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Eduard R. Riegert

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PREACHING: WHERE WE'RE GOING

Eduard Richard Riegert

Clyde E. Fant has pointed out that the history of preaching can be told by means of a recurring cycle: search, discovery, excitement, routinization, boredom, disillusionment, search . . .¹ If the 1950s and early 1960s saw preaching in the stages of routinization and boredom, and the latter 1960s and early 1970s in the stage of disillusionment, the 1970s saw the stage of search coming to greater and greater focus. Four areas of study were especially portentous for a renewal of preaching: communication; the nature of technological change (the "electronic revolution"); hermeneutics; and the rediscovery of myth and narrative.²

THE SEARCH FOCUSED

By the latter 1970s it was time to try and put the pieces together, or, to focus the search phase and see whether a discovery could be made. As a matter of fact, the four areas of development which we have reviewed all point in one direction, namely, to "event."

1. *Communication*. The "bottom line" of communication was seen as change. That is, when communication really occurs, change results. When the fire alarm sounds, people head for the exits: full communication has occurred. If no one pays attention to the fire alarm, communication has not occurred, and we need to find out why.

Communication thus becomes a very profound matter, and we have gotten used to expressing that fact with the word "dialogue". We know that when a genuine dialogue occurs the partners in that dialogue are changed. Indeed, in an "in-depth" dialogue a dying and rising go on: each partner "dying" to his perceptions of the other, to his self-perceptions, to his prejudices and assumptions, to elements of his frame of reference; and, on the other hand, each partner "rising" to a truer self-perception and other-perception, to insight, new understanding, to new truth.³

In short, communication — when it occurs fully, and is not aborted — is an

1. Clyde E. Fant, *Preaching For Today* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), p. 10.

2. This is not at all to say that these were the only areas.

3. See Gregory Baum, *Man Becoming* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1970), pp. 41 ff.

event. The partners could say, "In that conversation I was changed."

2. *Marshal McLuhan*. McLuhan pulled us out of a linear "print" world into the new world of sensate media. It meant that as many senses as possible must be appealed to; it meant that human relations had to be nurtured and our Western sense of "splendid isolationism" broken down. Above all, it meant the need for experience. Addressing people only on the intellectual level would not do, for communication occurred also non-verbally, and the non-verbal is always more powerful than the verbal. Ideally, the verbal and the non-verbal will be harmonized and congruent.

McLuhan told us, in short, that the technological and electronic world was a world that wanted something to happen, which they could experience at first hand. This world did not, for example, only want to know about God; it wanted to know God.⁴

3. *Hermeneutics*. The new hermeneutics had rediscovered the text as subject. No longer did the text just lie there as an object which needed to be sucked dry of its information; no, it was, in fact, a dialogue partner. We had to enter into dialogue with it and be prepared for it to challenge us, to probe us, to examine us, to prick our illusions and delusions. We had to allow light to shine upon our life through it, so that the Word of God could be spoken and heard again.

And that meant that preaching was an event, a happening, an encounter with the Word of God. It was a creative and creating moment.

4. *Story*. It was discovered that when stories are told, something happens. Students who told their life story made profound and influential discoveries about themselves. And they became aware how their lives were shaped (not by any means always for the good!) by the stories of their societies. And they also became aware that we live by stories, and that we need better stories to live by.

The re-discovery of story was part of a deep re-evaluation of myth. Myth, unfortunately, is popularly equated with unreality, with what is fictional. And so when it was said that there are myths in the Bible this was taken to mean untrue, false, un-historical. But when these students, after writing their own life stories and reflecting upon the power of societal stories upon their life, began to see the Bible myths as stories to live by, then a great new light came on. "Myth," says John A.T. Robinson, "relates to what is deepest in human experience, to something much more primal and archetypal and potent than the intellect. Psychologically and sociologically myth has been the binding force holding individuals and societies together."⁵

It was just this re-appreciation of the power and function of myth that revealed one of the devastating effects of secularism, namely, the destruction or erosion or overwhelming of a common mythology. Our society was no longer united and shaped and guided by a common mythology; there were now available many "stories to live by,"

4. This was verified again and again by people caught up in one of the several new religious groups that sprang up in the 1960s (see Charles Y. Glock and Robert N. Bellah, editors) *The New Religious Consciousness* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), as well as in the so-called Charismatic Movement.

5. John A.T. Robinson, *The Human Face of God* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1973), p. 20.

not the least potent of these were the myths of civil religion.⁶

In short, then, "story" also points to something that happens, for we live stories, we make stories, we live by stories.

All together, then, each of these developments pointed toward event, happening, experience.

THE DISCOVERY: STORY

The question for homiletics, therefore, was: how can words in the pulpit become an event? The "discovery" made by preachers was, of course, "By means of story."

For above all, when a story is told and listened to, something happens. What in fact happens when we listen to a story?

1. *We are caught up in it.* We suspend — more or less easily — our concept of reality. Usually that is a very limited concept of reality, one that, moreover, given our scientific and technological orientation, is usually also self-defensively pre-determined by empirical evidence, hard and provable facts, true and false categories. But we suspend it all, and are not surprised by — indeed, we rather relish — the dragons and demons, the angels and spirits, the talking animals and trees, and robots that pop along. We are caught up in it.

2. *We are moved by it.* We are open to a new or greater experience of reality. Our rational, logical, and scientific minds balk at dragons and demons, animated flora and larger-than-life heroes and villains, but the story moves us to touch the intangible realities that defy cause-and-effect.⁷ We hear the wind/Spirit moving over the face of the deep, calling up an unimaginable creation from seeming darkness and chaos. We are moved by it.

3. *We are moved with it.* The story will not permit us to stay where we are. It coaxes, seduces, demands that we move. It will not permit us merely to observe dispassionately, but throws out tentacles which draw us into it. We are in the story; it is our story; it is my story. That is the act of faith: that it is my story and that I am moving from here to . . . somewhere . . .; from an old to a new, out of a narrow reality to a tantalizing and frightening broad reality.

4. *It deposits us.* The story ends; it deposits us, sets us down: sometimes gently, sometimes with a thud, sometimes so subtly we don't realize we have been deposited. On the brink — like Moses on the top of Pisgah, from where he can see all the land (Deut. 34:1), the new land, the promise, the potential; or right in the middle somewhere — like Ezekiel set down in the midst of the valley full of bones, or like the children in C.S. Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia* who walk through the wardrobe to find themselves in Narnia, or like King David who is brutally thumped down into

6. Curiously come to the fore in recent years in the various voices of the "Moral Majority". See Frances FitzGerald, "A Disciplined, Charging Army", *The New Yorker*, 18 May 1981, pp. 53 ff.

7. Robert P. Roth says that to ask whether stories are true or false, whether they are "really true or merely imaginary" is to assume uncritically "that the only reality is historical and empirical." We ought not to ask how the story fits into history but how history fits into the story (*Story and Reality*, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1973, pp. 29 ff.).

8. For a stimulating analysis see David Granskou, *Preaching the Parables* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), pp. 45 ff.

the dark of his inner country by Nathan (2 Sam. 11-12).⁹ And that new land, in potential or fact, challenges us, but does not (or rarely) dwarf us.

5. *It may become a story to live by.* It becomes the occasion for change and, if it is a powerful enough story, a directive or guide or model for change. So it was for David, and so has the story of Jesus been for twenty centuries. Thus the criteria for stories and myths are not whether they are historically or factually or empirically "true" or "false", but whether they are meaningful, adequate to human existence and yearning, credible in the daily experience of people; in short, can they meet the needs of a faith by which to live?

How is it that story has such moving power? Because it is a very excellent vehicle of reality, to use Robert Paul Roth's phrase. Truth has to do with reality, with that which is "really real" beyond our constructs of reality, beyond our illusions and delusions. But we see reality only in glimpses: sometimes as a vision of joy and beauty of what could be, sometimes as crashing, crushing, devastating experiences that shatter our nice systems and structures.

On a clear summer day my friend was killed when his car, cresting a hill on a narrow road, collided with an oncoming vehicle. "What happened?" we ask, first. And it is not easy to answer. Was he not on his side of the road? Was the other car not on its side? There was a picture of his wife in my friend's hand. Was he looking at it instead of at the road? Was he saying goodbye on his way to suicide? Was he merely rearranging his wallet in an absent-minded way?

"Why?" we ask next. Why just here? Why just this day? Why in this way? Why, if it was an accident, did it happen? Why, if it wasn't an accident, did he do it? What brought him to this place and this time? We try to reconstruct the chain of events; we try to recall any "signs" or "signals" he gave out in the weeks or days before . . . But the mystery of life and death remain.

If you are the parents or wife or child of the deceased you ask "Why?" with urgency. Even if it was conclusively shown that a steering rod had broken and his car went out of control, or if it was medically proven that he had had a heart-attack and was dead at the wheel prior to the collision, this would not be ultimately satisfying. Do not his life and death have some ultimate significance? If they do not, then neither do mine or yours; then all life is absurd and we may as well live absurdly or go home and die absurdly.

If you are a Christian believer, you will at this point cry a word of faith into the mysterious realities: "God took him!" And you know it's not good theology, but somehow you have to find significance for this life and your life and all our poor lives. "It is God's will."

This event shows the contorted and convoluted nature of reality. Logical analysis and rational constructs fail to encompass it, or to express it adequately. Dimensions of mystery and irony break out of the package we try to make. We finally, then, revert to story: "God took him." We take the story of this human life, and we place it into the larger Judeo-Christian story. The little story of this person's life finds its place, and its significance, in the larger story of Joshua-Jesus. The story of this human life now does not come to an absurd and "untimely" end, but comes to *the*

9. Robert Paul Roth, *Story and Reality*, pp. 54 f.

End, to completion, to consummation in the timeless time of God.¹⁰

Because reality is ambiguous, open-ended, dramatic, shot through with mystery, no simple or complex rational "system" can adequately express it.¹¹ However, story is one vehicle that can carry this varied and contradictory load.¹² Where logic and reason balk and stumble, story leaps and we leap with it. If you asked someone, "What is God like?" what would you rather have him do, read Emil Brunner's three volumes of systematic theology or tell you the story of the Waiting Father? If you asked, "What is the nature of man?" what would you rather hear, Reinhold Niebuhr's two volumes on "The Nature and Destiny of Man" or the stories of the Garden, Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, the Tower, the call of Abraham? This is not to say that the ponderous and analytical treatises have no place. It is to say, however, that they are reflections upon the original stories. "When theology fails to acknowledge the story aspect of reality," says Robert Roth crisply, "it produces only tedious and prolix dissertations on Law and Gospel."¹³

Story is so effective because it is such an excellent vehicle for reality. It is, as the new hermeneutic has made clear with respect to texts, a medium through which light shines.

And all this is true of the Bible. We rediscovered the Bible as narrative. The vast bulk of the Bible is narrative and poem,¹⁴ and the rest is reflection upon the narrative. In fact, the Bible is one vast story. Joseph Sittler describes it in this way.

"By the story, I simply mean what our fathers called "The drama of the divine redemption." The great story begins with the affirmation of faith that the whole cosmos in all its structures and processes, including man, is of divine origin. It is not just nature; it is creation. The story goes on to talk about the divine creation in its perfection, followed by egocentrism, pride, rebellion, and the consequent alienation from God. And then comes the long story in the Old Testament of an oscillation between obedience and rebellion; the superficial ambitions of the people which were always replied to in soft or thundering tones by the prophets who recalled them to the original covenant which God had made with them.

"Then that story, as it occurs in the Old Testament, comes to a kind of upbeat question at the end in which the prophet asks or exclaims, "O that thou would'st rend the heavens and come down!" That's the sense in which the coming of Jesus Christ is the clarification of God. It's the clarification of the intention that is back of

10. In fact, Baptism has already placed it there. "For you have died and your life is hid with Christ in God" (Col. 3:3).

11. "We are saying that reality is multifarious, that it includes many realms, that some are empirical and some are not, some are historical and some are not. Moreover, there is a sickness unto death that runs through all reality, whether it is historical or not, empirical or not. And against this sickness there is a holy warfare which is dedicated through suffering to bring health and wholeness to the entire creature. The nature of reality is therefore dramatic" (Robert P. Roth, pp. 77 f.).

12. Robert P. Roth, in ch. 2, "The Nature of Story," demonstrates "how philosophy wrestles inadequately with categories which prove eminently successful in stories."

13. Ibid., pp. 27 f. See Sallie TeSelle, *Speaking In Parables: A Study in Metaphor and Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), especially chapter 6, "The Story: Coming to Belief."

14. For example, David J.A. Clines, "Story and Poem: The Old Testament as Literature and as Scripture," *Interpretation*, XXXIV, 2 (April 1980), pp. 115-127.

the whole creation, a second Adam in whom the tragedy of the first Adam is re-enacted, but reenacted this time in obedience, not in rebellion. It's reenacted in the sense that Mary in the New Testament is a rerun of the disobedience of Eve in the Old Testament, with the important difference that Eve said, "The serpent beguiled me, and I ate." And the second Eve — the old church name for Mary — said, "Let it be to me according to your Word."

"This story comes to its tragic apex in the destruction, the crucifixion, of God's action. And that which is a tragic moment is also the most joyful proclamation in the Gospel because if God does not enter into our abyss, if he does not become our isolation and our desolation, he is not enough God for human life, because human life is characterized by abysmal despairs, isolations and desolations, loneliness, failures and lack of honor. So in a sense the second Adam plays over properly the difficulties of the first Adam.

"Now, this story is a kind of massive parable of all human life. When one puts the substance of the tradition of the Christian faith and simplifies it by calling it a story, he is really saying that the truth of the story is not in its verifiability according to the usual rules of logic and evidence. It's a story that proclaims both its profundity and its truth by its sheer congruity with the contours of actual human life.

"I believe the Christian faith because I know of no other story which, in its tragedy and its pathos, its joy and its delight — no other story which has expressed life both in its disorganized and in its organized activity with anything like the very veracity, the vivacity, the actuality and the ductility to all human life that characterizes this story."¹⁵

And if the Bible is seen as such a story — "congruent with the contours of actual life" — then, says Sittler, ". . . I . . . regard preaching not so much as exhortation or even proclamation in terms of theological notions, but simply as an ever-fresh relating of aspects of the great story. Therefore, in preaching, I simply take a miracle story, a parable, an episode, a metaphor, an event from the great story, hold it up, take it apart, ask the hearer to ponder what's going on here and make the sermon the exposition of a possibility and not the declaration of a certainty."¹⁶

NARRATIVE PREACHING

The re-discovery of story as a vehicle of reality, and a re-appreciation of the Bible as story and theology as reflection upon story¹⁷ has led to the homiletic of "narrative preaching". It is important to say at once that narrative preaching does not mean that all preachers must now fall to and create "story sermons". While some advocate a narrow definition of narrative preaching, limiting it to a "full-length story"

15. Joseph Sittler, "Conversation with Sittler," by Robert M. Herhold, *LCA Partners*, 1, 3 (June 1979), p. 8.

16. *Ibid.*, pp. 7 f.

17. Cf., for example, Frederick Buechner, *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy and Fairy Tale* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977); John D. Crossan, *The Dark Interval: Toward a Theology of Story* (Niles, Illinois: Argus Communications, 1975); James W. McClendon, Jr., *Biography as Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1974); Sallie TeSelle, *Speaking in Parables: A Study in Metaphor and Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975); James B. Wiggins, *Religion As Story* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975).

format,¹⁸ a greater consensus understands it in a broader way as: first, preaching in which the meanings or message are elaborated by such forms as stories, parables, descriptive events; second, preaching in which the meanings or messages are made more vivid by the use of expressive language, including images, metaphors, and similes; third, preaching in which meanings or message are carried by form itself, e.g., a story, tale, or biographical segment; fourth, preaching in which the sermon structure highlights tension and resolution, i.e., the sermon moves like a story as over-against the "three points and a poem" propositional format.¹⁹

This broad understanding of narrative preaching is supported by Milton Crum. He describes such preaching as "person-to-person telling . . . telling a message which speaks to me and which, I hope, will speak to others in the congregation." This kind of telling, he writes, is like telling a story; but, he cautions, "This does not mean that all sermons will be narrative. Rather, it means that the sermon will incorporate some of the dynamic of a story and move like a story. A second grade child captured the dynamic of a story by explaining, "'It has to begin . . . and then' — making a quick gesture through the air — 'it has to go right along. And something has to happen, and then it has to stop.'" ²⁰

Perhaps the most succinct definition of narrative preaching has been articulated by Edmund A. Steimle: it is "the sensitive interweaving of three stories: first, the preacher's own; second, the listener's story; and third, the Bible's story, usually in the form of a pericope or passage which may be a sub-story of the great biblical story itself."²¹

While it is tempting to develop, now, the aims, purposes, and methods of narrative preaching, that is beyond the scope of this paper.²² The distinctive feature of narrative preaching is the change in the image of the preacher that it presents. Traditional images of the preacher are those of a herald proclaiming a message from above, a prophet standing over against his community, a teacher explaining divine and eternal verities to his people, a priest homilizing part of the ritual. In place of these, narrative preaching posits the image of the preacher as storyteller. Out of his own life-story he can witness to the judgment and grace of God, and in the life-stories of the community he can identify the working of God's judgment and grace; and he can do this because always in the "great story" he hears and sees the God who is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. "We all love a good story," writes Sallie TeSelle, "because of the basic narrative quality of human experience." And she continues, "We recognize in the stories of others' experiences of coming to

18. As Jensen, *Telling the Story*, appears to do.

19. This consensus was worked out by Lutheran Church in America homileticians and pastor-evangelists for the "Preaching from Commitment" seminars sponsored by the Division of Parish Services and now being offered to the Synods of the LCA since the fall of 1980.

20. Milton Crum, Jr., *Manual on Preaching* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1977), pp. 25 f., quoting Jeannette Perkins Brown, *The Story-teller in Religious Education* (Boston: The Pilgrim Press, 1951), p. 14.

21. Edmund A. Steimle, "Preaching," *LCA Partners*, June, 1979, p. 24. The best and most comprehensive discussion of narrative preaching is *Preaching the Story* by Edmund A. Steimle, Morris J. Niedenthal, Charles L. Rice (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980).

22. The reader may refer most profitably to Richard A. Jensen, *Telling the Story*, and Steimle, Niedenthal, and Rice, *Preaching the Story*.

belief our own agonizing journey and we rejoice in the companionship of those on the way.

"For the Christian, the story of Jesus is *the* story par excellence. For his story not only is the human struggle of moving toward belief but in some way that story is the unification of the mundane and the transcendent."²³

In narrative preaching we have recovered something, then, that is as old as mankind, as profound as "the infancy narratives" and the "passion narrative," as new as this morning's telephone call. For those who are trying it, narrative preaching is making all the old stories come alive again, and are discovering the truth of Hugh Kenner's words: "Whoever can give his people better stories than the ones they live in is like a priest in whose hands common bread and wine become capable of feeding the very soul."²⁴

23. *Speaking in Parables*, pp. 138 f.

24. Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1971), p. 39, quoted in John Dominic Crossan, *In Parables* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 2.

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