purpose: to ensure effective transmission and reception of an intended sermon and to spark additional conversation between the sender of the sermon and the one who receives it and also between both the sender and receiver and God.

These conversations between the receiver and sender of a sermon and their Creator God can be characterized as prayer. This should be the hope of a preacher employing the conversational preaching model: that the Word of God imparted to those who would receive it would spark in the receivers' hearts the need, the desire, for more conversation with God in prayer. The prayerful nature of this method is graphically represented by the fact that the triune symbol for God (see fig. 2 in chapter 5) has no beginning and no end. It represents the eternal nature of God and the embeddedness in God's self of this ongoing conversation with humanity, this "God Talk" that has been with God's people since creation and will be with us through eternity. As I asserted earlier, preaching is

prayer! Conversational preaching taps into the continuing conversation of God in which we are transformed into God's likeness by the action of the Holy Spirit through prayer.

One of the ways that I propose to adopt and integrate the conversational preaching model is to use an acronym derived from the word "preach":

- **P**rayer
- **R**elevant
- **E**vocative
- **A**cting
- **C**onvey
- **H**oly

As indicated by the letter *P*, one must always begin the path toward crafting a sermon with prayer. Pray and ask God to be with you in the process. The *P* can also serve as a reminder to prepare. There is never any excuse for taking the gift of proclamation lightly. Take the time! Do the work!

The *R* is a reminder that each sermon must be relevant; it must touch the hungers of the human heart. A recitation of eighteenth-century German theological thought might be interesting in an academic setting, but it is not appropriate for a sermon. Think of the situation of your people. What are their wants, desires, fears, and dreams? These are the foundations for good sermons. Remember sermons are prayers and that these human emotions and feelings are already the fabric of your congregation's prayers and prayer lives. An effective sermon will join that conversation, give voice to their struggles, and remind people that they are not alone on their journeys.

The *E* reinforces the fact that good communication skills use language and symbols that spark the imagination and evoke feelings.

The *A* reminds the preacher of the need to use all of the channels of communication that are available to him or her. Preaching is a performance similar to acting. In preaching, we use our bodies to communicate. How we use our facial features, our hands, our eyes, and our posture all can go far toward ensuring that our intended message can be transmitted and received.

Together, the *C* and *H* are a reminder of the imperative to convey the Holy. This time set aside to examine and explore God's Word is sacred. It is "Holy time" and should be approached as such.

Developing a Formula for the Conversational Preaching Method

One of the ways that sermons can be developed is through the use of a formula. As a homiletics student in the M.Div. program at Virginia Theological Seminary (VTS), I was exposed to Paul Wilson's book *The Four Pages of a Sermon* and encouraged to use it in the development of a sermon. I remember Dr. Ruthanna Hooke condensing Dr. Wilson's book into the following formula:

1. Trouble in the text
2. Trouble in the world
3. Grace in the text
4. Grace in the world

The idea is that each of the four concentration areas represents one page of a sermon.

This advice was truly a godsend for me, and I know that, during the first three years of

my priesthood, almost all of my sermons had the imprint of Paul Wilson's book on them.

Now, the following is my formula for creating conversational sermons:

1. Start with prayer.
2. Evoke the imagination.
3. Relate the story, text, or passage to people's lives.
4. Always give them grace and hope even when challenging them to be transformed.
5. End with prayer.

I contend that, if conversational preaching is about tapping into the ongoing dialogical prayer between God and God's people, then it is only logical to begin with prayer.

Invoking the name of the Trinity is one way to acknowledge the prayerful nature of conversational preaching. The following are some examples of prayerful beginnings:

- "In the name of God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit." *Amen.*
- "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come."
Amen.
- "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ."
Amen.
- "Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my Strength and my Redeemer." *Amen.*

All of these will be familiar to anyone with an intimate knowledge of and experience with the Book of Common Prayer. I would also encourage all preachers to create a "prayer sentence" on their own such as the following:

- "Lord, anoint my speech and turn all of our hearts to you to receive what you have for us!" *Amen.*

- “Heavenly Father, be in our minds, on my lips, and in all our hearts!” *Amen.*
- “Come, Holy Spirit, Come!” *Amen.*

The use of a prayer sentence reminds the congregation that this is Holy time and reinforces the concept that preaching is part of the “talk” of God.

Now, we turn to the body of the sermon. Here, is where the preacher uses everything that he or she has learned from his/her studies of interpersonal communication skills in the delivery of a sermon. The preacher would do well to use as many sensory channels of communications as can be deployed. It is here where all the skills of storytelling, voice modulation, and facial and body expression, as well as drama and poetry reading skills come into play. One must remember to be vivid: to spark people’s imagination, to capture their attention, and to put them in a mindset to receive what is being offered. Above all, the message must be relevant. It must give voice to the desires, longings, and fears that people have. Martin Smith, a profound author and expert in spiritual direction and preaching, implores his students to “start with a sensory image to evoke an emotion and thereby induce attention.”¹⁰⁰ It is important to always leave the people with a sense of God’s grace and mercy. Nothing is more depressing than a sermon that is constantly pointing out our human frailty and ends with no sense of what to do with our missteps or failings. God is in the reconciling business and desires nothing more than to redeem us and to transform us. This is the work of God! This is God’s grace! This is the Christian message to the broken world!

Finally, each sermon should end with a prayer. This again reinforces the idea that preaching is prayer. One of the great skills I learned at VTS was how to pray in collect

100. Martin L. Smith, “Implanting the Word: Skills for Helping People Internalize Scripture’s Transformative Symbols.” Lecture, Theory and Practice of Ministry Course MNST 10061 from Sewanee School of Theology, The University of the South, Sewanee, TN, Summer 2016.

form. The following excerpt was taken from the website of Trinity Episcopal Church in Cranford, New Jersey, and does an excellent job of defining what a collect is and how it is formed:

What is a collect?

One of the treasures of our Episcopal Church is the collects. Archbishop Thomas Cranmer established our Book of Common Prayer in 1549, writing some collects and passing along other more ancient ones.

The Collect, which is said at the beginning of each Eucharistic rite, is a time of collective prayer. The celebrant opens by saying, “Let us pray.” Then there is silence as members of the congregation collect all their thoughts and prayers and, in essence, give them to the celebrant, who prays on behalf of all.

“Collect” comes from the Latin, meaning to gather, or a gathering. Collects are found in the Anglican and Roman Catholic, and Lutheran Churches, but are not used in the Greek or Eastern Orthodox, nor in other Protestant churches. They are venerable, pure, and meaningful parts of our liturgy.

Collects are said to “ask for one thing only”, and are generally focused on a single theme—as in the Collect for Grace and the Collect for Purity on pages 57 and 323 of the Book of Common Prayer, respectively. Collects are literary forms, as well, structured as are sonnets and odes.

First is an address to God, usually to God the Father, often preceded by a descriptor such as “almighty” or “merciful” or “eternal.”

Then the petition. Collects are generally singular in their petition, asking for forgiveness, protection, guidance, comfort, holiness, love, etc.

Next, what has been called the “aspiration” or the reason for the petition (“so that we . . .”). For example, the collect for All Saints’ Day: “Grant us grace so to follow thy blessed saints in all virtuous and godly living, that we may come to those ineffable joys . . .”

Finally, the doxology [or a petition to the Trinity], for instance “. . . In the Name of Jesus Christ”, which is a pleading, since it is through Jesus that we can draw near the Father.¹⁰¹

101. “What is a collect?” *Trinity Episcopal Church*. http://www.trinitycranford.org/?page_id=3830.

Teaching your congregants how to pray in collect form will help relieve some of the pressure people feel when asked to pray in public for example, if asked to give a prayer before the start of a meeting of a community organization. Assuming that everyone is of the Christian faith, a prayer in collect form such as the following might be appropriate for the meeting:

- Most Gracious God, we ask your blessing on our gathering to do work on behalf of our community. Give us wisdom and discernment as we make decisions here that will affect the lives of those with whom we live. All this we ask in the name of Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, One God, now and forever. *Amen.*

If the members are of interfaith backgrounds, the form of a collect can still be used but with any reference to the Christian understanding of God omitted. In the above example, the last sentence can be changed to “All this we ask in the name of God” to yield an ecumenical/interfaith prayer. Returning to the idea of concluding sermons with a prayer, I can think of no better place to use a short prayer in collect form. The concept of gathering the thoughts and precepts of a sermon seems perfect for creating ending prayer sentences in collect form to encapsulate what the sermon is about. Here are some examples of sermon themes and ending collects:

- Forgiveness
 - “Heavenly Father, you have taught us in your Holy Word to be people who practice forgiveness. Keep us ever mindful of the need to forgive and to be forgiven. All this we ask in the name of the triune God!” *Amen.*
- Faith
 - “Lord Jesus, you have given us an example of great faith in your life and death. Teach us to be faithful people so that the world might come to

know you through our life and actions. We ask this in your Holy name,
Jesus Christ.” *Amen.*

I will end this chapter with an example of one of my sermons that I wrote and delivered for the faculty and students of the Advanced Degree Program at the Sewanee School of Theology at the University of the South. This sermon was delivered at the noon celebration of the Eucharist. There is a major time restriction on these sermons, and students are instructed to keep the sermon to five minutes or less. Although this sermon is short in time duration, I tried to incorporate as many elements from my conversational preaching model as possible.

Boundaries!

By The Reverend Mike Sowards

Delivered to the students and faculty of the Sewanee School of Theology

at Sewanee, TN in the Summer of 2016

(This sermon had a five-minute time limit)

Gospel: Matt. 7:6, 12–14

“Do not give what is holy to dogs; and do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under foot and turn and maul you. “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets. “Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it.¹⁰²

In the Name of God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit! *Amen.*

Some 40 years and approximately 120 lbs. ago—the significance of that fact will be made apparent in a few minutes—I spent a summer living on my Grandfather’s farm in rural, southern West Virginia. My Grandfather had remarried again later in life and had started a second family of which there were eight children. The oldest of which, Rocky, and I were just one month apart. My Grandfather’s farm consisted of three very large garden plots as well as a chicken house and a large nasty, stinky pig pen. In this pig pen lived two very large sows and a litter of piglets that had been born that spring. One of my chores that summer was to take all of the leftover food scrapes from all of the day’s meals and go and “slop the pigs.” I approached this chore with much anxiety and trepidation every day. Well first of all the pig pen stunk! And, secondly, these sows were

102. Matt. 7:6, 12–14 NRSV.

HUGE! Of course it didn't help that my country-raised step uncles had plied me with stories about how the farmer in the "next holler" had suffered a heart attack while feeding his pigs, had fell into the pen and been eaten! Well this city boy was having none of that. Those pigs got their slop as quickly as I could fill up their troughs and I got the heck out of there! There was no way I was going to allow those sows a crack at me!

One Saturday morning a pickup truck with wire cages drove into the yard. My Grandfather had decided to sell some of the spring piglets and this man was coming to pay for and collect his new pigs. I watched with fascination as my step-uncles reached into the pen and pulled up these piglets by their hind legs. There was such a cacophony of noise like you have never heard. The piglets were squealing and the sows were grunting and my step uncles were laughing—it was crazy delightful! Barnyard madness! Well my step-uncles were smart enough to catch the piglets away from the watchful eye of the sows. But, not this city boy! It looked like fun so I leaned over the wooden enclosure that was the pig pen and I secured one of those piglets by the leg and I got just the reaction I was looking for. That piglet let out a squeal and started flopping around and gyrating wildly. But, I had made a BIG mistake. You see I had picked up that piglet right in front of its mother and that 400-plus-pound sow was not happy about what I had done. All of a sudden this humongous beast, which I had been warned can eat and kill a man, came charging toward the rickety wooden enclosure and head butted the fence, all in an attempt to kill me and rescue her piglet. I remember hearing my Grandfather's voice shouting at me to drop that piglet and to get out of there. Well I didn't need to be told twice, and as I dropped that piglet back into the pen, the sow made another attempt to get to me, and this time, I knew I was in trouble when I heard boards cracking and breaking. On the third

attempt, that sow was free and she had murderous intentions on my poor feeble frame. This is where the fact that I was 120 pounds lighter than I am today helped save my life. Approximately 40 yards from the pig pen stood an old poplar tree. I, doing my best imitation of Jesse Owens and Tarzan, made haste to the safety of that tree. I was about five feet off the ground when I felt the earth shudder beneath me. That sow had run into the tree trying to get to me. Fortunately for me, she hit the tree so hard that it caused her to fall over on her side. I was probably in that tree no more than five minutes max—just time enough for my Grandfather to secure the sow and place me out of harm’s way. But in that five minutes something very important came to me. What came to me was the importance of boundaries. Sows and piglets belonged on one side of a fence and I belonged on the other.

I believe that what is at the heart of today’s Gospel is a lesson about boundaries. The Epistle writer of First Peter reminds us that “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.” We are that which is precious to God! We have been made Holy by God through the power of the Holy Spirit. We need to realize that there are many dog kennels and pigsties that are dangerous to our well-being and to our souls. We must avoid the kennels of self-righteousness or the pigsties of disinterestedness that can trample our spirituality and maul us to death with indifference. There are places where the boundaries need to remain clear. Sometimes we are called to be witnesses to God’s reconciling love without being scarred and mauled in the process. Please hear me: I’m not talking about not getting down and dirty with the world. That is what Jesus has called us to do. I’m talking about wisdom and discernment

that allows us to continue to be ambassadors for Christ and at the same time keep us safe. Remember the words of the Gospel writer of Matthew: “for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction.” Every now and again, we need the narrow path of a spiritual poplar tree; a place where we can have protection—a place where we can be safe.

Let us pray:

Most Gracious and Holy God, we give thanks for your providence and love toward us and we know that we are precious in your sight. We ask that you would give us wisdom and discernment in deciphering the needed boundaries of our lives. All this we ask in the name of your son Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit; One God in glory everlasting. *Amen.*

Chapter 7

Life-long Practices of Interpersonal Communication Skills and Conversational Preaching

Practice is the hardest part of learning, and training is the essence of transformation.

—Ann Voskamp

Practice makes the master.

—Patrick Rothfuss

At this point, I hope that you are convinced of the merits and necessity of employing the principles of interpersonal communication skills and conversational preaching in the pulpit. The question arises: Where can one go for additional training and/or to practice these skills? The good news is that there are plenty of places one can go to hone his or her communication skills and the art of public speaking. In this chapter, I discuss the opportunities to improve one's skills in three main areas: preaching, public speaking, and drama skills.

Preaching

As discussed in chapter 4 in relation to the topic of feedback, preaching colloquies and preaching feedback groups are simple and inexpensive ways to start working on the craft of preaching. Recall that a preaching colloquy consists of fellow preachers who might not have had any training in homiletics since their seminary training and that a preaching feedback group can consist of professional and nonprofessional laity.

Regardless of the group used, it is important that all members understand and make use of the tools for feedback provided in chapter 4 with regard to the sandwich method, whereby all constructive criticism is sandwiched between positive affirmation statements.

Another way to help improve one's preaching skills is to attend a Doctor of Ministry program with a concentration in preaching. This might sound simple, but it is not. Most Doctor of Ministry programs fail to offer a concentration in preaching, and attending any further education program requires a consideration of family and work schedules, as well as finances. However, if the opportunity is available, then this is an excellent option for meeting skilled faculty and colleagues and working on preaching skills. Another possibility is to get involved with preaching events and seminars. The Episcopal Preaching Foundation offers periodic training throughout the country that provides an outstanding opportunity for learning some skills. You can find a schedule of upcoming events for the Episcopal Preaching Foundation at <http://www.preachingfoundation.org/event/>. Those living or working near a seminary might also have an opportunity to attend seminars and workshops offered there. Just a cursory search online for preaching organizations and seminars produced over 700,000 hits.

Public Speaking

Depending on one's location, many organizations dedicated to public speaking are available. The most famous of these is Toastmasters International, whose website is full of information about where current groups are meeting and also how to start a new Toastmasters International chapter. Information can be found at www.toastmasters.org.

Another option is the National Speakers Association, which provides resources and information on conferences and seminars at its website, www.nsaspeaker.org. One of the approaches I have used is to get involved with a local civic group. Clubs such as Kiwanis International, Lions Club International, the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW),

and the Rotary Club all afford people the opportunity to practice public speaking and have the added advantage of helping the community and affording community networking contacts. Another good source for training in public speaking is local colleges or universities. There are normally credit and noncredit offerings to fit various financial situations. The website of the Advanced Public Speaking Institute (<http://www.public-speaking.org/speaking-resources.htm>) also has many different links to speaking organizations, as well as resources for speaker training.

Drama

Because, as discussed earlier, there is a strong connection between the skills employed with acting and drama and the effective delivery of a sermon, it only seems right that opportunities to learn and refine acting skills would also support improved preaching skills. As might be expected, fewer organizations are available for this kind of training than for the two areas that were already discussed. Again, local community colleges or universities might offer courses in drama and play acting. Another excellent resource is the local theater. Many times, these local play companies are operated by professionally trained actors who develop local amateur talent to put on productions. In my small, fairly rural area of Collegeville, Pennsylvania, there are more than ten local area play companies who are always looking for new talent and for those willing to put in effort and learn lines.

Storytelling

The mastery and artistry of a good storyteller is something wonderful to behold. The popularity of celebrities such as Garrison Keillor attests to this fact. He has a wonderful ability to spin a yarn and keep people mesmerized and on the edge of their

seats waiting with anticipation for what will happen next. There are probably great storytellers in every community. You can often find these masters of the spoken word reading books to children at the local library. Another source for finding mentors in the craft of storytelling is, again, the local college or university. One of the most wonderful events that I have had the pleasure of attending is the National Storytelling Festival held every October in Jonesboro, Tennessee. This year, one of the featured speakers is Barbara McBride-Smith who is an expert in Biblical storytelling. The following is an excerpt from an introductory biography found on the National Storytelling Festival website:

Barbara McBride-Smith transports audiences from the ancient world of the Greek gods and goddesses to the eclectic shenanigans of her Baby Boomer generation. She midrases the lives of Biblical saints and sinners and interprets folklore with the style of a Texas-born cheerleader.

McBride-Smith, who travels nationally, has been featured on NPR, authored two books, and contributed to the multi-volume series, *The Storytellers Companion to the Bible*. She is the recipient of the NSN ORACLE Circle of Excellence and the American Library Association's 'Top Ten Titles' awards.

"Her stories will make you laugh . . . break your heart, and give you a new take on the struggles of 'we mortals' to live our lives on this earth."¹⁰³

What is evident is that McBride-Smith has tapped into all the various channels of communication and is an expert at using symbols and imagery to evoke emotions and feelings.

The National Storytelling Festival is not the only storytelling festival. Festivals dedicated to storytelling occur all over the country. Just a cursory check on Google produced eleven other festivals stretching from Florida to Ohio and from Nebraska to New York.

103. <http://www.storytellingcenter.net/festival/featured-tellers/barbara-mcbride-smith/>.

Dance

Georganne Spruce, an avid dancer and author has pointed out that dance has wonderful benefits for a person's physical wellbeing, as well as their spiritual life. Spruce wrote:

Dance has often been at the core of my spiritual life. Now, when I want to escape into joy or de-stress, I turn on music and dance around the house by myself. It is a perfect way to lift my vibration and chase away the blues! Dancing stimulates the release of endorphins which reduces pain and gives us a natural high in addition to increasing our metabolism and blood flow. During the sixties and seventies when so many people I knew were doing drugs, I was never interested because dancing gave me a high in a natural way.

Not only is dance good for us physically, it can also affect us emotionally in very positive ways. Over the years, I've met people who grew up in families where they were taught that any strong or passionate expression of emotion was not acceptable, especially if it was negative. In other instances, people I know needed to hide who they really were or what they thought out of fear that the truth would damage their relationships. Keeping our feelings hidden like this creates tension in the body and shrinks who we are, restricting our ability to express.¹⁰⁴

Dance uses the language of body to communicate emotions to the observer. The grace with which a dancer can fluidly convey emotions is amazingly effective. Although I am not a dancer, I do see value in learning to communicate emotion through the use of the body in the act of dancing. Dancing does not need to be ballet. There are many forms of dancing from ballroom dancing to country line dancing to disco dancing. All forms of dance are expressive arts through which one can learn to use one's body in a communicative way. There are normally many dance studios that cater to those wishing to learn to dance. Preachers who learn to appreciate the art form of dance and can use the body to communicate their messages will be more effective.

104. Georganne Spruce, *Awakening to the Dance: A Journey to Wholeness* (Georganne Spruce, 2012), excerpted at <https://georgannespruce.com/2012/02/01/dancing-to-free-our-emotions/>.

Prayer Practices

Another wonderful tool for helping preachers learn to speak the language of God and to incorporate symbolism and imagery into their preaching is to practice differing prayer methods. One of the most effective prayer methods for accomplishing this is the Ignatius prayer method. This method is designed to use all of the sensory systems, which, as we know, are channels of communication by which God can speak to us. The following is a guide for practicing Ignatius prayer:

St. Ignatius of Loyola taught a form of reflective prayer, also known as meditation, that invites you to use your mind and imagination to engage in prayerful conversation with God and to recognize his presence in your daily life. Reflective prayer involves the following simple steps.

- Find a quiet place where you can be alone for 10 or 15 minutes. Assume a comfortable position and, if you wish, close your eyes or focus on a religious picture or a lighted candle. If you wish, play soft background music to help establish a prayerful mood. Become aware of God's presence and ask the Holy Spirit to guide your prayer.
- Take 2 or 3 minutes to practice rhythmic breathing—counting to three slowly and silently while breathing in and counting slowly to five while breathing out—to help concentration. If you become distracted, return to concentrating on your breathing and let the distractions go by so that you can turn your heart back to God. Likewise, you can choose a special word or phrase, such as Jesus or My Lord and My God, and repeat it when you are distracted to bring your attention back to God's presence.
- Select a brief passage from Scripture and prayerfully read it. If the passage you select is a Gospel story, use your five senses to imagine yourself as a participant in the story (What can you see? What sounds do you hear? What can you feel?). Imagine a setting in which you can talk with Jesus and listen to him speak to you. You can respond to what Jesus is saying or doing in the story, or you can simply talk about something that has happened to you recently or about a forthcoming event in your life.
- In addition to using Scripture in your reflection, you can also use writings from or about the saints as well as other inspirational

literature or prayer books. Likewise, you can choose to concentrate on a sacred object such as a crucifix, or reflect on a sacred image, such as an icon of Jesus or a favorite saint. Take this time to talk to God as you would to a friend.

- Close with one or two minutes of contemplation, time to rest silently in God's presence. As adults, we come to recognize more and more that God speaks to us using the language of silence. Take a few moments at the end of your reflection to enter into a few silent moments with God.

Through reflective prayer you can begin to more readily recognize God's presence in your daily life.¹⁰⁵

By practicing this method and tapping into the sensory systems and channels of communication that are available to each person internally, one can begin to think in a new way and to read scripture differently. By using the Ignatius prayer method, one can begin to train his or her brain to look for the symbols and imagery inherent in scripture and then be able to use those symbols and imagery in the composing of a sermon.

Regardless of the organizations or skills used by an individual, a commitment to the art of preaching and to acquiring and honing his/her craft will make him/her a better communicator and thus a better preacher.

105. Joe Paprocki, "Praying the Ignatian Way," *Loyola Press*. <http://www.loyolapress.com/our-catholic-faith/ignatian-spirituality/examen-and-ignatian-prayer/praying-the-ignatian-way-reflective-prayer>.

Chapter 8

Summary and Conclusions

The preacher as a communicator of God’s Word and a conveyer of things Holy was the premise that began this work. If someone is called by God to this awesome vocation, then the need to develop skills and tools to be proficient in the task is self-evident. To engage in effective communication, there needs to be a set of agreed-upon symbols and word definitions that are used in the exchange of ideas between persons. This agreed-upon set of symbols and word definitions is what we commonly call “language”. I explored how channels of communication are open through our sensory systems that help facilitate the transfer of messages. The “talk” of people can also be blocked by noise that can stop or distort signals. I investigated the idea that Christianity is unique and has a “cultural-linguistic tradition” all its own. The need to teach our people this tradition and to educate them with the knowledge of the cultural-linguistic tradition was explored. From our investigation of the aspects of interpersonal communications theory, I defined what is meant by the term “conversational preaching” and created a model to illustrate its use. I also developed the following acronym to help remember the tenets of conversational preaching:

- **P**rayer
- **R**elevant
- **E**vocative
- **A**cting
- **C**onvey
- **H**oly

Next I developed a formula for creating conversational sermons:

1. Start with prayer.
2. Evoke the imagination.
3. Relate the story, text, or passage to people's life.
4. Always give them grace and hope even when challenging them to be transformed.
5. End with prayer.

I also provided an example of such a sermon and have included other sermons of my own in Appendix A. Finally, I offered some resources to help the interested individual in acquiring new skills and competencies to be used in the crafting and delivering of sermons. My fervent prayer is that all preachers of God's Word will take preaching seriously and might find something in this work that will support them in that endeavor.

Blessings and Peace!

Appendix A

Sermons

Christmas Eve Sermon

By The Reverend Mike Sowards

Delivered to the people of St. James' Episcopal Church in Colledgeville, PA

Christmas Eve 2014

Gospel: Luke 2:1–20

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.¹⁰⁶

Let us pray:

106. Luke 2:1–20 NRSV.

Heavenly Father, anoint my words and all our hearts to receive what you have in store for us! *Amen.*

“So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in a manger.”

Oh what a night! In today’s gospel we hear the familiar story that warms our hearts. This is the Gospel according to Luke used in the Charlie Brown Christmas story! This is the beauty of a nativity scene! This is the stuff of Hallmark cards and banners. This is the story that warms our hearts and lets us know it is Christmas. It’s time for hot chocolate and cookies, time for gingerbread men and fruitcake, time for football and family. But the first Christmas was far from the bucolic scene that we have had imprinted on us by advertising execs of Madison Ave. The first Christmas was filled with apprehension and fear. Mary is getting ready to deliver her child far from the comforts of her family and friends at home in Nazareth. Joseph knows that Mary’s time is near and he is desperately trying to find a place out of the harshness of the Bethlehem streets in which this promised child of God can be born. In exhaustion and frustration, Joseph finds the only place available. God incarnate came to us in weakness, in a dirty barn. The Word incarnate was placed in a manger, an animal feeding trough, in scraps of cloth. God did not come into this world in a sterile hospital environment. His air that he breathed wasn’t filtered and fresh. God came into this world surrounded by the stench of animal sweat and waste, by the sound of the wind and weather creaking through the planks of a barn. Humble and lowly are the nice words we put on it. Filthy and poor seems more accurate but less likely to be used in a hymn or on a Christmas card. This baseness, this beginning in poverty seems to be just what God wanted! Not only does God come to us vulnerable and without means, the annunciation of this miracle, this in-breaking of God, is not

announced by heralds and Kingly proclamations. The first announcement of this miracle, this amazing thing that God in God's self has taken on human form, comes to the other, the outcast, to those most ridiculed and despised, to those who also have nothing: to shepherds watching their own filthy animals, who also know the smell of animal sweat and waste, to ones who understand the function and meaning of an animal trough, a manger. It is to this barn, this manger, this animal trough, that the outcasts of Jewish society, the shepherds, make their way. I can imagine what an exhausted Mary thought as shepherds invaded the semiprivate accommodations of the barn. I imagined she thought—great! more animals - more animal sweat - more stench. I'm sure both Mary and Joseph appreciated the testimony of the shepherds. Their encounter with angels only reinforces their own remembrance of their own encounter with angels. This is the promised child! This is God's Son! How can this be happening in a barn! Why is it that the only place for me to lay my child, this child, this promised child of God, is in a feeding trough in a manger? But, as I reflect of the awesomeness and benevolence of God, there is really only one place for the savior of the world to come into this world and rest his head. There is only one place that would be the most appropriate and that place would be made of wood, a place where God's creation congregates and is feed. An animal table if you will—a place of nourishment and sustenance—a manger. It is from this wooden table, this manger, that this child grows into manhood and accepts his divinity and his destiny. It is at another wooden trough, a wooden table, where the savior and redeemer of the world takes the unleavened bread of the Passover meal and the wine used in that celebration and he infuses them with new meaning. This is my body! This is my blood! Spiritual food for spiritual people! This man, this God incarnate also instructs

his followers. Love your neighbor as yourself! Feed my sheep! Clothe my people! Visit my sick! My Prisoners! My people who are outcast! The Lowly! The Poor! The people like me! For over two thousand years, people of God have gathered around wooden structures, communion tables, a feeding place, to remember the awesomeness of God who came to all of us and took on human form. God came into the world in a feeding trough and God still feeds God's people today in the sacrament of his body and blood. God feeds God's people in order for us to go into the world and to share God's love. How many barns are there in this world that is in need of God's mercy! How many places of fear, hunger and oppression? Do we see the needy? Do we recognize that there are people suffering? Do we try and insulate ourselves from the suffering of others because it puts a damper on our Holliday celebrations? Do we say, we will worry about those in need later, today is about abundance and joy, about peace on earth and beautiful nativity scenes. We have gathered here today to celebrate the birth of our savior, let us never forget God's humble beginnings. Let us come again as a community once more, around this table, our manger, and let us be feed by the one and only True God. Thank you God for coming to us in human form! Thank you God for feeding us with your body and blood! Thank you for reminding us that it is not about power and privilege. It is not about material gain and comfort; it is about the other. On this Christmas, may the Holy Spirit of God infuse us with his power and may we be living sacraments, outward and visible signs of God's inward and spiritual grace. May we feed on the goodness of God at this table, our manger, and then may we be transformed to invite others to come and feast with us. The world needs this meal, this bread, and this wine. This is the meal that will break down all

divisions and heal this broken world. Come, let us go with haste and find Christ again at the manger! *Amen.*

Sermon on the Mount

By The Reverend Mike Sowards

Delivered to the students and faculty of the Sewanee School of Theology

at Sewanee, TN, in the Summer of 2015

(This sermon had a five-minute time limit)

Gospel: Matthew 5:1–11

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.” “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.” “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.” “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.” “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.” “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.” “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.”¹⁰⁷

In the name of God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit!

“Blessed are . . . for they will!” A large crowd has gathered to hear the new preacher, Jesus of Nazareth. No doubt his reputation as a miracle worker and his great oratory prowess and prompted such a gathering of the people. Jesus sits down and begins to declare to them their blessedness! No doubt Jesus saw many nodding heads as he began his teaching. “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God!” “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted!” Yes! Yes! Preacher, we

107. Matt. 5: 1–11 NRSV.

know these promises declared to us by the Great Prophet Isaiah. “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled!” Yes, Preacher, we heard that one too—that is found in the Psalms. “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy!” It was probably around this point that the crowd begins to realize that there is something different in this teaching. Jesus is not just reminding them of the promises of God declared to them from the past. Jesus is saying that this is a reality that is now. Jesus is declaring on his authority that the promises of God are true and that the Kingdom of God is here and among them. Wait a minute, preacher; are you saying that we are Blessed Now? Don’t you see that we are occupied by a foreign power? We are being taxed to death and our people are being killed for the slightest offense. Yes I believe in the promises of God, Yes I believe that God will set things right! Yes I am looking forward to the Messianic age where the land will be restored and there will be peace but Now—in the midst of all this suffering—You are saying we are Blessed! Yes, Jesus tells them. Yes, you are blessed! This is a reality promised to you by divine action! You are to proclaim this reality and live into its promises. You are to bring into being that which God has declared. The Beatitudes are still prescriptive for our relationship with God and humanity today as they were for that Galilean crowd gathered around Jesus on that hillside. You are blessed! Now work for peace despite the fact that there is violence all around you. You are blessed! Now strive for righteousness in a world that has forgotten God and seems to have no morals. You are blessed! Now comfort the sick, the friendless and the needy!

You are blessed! Now strive for justice and respect the dignity of every human being. You are blessed! You are blessed! The Beatitudes are not just a declaration of

God's grace; they are also a call to action. A call to live into a divine reality and a call to make that reality manifest to a broken world. "Blessed are . . . for they will!" Amen!

Good Friday Sermon

By The Reverend Mike Sowards

Delivered to the people of St. James' Episcopal Church in Collegeville, PA

Good Friday 2013

Gospel: John 18:1–19:22

(I feel that this is a good example of using storytelling in a sermon)

After Jesus had spoken these words, he went out with his disciples across the Kidron valley to a place where there was a garden, which he and his disciples entered. Now Judas, who betrayed him, also knew the place, because Jesus often met there with his disciples. So Judas brought a detachment of soldiers together with police from the chief priests and the Pharisees, and they came there with lanterns and torches and weapons. Then Jesus, knowing all that was to happen to him, came forward and asked them, "For whom are you looking?" They answered, "Jesus of Nazareth." Jesus replied, "I am he." Judas, who betrayed him, was standing with them. When Jesus said to them, "I am he," they stepped back and fell to the ground. Again he asked them, "For whom are you looking?" And they said, "Jesus of Nazareth." Jesus answered, "I told you that I am he. So if you are looking for me, let these men go." This was to fulfil the word that he had spoken, "I did not lose a single one of those whom you gave me." Then Simon Peter, who had a sword, drew it, struck the high priest's slave, and cut off his right ear. The slave's name was Malchus. Jesus said to Peter, "Put your sword back into its sheath. Am I not to drink the cup that the Father has given me?" So the soldiers, their officer, and the Jewish police arrested Jesus and bound him. First they took him to Annas, who was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, the high priest that year. Caiaphas was the one who had advised the Jews that it was better to have one person die for the people. Simon Peter and another disciple followed Jesus. Since that disciple was known to the high priest, he went with Jesus into the courtyard of the high priest, but Peter was standing outside at the gate. So the other disciple, who was known to the high priest, went out, spoke to the woman who guarded the gate, and brought Peter in. The woman said to Peter, "You are not also one of this man's disciples, are you?" He said, "I am not." Now the slaves and the police had made a charcoal fire because it was cold, and they were standing round it and warming themselves. Peter also was standing with them and warming himself. Then the high priest questioned Jesus about his disciples and about his teaching. Jesus answered, "I have spoken openly to the world; I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all the Jews come together. I have said nothing in secret. Why do you ask me? Ask those who heard what I

said to them; they know what I said.” When he had said this, one of the police standing nearby struck Jesus on the face, saying, “Is that how you answer the high priest?” Jesus answered, “If I have spoken wrongly, testify to the wrong. But if I have spoken rightly, why do you strike me?” Then Annas sent him bound to Caiaphas the high priest. Now Simon Peter was standing and warming himself. They asked him, “You are not also one of his disciples, are you?” He denied it and said, “I am not.” One of the slaves of the high priest, a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, asked, “Did I not see you in the garden with him?” Again Peter denied it, and at that moment the cock crowed. Then they took Jesus from Caiaphas to Pilate’s headquarters. It was early in the morning. They themselves did not enter the headquarters, so as to avoid ritual defilement and to be able to eat the Passover. So Pilate went out to them and said, “What accusation do you bring against this man?” They answered, “If this man were not a criminal, we would not have handed him over to you.” Pilate said to them, “Take him yourselves and judge him according to your law.” The Jews replied, “We are not permitted to put anyone to death.” (This was to fulfil what Jesus had said when he indicated the kind of death he was to die.) Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” Jesus answered, “Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?” Pilate replied, “I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?” Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.” Pilate asked him, “So you are a king?” Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.” Pilate asked him, “What is truth?” After he had said this, he went out to the Jews again and told them, “I find no case against him. But you have a custom that I release someone for you at the Passover. Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?” They shouted in reply, “Not this man, but Barabbas!” Now Barabbas was a bandit. Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged. And the soldiers wove a crown of thorns and put it on his head, and they dressed him in a purple robe. They kept coming up to him, saying, “Hail, King of the Jews!” and striking him on the face. Pilate went out again and said to them, “Look, I am bringing him out to you to let you know that I find no case against him.” So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, “Here is the man!” When the chief priests and the police saw him, they shouted, “Crucify him! Crucify him!” Pilate said to them, “Take him yourselves and crucify him; I find no case against him.” The Jews answered him, “We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because he has claimed to be the Son of God.” Now when Pilate heard this, he was more afraid than ever. He entered his headquarters again and asked Jesus, “Where are you from?” But Jesus gave him no answer. Pilate therefore said to him, “Do you refuse to speak to me? Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?” Jesus answered him, “You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above; therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin.” From then on Pilate

tried to release him, but the Jews cried out, "If you release this man, you are no friend of the emperor. Everyone who claims to be a king sets himself against the emperor." When Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus outside and sat on the judge's bench at a place called The Stone Pavement, or in Hebrew Gabbatha. Now it was the day of Preparation for the Passover; and it was about noon. He said to the Jews, "Here is your King!" They cried out, "Away with him! Away with him! Crucify him!" Pilate asked them, "Shall I crucify your King?" The chief priests answered, "We have no king but the emperor." Then he handed him over to them to be crucified. So they took Jesus; and carrying the cross by himself, he went out to what is called The Place of the Skull, which in Hebrew is called Golgotha. There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, with Jesus between them. Pilate also had an inscription written and put on the cross. It read, "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews." Many of the Jews read this inscription, because the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city; and it was written in Hebrew, in Latin, and in Greek. Then the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate, "Do not write, 'The King of the Jews,' but 'This man said, I am King of the Jews.'" Pilate answered, "What I have written I have written." When the soldiers had crucified Jesus, they took his clothes and divided them into four parts, one for each soldier. They also took his tunic; now the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece from the top. So they said to one another, "Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it to see who will get it." This was to fulfil what the scripture says, "They divided my clothes among themselves, and for my clothing they cast lots." And that is what the soldiers did. Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son." Then he said to the disciple, "Here is your mother." And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home. After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfil the scripture), "I am thirsty." A jar full of sour wine was standing there. So they put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth. When Jesus had received the wine, he said, "It is finished." Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. Since it was the day of Preparation, the Jews did not want the bodies left on the cross during the Sabbath, especially because that Sabbath was a day of great solemnity. So they asked Pilate to have the legs of the crucified men broken and the bodies removed. Then the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first and of the other who had been crucified with him. But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. Instead, one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once blood and water came out. (He who saw this has testified so that you also might believe. His testimony is true, and he knows that he tells the truth.) These things occurred so that the scripture might be fulfilled, "None of his bones shall be broken." And again another passage of scripture says, "They will look on the one whom they have pierced." After these things, Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one because of his fear of the Jews, asked Pilate to let him take away the body of Jesus. Pilate gave him permission; so he came and removed his body. Nicodemus, who had at first come

to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews. Now there was a garden in the place where he was crucified, and in the garden there was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid. And so, because it was the Jewish day of Preparation, and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.¹⁰⁸

In the name of God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit! *Amen.*

Dear Lucinda, It's Thursday evening here at the barracks and I am trying to finish this letter and get it off to you before going to bed. Me, and the boys from the village, you remember Cato, Gaius, and Valentus, we all got an "Outstanding" on our personnel inspection last week, so we get the prize duty of being the guards at Pontius Pilate's headquarters tomorrow. The food at the palace is much better than the mess hall here, which I thank Caesar and Jupiter for. Things are a little crazy here in Jerusalem this week; there is some kind of festival going on and we are all on high alert. I hope it stays quiet. Enough about me and my crazy life. I miss you and I miss our little Julius. Only three more months and this deployment will be over. Give our son a kiss from his dad and know that you are the love of my life. Better close to ensure you get this. Me and the boys are planning to go fishing on the Sea of Tiberius this Saturday. Here is hoping for a good Friday and a great weekend. I love you! Your husband, Brutus

With his letter done, the soldier traipses off to the postmaster so that he can turn in early and dream about all the good food there is at the palace. At approximately 4:30 on Friday morning, Brutus and his companions are roused by the duty officer who orders them to "Hurry and eat and get over to the palace—there seems to be some commotion

¹⁰⁸ John 18:1–19:42 NRSV.

going on.” At close to 6:00 AM, just as the sun is starting to break through the horizon, Brutus and his three companions arrive at the palace and check in with the Captain of the Guard. “What’s with the crowd?” Brutus asks.

“Oh it’s the Sanhedrin. They have arrested someone for blasphemy or treason or something like that, and they seem really angry.” “Where do you want us?” asks Brutus. “Take your squad into the inner court yard and wait for instructions.”

So the four walk toward the inner courtyard with dread. They know this place well. It is a place where the floggings take place. It is a place of blood and dirt and pain. Brutus says to Cato, “You seem to understand their language. Can you tell me what they’re shouting?” Cato replies, “It seems that they are changing their charge. They’re saying that he claims to be a King and they are saying they have no King but Caesar. And we all know how much they love our Caesar!”

Gaius breaks the levity and says to Brutus: “Hey! Here they come bringing the poor fellow. You know what’s next.” And as they anticipated, they are given orders to flog the prisoner: “Give him 30 lashes, and when you are done, put this crown of thorns on his head and this purple robe on him and bring him back to us.”

“Yes sir!” shouts Brutus, and he gives the order to have the man stripped and tied to the post for the flogging. Brutus hates this part of his job. He knows that he could order any one of the three of his friends to do it—but, if he does, he knows that the teasing will begin again on how he is soft and has no stomach for being a Roman soldier. So with dogged determination, Brutus takes the whip, the instrument of flogging, the seven-leather-cord whip with glass and stones embedded in the cords, and he begins his task.

After the fifth stroke, Brutus starts to think something is off: *I hear his cries of pain yet—yet—that’s it! He is not cursing us! They always curse us. He seems . . . resigned to it.*

Brutus finishes the task: 29 . . . 30. The whip has done its job! The prisoner’s back has been flayed, and as they lift him from the post—on legs wobbling from pain—the prisoner looks at Brutus. Brutus thinks: *Wow that was strange! What kind of look was that? I’ve seen that look before but . . . Oh snap out of it, Brutus! Just get the robe and the crown on him and get him back to Pilate. By Jupiter, I hope that is the last I see of that man!*

The prisoner is clothed as ordered and returned to the palace guards. The guards seem to get a kick out of the idea of the prisoner being a king and begin to mock him and hit him on the head, driving the crown of thorns into the man’s scalp. Brutus thinks: *I hope Pilate releases this guy. After that flogging, I think he has had enough.*

So Brutus and his companions go about the task of cleaning up. Valentus thinks: *Anyone who saw that would never call Brutus soft again.*

With the task of cleanup about complete, the four soldiers hear the shouts of the crowd again. This time, Brutus doesn’t need Cato to interpret for him. He hears what they’re shouting. He knows what they want. Gaius breaks the silence and states what all four of them have been thinking: “You think they’re really going to crucify that fellow?”

Brutus thinks, *By Jupiter, I hope not.* Brutus is thinking what they are all thinking: *Crucifixion takes hours . . . More blood . . . more dirt . . . more pain.*

Sure enough, their thoughts are broken when the palace guards bring the prisoner back, hand Brutus a plaque, and tell him to take the prisoner to the hill designated outside the city and to crucify him. Valentus asks: “What’s on the plaque.” Cato answers: “It

says 'Jesus of Nazareth - King of the Jews.' Cato remarks: "They must have wanted everyone to know his crime because they wrote it in Latin, Aramaic, and Greek."

As Valentus and Gaius take hold of the man, Jesus looks at Brutus again. Brutus thinks: *There's that look again! I know I have seen that look before. Why is he looking at me like that?*

Cato breaks his thoughts and says to Brutus: "Who is going to carry the cross for the crucifixion? I'm not sure this guy can make it. Boy, you really gave it to him Brutus." Brutus tells Cato to shut up "Let's go. He can carry his own cross."

So the four make their way with their prisoner toward the execution site. They have barely begun their journey when the prisoner falls. Brutus thinks: *That's odd., Besides the sound of his labored breathing and the grunts of pain, we have heard nothing from this guy.* Brutus commands the prisoner to stand and pick up that beam, and as he does, the prisoner looks at Brutus again. Brutus thinks: *There is that look again! WHAT IS THAT LOOK? I know I've seen that look somewhere before.*

The prisoner rises and takes up his cross, and they all continue on their way to the hill, the place of the skull, the place where crucifixions happen. Valentus breaks Brutus' thoughts when he announces, "Hey, look, boss! There are two other squads coming with two other prisoners! Looks like we are going to have a party! Hey, look, Gaius! Isn't that Tactus in that other group? I hope he brought his dice. That man owes me 20 denarii."

The prisoner falls a second time, and Brutus shouts at him to continue as before. The prisoner again looks at him, and again an uneasy feeling comes over Brutus. When the prisoner falls for a third time, Cato remarks, "I told you, Brutus, that I didn't think

this guy would make, it and you know that, if he dies before we get him up on that cross, there is going to be heck to pay.”

Brutus knows that Cato is right. Brutus knows that crucifixion isn't just about killing the condemned. It is used to make a statement; it is meant to remind all who see the one hanging on a cross who is in charge. Rome is in charge!

Brutus tells Gaius to find someone to carry the cross. Valentus says, “How ‘bout that big African over there? Let’s get him!” And with that, Simon of Cyrene is pressed into service. As Simon takes the cross from the prisoner, Jesus looks directly at Simon. Brutus sees the encounter. Brutus thinks: *Wow, that it just how he looked at me. What is it about that look? That look is driving me nuts! I will be glad when this day is over!*

Finally, the four legionaries with their prisoner arrive at the appointed place. Brutus shouts the order, and they begin to strip Jesus naked to ready him for the nailing. They take and throw him on the wood. Pain shoots through his body. The soldiers grab his arms and stretch them out on the beam. At that point, Brutus takes the stone hammer and drives a spike into the prisoner’s wrist. The man cried out in pain and looks at him. Brutus thinks: *There’s that look again! What is it?! Am I imagining this?! Am I going crazy?!*

As Brutus makes his way to the other side with the hammer and spikes, the prisoner turns his head and looks at him again. Again a spike is placed in the wrist area where the small bones are located. Brutus has been schooled well in the art of crucifixion. He knows just where to put the spikes to cause the most pain. He has done this before. He hopes this is his last.

Again, as the spike pierces the flesh of the wrist and the prisoner cries out in pain, He looks at Brutus. Their eyes meet again. Brutus thinks: *What is it about this man? Why does he look at me so?* Brutus ignores his uneasiness and completes his task by driving one single nail into the feet of the prisoner. Brutus knows that the next hours are going to be nothing but pain for the prisoner. Brutus knows that Jesus will have to pull his body weight up using his arms and his feet in order to breathe. Brutus knows that each breath will be torture and that the torture will seem to last forever. Finally, Jesus speaks. The sound of him speaking startles Brutus. He calls Cato over. Cato, Gaius, and Valentus along with Tactus from the other group are all playing dice. They are playing for Jesus' tunic, which Cato tells Brutus is a wonderful piece of cloth woven in one piece. Brutus yells: "I don't care about the tunic!" Can you tell me what he just said?"

Cato says, "Oh, sorry Brutus. Yeah, uh, he said something like 'Here is my mother and here is your son.' I'm not sure of the complete translation, but I believe he is giving his mother over to the care of one of those people who have been following us since we left the palace. Did that answer your question Brutus, and may I get back to the dice game?"

Brutus dismisses Cato with a wave and looks up at Jesus, who is in unimaginable agony. Brutus thinks: *How can one think of others in a time like this?* At that moment, Jesus speaks again from the cross. Brutus says to Cato: "Well?" For the first time this day, Cato has a confused look on his face. Cato answers, "Well, he seems to be talking to his father, and he asks his father to . . . to . . . ah, well, forgive us." Brutus thinks: *How strange! This is the craziest execution I have ever been a part of. Forgiveness?!?*

Brutus asks Valentus, "How long have we been here?" "Almost 3 hours, Brutus." Again, they hear the prisoner cry out, and then he seems to hang his head and is silent. Brutus asks, "What did he say?" Cato for the second time has a confused look on his face. "Ah, he said, ah, 'It is finished!' I think he's dead." At that moment, a messenger from the palace arrives and orders them to break the arms and legs of the prisoners to expedite their death. He tells them that Pilate wants them taken down by sundown. Valentus, without waiting for orders from Brutus, thrusts a spear into Jesus and is engulfed with blood and water. Before Brutus can give the order to have the prisoner Jesus taken down, he is approached by a small group whose leader has some kind of document in his hands. Brutus has seen the leader of this group before. He knows that he is an influential Jew named Joseph of Arimathea. Joseph approaches Brutus and hands him an order from Pilate to release the man's body over to him for burial. Brutus looks up at the pathetic man one more time and orders the three legionaries in his charge to take the prisoner down and hand the body over. Joseph of Arimathea receives Jesus' body and gently lays it into the arms of his mother. Brutus is watching. Brutus notices the look the mother gives her son. It is at that moment that Brutus understands the look the prisoner has been giving him. It is LOVE. *He looked at me with LOVE! How can that be! How can that be possible?*

Dear Lucinda, I decided not to go fishing with the boys this Saturday. Yesterday was such an awful day that I thought I would just stay around the barracks and try and get my wits back. I wish you were here, or better yet, I wish I was there so you could help me

make sense of my experience. I don't know how to explain it, but . . . I'm afraid . . . after yesterday . . . that there will never be another good Friday again.

Amen.

Feast Day of St. James the Apostle

By The Reverend Mike Sowards

Delivered to the people of St. James' Episcopal Church in Collegeville, PA

July 25 and 26, 2015

Gospel: Matthew 20:20–28

Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to him with her sons, and kneeling before him, she asked a favor of him. And he said to her, "What do you want?" She said to him, "Declare that these two sons of mine will sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom." But Jesus answered, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?" They said to him, "We are able." He said to them, "You will indeed drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and at my left, this is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father." When the ten heard it, they were angry with the two brothers. But Jesus called them to him and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."¹⁰⁹

In the name of God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit! *Amen.*

Today we are celebrating the feast of St. James, the patron saint of our church. People have asked me: Which St. James are we? Are we named after St. James the Greater or St. James the Lesser? Well I can happily report to you that it is St. James the Greater, the brother of John, in James and John of Zebedee, who is our patron saint. In the iconography for saints, St. James is always symbolized by a sword and scallop shell. Tradition holds that James evangelized as far as the shores of Galicia in modern day

¹⁰⁹ Matt. 20: 20–28 NRSV.

Spain to preach the gospel before returning to Jerusalem to be martyred, beheaded with a sword, at the hands of Herod. Legend has it that two of his companions climbed with the martyr's remains into a rudderless boat that drifted, by the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to Spain, where the apostle was buried. In due time, his faithful friends were buried beside him, and the site of the tomb was forgotten. In the ninth century, the tomb was supposedly rediscovered when the local bishop, guided by a vision of stars, was led to the location of the tomb. From that time onward, the site of the tomb became a holy place, a place where people would gather and pray. In the thirteenth century, a mighty cathedral was built over the tomb to accommodate the flood of pilgrims.

The Way of St. James is a pilgrimage route that extends from all corners of Europe, and even North Africa, on its way to Santiago de Compostela, the Cathedral of St. James. Pilgrims coming from the European mainland, after a long and dusty journey through the north of Spain, would catch their first glimpse of the towers of the Cathedral of Santiago from a hilltop that came to be called Mount Joy. On arrival, after visiting the tomb and greeting the image of St. James with a kiss, pilgrims would receive their Compostela, a document certifying that they had completed the pilgrimage, and the coveted scallop shell, the symbol of pilgrimage to Santiago, a symbol of the pilgrimage to St. James.

The emblems of Sword and Shell that represent St. James are prominent in the statue that stands on our lawn facing Evansburg Road. There, the statue stands with the saint holding a scallop shell in his left hand, in a gesture of offering and balanced by leaning on the sword of his martyrdom on his right. Sword and Shell: symbols of St. James, symbols for us. Many pilgrims who received their scallop shell began to associate the shell with

baptism. Just as the shell marked their journey to the tomb of St. James, the shell began to symbolize our journeys, our pilgrimages, that we take with Christ at our baptism. The symbol of the sword has long been associated with the word of God. The Epistle writer of Hebrews wrote that the word of God is alive and active and sharper than any two-edged sword. Sword and Shell. Word and sacrament.

For over 300 years, we here at St. James' have been a community of Christian pilgrims who would gather on the first day of the week to worship God in Christ through word and sacrament. Every Sunday, the faithful gather here, around this font, around this table, to hear the word of God, to be feed with the body and blood of Christ and then to be sent forth, sent forth into the community, the town, the world to share God's Word and to be living sacraments, outward and visible signs of God's grace, to a broken and hurting world. I have watched you be Sword and Shell, Word and Sacrament, in the ministries that we have here at St. James'. In the efforts of those who volunteer to feed the hungry through our Outreach House mission and by those who support the Soup Kitchen ministry at St. Mary's in downtown Philadelphia. My heart has been touched as members of our pastoral care team bring Sword and Shell, word and sacraments to those who are hospitalized and homebound. I have watched you be true to our baptismal covenant as we bring Sword and Shell, word and sacraments to each other in the ministries of our Church School, Rite 13, and J2A programs and adult Bible study classes. I have been a holy witness to bringing Sword and Shell, Word and Sacraments, to those incarcerated at Graterford Prison.

Today, St. James' Perkiomen is housed in our third manifestation. The first two buildings that served the pilgrims of this community were located across the street, where

our cemetery is located. This building was completed in 1849 and has stood as a symbol of the gathering of God's faithful ever since. Although we are not as elaborate as the Cathedral in Compostela, I believe that we are a beacon to weary travelers, a place where we can find rest and refreshment, a place where the hand of hospitality is offered—a place of Joy!

Sword and Shell, Word and Sacrament. May we continue to be a living example of the missionary zeal of St. James. May we always strive to find new ways to minister to the world in Christ's name and in the name of our Patron Saint. I believe God is pleased with us and our efforts here at St. James, and I believe St. James is proud of us too. *Amen.*

Bibliography

- Allen, O. Wesley, Jr. *Preaching and Reading the Lectionary: A Three-Dimensional Approach to the Liturgical Year*. Danvers, MA: Chalice Press, 2007.
- Armstrong, Richard Stoll. *The Pastor as Evangelist*. Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1984.
- Austrian, Sonia G., ed. *Developmental Theories Through the Life Cycle*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002.
- Borg, Marcus J. *Speaking Christian: How Christian Words Have Lost Their Meaning and Power—And How They Can Be Restored*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2011.
- Brosend, William. *The Preaching of Jesus: Gospel Proclamation, Then and Now*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010.
- Brueggemann, Walter. *The Word Militant: Preaching a Decentering Word*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007.
- Campbell, Charles L. *Preaching Jesus: New Directions for Homiletics in Hans Frei's Postliberal Theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997.
- Chartier, Myron R. *Preaching as Communication: An Interpersonal Perspective*. Nashville, TN: Abington Press, 1981.
- Childers, Jana, and Clayton J. Schmit, eds. *Performance in Preaching: Bringing the Sermon to Life*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008.
- Cooper, Burton Z., and John S. McClure. *Claiming Theology in the Pulpit*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003.
- Craddock, Fred B. *Preaching*. Nashville, TN: Abington Press, 1985.
- . *The Cherry Log Sermons*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001.
- Dillon, Christine, *Telling the Gospel Through Story*, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012.

- Fleming, Carol A. *It's The Way You Say It: Becoming Articulate, Well-Spoken and Clear*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2013.
- Ford, David F. *Shaping Theology: Engagements in a Religious and Secular World*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007.
- Gomes, Peter J. *The Good Book: Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart*. New York: Avon Books, 1996.
- Graves, Mike. *The Sermon as Symphony: Preaching the Literary Forms of the New Testament*. Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1997.
- Gruden, Wayne. *Politics According to the Bible: A Comprehensive Resource for Understanding Modern Political Issues in Light of Scripture*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010.
- Hamilton, Adam. *When Christians Get it Wrong: Updated and Revised*. Nashville, TN: Abington Press, 2013.
- Hethcock, William. *How to Get Your Sermon Heard: Preaching to Win Minds and Hearts*. Sewanee, TN: Plateau Books, 2012.
- Hilkert, Mary Catherine. *Naming Grace: Preaching and the Sacramental Imagination*. New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1997.
- Hillman, James. *Insearch: Psychology and Religion*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1967.
- Hooke, Ruthanna B. *Transforming Preaching*. New York: Church Publishing, Incorporated, 2010.
- Hughes, Fred. "James Fowler's Concept of Faith Development - An Evangelical Perspective." *Whitefield Briefing*, November 1977 (Vol. 2 No. 5).
- Kehoe, Dalton A. *Communication in Everyday Life*. 5th ed. Boston, MA: Pearson Learning Solutions, 2013.
- Leech, Kenneth. *We Preach Christ Crucified*. 10th Anniversary ed. New York: Church Publishing Incorporated, 2005.
- Leveen, Adriane. "Storytelling in the Bible." In *The Jewish Bible: A JPS Guide*. Edited by Shalom Paul, Fred Greenspahn, and Ziony Zevit. Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society, 2008.
- Lischer, Richard. *A Theology of Preaching: The Dynamics of the Gospel*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1992.

- Lischer, Richard. *The Company of Preachers: Wisdom on Preaching, Augustine to Present*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002.
- Lonergan, Bernard J.F. *Method in Theology*. London: Darton, Longman and Todd Publishers, 1972.
- Long, Thomas G. *Preaching from Memory to Hope*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.
- Long, Thomas G. *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible*. Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1989.
- Long, Thomas G. *The Witness of Preaching*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989.
- Macquarrie, John, *Principles of Christian Theology*. 2nd ed. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1977.
- McKenzie, Alyce M. *Novel Preaching: Tips from Top Writers on Crafting Creative Sermons*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010.
- Monshau, Michael., ed. *Preaching at the Double Feast: Homiletics for Eucharistic Worship*. Collegetown, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2006.
- Parks, Lewis A. *Preaching in the Small Membership Church*. Nashville, TN: Abington Press, 2009.
- Pearce, Terry, *Leading out Loud: A Guide for Engaging Others in Creating the Future*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass a division of John Wiley & Sons, 2013.
- Pentland, Alex. "To Signal is Human." *American Scientist* 98 (2010): 203.
- Price, Charles P., and Louis Weil. *Liturgy for Living: The Church's Teaching Series*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1979.
- Prothero, Stephen. *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs To Know—And Doesn't*. San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 2007.
- Recinos, Harold J. *Who Comes in the Name of the Lord?: Jesus at the Margins*. Nashville, TN: Abington Press, 1997.
- Reisman, David. *The Lonely Crowd*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press Nota Bene, 2001.
- Robinson, Elaine A. *Race and Theology*. Nashville, TN: Abington Press, 2012.

- Rose, Lucy Atkinson. *Sharing the Word: Preaching in the Roundtable Church*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997.
- Slaughter, Michael and Warren Bird. *Unlearning Church: Just When You Thought You Had Leadership All Figured Out*. Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, 2008.
- Smith, Martin L. *The Word is Very Near You: A Guide to Praying with Scripture*. Landham, MD: Cowley Publications, 1989.
- Spong, John Shelby. *The Sins of Scripture: Exposing the Bible's Texts of Hate to Reveal the God of Love*. San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins Publishers, 2005.
- Spruce, Georganne. *Awakening to the Dance: A Journey to Wholeness*. N.p.: Georganne Spruce, 2012. e-book.
- Stanley, Andy, and Lane Jones. *Communicating for a Change*. Colorado Springs, CO: Maltnomah Books, 2006.
- Steinke, Peter L. *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times: Being Calm and Courageous No Matter What*. Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2006.
- . *How Your Church Family Works: Understanding Congregations as Emotional Systems*. Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2006.
- Stevenson, Peter K., and Stephen I. Wright. *Preaching the Atonement*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.
- . *Preaching the Incarnation*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010.
- Tait, Lewis T., Jr., and Van Gorder Christian A. Van Gorder. *Three-Fifths Theology: Challenging Racism in American Christianity*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, Inc., 2002.
- Taylor, Barbara Brown. *An Altar in the World*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2009.
- . *Speaking of Sin: The lost Language of Salvation*. Lanham, MD: Cowley Publications, 2000.
- . *The Preaching Life*. Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1993.
- Thorton, John F., and Katharine Washburn, eds. *Tongues of Angels, Tongues of Men: A Book of Sermons*. New York: Doubleday, 1999.
- Tisdale, Leonora Tubbs. *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997.

- Tucker, Austin B. *The Preacher as Storyteller: The Power of Narrative in the Pulpit*. Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2008.
- Tuhovsky, Ian. *Communication Skills Training: A Practical Guide to Improving Your Social Intelligence, Presentation, Persuasion and Public Speaking*. Middleton, DE: Ian Tuhovsky, 2015.
- Vanhoozer, Kevin J., and Owen Strachan. *The Pastor as Public Theologian: Reclaiming a Lost Vision*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2015.
- Wallace, James A. *Preaching to the Hungers of the Heart: The Homily on the Feast and within the Rites*. Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2002.
- Wallis, Jim. *America's Original Sin: Racism, White Privilege and the Bridge to a New America*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2016.
- . *The Soul of Politics*, New York: The New Press and Orbis Books, 1994.
- Ward, Richard F. *Speaking of the Holy: The Art of Communication in Preaching*. St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2001.
- Webb, Joseph M. *Preaching for the Contemporary Service*. Nashville, TN: Abington Press, 2006.
- Willimon, William H., and Richard Lischer, eds. *Concise Encyclopedia of Preaching*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995.
- Willimon, William H. *Calling and Character: Virtues of the Ordained Life*. Nashville, TN: Abington Press, 2000.
- . *Proclamation and Theology*. Nashville, TN: Abington Press, 2005.
- Wilson, Paul Scott. *The Four Pages of a Sermon: A Guide to Biblical Preaching*. Nashville, TN: Abington Press, 1999.
- . *The Practice of Preaching*. Revised Edition. Nashville, TN: Abington Press, 2007.