

Poetic Preaching by Robin Morgan

A couple of weeks ago I was part of a preaching workshop called "Preaching in the African-American Catholic Setting for Non-African Americans." It was taught by Maurice Nutt, an African-American priest finishing up his DMin in preaching at the Aquinas Institute here in St. Louis.

If I were to sum up what I learned in a sentence, it would be that preaching is not primarily a didactic exercise but a transcendent moment when the preacher, the congregation and God are joined together in celebration through the power of the Word of God.

Father Nutt told us that "Thus Saith the Lord" is always the starting point of all good African-American preaching. He said that Exodus and Jesus as liberator are the two pillars of Scripture upon which all African-American preaching rests. Secondly, preaching must be communal. Relationships are the backbone of the African-American community and preaching must also be relational. "Do you love us/can we touch you?" are questions that the congregation will implicitly ask. Third, preaching must be contemplative in the sense that God is everywhere. Though we come together in the church building, prayer and praise to God happen wherever we are, whenever our hearts are moved to speak to God. In the fourth place, preaching must be holistic. Every part of life is touched by God and needs to be addressed in preaching. The preacher must be real and tell it like it is. Finally, preaching culminates in joy. The moment of celebration when God's answer in Jesus to our woes and the woes of the world becomes evident is the pinnacle of the preaching moment. God triumphs over all and we are freed to live

another day for the Lord.

Though I cannot tell you everything that we talked about in the five afternoons we shared together (I heartily recommend taking this class from Father Nutt if you ever get the chance), I would like to offer a few concrete ideas that, I believe, may help expand your preaching horizon regardless of the setting you're in. We explored at length the "how" of preaching as well as the "what/Who." Word play is a vital part of African-American preaching. Break it down, Preacher! Tell me what you want me to hear in a way that grabs my attention, in as many ways as possible that will help me remember all week long what you said on Sunday morning.

During the workshop we played word games with significant words in the text to help loosen up our vocabularies and help us find different ways of getting our point across. Making lists of synonyms, antonyms, drawing a picture of the Scripture passage, making word associations or role playing are all ideas to get the juices flowing and help the preacher begin to appropriate the text for the preaching moment. These ideas are not substitutes for exegetical study or theological reflection, but offer us ways to approach the text inductively, so that we can engage our heads, hearts, souls and emotions. Hopefully, this combination of approaches will open more ways for the Holy Spirit to move in all aspects of our lives and bring the Word to fruition among us.

What I'd like to do now is offer you my initial word associations for preaching this coming Sunday on Matthew 13: 1-9, 18-23. It's Tuesday night as I write this and I haven't done any biblical work on the text yet. I went through the Sabbatheology on Saturday for typos, but I haven't really thought extensively about the theology of the text. However, I have read the passage over several times and the word that

really grabbed me was LISTEN. In verse 3 Jesus says, "Listen! A sower went out to sow." Then in verse 9 he finishes the parable with "Let anyone with ears listen!"

So I put listen inside a circle in the middle of a piece of paper and started brainstorming: tell me, hear, catch it, focused, it matters, ears open/mouth shut, what?, teach me, all ears, attentive, preach it, I can't hear you!, repeat it, poised/willing/ready, caring, holding fast.

Then I thought about someone standing at the airport waiting for their lover to return from a long trip. You're all dressed up (oooh, you look fine!) and smell so nice. He (or she) is on the plane that just landed and you're waiting at the gate, watching with outstretched neck, listening for his voice. Nothing else matters, you're completely focused on hearing his voice. It seems as if no else is even in the airport, you only have eyes and ears for him.

Some phrases that add breadth to the idea of listening to the Word: bring the community together, health to the hearers, joy for the sorrowful, peace for the anxious, listen, God is calling (I'm going to use this hymn from "With One Voice" and the new "This Far by Faith" for the hymn of the day).

A couple of phrases that illustrate the opposite of listening: I already know what I need to know, refuse to hear, I don't need you.

I'm sure you can think of many other possibilities, but these offer you some ideas about how you might begin to expand your verbal repertoire and give your hearers phrases to carry with them all week long.

We also talked about repetition, call and response, alliteration – basics of poetic language, which leads me to my final point. I

know that the emotive quality of African-American preaching is probably not going to go over big in some congregations. German farmers may not respond positively when you tell them from the pulpit, "Turn to your neighbor and tell her, 'Listen, God is calling YOU!'" However, the use of poetic language in preaching has a long, honorable and biblical tradition that the African-American church has retained at the core of its being.

Another voice that may be more familiar to many of you and who also talks about the transformative quality of poetic language in preaching is Walter Brueggemann in his book "Finally Comes the Poet." He says, "there is a casual, indifferent readiness, even in our increasingly secularized society, to grant the main claims of the gospel – not to grant them importance, but to accept them as premises of religious life." Brueggemann's remedy for this "prose flattened" gospel is poetic proclamation. "By prose I refer to a world that is organized in settled formulae, so that even pastoral prayers and love letters sound like memos. By poetry, I do not mean rhyme, rhythm, or meter, but language that moves like Bob Gibson's fast ball, that jumps at the right moment, that breaks open old worlds with surprise, abrasion, and pace...Such preaching is not moral instruction or problem solving or doctrinal clarification. It is not good advice, nor is it romantic caressing, nor is it a soothing good humor. It is, rather, the ready, steady, surprising proposal that the real world in which God invites us to live is not the one made available by the rulers of this age."

That last sentence, I believe, is the key to the riches of African-American preaching, and which makes it so valuable to Christians everywhere. As Christianity as a whole continues to be marginalized from the center of our society, we need to refine our ability to make the preaching moment a transformative time. The African-American church has always come to the preaching moment to be transformed by Jesus, to live, if only

for awhile, in that REAL WORLD which God continues to create rather than the world made by the rulers of this age.

We can claim Jesus' words in Luke 4: "The spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord."

PS – Next week I plan on talking about how one might go about synthesizing what could be construed as a "settled formula" (the six step Crossings method) and this poetic language I've just discussed. Since I don't have it all figured out yet :), if any of you do have figured it out, wholly or partially, please send me your ideas and I'll put our collective inspiration together as Thursday Theology #58

PSS – Ed and Marie now have an e-mail address in Bali