

EPILOGUE: DOES PREACHING MATTER?

Does preaching matter? Does what we say and do in the ambo week in and week out *really* make any difference? I am guessing that I am not the only preacher who has ever asked this question.

There are writers today who claim that preaching is no longer relevant, that preaching changes neither the individual listener nor the community or culture at large in what Dr. Lori Carrell calls our “post-modern, media-saturated world.”

On October 6, 2015, Dr. Carrell presented the 25th annual John S. and Virginia Marten Lecture in Homiletics at the St. Meinrad Seminary and School of Theology and offered her answer to that question. Dr. Carrell’s area of expertise is communication, and it is through the lens of that field that she studies preaching. She has conducted empirical research across denominational lines for over a decade, and shared her results with the St. Meinrad community (see her book below for details).

Carrell disagrees with those voices that I mentioned at the start of this article. She maintains, instead, that preaching *can* and *does* make a difference. How? To delve deeper into this question, Carrell asks three other questions: (1) What do listeners expect from preaching? (2) What are the characteristics of sermons that listeners say are spiritually transformative? (3) How did those preachers enhance the transformative power of their preaching by changing their preparation habits?

(1) Expectations

First, the good news: people do want to listen to our homilies. Based on her research, Carrell concludes that listeners have fairly high expectations when it comes to preaching. That is, preaching *does* matter to those in the pews. These expectations fall in four areas. First, those in the assembly listen expecting to be inspired; that is, listeners expect that what is said in our homilies is applicable to their lives. Second, there is a relational expectation: listeners want to hear from *their* spiritual leader, someone who is part of and invested in their community. Third, listeners expect spiritual content, something they are not getting anywhere else. Finally, listeners are looking for long-lasting spiritual growth – that’s one reason why they come back week after week. They want to be transformed.

(2) Characteristics

Now the not-so-good news: Only 5% of the homilies that Carrell studied could be described as transformative. The rest served a “maintenance” function... which is fine in and of itself, but that is not what people are seeking. According to Carrell, transformative homilies share four characteristics.

First, these homilies explicitly name a “clear, change-based goal” based on the scriptures. The preacher not only names the change desired (‘what’) but also explores ‘how’ to help bring about the desired change. As an aside, Carrell’s research also shows that congregants are more willing to be challenged than preachers realize, as long as it is done in a direct but gracious way.

Second, transformative homilies are “organized for listening.” Preaching is an oral-aural event – different from reading a manuscript or viewing a movie. We process aural information differently from visual information.

Third, transformative homilies are well-delivered. By this, Carrell means that the preacher attends to “para-language” – how things are said, not just what is said. The sound of one’s voice, the way one speaks, can communicate (com)passion, or disinterest. In other words, delivery—as expressive of emotions—helps build relationship.

Finally, transformative homilies “integrate listener’s perspectives.” This is not pandering, but doing what Pope Francis does so well: connecting the scriptures with the lived experiences and cultural context of the assembly.

Changes to Preparation that Matter

As part of her research, Carrell worked with preachers as they sought to make their preaching more transformative. The preachers themselves decided what changes they wanted to make to their process for homily preparation; Carrell measured the results of these changes by studying their congregations. At the end of the study, she found four interventions that made a statistically significant difference in how transformative one’s preaching had become.

First, “deepening one’s own personal spiritual journey,” beyond the requirements of one’s professional responsibilities, impacted the transformative power of one’s preaching. This effect of “remote preparation” should not be surprising; the better one is grounded in one’s relationship with God the better one is able to mediate that transformative relationship to others.

Second, transformative preachers “prayerfully select a response goal” and this focuses their preparation and helps them structure their homily. The key is to expect change, and not simply explain or declare something.

Third, “oral crafting” of the homily also helps. As mentioned above, “preaching is an oral act and a communal act” – yet most preparation is time spent alone in thought or writing. For many of us, there is a fundamental “disconnect” between how we prepare to preach and how we preach the homily itself. The oral crafting of a homily goes beyond writing a manuscript and then rehearsing with it; it means that throughout the process of constructing the homily we talk out loud, preferably with others.

Finally, transformative preaching flows from listening to the listeners in a routine and structured way. She describes “sojourner groups” in congregations—parishioners who meet with preachers to read the scriptures together and share their thoughts (while the preacher listens). This exercise in “cultural exegesis” is not new; the U.S. Bishops recommended such groups in their landmark document, *Fulfilled in Your Hearing*. As Pope Francis has put it, vital preaching answers the questions that people are really asking.

Conclusion: Dialogue

This last point is especially important. The resources mentioned below share one thing in common: they highlight that THE key component missing from preaching today is a structured dialogue between preacher and listener. “Nice homily” uttered on the way out of church does not cut it. As Carrell noted in her talk, 78% of listeners have never talked to a preacher about the homily. They talk to others – but not to the preacher. If we are going to stop talking past each other, if our preaching is going to make a difference and be transformative, then we need to be more intentional about taking the dialogical nature of the homily seriously.

Resources

Bellinger, Karla J. *Connecting Pulpit and Pew: Breaking Open the Conversation about Catholic Preaching*. Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2014.

Carrell, Lori J. *Preaching That Matters: Reflective Practices for Transforming Sermons*. Alban: Herndon, VA: 2013.

Untener, Ken. *Preaching Better: Practical Suggestions for Homilies*. New York: Paulist Press, 1999.

Wallace, James A., ed. *Preaching in the Sunday Assembly: A Pastoral Commentary on Fulfilled in Your Hearing. Commentary and Text*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2010.