

Creative Preaching

Walk with imagination in the footsteps of Jesus

By Richard Hart, O.F.M. Cap.

Walter Burghardt, S.J., of Georgetown University said, "We preachers approach the pulpit with all the imagination of a dead fish." He believed that the most serious trouble with preaching is the lack of imagination. When was the last time you heard or gave a homily that was imaginative or creative? This article will attempt to suggest some ideas how to stir up our creative juices in our important task of proclaiming the Word of God.

What does it mean to possess creative imagination? It means to approach some ideas or a problem in a novel way by introducing some new perspective, new insight, new solution, stimulating the imagination, and maybe giving or developing some new meaning to an idea. A preacher needs to be willing to explore new ideas and experiences. At times we need to take a wide-angle lens view of a Scripture text, which often demands a large dose of intuition, knowing without really understanding why something is true and be surprised with the results. In contrast, a preacher can zoom in on a text with a telephoto lens, focusing on one specific area or problem. The creative or imaginative preacher does both.

Creative preaching strives to free oneself from restraints, allowing much broader ways for one's imagination to approach a text. When God called Abraham, his response was "Ready" (Gn 22:1). "He went out, not knowing where he was to go" (Heb 11:8). The key is an openness to how the Spirit wants to direct and guide us. We need to be led to places we would rather not go, and to learn to walk where there

is no road. Are our assembled parishioners willing to respond to God's invitation by saying, "Ready"?

The creative preacher, however, has to guard against the aimless wandering of the Israelites in the desert. They often forgot where they were going, or what God had promised them. Fred Craddock states, "Imagination does not take off on flights of fancy, but walks down the street." The difficult task is to harmonize the openness to the Spirit with the passage. Imagination can be the best torturer. What is the main thrust of the passage? We often have to choose one point of view out of many, and realize we can't cover the whole waterfront or try to tie all the readings together. Is it possible to sum up your main point in one short sentence or in the number of words used in a brief telegram? Maybe we need to craft creative crock-pots. A creative

homily needs to percolate, simmer, cook slowly. Creativity takes energy, time and hard work.

Some preachers are just the opposite of a magician. Magicians are able to pull many things from the same hat. Some homilists "pull out" the same message Sunday after Sunday from different texts. Joseph Campbell, the scholar of mythology, had little use for clergy because he thought that they had no imagination. Alice McKenzie, in *Novel Preaching: Tips from Top Writers on Crafting Creative Sermons*, draws on the insights of renown novelists to offer preachers a rich selection of practical suggestions to consider when preparing a homily. She believes in a "knack for noticing," being more attuned to both the Scriptures and everyday life and cultivating an awareness of people's choices, desires and interactions. McKenzie encourages us to



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IN BRIEF

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carry a notebook and keep a journal.

After reading and praying over the texts, one might “brainstorm” (could be done with others) for all the ideas possible, even if they sound crazy or weird. If you were given an opportunity to cast the characters of the widow and the unjust judge on “Saturday Night Live,” how would you do it? Once you have done this, evaluate your ideas for their practicality or usefulness.

Too many preachers have immediate recourse to homily hints or pre-packaged homilies rather than seek out their own ideas. This approach will short circuit the creative process. It is much better to have a paper full of your own ideas, even though many can't be used, than to have an empty sheet or immediate recourse to other sources. Don't ever stop the flow of ideas; you can always separate the wheat from the tares. Then express your creativity in your own unique

way. We will not be perfect, but as the poet Lisa Colt wrote, “perfection is nowhere.” Be a lightning rod for the conflicts and fears of others. Remember that it takes imagination to live as if God's kingdom is right around the corner, even though we might peek to see what is coming.

One preacher who was trying to get across our uniqueness asked the people to look at their index finger, really look at it. “That fingerprint does not belong to anyone else,” he said. “It is exclusively yours. The same is true concerning your distinctive retinal scan, as well as your DNA, because there is only one of you. You can touch someone like nobody else can touch the person, and see the way no one else can.”

Introductions

A powerful way to be creative is to vary your introductions, not to start every homily with “In today's Gospel

we heard. . .” or some similar ho-hum sentence. A brief but pointed illustration is very effective. For example, one day a man came to a preacher and said, “Oh, all these problems, I only wish I could go to a place of no problems.” The preacher responded, “Why, I just came from such a place; I conducted a funeral this afternoon, and I came from a cemetery. People out there are not under any stress.” This was his introduction to his homily on Jesus' words, “Come to me, all you who are burdened, and I will give you rest” (Mt 11:28).

A quotation from an author like Dag Hammarskjöld, “The longest journey is the journey within,” can focus on how we find it hard to accept our powerlessness and take a Peter Pan flight from our inner struggles. A headline from today's newspaper will inevitably catch attention. Ask a penetrating question like, “How many of you consider yourselves Catho-

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lic?" One preacher did that and asked the parishioners to raise their hands. They did. He went on to show them what it means to be a Catholic today: ". . .love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you" (Lk 6:27-28). At the end of his homily, he concluded by asking, "Now, how many of us can say we are Catholics?"

Many penetrating questions are found in the Scriptures. God asked of Adam and Eve, "Where are you?" (Gn 3:9). The Lord said to Cain: "Why are you so resentful and crestfallen?" (Gn 4:6). "Who will roll back the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?"

(Mk 16:3). "Do you love me more than these?" (Jn 21:15). And the central question in the Gospels, "Who do the crowds say that I am?" (Lk 9:18). John Deer has written *The Questions of Jesus* to make us more aware of how many questions Jesus asked.

We often have to ask ourselves what questions people are asking. For example, "You want me to forgive him after what he did to me?" Or, "Why do I have to suffer so much?"

You might even ask the people, "If you could carry on a dialogue with Peter, Lazarus, Mary, Martha, the prodigal son or his father, what would you say?" Or you might start off with "What if?" or "Can you imagine?"

A piece of poetry to set the tone of the homily is often very effective. If your homily concerns the resurrection and the stone at the tomb, you might use John Shea's words: "So if a passer-by would ask who rules this life, point him to this stone and tell him I am inside disassembling the handiwork of God."

One might take a paradoxical statement like Meister Eckhart's "I pray God to free me of God," and then explain what he meant by this statement. Jesus used many paradoxes to get across His point especially about discipleship: "For whoever wishes to save one's life will lose it, but whoever loses one's life for my sake will save it" (Lk 9:24).

Interactive Preaching

A form of creative preaching is using a dialogue homily. This once was a popular way to reflect on the Gospel, especially in smaller weekday gatherings. The creative challenge is to make preaching participative: what a preacher does and how the community reacts. A preacher has to engage the people in the pews. One preacher did this by telling his listeners a few reasons why people are not

coming to church, and then asking them for other reasons why they are not coming. They gave good answers.

Paul Tillich insisted that there is no communication where there is no participation. What is going on in people's lives? We have to be aware of their pains, struggles, doubts, fears, hurts, sorrows and joys.

The marks of authentic pain should identify the preacher. Jesus was willing to show them his hands and his side. What are we willing to show them? Horace once said, "If you want me to weep, you must weep yourself." Above all, we must apply salve to their wounds. But to accomplish this, we need to heed the words of Carl Rodgers, "What is most personal and intimate is always universal." Psychologists point out how the retention value is in direct proportion to involvement. A fine compliment to hear after a successful homily is: "That message really spoke to me." Or "I felt as if you were speaking right to me."

Stories

A powerful way to help people interact is to tell pointed stories. Jesus was a master storyteller because he was a keen observer, a quality He was able to incorporate into a truth he was trying to get across. John Shea is very good at writing and telling stories. Many of his stories are gems, and you don't need a jeweler's eyeglass to understand the message. Shea insists that stories be preachable, personable, and have pastoral meaning. Good stories allow for multiplicity of meaning and are readily remembered. We preachers need to expand our awareness and imagination by discovering or noticing things that might be used as meaningful stories and to record them.

The question remains, how do we build a bridge over the chasm separating our world of preaching from our world of mass media? How do we integrate visual media in communicating God's Word? We live in the

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midst of an electronic culture. How many children have learned to spell and add by watching "Sesame Street"?

Good driving and computer science are demonstrated by means of videos and films. Since we are wedded to high technology, a computer age and TV, we do so for better or worse, for either richer or poorer, until frustration does us in.

We either get the hang of using creative imagination or we hang separately. Did you ever notice how TV commercials start off with something catchy, trying to capture our attention? For example, do we have a headache? That is followed by a proposal: do you want to rid yourself of the headache? Then the answer to the need: Tylenol or some other product. This is followed by the proof: it has worked. Finally the call for action: buy the product now! These simple steps used in electronic media can also be used in constructing a homily. TV programs often use what is called a teaser so you will continue to watch the program. Teasers are often used by pastors in other denominations to advertise their forthcoming sermon.

Visual Homily

Using visual aids can be a most effective way to convey a Gospel message. A match can be used to point out the power it has for good or evil, just as we have the potential for good or evil. A match is used for something else and does not become a decorative piece in one's house but is used to light a fire. We also do not exist for ourselves but for others. Jesus was a man for others. To light a match you need to strike it against something brittle before it ignites. This points out the opposition we encounter when bringing or witnessing the Good News to others. Once the match is lit, it becomes a tiny glorious flame as a reminder how Jesus challenged us, "You are the light of the world" (Mt 5:14).

A piece of tapestry might be used, especially showing the backside which

is a jumble of interwoven pieces of thread. This is the side we often are looking at as we journey through life and encounter events which don't make much sense. But once the tapestry is turned around, a beautiful pattern is seen. That might be our experience at the end of our lives, how all the events and circumstances of our lives that we often don't understand fit together to form a beautiful pattern.

Many other aids can be used. One parish made a scroll for me because my talks for the week were based on the time Jesus went into the synagogue at Nazareth and was offered a scroll which he opened to the passage from Isaiah, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me..." (Lk 4:18). At the appropriate time I opened the scroll and read the full passage. At the end of the week, I asked those people who wanted to commit themselves to being spirited and animated and willing to bring glad tidings to others to sign the scroll. The signed scroll was carried in procession at the closing Mass.

Some preachers enhance their homilies by means of song. Pat Boone used to shake hands with as many people in his audience as possible, and then sing songs to bolster his Gospel message. Jeff Vanden Heuvel, a Lutheran pastor in Wisconsin and a popular homilist, has produced a number of tapes entitled "Singing the Stories of the Good News."

Songs often have power to communicate more effectively than words. One of my classmates who was gifted with a beautiful voice would sing "Bridge Over Troubled Waters" whenever it was appropriate.

One pastor in the Las Vegas area used posters around the altar to illustrate his Sunday homily. He endeavored to visualize the meaning of Christ's message as well as possible so the congregation could see the message as well as hear it. Visuals used prudently, selectively and

with variation can not only enhance a homily, but help listeners to remember, recall and better understand the mes-

sage. Jesus used all kinds of visuals such as corn, wheat, jars, water, oil, and wine. So take up your media bag and preach.

Good Imagery

A creative preacher appeals to sense experience, and one of the best ways to do this is good imagery. A congregation ordinarily does not supply its own pictures. If we want someone to really enjoy a filet mignon, we let the person smell it, taste and savor it. As preachers we don't merely say that 6 million Jews were exterminated; we help the audience see the gas ovens, and we vividly describe the mountains of bones.

Worn-out words arouse no pictures or images. Instead of saying someone has a bad attitude toward life, why not speak of a jaundiced attitude. We often speak of leading monotonous lives, when we could say, "Tuesday is a dull echo of Monday, Thursday is a faint copy of Wednesday, and by the time we get to Friday we say TGIF!" Or if we want to describe the end of our day we might say that we felt or looked like a worn out rag doll. We can describe life as looking at a coral reef through a glass bottom boat. We become the glass bottom boat. Other examples: Wringing our hands has become a national pastime. Our vanity can outrun our sanity.

One way to talk about mystery is to use imagery well, as Jesus did. Shakespeare often used metaphors such as describing life as a walking shadow, a poor player, or a tale told by an idiot. Harry Emerson Fosdick, the famous preacher, once compared preaching to a person standing on top of a ten-story building with an eye dropper trying to hit someone's diseased eye in the sea of upturned faces in the crowd below. The creative preacher has a better chance of hitting someone's diseased eye and of

bringing healing to many who need it today. But we also have to be careful not to allow creativity to become a gimmick. Homilies come and go like telephone polls on the highway. Creativity will make our world a more beautiful and exciting place to live.

The advice a famous novelist gave to his students was to notice what they see and then trust in the significance of their observation. Too often we look at life with glazed eyes rather than creative eyes that zoom in on details. We flinch and avoid what needs to be seen. We need to bring out the "old and new treasures" of the Scriptures. It takes imagination to live as if God's kingdom is right around the corner. So pick up your creative imagination and walk in the footsteps of Jesus, the creative preacher. **P**

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THE IMITATION (from page 88)

Easier said than done, but I learned in the Cursillos that time is a question of preference.

Talking With Jesus at Communion Time. This is a powerful one. "You, Lord, sweet and loving, I want right now; I want to receive You with all devotion. You know my weaknesses and the necessities I live with; You know my sins and the evils I'm involved with; You know how often I'm weighed down, tempted, troubled, dirtied.

"To You I come for therapy, consolation, support. I want to talk to You because You know everything; You know my thoughts; You know how to comfort me; You know how to help me; You know the good I need; You know how poor I am in goodness" (book 4, chapter 16, no. 1).

Fervent Love to Receive Jesus.

"O Lord, my God, my Creator, my Redeemer, I want to receive You today with Affection, Reverence, Praise, Honor, Gratitude, Credibility, Love, Faith, Hope and Purity. Mary received you like this; she desired You like this when the angel told her the good news of the Incarnation...(saying, Lk 1:38) I am the Lord's maid; I am ready for what you say" (book 4, chapter 17, no. 2).

So dust off that old copy of *The Imitation of Christ*. Download it. Have a copy nearby. Try it. I guarantee you are going to like what you see. **P**

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