

Poetic Preaching – part 2

Robin Morgan

Last week I talked about an African-American preaching workshop I attended which had been given by Father Maurice Nutt, who is finishing a doctorate of ministry in preaching at the Aquinas Institute here in St. Louis. I talked about the significance of poetic language in proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ, especially at this juncture in the church's life, and how traditional African-American preaching has so much to teach the church about touching the whole person – head, heart, emotions, soul, and body.

Building on this theme of the significance of preaching in the church today is an article by Marva Dawn about worship in the January 1997 issue of "CrossAccent," the Journal of the Association of Lutheran Church Musicians. Dawn talks about the struggle to be church in the postmodern world:

"The postmodern spirit was really inevitable, since modernity believed so firmly in the faulty Enlightenment notion of Progress. With the rise of science and technology, economics and communications, the modern spirit insisted that everything would get better and better – that we could solve the problems of the world with enough scientific discovery and technological fixes...The failure of 'progress' leads to postmodernist spirals of despair and hopelessness...Most importantly, the failure of the hyped-up promises of science and technology accentuates the loss of truth already inherent in modernist relativizing and in the rejection of authoritative structures or persons with moral authority. Consequently, the major characteristic of the postmodern condition is the repudiation of any Truth that claims to be absolute or truly true."

I don't believe there is a logical/rational way past this postmodern condition of repudiating Truth at this time. Disillusionment with "progress" must run its course. However, I believe we are able to step beyond "postmodern anomie" through a synthesis of theological precision and passionate proclamation.

At a time like this when there is an "obvious loss of any moral consensus or commitment to the common good" it is the depth of the truth in theology of the cross that is vital to effective preaching. Knowing who, what and why we preach cannot be overestimated. As Dawn says,

"The Truth that the Church has to offer to people caught in the postmodern condition must be shared in all its wholeness. To those who criticize Christianity because it has been (and sometimes still is) violent and oppressive, we must acknowledge they are right. Beyond accepting the blame for Christians' failures in history, we must recognize the whole truth that we remain sinful and fallible...[however] I believe Christians can humbly suggest a non-oppressive, all-inclusive story of a Triune God who creates, redeems, and unifies as manifestations of a perfect love for the whole world. The Christian meta-narrative is the account of a Promising God who always keeps his promises – a Truth clearly seen in the First Testament history of Israel and most clearly seen in the history of Jesus of Nazareth, who died and rose again in fulfillment of God's promises."

To the wholeness of God's message we offer our energy and our passion for the Gospel by preaching "in the Spirit" as it is sometimes called in the African-American context. Martin Rafanan offers us his reflections on this style of proclamation:

"Careful preparation and development of the sermon is only the first stage. Living the sermon and being 'caught up in the

Spirit' in proclamation is a part of the process. This is why 'time' is not really a factor in the African American setting... in fact, time as we usually experience it is suspended and one enters into the moment of kairos... it is a blessed experience! There is definitely a synthesis of this style that can be used in the more 'rational' Lutheran setting and it is usually much appreciated. It involves moving into peoples' space with the Gospel... bursting the bubbles people hide within with the Good News... as Maurice says, 'touching people' and letting them know that you can be touched/loved/challenged... engaging people actively. This usually means getting into the space/face of the people, speaking very directly to their need, seeking their active response, challenging them to be a part of the proclamation (being very assertive about this – in love!), bringing humor and personal story-telling that add a depth and commitment of the preacher to exposing/sharing their lives that encourages others to do the same."