

Preaching and the Cities

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The story is told of a homeless man in a large city who was asking, "Is there a church around here?" None of the people was paying attention to him or looked the other way as we often do. So he cried out his question all the louder much like Bartimeus. Finally, a man stopped and said to him, "Yes, there is, just a few blocks from here. They will give you a sandwich and some help." He replied, "I don't need help, I just want to pray."

This story might point out the complex relationship of the Church and the city. What is its role, and how are preachers to address this issue? The issue dates itself to the time of the Babylonian exile where the psalmist described their plight: "By the rivers of Babylon we sat mourning and weeping when we remembered Zion. On the poplars of that land we hung up our harps. There our captors asked us for the words of a song, our tormentors, for a joyful song: 'Sing for us a song of Zion!' But how could we sing a song of the Lord in a foreign land?" (Ps. 137:1-4)

They certainly were not paying attention to the city of Babylon. Jeremiah wrote to them these encouraging words, "Promote the welfare of the city to which I have exiled you; pray for it to the Lord, for upon its welfare depends your own." (29:7) Jeremiah was warning them to stop living in the past, but pay more attention to the present, to the city they were living in. He was suggesting that they pray and work for its welfare, which would determine their own welfare. Maybe that is the mission of every preacher, to help people pray and work for the welfare of their own city and community.

Cities and civilizations are in many respects synonymous. The words "civil," "polite," and "urbane," find their derivation from city life. Aristotle believed that "man is a political animal." Polis means city, a place where we live. He believed that only gods and beasts live in the wilderness. The Jesuits built their plan for the world's conversion around the emerging cities. Is it a coincidence

that the Bible begins with a garden and ends with a heavenly city?

The Hebrew Bible as well as the New Testament has drawn much from cities for their background information. The Temple, the place of worship for the Jews, was in the city of Jerusalem. It was not only the place of spirituality but also a place of economic, social and political power. Cities at that time were the main stops to do business and ply one's trade. But they also afforded many the opportunities to steal, lie and cheat. No wonder the prophets directed much of their attention to the cities.

Preaching in the global city

The challenge for preachers as we now live in a "global city" is to create and form community among people who live as strangers. Our preaching arises from the life of the community. Paul focused much of his attention on cities like Corinth, Rome, Ephesus, Philippi, and many more. They gave him the opportunity to preach his message in a forceful and persuasive manner. Paul was shrewd in using the various cities he visited as his base of operations. Then he asked for support of these churches to continue his evangelizing efforts. Barnabas brought Paul to Antioch as we read in the Acts, "For a whole year they met with the church and taught a large number of people, and

it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called Christians." (11:26). Good preaching helps to form communities of love, grace and service which Paul sincerely desired. Richard Hays in his commentary on 1 Corinthians states, "Paul is not concerned just with individual edification of believers or with doctrinal teaching in the abstract, rather his pastoral task is the organization of and nurturing of a community. His constant goal is to call the Corinthians to understand their corporate existence as the Church."

Preaching can help communities find their own identity and thereby nurture a common vision. We read in the Acts: "The community of believers was of one heart and mind, and no one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they had everything in common. With great power the Apostles bore witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great favor was accorded them." (4:32-33)

Helping to shape communities of love and service will mean cultivating a spirit of repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation. Our preaching will be shaped by the experiences of our communities and especially their mission dedicated to peace and justice that Jesus sought. So preachers have to ask their audiences: how can they work together to form a better community to build up the reign of God in their midst? To do this effectively preachers need on-going

conversion in their own lives as they watch it happen in their communities.

Jesus and the city

Even though Jesus used images that most country folk understood like sheep, shepherds, mustard seeds, tenant farmers, where did he head when he began his preaching? To the city, just as Paul did. The city and Christianity go together like a mother and child. When Jesus looked over the city of Jerusalem he wept saying, "If this day you only knew what makes for peace but now it is hidden from your eyes." (Lk 19:42) The Assyrians, the Babylonians, and the Romans destroyed the city of Jerusalem because they did not listen to the prophets. How many cities would Jesus weep over today? Cities continue to turn a deaf ear to the prophets or even kill them as they did Doctor Martin Luther King Jr. We read in Matthew's Gospel that Jesus "began to reproach the towns where most of his mighty deeds had been done, since they had not repented." (11:20). They killed the greatest prophet of all so that we might be reminded, "here we have no lasting city, but we seek the one that is to come." (Heb. 13:14)

The Gospel preached boldly, as Jesus did, will clear up blurred lines of alienation caused by injustice, and loneliness caused by people seeking

community, and put them in proper focus. A forceful Gospel message will knife through the hypocrisy, copouts and power struggles found in some cities. The preached word invites a "yes" or "no," not a "maybe." We have to invite our audiences to align themselves with Jesus and allow the transformation to take place in their lives as well as the community.

Jesus felt comfortable with all kinds of people: prostitutes, a Samaritan woman, lepers, an adulteress, a Roman centurion. Someone has said that Jesus reached out to the least, the last, and the lost as well as the chosen ones. We need to encourage our listeners to be a welcoming person, a welcoming community. I remember a couple who told me that it took them a whole year before they felt comfortable attending their parish. The early Christians had to learn to welcome the Gentiles and not subject them to circumcision. They reached out to aliens, exiles and displaced people. St. Paul encouraged the Romans, "Contribute to the needs of holy ones, exercise hospitality." (12:13)

As preachers we are called upon, like Jesus, to preach good news to the poor, release to captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and allow the oppressed to go free. We need to call into question the social injustices that exist in our cities. Are we acting as prophets helping to create a radical community to heal the bro-

kenness and fragmentation often present in cities? The poor and homeless are often not welcome in most cities.

The plight of cities

Since the September attack on New York and Washington, D.C., we have become more aware how susceptible we are to terrorist attacks. One Bishop described what happened in New York City as a pillar of smoke that led the Israelites through the desert and a pillar of fire that continued to burn the twin towers. It might be a flashback to how Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed as fire and sulfur rained down on the city, or people fleeing from the burning villages of Vietnam, East Timor, Nicaragua, and El Salvador. But we need to ask: since 1945 have we not rained ruin on 20 different nations?

The destruction of the twin towers also brought out most graphically how courageous firemen, policemen and many lay people were as they ran into an inferno to save lives only to have their own snuffed out. One day the city might be described as proud, self sufficient, and even arrogant, the next day as humbled, afraid and ready to reach out. New York city is made up of at least 15 different neighborhoods and mixed cultures, the rich living only a few blocks from the poor. The 1990 census re-

vealed that one out of five New Yorkers was born overseas. At least 100,000 people lost their jobs. But New York City was transformed and united into a city of compassion, love and resilience. Maybe this was a glimpse of the New Jerusalem.

This tragedy has been compared to a modern enemy with Trojan horses. Just as the Jews lamented the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. many Americans have said, "Is this the all-beautiful city, the joy of the whole earth...? They say, we have devoured her, this at last is the day we hoped for; we have lived to see it." (Lam. 2: 15b, 16b) But our nation rebounded with unity and resolves to counteract this terrorist attack. As Pearl Harbor shattered our image of isolation, this event shattered our image of invincibility. We need to keep the flickering flame of faith from being extinguished.

That is a most difficult challenge for preachers, especially as we view our cities today. The poor and homeless are an eyesore to most cities. Gentrification and the need for low-income housing are evident in most cities. When public housing is demolished as was done in 100,000 units in 1996, there was not adequate housing to replace 40,000 residents. Developers made millions of dollars as a result of these decisions. This is a good example of how our decisions can affect the whole community. A number of coalitions, especially in Chicago, have united to protect pub-

lic housing. As Yvonne Delk points out, "They are working to change the face of public housing with changing the faces in public housing, believing that public housing tenants have a right to enjoy the hospitality of the city."

We need to see "America the ugly." How many displaced immigrants or juvenile delinquents are there in every city? City life is fragmented and people are falling through the cracks. Consider the racial disparity in our prisons or the rampant racism in some cities. As John Vaughn maintains: "Though there has been an increased level of racial tolerance throughout many regions of the U.S., the preacher's challenge is not to mistake it for absence of racism. When one conducts an analysis of power within cities, where the real decisions are made, the reality is that the majority of the power brokers are still White." Some other areas or projects that need attention are the lack of affordable housing, environmental injustices, laying off people who have worked 20 or more years for a company, gas stations with storage tanks that leak and have been abandoned, zoning policies that are racist, large tracts of contaminated land that have not been cleaned up. Our news media constantly bombard us with the rapes, muggings, drug deals, robberies, prostitution, unemployment and homelessness in our cities.

Despite all this, we need to preach

a message of hope especially in our inner cities. The preaching will vary depending on the community, the questions that need to be addressed, the issues that need to be challenged. Certainly preachers need to be attuned to the suffering and sorrows as well as the joys of the community. These stories can at times be linked to the Scriptural readings and the life of Jesus. This will prevent us from preaching at people. Preaching is a community event and has to address the people's fears, struggles and hopes as they live the present moment and face the unknown future

Cities can be life giving

We need to remind our audiences that cities can be exciting and life-giving places. Cities are the center for transportation, finance, media and commerce. Cities also support art, drama and culture through their museums, art galleries, libraries and opera houses. Where can you find theaters, recital halls, salons, malls, stores and schools in such abundance? Cain named the first city after his son Enoch whose descendants were musicians and smiths. E.L. Doctorow in his novel *City of God* describes the city, "If you fly above it at night, it is a jeweled wonder of the universe, floating like a giant line on the sea of darkness. It is smart, sophisticated, and breathtaking. And

it glimmers and sparkles." Many of the cities have a sports stadium where millions of people gather every year to cheer on their favorite team. Places of worship where people find the comfort and encouragement needed to face the realities of life are evident often by the huge steeples that dot the skyline. People often come to cities to start over their lives or share their talents. In one parish a preacher invited his parishioners at homily time to take a ten-minute walk in pairs around the neighborhood. They were to identify where they found God present in the neighborhood. These findings were shared and then offered up as part of the presentation of the gifts. Talk about a homily in action!

The city of Philadelphia was plagued by much violence and racism in the 80's. Many responded by spray-painting the city to emphasize their frustration. The graffiti began to overturn the city. The mayor, Wilson Goode, decided to promote mural painting. Any person found guilty of spray painting was given an opportunity to work on a mural rather than paying a fine or serving time. The project was so successful that by the end of 1984 over 130 graffiti artists combined with others to paint local murals. At the end of the 80's over 170,000 volunteers had worked on murals. Now over 1500 murals brighten the city of Philadelphia. What a way to change a city into an outdoor art gallery.

Saints for the cities

Many outstanding saints have been connected to cities: Teresa of Avila, Augustine of Hippo, Ambrose of Milan, Francis of Assisi, Rose of Viterbo, and many more. Rose actually was a street preacher and dared to preach against the emperor at that time, Frederick II. Some day Dorothy Day might be canonized despite the fact that at one time she was involved in love affairs that failed and also had an abortion. She converted to the Catholic faith, and along with Peter Maurin founded the famous Catholic Worker movement, which established many houses of hospitality in New York. Once she became more informed about her Catholic faith she was shocked about the Church's lack of social commitment. She, as well as many of her workers, became a pacifist during World War II, and refused to support the war.

Day and Peter Maurin were very concerned about the city. They established many farms to help feed the poor in the city. She assured people she "would not abandon the city, which is above all the home of the dispossessed, of the forgotten." Dorothy and her followers did their best work in the city helping the poor and publishing a Catholic newspaper. William Miller, her biographer, maintains that her spirit was claimed by the city.

Another possible "saint" is Edwina Gately who felt called to minister in the inner city despite a lot of fear and trepidation. At first she could not see herself ministering to prostitutes, shoplifters and the homeless. If she tried to reach out to prostitutes, she often was rebuffed with "f... off." Despite this she kept walking the streets often not knowing what to do. By persisting in this adventure for weeks, months, years, she finally came to understand these people. She began to learn their names like Rose who was once a college teacher until she suffered a mental breakdown. Mark was a wino whom she let sleep in her car. Desperately she wanted to help these people but her efforts were often futile. Edwina finally came to the realization that she had to let go of her plans, dreams and hopes to heal and save. All she could do was love these people as intensely as possible. Mezzie, a prostitute, wrote her a letter that read, "If I die, remember that I knew - you loved me." She died at the age of 36.

We read in the fourth chapter of Genesis how Cain built the first city. In the final book of the Bible, Revelation, we read how the author "saw a new heaven and a new earth. The former heaven and the former earth had passed away, and the seas were no more. I also saw the holy city, a new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband." (21: 1-2)

Later on we read "The city had no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gave it light..." (21:23) God promises to live with us and make all things new. We are citizens of this new city. We have to work toward the goal of a new heaven and a new earth.

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A Native American Thanksgiving Prayer

*Almighty Creator, we praise
you for giving us life.*

*We give you thanks for enlightening
our minds with the wisdom
of our ancestors, and with the
Holy Scripture.*

*Thank you for our Mother
Earth, who sustains and keeps us.*

*We are thankful for nourishing
our souls through prayer, and
for your great kingdom the heavens,
our home.*

*We thank you for these gifts
and all the blessings you have
given us.*

*-Sylvia Mendivil Salazar,
Pima/Yagui
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