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CHRISTIANITY AND CULTURE

SAYING GOODBYE TO MY GUY ON THE HILL
Kristin Saldine
Please don’t tell my presbytery’s Committee on Ministry, but I would make three sacraments if I ran the world. Baptism and the Eucharist would be essential, of course, as they are now. But if I ran the world, I would add a third—preaching.

Some of us think that that’s what John Calvin was about when, in his liturgical practice, he moved the *epiclesis* portion of the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving—the portion of that prayer summoning God’s Holy Spirit to dwell within the elements of bread and wine—and placed it, instead, just ahead of the sermon. In so doing, was he suggesting, maybe, that preaching, too, is sacramental?

That’s what I would suggest if I ran the world.

Preaching, when it is faithfully spoken and faithfully heard, has many sacramental qualities, and one such quality is this: it uses common things—words—for a holy purpose. In Baptism, common tap water is set apart for a holy purpose; at the Eucharist, common bread and wine are set apart for a holy purpose. In preaching, if I ran the world, preachers would forever be lifting up the commonality of words—often hewn out of the language of their own experience—for a holy purpose.

And that purpose would be fundamentally trustworthy. In fact, as Tom Long has said, preaching is a way of truth-telling measured not just by what it *is* but by what it *does*, and if, for example, what it does is to divide us and create suspicion among us and make us angry at one another, then there’s a good chance that it’s not the truth. But if preaching uses common words—the wheat and fruit of our ongoing experience—in ways that can be trusted, so that we end up talking with one another the way Adam and Eve talked in the Garden of Eden before the snake came and tied human language into knots, then our words spoken from the pulpit would be downright sacramental.

The words that follow are primarily about preaching, and they invite us to think about the inextricable way in which preaching is linked to the sacraments. These words come from some of the preachers I most admire. Jennifer Lord, associate professor of homiletics here at Austin Seminary, never allows Word to wander off by itself somewhere, but is forever summoning her students and readers to behold how Word and Sacrament feed and nourish one another. Two trustees of the Seminary, Michael Lindvall and Tom Are, regularly lift up their own sanctified language in witness to the Word which lives and breathes within their ministries, and what they have to say about preaching and the pastoral life is worth your complete attention. Sally Brown, one of the finest homileticians I know, will inspire you with the image of worship being ultimately about an outpoured God. Gordon Lathrop, in my mind the most important liturgical theologian of our time, invites us to imagine our words as preachers being words that are eaten and drunk. Two cherished alums, Ray Reed and Tammy Gregory Brown, bring their considerable pastoral imaginations to reflections about their own preaching and thus remind me of best practices out there in the parish. In other words, this is rich reading in the pages that follow.

May God bless your ministry, and may God—who, thanks be to God, really runs the world—use your words as common vessels of a holy mystery!

Theodore J. Wardlaw
President, Austin Seminary
Despite common opinion to the contrary, symbols are neither nostalgic remembrances of the past nor familiar reminders of things we already know. Symbols are not things people invent and interpret, but realities that “make” and interpret a people. What we need today is not so much “better symbols,” but a willingness to let ourselves be grasped and explored by them. For a symbol is not an object to be manipulated through mime and memory but an environment to be inhabited. Symbols are places to live, breathing spaces that help us discover what possibilities life offers.

—Nathan Mitchell

IN VITAT I ON TO C H RIST

In 2002 the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) authorized the appointment of a Sacraments Study Group, fulfilling a request from the denomination’s Office of Theology and Worship for “a full and substantive study of the

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sacraments both in the Reformed tradition and in the ecumenical context in order to help the church discern the history and theology of baptism and the Lord’s Supper, as well as their appropriate relationship.” The Office’s request was in response to various overtures sent to the General Assembly regarding language about the sacraments in the Directory for Worship. The Sacraments Study Group met over three years and produced the document, “Invitation to Christ: A Guide to Sacramental Practices.”2 The study group committed to shared sacramental practice and at each of their fifteen meetings over the three-year period reaffirmed the baptismal covenant and celebrated the Lord’s Supper.

The study of the sacraments was done in the context of sacramental practice. The document grew out of these shared practices, theological discussions, research, congregational surveys and interviews, and ecumenical conversations. The final report provides a careful overview of the biblical, historical, theological, and confessional foundations of the sacraments and issues a call to renewed sacramental practice. The impetus for the document is far reaching:

We are convinced that a rediscovery of the gift and call of our baptism can transform the church for ministry in the 21st century. We believe that the Christian life, engaged as a life of discipleship springing from baptism, can help to center and unify the church around its foundational calling from the risen Christ, to ‘go and make disciples’ (Matthew 28:19).3

The committee invited every congregation to engage five particular practices for the two years as a way of growing in sacramental understanding and centrality. The five practices are:

1. Set the font in full view of the congregation.
2. Open the font and fill it with water on every Lord’s Day.
3. Set cup and plate on the Lord’s Table on every Lord’s Day.
4. Lead appropriate portions of weekly worship from the font and from the table.
5. Increase the number of Sundays on which the Lord’s Supper is celebrated.

The “Invitation to Christ” document came about in response to questions about the relationship between baptism and eucharist, specifically if baptism was a requirement for receiving communion. With great care and sensitivity, the study group concluded that though there are pastoral occasions when we would not refuse someone the bread and the cup, the “fullest range of meanings of baptism and the Lord’s Supper” is sustained and lived out in the normative relationship of the sacraments: baptism before eucharist.4

Though it is not my intention to focus on this particular issue in relation to the sacraments, I highlight it because the issue itself points to our ongoing need to deepen our experience and understanding of the sacraments. I turn to Nathan Mitchell’s words to help with this work.

GRASPING THE SACRAMENTS

I choose to read Nathan Mitchell’s words about symbols, quoted above, through the lens of the sacraments, and I welcome his challenge. What does it mean to be
grasped by the sacraments, to be explored by them, and to inhabit them? This way of speaking about our relationship to the sacraments intrigues me and feels most true. But the use of this language for baptism and eucharist is suspect among many Presbyterians and other Protestants. I want to spend some time with Mitchell’s view and then think about the ways preaching enters into this conversation.

What does it mean to be grasped and explored by the sacraments? Or perhaps I should back up and ask a preliminary question: Is there anything by which we allow ourselves to be grasped and explored these days? The question, arranged that way, carries a sense of seeing ourselves as smaller than the thing that grasps us. And that means trusting another entity. What do we let ourselves to be grasped and explored by in our time? Probably medical science—for the purposes of good health I will let myself be explored and grasped by annual tests and the doctor’s interrogation about my eating and sleeping and stress patterns. We are certainly grasped by economics. All of our belongings are ramifications of global trade and complex patterns of needs, desires, productivity, and purchases. We allow ourselves to be grasped and explored in loving relationships.

But at least some of our time is spent acting as if the opposite were true: that we are in control and construct all aspects of our world. We use the language of “making our relationships work.” We exert resistance if our work is not to our satisfaction. If we are privileged enough, we make our work, well, work. And if we think about the ways we navigate the quotidian aspects of our lives and even the larger moments or crises, do we encounter them as events that we grasp or as events that grasp us? How do we negotiate this? Mitchell’s comments are resonant for several reasons: the church engages the sacraments in ways that put us in the position of grasping them. I will look briefly at two examples of this.

This past summer I thought about how we grasp the sacraments. At a denominational conference the bread and the cup were distributed among more than one thousand persons. Moreover, the elements were distributed by intinction. One participant told me that, had his home church committee members been in charge of communion at this conference, we would have never received the elements this way. In his congregational setting, he said, the concern about germs was too intense and the rubric of safety and cleanliness governs all decisions about the distribution of communion. We know this is true; in times of public illness these concerns increase. Worship committees may talk only about safety issues or rancor in congregations over distribution methods instead of the centrality of the sacraments for our life together. This talk has become common. Here is one thing to notice: these sorts of discussions emphasize that we handle the sacraments, meaning that the sacraments are, we believe, under our control. And if that is the only way we talk about the sacraments, then it patterns us into thinking that we grasp them.

In some corners of the church the sacraments have even been deemed irrelevant by being celebrated as infrequently as possible or dismissed altogether. I am thinking about individual congregations who break with denominational polity and practices. This is yet another way that we exert control over them. Some reasons for this dismissal grow out of certain characteristics of Protestant sacramental traditions, like our theo-
logical tendencies that favor the rational and value suspicion of symbols.

One recent publication offers another way to think about this Presbyterian (and generally Protestant) history of making the sacrament of bread and wine liturgically irrelevant. Richard Gaillardetz’s article, “Doing Liturgy in a Technological Age” uses the categories of “device paradigm” and “focal practices” to talk about technology and human practices and, in particular, about Christian liturgy. We can think about these categories in relationship to the sacraments. Both focal thing and device exist, Gaillardetz says, to provide a commodity—something that we want or need for our lives. In order to describe focal practices he cites the example of a wood-burning stove or fireplace which

produces a commodity, heat, but it also provides a focus; it offers a hearth, a place to gather. The fireplace remains in view and requires numerous tasks and skills for its proper use. There is the task of obtaining firewood, knowing which kinds of wood burn best, learning how to properly start and stoke the fire. These skills and practices inevitably bring one into contact with the larger world of nature and other persons and require the extended human interaction and relationships necessary to pass on the requisite skills to another.

A device, on the other hand, has these characteristics: it produces one commodity and it is concealed. “Following the example above, a central heating system is a device that provides the same commodity as the fireplace, heat, without intruding in our lives or placing demands on our time.”

These are intriguing categories for thinking about the sacraments: device commodity and focal practice. Considering sacraments as focal practices draws us into what Gaillardetz calls “manifold engagement”: they engage us in many ways and multiple commodities are produced. The sacraments as focal practices involve our embodied presence, interpersonal engagement, movements, gestures, song, speech, silence, preparation of self, the preparation of elements (water, bread, wine, assistants, servers, ministers, assembly), the unpredictable, the unknown. There is a great list of possible “commodities”: forgiveness, remembrance, hope, community, unity, acceptance, re-creation, etc. (Of course we understand that any production of “commodities” is only possible by the power of the Holy Spirit.) This list, these “commodities,” are anything but irrelevant. They are the very stuff of life. The sacraments are, in fact, the ultimate expression of a focal practice.

It is difficult to imagine that the sacraments have ever been a device commodity by design: mechanistic, hidden from view, with only one commodity, although we can envision eucharist in the later middle ages and come close: the priest speaks quietly in Latin, stands behind rood screens, shares the bread and cup infrequently with the people, emphasizes salvation. The Eucharist as device commodity is still the Eucharist (bread, cup, administrants, receivers, the assembly—all working together in the Spirit to effect the grace given), yet the actual doing of eucharist has become static or ossified somehow. It now has one function (salvation) that happens in a rote way. The “manifold engagements” matter much less.

Is the language about irrelevancy a charge against the sacraments as focal practices or against the sacraments as a particular commodity? I suspect that the ways that we
perform these focal practices or lessen our manifold engagement with the sacraments contributes to an understanding of sacraments as device commodity. Whatever our answers are to these questions, the charge of irrelevancy suggests that we have complete understanding of the scope of sacramental relevancy—enough to dismiss them as being irrelevant.

These examples are sufficient cause for engaging Mitchell’s words. While the “Invitation to Christ” document describes how this call to sacramental renewal follows biblical, historical, and theological precedents, it is fruitful to also retain focus on Mitchell’s language about symbols. Because both the “Invitation to Christ” document and the words from Nathan Mitchell summon us to find life and meaning in this system of symbols, I will say a bit more about the nature and purpose of symbols.

**SACRAMENTS AS SYMBOLS**

To climb inside Mitchell’s words, it is helpful to think about symbols as a way of knowing. There is the type of knowing, for instance, that recognizes $2+2=4$. We can call this foundational knowledge and characterize it as logical, sequential, and linear. The use of signs is closer to this way of knowing than is the use of symbols. Signs are ways that we share meaning and communicate based on one-to-one connotations. The common example of this is that a stop sign means stop. For another example, the illumined number at the grocery store check-out line means it is open.

Symbols are more complex than signs. The root of the word is *sym ballein*—originally two pieces of pottery or a coin and when placed together could be recognized as belonging together. Symbols are constructed by throwing together and layering divergent meanings. “Because we cannot say all the truth simultaneously, the symbol presents the community a complex of meanings that are beyond words.”

Symbols as a way of knowing differ from one-to-one connotations. Symbols are more complex and elusive and trigger a process of invention and discerning. Here is an example of the symbolic dimension of knowing:

You, oh Christ, are the Kingdom of Heaven;  
You, the land promised to the gentle;  
You the grazing lands of paradise;  
You, the hall of the celestial banquet;  
You, the ineffable marriage chamber;  
You the table set for all;  
You, the bread of life;  
You, the unheard of drink;  
You, both the urn for the water  
and the life-giving water;  
You, moreover, the inextinguishable lamp  
for each one of the saints;  
You, the garment and the crown  
and the one who distributes crowns.

We know this ancient poem says something about Jesus Christ. In fact it says many things. But the words work on us in a manner different from linear progression or
didacticism. Recent studies in neurology tell us that this symbolic or metaphoric way of knowing is inherent in us.

I might say more accurately that metaphors are useful, perhaps even necessary, to unite the cognitive and emotional meaning of a proposition. The way the two are integrated has everything to do with the way our brains work. Metaphor’s resonance comes from its ability to activate not only the cerebral cortex’s cognitive and sensory networks, but also the limbic system’s affective and motivational networks. Both systems are necessary for what we would call understanding.¹²

Symbolic knowing is intrinsic to how we negotiate meaning and understanding. And liturgy belongs to the realm of symbolic knowing. We say baptism is tomb and womb. It is not, really. But it is: really! Eucharist is tomb and womb, too, and it is dying and rising, brokenness and wholeness, and more. Our temptation is to say that baptism is … or that eucharist is … and to give only one definitive answer. But that is always dangerous. The word and is crucial. We say this about the very sacraments themselves: baptism is the washing and eucharist is the meal but the Eucharist is also the repeatable part of baptism.¹³ Symbols are a complex of meanings.

So far we have been thinking about symbols as a way of knowing. There are some additional things to say about symbols. They are multivalent: they have more than one meaning associated with them. I remember a time when several of us were thinking about the doctrinal focus of the sermons we were working on. One person named forgiveness, another named creation, another pneumatology. Someone named the sacraments. We talked then about the ways that the sacraments were not one doctrinal loci among these others but in fact contain them all. The sacraments have something to say about forgiveness, creation, and the Holy Spirit. The sacraments, being a symbolic way of knowing, hold many meanings. Recent publications, for instance, make this clear as they explore eucharist and violence, eucharist and hunger, and eucharist and economy.¹⁴

Here is another thing to say about symbols: they are not “merely” symbols. We get caught up in that assertion: it’s just a symbol! Or the claim related to this sentiment: that symbols obfuscate what is real. These attitudes suggest that symbols are either second string to the real thing or that they are to be held in deep suspicion because they are a stumbling block to our connection with the real thing.

We’ve spent time thinking about symbols as a way of knowing. It must be added that they are a tangible way of knowing. It is the tangibility of the sacraments that is the condition under which the triune God promises to be present, i.e., water, bread, and wine.¹⁵ They are not in the way of what is real or merely a pleasing decoration: they are how we negotiate meaning.

But they are not still-life forms. Baptism is not the water sitting in the bowl or the water running in the creek. The Eucharist is not the bread and the cup on the table. We sometimes speak as if the symbol is the same thing as the object. Instead, Mitchell says, see the actions. Sacraments are only themselves in use. The objects are in use. The sacraments involve physical doing: washing, eating, moving, standing, kneeling. And more. The sacraments can affect our relationships including issues around power and identity. They order our worldviews. We see rich and poor drinking from the same cup
and this presents a likeness between human beings that is not operative in the same way outside the church walls. But it also suggests what can become operative outside the church walls. The sacraments present models for a different way of being in the world and for our engagement with social structures. 16

SACRAMENTAL PREACHING

With this view of the sacraments in mind—symbols that are ways of knowing, multivalent, tangible accommodations, world-creating actions—what does it mean to preach alongside them? Preaching is the verbal articulation of the gospel that stands alongside these visual forms of the gospel. In this last section, we engage new questions: How does preaching help us re-inhabit our central symbols? How does preaching help us know that they are environments, places to live, focal practices for our manifold engagement? Here are a few thoughts.

1) There is a time for preaching about the sacraments. The person mentioned above who suggested that sacraments were one loci among other theological doctrines had a point—sometimes we want the sacraments to be the focus of a sermon specifically to help us experience the tangible reality of grace offered by the sacraments. The church has a long history with these types of sermons. These are the mystagogical sermons—sermons on the mysteries (sacraments). Cyril of Jerusalem, Ambrose of Milan, and Theodore of Mopsuestia all give us sermons that immerse us in the sacraments as environment for life. An important difference is that the mystagogical sermons happened after the people had participated in the sacraments. These sermons were not part of the Sunday liturgy but occurred during an appointed time of post-baptismal catechesis. The sermons instructed the newly baptized on their recent sacramental experiences and revealed the meanings of gestures and symbols of the rites of initiation. It is this quality of these sermons that I wish to highlight. This way of preaching is distinct from any tendency to think that the sermon must provide a proper understanding of sacrament before we engage it. Instead of focusing on answers and proper understandings, the ancient mystagogical sermons focus on the significance inherent in the sacramental actions, including all the focal practices surrounding the sacraments. And this preaching was done after the experiences. The sermon, then, does not presume to explain the meanings of the sacraments as separate from how they are done. Our preaching occurs for the most part in the middle of things: a sermon on a given Sunday occurs after the sacramental celebrations of previous weeks but before the celebration of the sacraments on that day. We need not extract theological meanings as if they are separate from how we go about the actions of the sacraments. Our preaching can take all these focal practice meanings into account.

2) Some preachers will select a preaching text because it has an explicit connection to the baptism or eucharist that will happen later in the worship service. But I am interested in ways that we can make connections between every preaching text and the sacraments. This is not to say that every sermon is an excursus on baptism or eucharist. Rather, it is to say that we can train ourselves to see the connections: font and table as good soil, as the prodigal’s welcome home, as the feast of all nations. Doing this asso-
ciative work will unearth the faceted nature of the sacraments, their multivalence as symbols. And this can happen whether or not the sacraments are being celebrated on that given day. We may include one phrase in a sermon that makes a connection between an image from the text and baptism or eucharist, or even make one gesture toward font or table during a part of the sermon. But that phrase or gesture makes the connection and helps us more fully participate in the sacramental actions because a nuance has been highlighted, meaning expanded. In the language of the biblical texts, we can point to possibilities within the range of sacramental meanings.

3) I also want to turn tables here and think about preaching that helps us re-inhabit the sacraments because we allow the sacraments to serve as an interpretive lens for our preaching. Here is one example: the sacraments say something particular about the concept of time. Past, present, and future are layered on top of each other. This has been described as the *Hodie* of the liturgy—the *today* of the events. The Eucharist, for instance, is not the same thing as the last supper of Jesus with his disciples, a meal of the past. The Eucharist is our meal with the risen Christ. But the *Hodie* of the sacrament is such that in the re-presentation, the meaning of the past event includes our own present participation. Hence, although the Eucharist is in this moment and is with the risen Christ, it is also the way by which we say of the Last Supper (and the Exodus, and Emmaus Road) that, in fact, we, too, were there. What is key is that we do not have to wish we lived back then and walked with Jesus. We walk with Jesus now. We live with Jesus now. This *Hodie* quality points the other direction, too. It is the eschatological presence of Christ in the Holy Spirit now. The future tense has a claim on us now. What we hope for in the end times directs our life together now. We do not live only for that later time. Preaching, then, is free to be present tense in the *Hodie* sense. There is no need for us to wish for another age, past or future. Preaching in the present tense means that our sense of the present is informed by the past and the future.

These are only three examples of ways that preaching can help us enter more deeply into the sacraments. Hopefully they are suggestive of additional ways that preaching can help us enter the environments of the sacraments. Taking a cue from the study document, “Invitation to Christ,” we can not only recover sacramental practices but deepen our manifold engagements with them. We enter into them not because they are a fixed commodity that will mechanistically realign us. We enter into them because they are the symbolic/tangible way of making present God’s purposes for all people. As such they are ways of knowing God and knowing ourselves. They hold the full range of possible meanings for our life in the triune God. By the power of the Holy Spirit they shape us for all the ways we need to be formed for each other and for the world.

NOTES
4. Ibid., 24.
5. I am thinking about individual congregations who break with denominational polity and practices.


7. Ibid., 431-432.

8. Ibid., 433.

9. I am using a common schematic to distinguish symbol from sign. But it should be noted that this is different than John Calvin's use of signs when he speaks of the sacraments.


13. The Study document makes this clear: “In ancient Christianity, there was unity of Word, font, and table. While there were some differences in the shape and duration of the initiatory process from one region to another, baptism and the Lord’s supper were linked as two parts of a single act of Christian initiation. The two sacraments of the church that we practice today were so closely related in the ancient church that eucharist was understood as the one repeatable part of baptism.” “Invitation to Christ,” 30.


16. See Martha Moore-Keish, *Do This in Remembrance of Me: A Ritual Approach to Eucharistic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2008), 90. Here I make use of Moore-Keish’s categories for ritual action to describe symbols as actions.


I was intrigued by the part of your essay where you claim that symbols are intrinsic to how we know and how we navigate meaning and understanding. Could you say a little more about what you mean by that?

People who study worship like to point out that worship is a different way of knowing—an affective way of knowing—through symbols, ritual, and metaphor. There's an overabundance of those things in our Sunday morning worship services and any time we gather for worship. Symbolic knowing is different from linear, logical information, such as two plus two equaling four or the octagonal red sign at the intersection meaning stop. Some begin worship by saying “In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.” What does that mean, In the name? What does it mean to dwell In the name and why are we greeting each other In the name instead of saying good morning? That's symbolic speech right there. The intrinsic use of symbols is not unique to worship. For instance thanksgiving dinner, ballgames, and birthdays are full of symbolic ways of navigating meaning.

Let’s look at the central things that we gather around in worship. We gather with other people. We are a symbol. We are individuals, but when we gather, we are the constituted body of Christ in that local place. That is symbolic speech. It doesn't quite make sense; it's not logical, but that's what we say happens in church. Gordon Lathrop talks about the people, the water, the word, and the meal as the holy things. These are not still objects, they are the central things of worship and they are in action. We do not make these up, they are biblical, historical, and ecumenical.

So is it a bit like saying we live and learn by story as much as data?

Yes, because stories, like symbols, are a way of holding meanings for our lives. At the end of the day I don't give a data report at the dinner table, I tell the stories of what happened during my day.

Paul Tillich described symbols as participating in the realities towards which they point. Do you find that a helpful way of thinking about symbols?

For a long time, that's a definition that I would use in class, and Tillich's definition helps folks begin to shift away from looking at something and saying, “that's just a symbol.” Now, to be clear, when I'm talking about this I am thinking about the central things, the holy things of the Sunday assembly: the water that will be used for baptism, the Bible, the bread and the cup, and the gathered assembly.

Tillich’s language is helpful in moving us away from saying something is merely a
symbol, because he’s saying the object itself is integral and needed for our interactions with the reality. And that there is more to that object than what meets our eyes. We might use Calvin’s language of accommodation here. It’s a tangible accommodation on God’s part because we need to interact with these concrete objects in order to access what God wants us to know. Tillich’s language highlights that they’re not merely objects but they are connected with this greater reality of the life of God.

More recent discussion of ritual and symbols has nuanced Tillich’s definition a bit, and I’m exploring that edge in this essay. Here’s why: there are Reformed trajectories that say reality can exist separately from the symbols. This understanding makes symbols (assembly, reading, baptism, eucharist) expendable. The newer critiques caution against this: it’s not that meaning just hovers in the background and then we can access it after-the-fact by symbolic interactions. Or, worse, that we don’t even need the symbolic interactions. Let’s shift a little from Tillich’s discussion and say instead that we need the symbols because it’s in the doing of them that the reality that they’re pointing to can become known to us. The doing of them is freshly contextual and, to use Lathrop’s language, juxtaposes us again with them so meaning breaks open.

**So are you saying that the bread alone is not a symbol, but the bread in the breaking, blessing, and sharing becomes symbolic?**

Correct, the bread on the table, inactive, is not a central symbol. The words of institution are not said to the bread, but to the people—a warrant about our actions of eucharist.
What about for people who, for various reasons, don’t see the symbol, that what we see on the table is just bread and just wine and we’re remembering something that happened a long time ago? Have some of us lost our capacity to tap into symbols?

I think the best way to help folks disrupt their suspicion of symbols is to examine common things in their own lives that have a similar function. So a photo is a fine example because it makes us think of the past event, but in the present moment it can evoke fresh meaning and the demarcations between past, present, and even the future, shift. Do we want to see that person? Are they deceased? So we remember or experience anticipation or become sad, which in turn may make us take action. It’s not a big step, then, to consider how symbols can hold both codified meanings and emergent meanings. Identifying how simple objects function in our lives can help make the connection to symbols.

The meaning of Jesus’ forgiveness is not only contained in the past event of the cross death, but again and again in my life and our life together. What does it mean for me to experience that forgiveness with a gathered community, some of whom are sturdy friends, some of whom I don’t know, and some of whom have offended me? We move forward to have bread placed in our hands and to receive the cup and what does all this say now about how we are to be with one another? New insights layer on the older meanings in symbolic interactions.

Do you have any concrete suggestions for congregations in implementing some of these reflections on symbol, sacrament and preaching for congregational worship? What would worship look like when we’re grasped by the sacraments?

I’ll reflect on what it’s looked like when I’ve been in a liturgical celebration, in a Sunday morning worship service, where I have felt grasped. First of all, there’s the sense that I’ve got some work to do as a person in the pew - that the nature of the symbolic event is not just up to the people up front (the clergy, the choir directors, the reader for the day); that I’m part of this event, too. It means that if I have a bulletin, that I’m paying attention, and if the prayer is being led by another person, I’m ready with a very strong Amen; that I sing; that I pay attention to the action at hand; that if it’s time to pass the peace, I do that fully, looking that person in the eye or bowing, and I hold that greeting with them until I finish those words. The peace is not said flippantly in passing; I’m being intentional in all my actions. Whatever action is at hand or that I’m engaged in is my responsibility as a worshipper. Sometimes I may not feel like it, but taking part in those actions patterns me and shapes me.

Worship looks different when there is a sense that everyone is intentional and leaning in to do the actions at hand together.

Congregations could engage in worship reflection times after services—a study group of sorts that articulates historic, biblical, ecumenical, and emergent meanings of worship, and the sacraments in particular.

This sort of teaching, in addition to preaching, enlarges my understandings of the ways we are formed by our symbols.
Let's turn to preaching a little bit. Has preaching become a kind of sacrament in Protestantism? Is it helpful to see preaching in terms of symbol as well?

I think it’s helpful to hear that preaching and the sacraments are manifestations of the gospel (we can spend a whole lot of time saying how is that so, and questioning if they always so.) Yet we always claim that they are gospel only by the power of the Holy Spirit, and still are human actions prepared for, administered, and lived out in their doing. But the sacraments and preaching are distinct because preaching has been and in most places still is speech, and the sacraments are referred to as “the visible Word.” Calvin has language for this, that these are two incredible, wonderful ways that God accommodates God’s self to us. But I don’t want to merge the categories and say that preaching is a sacrament. There are these similar qualities: Calvin talks about them both as means of grace. In the Reformed tradition, they both have an epiclesis. We call upon the Holy Spirit in the prayer for illumination, in the flood prayer, the prayer over the water, in the eucharistic prayer before the speech event, or before these visual actions are done.

So they have similar qualities, but they are two ways that the gospel comes to us. It’s a misnomer to say “word and sacrament” because it is Christ, the Living Word in both. In each of these there is articulated proclamation of good news and visible participation in the good news. And they need each other; we need both. In my essay, I ask how preaching points to and helps us live into the tangibility of the sacraments.

So how does preaching point to the sacramental life?

If preaching is happening in a sacramental context, what does it mean that there’s a major activity coming after the sermon? We’re preaching towards participating in this event, and I like that framework because it reminds me as a preacher that preaching is always pointing to something else that is to come, some way that I am to be formed, a way that I am to be formed for life in the world, for God’s love of the world, for God’s continuing work of resurrection and new creation now in the world.

There are some who say that the purpose of preaching is to enable us to enter more deeply into the actions of worship because those actions—and the sacraments would be prime among them—are a deep way of patterning us in cruciform lives, lives shaped in Christ to be Christ’s very body in the world. Preaching helps articulate the many meanings of these sacramental actions. And in the actions, then, our bodily selves are engaged in ways that shape us—our very character—for how we are in the world.

I remember one woman who said that she is a communion server in her congregation and has been changed by the action of distributing communion. It has made her think, “Oh, therefore, when I’m out driving around, I should not so easily get angry at other people and make a rude gesture because they might well be somebody that I’ve served in the communion line.” That’s funny, but what it started to do was enlarge her way of thinking about the connection between worship and daily life. Who are we as the body of Christ and what does that mean for our actions in the world? What is our identity in these moments in worship, and how does that carry over for life in the world?

I was distributing the bread during eucharist at a conference this summer and many children were in line. In a nanosecond I handed the young girl the element and she simultaneously moved toward the chalice and turned to hold out her bread to the young girl behind her. Then she saw I had bread to hand to that young girl. I think I saw some deep instinct for sharing in that instant—in a young life something of the cruciform life already taking shape.
A ppearances to the contrary, good preaching is conversational. Come Sunday morning, it may look one-sided with all the words coming from the pulpit, but if those words be preached at its best, they have been shaped in an ongoing conversation with other “voices”—those of Holy Scripture and those of members of the congregation listening to the sermon.

The sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion are conversational in precisely the same way. Indeed, Reformed sacramental theology resists the temptation to make the sacraments merely dialogical—that is, a two-party “private” interface between God and the individual, as this marginalizes or eliminates the community. Reformed baptism is normally conducted in the context of a public service of worship. Likewise, communion for the ill or home-bound is an extension of the sacrament celebrated by the community, preferably on the same day rather than as a separate “private” act. “The sacramental,” understood more broadly as any divine interface with the human, is equally conversational because the meeting of God and individuals most often takes place in the context of communities. Mystics may encounter God in their lonely deserts, but they are shaped in community before they retreat to the wilderness.

Preaching falls short when any voice in this tri-partite conversation comes to dominate, or when one of the voices falls too quiet. In order for the words of the preacher to become the word of God in that ether somewhere between the mouth of the preacher and the ears of the congregation, all three voices—the preacher’s, the Bible’s, and the congregation’s—must be raised, all three must be heard, and all three must be attended to.

First, the preacher’s voice must be heard because, like it or not, preaching, indeed any rhetorical act, is mediated through the “personality” of the speaker. This reality is
awkward for Christians, accustomed as we are to subjugating the self, taming the raging ego, if you will. The challenge - a daunting and slippery one to be sure - is for the preacher to use his or her personality for the sake of the word. The preacher must let her or his “self” find its idiosyncratic voice in the very act of being tamed by God, for the sake of the word and out of love for the congregation.

So personal stories, some measure of pulpit candor or a sermonic confession of one’s struggle with a text, and all the like, are indeed fit grist for the sermon mill—provided that the person of the preacher (the preacher’s voice) does not come to dominate the sermonic conversation. A few tales about your children (who say the cleverest things), your most recent vacation, or your bouts with adolescent doubt go a long way. As something of an aside, I have come to believe that when the preacher enters the sermon with an anecdote about the preacher, he or she can never be the hero of the tale (even if the preacher really was a hero, as sometimes happens). Even the most vaguely laudatory self-portrayals come across as self-serving and are inevitably off-putting. The preacher’s hard call is to incorporate the message of the sermon in the earthen vessel that he or she is, celebrating not vessel but rather the wine it carries. Wine, new or old, must be offered in a vessel of some sort, and the sermonic act presents both the wine and its container.

Second, the voice of the congregation must be heard. Sermons become the word of God for a congregation when shaped in response to the concerns and questions, pain and hope of the community to which they are addressed. A good preacher listens closely to the voice of the congregation—at committee meetings and diner parties, in hospital rooms and classrooms.

By being shaped in response to what the preacher has heard in the days that separate Sundays, the sermon becomes conversational. This is why it always a bit awkward to be a guest preacher in a congregation you do not know. Guest sermons, fine and valuable as they may be, are somehow isolated and one-sided speech events. It is in the rhythm of week-to-week preaching to the same people you know and love that sermons become long speeches in a sustained theological conversation with the congregation about the shared struggle to be faithful. Incidentally, I have come to believe that a preacher cannot effectively preach to a congregation that he or she does not love and accept in the way Christ loves and accepts both preacher and congregation—in spite of themselves. Indeed, it may help to count plural pronouns in your sermons—too many “you’s” or “they’s” should give pause. “We’s” should probably predominate.

Finally, the voice of God through Holy Scripture must be heard. As part of new member training classes, I routinely do a session on worship. When I get to the sermon, I always point out that it’s not an essay, nor is it the preacher’s personal opinion or idea of the week. Rather, the sermon is the preacher’s attempt to pull the ancient voice of Scripture across the ages and plant its word in our time and place so that it might shape our living and believing. It disconcerts me that this explanation to new members comes as a surprise to so many of them. The preacher’s call is to avoid doing exactly what I tell them the sermon is not—the minister’s “ide du jour.” The sermon is not so much “about” Scripture as it culturally translates Scripture, so that God’s word in the Bible becomes God’s word for the congregation through the sermon. As anoth-
er aside, faithful use of the lectionary has helped me to do this better. When I am urged by the lectionary to start with a text rather than a concern, an idea, or an illustration burning a hole in my pocket, what I preach is more likely to be Scripture exegeted rather than an important point or two based on a text.

In his recent and remarkable book about the value of work, *Shop Class as Soul Craft*, philosopher Matthew Crawford quotes his philosopher-friend Talbot Brewer. The subject of the quote is work and how the anonymity and generic nature of globalization have changed it. But Brewer’s words are a parable of sorts for what I believe about the work of preaching: “It is one thing for the Chinese factory worker to know that somewhere in the U. S. hinterlands, the vernacular rural American quilt that she has stitched together is being used, and that it has some cultural significance to the person using it, which she can barely comprehend. It is another thing for a carpenter to walk around a town and see the new entryway he designed and built for that store, to learn from a direct experience and from chatting with others of its functional and aesthetic achievements and shortcomings, and to modify future work in accordance with this running feedback that is picked up in the course of daily activities.”

**Note**

For the forty years that I have been a preacher, I have rarely used a manuscript. Mostly, after a long period of preparation, I place my notes for the sermon on a small card, place that card in my Bible at the place of the principal text for the sermon, and carry both Bible and card with me into the pulpit. I do so thinking that the act of preaching is an oral event of direct speech in the Christian assembly, the church being, as Luther said, “a mouth-house and not a pen-house.” And I do so hoping that the words that are needed — the words I have found and rehearsed and the words I am still finding in the meeting — will be there for me, for us. Sometimes, however, I am more than usually worried that those planned words will not be there, and I write the sermon out in full and carry that text with me as I come to preach.

But in both cases, I begin with the same thing. At the head of the card or at the head of the manuscript, I draw a small cross. I know other preachers who do other things. They inscribe INI, for example — in nomine Jesu; or SDG — soli Deo gloria. Or they write out: “We preach Christ crucified,” quoting Paul in 1 Corinthians 1:23. Such practices are moving to me. I suppose they could simply be long-term habits, with little meaning. But I do not think so. At the very least, these ritual inscriptions reflect a time when that preacher was indeed hoping that what she or he said in preaching would indeed be full of the presence — the “name” — of Jesus and the truth of the cross and the paradoxical glory of God. I wonder if the congregations gathered before those preachers know the seriousness with which they approach their task, know the honor they show those assemblies by that very seriousness. I would like to tell each assembly about its preacher’s practice. But their habits are not mine. What I do is draw a small cross.

I do it, of course, with 1 Corinthians 1:23 in mind. I, too, want to be serious about

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preaching, letting go of all the temptations to “tell my story” or entertain my listeners or demonstrate my scholarship or publicly exercise my opinions. I, too, deeply hope that what I say will be centered not in me but in the cross of Jesus Christ. The New Testament Gospel books all go to the cross.

They are, as Martin Kähler said, “passion stories with long prefaces.” If I want my preaching to be like the Gospels—indeed, if I am preaching on a Gospel text—then I need to say that the annual mustard bush of which Jesus spoke, the one that has room like the very tree of life for all the birds of the air, for all of needy humanity, is none other than his cross. I need to say that the Good Samaritan, that unclean and rejected outsider who carries us wounded to the inn, is none other than the crucified one. I need to say that the one who welcomes sinners and eats with them is the one who also dies with them. I need to say that God is where we did not expect God to be.

It is not simply that I promised myself long ago that I would never preach on Sunday without trying again somehow to say, in the terms of the texts for the day, *cur Deus homo*, as Anselm put it—to say, that is, why God became a human being, why indeed God shared the death of humankind. I did make that promise to try to articulate again the “atonement,” and I do so try—though that verbal work is hard, requiring the avoidance of easy language. Because of the identity of the Sunday meeting, I made myself other promises as well that I try and too often fail to keep: to speak the Trinity in terms of these texts; to speak of baptismal meaning; to invite people to the supper. But beyond my promises, I think the Sunday lectionary texts are meant to come again to speech so that the speech itself gathers up wounded and needy ones, tells the truth about violation and suffering, tells the recognizable truth about us, and yet does this with healing mercy, carrying us through the cross of Jesus Christ to hope and life, telling the truth about God, and reorienting us, in turn, toward the needs of our neighbors. I think the texts are meant to be preached so that we come again to faith, come again to trust the God who shares our death and makes us witnesses to life. And I think that so to “preach the cross” is none other than to announce the resurrection, for the cross has continuing meaning—is not just another of the endless list of awful tragedies — because the crucified one is risen.

There are certainly some things that I do not mean by “preaching the cross.” I hope my sermon will not be a horrifying recital of the sufferings of Jesus, made up mostly whole cloth from present imagination since even the passion accounts do not do that, being largely theological and symbolic accounts of the meaning of his death. I hope it will not be a glorification of suffering and a call for people (it has often been women who were so called) to submit. I hope it will not be an expression of the preacher’s own angst masquerading as the story of God. Nonetheless, proclaiming God as being where we thought God could not be — turning our places of death into the places of life — such is what I hope to do.

I put down that little cross as something like the small crucifix that used to be mounted on the wall of many pulpits so that the preacher would see it as he or she climbed into the pulpit. Preach the crucified Christ, Gordon. Tell the truth. There will be room for both your hearers and you in that word, and there will then be the possi-
bility of the rebirth of faith and thus of love.

But I have come to think that my little cross means something else as well. I have come to think of it as if I have before me a lump of dough, on the way to being baked into a fresh and warm loaf of bread; and it needs to be scored on top in order to be easily broken into four pieces for sharing. My little cross marks a loaf of words, hoping for such baking and sharing. Of course, I have long loved those images in Ezekiel and in Revelation that urge the prophet or the seer to “eat the scroll,” eat the words, full of “lamentation and mourning and woe”—full of our sorrow and God’s weeping—but then sweet and life-giving in the eating. And I have loved the words of Origen, who spoke of the “bread of the word” and the “bread of the Eucharist,” and of Hilary of Poitiers, who invites us to the “table of the Lord’s word” as well as the “table of the Lord.” Even more, I have been taken by the fact that Paul does not only speak of the *preacher* as proclaiming Jesus Christ crucified. He also says that the *Lord’s Supper* preaches the Lord’s death until he comes (1 Corinthians 11:26). The way I have said it is this: I hope that my sermon says, in the terms of the texts of the day, the same thing that a faithful celebration of the Lord’s Supper says: “my body for you; my blood of the new covenant for you and for all for the forgiveness of sins.” And, thus, “eat and live.” And so “behold this body you are made together.” And so “remember the wretched and the hungry with whom the world is filled.” Both the sermon and the supper are called to interpenetrate each other, and the supper is a standard for the sermon.

I hope my words may be eaten and drunk. How is that?

What makes that possible? I suppose one might say that concrete images in the preaching make it possible for the hungry imagination of the hearers to devour the words. That is true. It is also true that if the words “smell” and “taste” are life-giving—if they do not lie; if they bear witness to the triune God; if they make primary and truthful use of the remarkably tasty materials of the scripture—then people may want to “eat” them. But what I really mean is this: Here are these words I have prepared. I now beg God to make use of them like the bread and wine of the Eucharist, pouring out the Spirit on them so that on, in, and under them—as in preaching made sacramental—the hearers will encounter Jesus Christ and find that what he has to give in the cross makes them alive.

Of course, I could say something similar about the words as a “bath,” washing over us and carrying us into new life, killing us and making us alive, saying the same thing that baptism says. But for now, this is enough: the words as a loaf.

If you are a preacher, you do not need to mark your sermons with a little graphic cross. But I hope you will find that preaching the cross leads you and your hearers also to eating it, like the cross-marked, cross-interpreting, cross-giving bread of the Lord’s Supper. And if you are a hearer of sermons, I hope that you are finding that you can indeed eat them and live.
As for a sermon title for the occasion of baptism, I settled on “Flood Warning.” In the back of my mind was Martin Luther’s famous “flood prayer,” now incorporated into the baptismal prayers of the Presbyterian Book of Common Worship and other service books. But I also had in mind the scene in Luke’s gospel where John is calling the crowds down to the river for baptism.

John’s baptismal invitation was not the sort of thing you hear in church. He did not cluck and coo over the baptismal candidates; he railed at them. Imagine: eager parents beaming from the front row, infant in arms. The congregation waits expectantly. Taking her stand by the baptismal font, the pastor yells, “You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?!”

While such liturgical innovation is probably unwise, we might do well to make it more clear from font and pulpit that, while both baptism and eucharist make the astounding claim that we are claimed as God’s own, it is a crucified God that claims us.

Sacramental, Not Sentimental
The sacraments can be all too easily sentimentalized. Nearly everyone has been at one of those services where, in a well-meant effort to make the communion service more accessible for outsiders to the church, the presider plays the part of the jovial host, turning the Eucharist into a cozy family meal. The same can happen with baptism. Uncomfortably aware of just how strange this whole business must seem to the three rows of restless “unchurched” family and friends who have come to the little one’s “christening,” the celebrant begins to ramble amicably about babies and being one big happy

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family until we are deep in the theological wilderness.

There is rigor in the sacraments—and this sacramental rigor belongs to faithful preaching as well. Jesus promised his followers that they would be baptized with his baptism and would drink his cup, a promise underscored at his final supper with them. The resurrection didn’t change this reality. In fact, John’s presentation of a closing conversation between the risen Christ and his disciples on the beach seems only to intensify the message that following the crucified and risen One can be dangerous.

I am not out to trash the sense of family that develops around the communion table or denigrate the tender joy and hope that children bring to us. But, peering into a couple of inches of water in a lovely silver baptismal font instead of stepping into a powerful river current, we can quickly lose sight of something the ancients knew well: water can save your life but it can also take your life. When Jesus ate and drank with his followers for the last time before his execution, death stalked him for his uncompromising fidelity to the love and justice of God.

Font, table, and Gospel proclamation grant us life, but at the same time these sacramental actions pronounce a death-sentence on everything in us and in the institutions we create that preys upon the well-being of others. If preaching mediates through speech what table and font mediate through bread, wine, and water, faithful preachers must testify that being claimed by God means both death and life. It is all too easy in our sacramental acts and words to mute both the radical self-donation of God and the radical self-donation asked of us. Some things in us and in our flawed human institutions cannot and should not survive the baptismal waters, the cup’s draught, or the Word’s winnowing.

Spare Eloquence
Certainly, part of the eloquence of sacramental action lies in its sheer spareness. Taking, thanking, breaking, giving: is there a clue here for preachers? Turning a single, uncluttered image drawn from the biblical text loose among listeners can bear fruit for many days. Like the taste of bread and sip of wine that becomes a feast, or the administration of water that cleanses through and through, a well-turned image can feed heart and mind well beyond the Saturday evening or Sunday morning service. Letting a paradigmatic image “travel” in the sermon through several sermonic moves makes it more likely that after the sermon ends, that same image will travel with the people into their diverse contexts. Not every sermon lends itself to this manner of speaking. Not all worthwhile and necessary theological ideas are simple to communicate. But from time to time, a spareness of speech as unadorned as bread, wine, and water best manifests the living God.

Prodigal Love for the World
Homiletician Tom Long tells the story of a preacher who, at the end of the communion rite, addresses the congregation in a loud voice: “Has everyone been fed?” Then, gazing toward the church window open toward the town, he all but shouts into the world: “Has every one been fed?” God’s fountain of life, God’s feast of plenty, and God’s
emancipating Word are God’s self-outpouring for the sake not just of the conscien-
tiously religious (although they can be saved), but for the sake of the world.

Bread, wine, water, word: precisely these mundane elements of ordinary human
experience are God’s means for wooing the world with relentless love. The sign-actions
commanded by our Lord and accompanied by divine promise in Scripture, which the
Reformed tradition names sacraments, are not esoteric or exotic. These instruments of
grace are common things, as indeed they must be. They are for the whole world.
Preaching is a quintessentially “worldly” sacrament. Speech often spills beyond its
immediately intended audience, heedless of boundaries. One side of an intimate cell
phone call wafts to our window from the street. Voices—happy, angry, or sad—pen-
trate a dormitory wall. Our business lunch is punctuated by a crescendo in the baseball
announcer’s commentary—home run!—from the TV over the bar.

By its nature as free-flowing sound, preaching, even more than font and table, is
God’s prodigal grace broadcast (“cast liberally”) into the world. A preacher throws
God’s profession of love into the soundwaves, and today, thanks to the Internet, there
is no telling who may hear. Today the preached Word spills more haphazardly than ever
across the boundaries of sacred and secular, around the globe. Sermons will be over-
heard, and should be; they are public address. Every Christian sermon is the impas-
sioned entreaty of the unquenchably hopeful divine Lover, wooing the world.

Outpoured water, outpoured cup, outpoured Word: outpoured God. Just as God
places the means of grace in human hands at font and table, so in preaching God
entrusts matters of life and death to our stammering tongues. God’s life and love
poured into the world in the fragile medium of speech: that is the sacramental heart of
preaching.
Pastors’ Panel

We asked church leaders to reflect on the challenges and practice of preaching today. Here is what they told us:

What persons have served as the greatest influences on your preaching?

Ray L. Reed, Pastor, Russell Memorial United Methodist Church, Wills Point, Texas

There are two people who have had a great influence on my preaching and both were part of my MDiv days at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary. The first is Scott Black Johnston who was associate professor of homiletics at the time. Scott helped me to see that a sermon is an oral event and that it is very much like a poem—it builds tension by presenting a problem, it has a climax where the problem is resolved, and it has a denouement. Scott also showed me how to format my manuscripts like a poem by using separate stanzas for each separate idea and how it is helpful to identify the climax in some way. He also underlined the importance of the pause at the opportune moment.

The second person is Bob Shelton who was president and Jean Brown Professor of Homiletics and Liturgics. I took my “senior preaching” course from Bob. As part of that course I had a special opportunity to meet with him for one-on-one assessment and discussion. During that meeting he commented that my preaching seemed more like teaching than preaching. Puzzled and clueless, I asked him, “What is the difference between the two?” He said to me that preaching goes one step beyond teaching in that it propels God’s people to go out and do something about what they have just heard. That was an “aha!” moment for me.

Tammy Gregory Brown, Senior Pastor, Westminster Presbyterian Church, Charleston, South Carolina

When I graduated, there were three preaching “giants” that I admired. Over the years, I have not only had the opportunity to read their works but to meet them. My admiration remains with one of them, Dr. Fred B. Craddock, Bandy Distinguished Professor of Preaching and New Testament Emeritus, Candler School of Theology, Emory University, and Director of the Craddock Center. Dr. Craddock has an amazing ability to construct a hermeneutical bridge. His work and his life show deep integrity.

The congregations I have been blessed to serve have greatly influenced my preaching as well. Understanding a congregation’s cultural context, history, and current situation is extraordinarily important if preaching is to be a conversation engaging God, pastor, and congregation. I feel it is also important to understand the genre of a particular people or place. Story is such an important medium where I live and serve that I have had to listen, study, and learn new ways to communicate God’s continuing story.
Thomas L. Are Jr., Pastor, The Village Church, Prairie Village, Kansas

Bob, Jon, Leanne, Kim, Mark, Charlie, K.C., Agnes, Chandler, Gail, Ted, King, Thompson, Lewicki, Patrick, Karen, the other Karen, Chris, Larry, Carla, Cynthia, Rick, Michael, and Jim, who is not forgotten. They are all preachers who love the church, who stand under the text and who are anything but casual about preaching. Eighteen years ago they invited me to join them for a week to study lectionary texts and to imagine together the gospel that arises as we seek to place those texts in our own mouths. We continue to meet every year. I began with them trembling in the presence of others I deemed to be the greatest of preachers. From them I have learned to tremble before the text and to worry less about being a preacher and more about being a Christian. Every preacher needs to be part of a group like this. Preaching can be lonely work at times; we need to be reminded that there are a host of proclaimers, there is a cloud of witnesses, and we are never alone.

Even more than these, however, I have learned from the saints of Westminster, Seven Oaks, Riverside and Village, all of whom taught me that the first step in preaching is listening.

What are the greatest challenges you face in preaching?

Tom Are

The greatest challenge in preaching is paying attention to my own context. I love the lectionary, but I seldom use it to shape worship planning these days. It has been a great personal discipline and guided my preaching life for seventeen years. However, I began to sense a disconnection. Every pattern of preaching is built on assumptions. The lectionary is no different. The lectionary assumes a general knowledge of the significance of the liturgical year. Even more, the lectionary assumes a general knowledge of the biblical narrative. These are risky assumptions these days. As a result, preaching from the lectionary can seem rather episodic. So, how do you plan proclamation?

I think of Paul’s letters. They were not lectionary based, but rather shaped by what was happening on the ground (the Gospels also, for that matter). The Corinthian letters and the Philippian letter(s) are shaped, for example, by what is happening in Corinth or in Philippi. Inasmuch as Paul’s letters were shaped by the events taking place on the ground, our preaching should be shaped by the events and questions in our congregations. These days, I begin my worship planning asking, what does this congregation hunger to know? What do they need to see? How are they following Jesus Christ and what is our next step in the journey of faithfulness? These are not new questions in preaching; but beginning with these questions has transformed my approach to preaching, and requires that I pay closer attention to what is happening with the people of God around me.

Tammy Gregory Brown

The alarming regularity of Sunday morning is the greatest challenge. Someone once told me that for pastors, Sunday comes around every four days and I believe that to be true. I am deeply grateful to work with another Austin Seminary graduate who loves
to preach and provides our congregation with another voice each month.

It is also challenging to try to be faithful to the text and relevant to the world in which we live.

RAY REED

My preaching hasn’t exactly been popular lately. I hope and pray it’s because what I’ve been saying is prophetic. One thing is for sure, Joel Osteen I am not—I am not getting the best ratings. For now, this is my biggest challenge in preaching. I like to be liked, but being liked is apparently not what I am called to be, at least for now. I can say, however, with full confidence, that I do hear from God each week with God’s message for God’s people and that is very fulfilling for me and is what keeps me going.

Do you have any practices that help you sustain your weekly preaching?

TAMMY GREGORY BROWN

Keeping some form of Sabbath is essential. If my own spiritual well is dry, everything suffers. Setting aside sacred space and time for study, reflection, and writing sustains me and my weekly preaching. Studying the text with a diverse group of pastors, elders, and educators provides different eyes and fresh perspective. Recognizing that my plans are not God’s plans and that events sometimes arise which necessitate a change, I also still attempt to work ahead in planning worship and writing sermons.

TOM ARE

First, I read: the paper, the Bible, novels, books on history, and sermons online. I am a terribly slow reader, but preaching requires engagement with the thoughts of others. Second, I have time in the week set aside for reading and writing. (Tuesdays, for example, I do not come to the office until my 1:30 worship meeting. That morning I am home working on the sermon.) In addition, I take a couple days every month to do the same. I confess that this is a recent practice of mine. Most of my ministry I have left study and writing a sermon to the “left over” times in the week. There is a lack of certainty in many congregations about what they want from their pastor: preacher, dispenser of pastoral care, program director, visionary, fund raiser, staff manager, volunteer coordinator, sometimes a cook. There is sometimes an equal lack of certainty among pastors as to what is most important to do. I make no claim to wisdom about how these many important tasks are to be balanced. I have learned that preaching can be done with little advanced planning, prayer, or study. However, when preaching is the fruit of “left over” time, there is a tremendous cost. The more time I find to study, pray, and plan, the more engaged I am with this good news that shapes our lives and, therefore, the better steward I am of the gifts God gives for preaching.

RAY REED

I have several regular “practices” that inform my preaching.

The first is constant communication with God, which I have found comes in many different forms. I also enjoy studying and meditating on Holy Scripture, espe-
I was invited to write this book review within days of receiving a phone call from a large-church pastor in our historic Seminary constituency. He wanted my advice about a book on worship, suitable for a church school class, which would be accessible to laypeople and would lay out the biblical and theological foundations for the way Reformed Christians worship. He was not interested in a fussy polemic against contemporary worship, nor an overly scholarly approach that would satisfy the guild but not necessarily the pew.

I recommended to the pastor the book that I have decided to review for this issue of Insights. I used Worship Old and New heavily in a course on liturgics I taught this past June at Justo Mwale Theological University College—one of our global sister institutions located in Lusaka, Zambia.

One of maybe forty books that the late Dr. Webber wrote across his career, Worship Old and New is one of a series of books representing the turn—about halfway through his career—that Webber’s original deep-rooted evangelicalism took toward the recovery of the ancient roots of Christianity and, specifically, Christian worship. A graduate of Bob Jones University, the Reformed Episcopal Seminary, Covenant Theological Seminary, and Concordia Theological Seminary (ThD), Webber taught at Wheaton College and Northern Baptist Theological Seminary before founding the Institute for Worship Studies in Jacksonville, Florida. He died at age 73 in 2007. While he never abandoned his evangelical roots, he did steadily migrate—theologically and liturgically—into the sacramental piety of the Episcopal church, always remembering the ancient even as he embraced the contemporary. His contributions are appreciated for encouraging evangelical Protestants to take worship seriously as the center of any church’s life.

Worship Old and New invites its readers into a generous conversation about worship, without presuming that they have an advanced degree in liturgics. It is divided into four major sections, with the first section exploring the Old Testament, New Testament, and early church foundations upon which our understandings of worship are based. It goes on to trace the ancient roots of Christian worship and the various ways in which they diverged at the Reformation. For sure, the book explores the various markers by which, for example, Eastern practices are distinguished from Western practices, and Calvinists are distinguished from Lutherans or Anglicans or Free Church traditions, but it also explores the deep roots and common concerns that these classical traditions share. It even treats the antiliturgical movement with respect, exploring its roots in English Puritanism. Many contemporary pastors and parishioners—perhaps tired of the continuing salvos fired in the “worship wars”—will be grateful for the reverent and relational way that the book analyzes various worship renewal patterns in our time, without failing to offer appropriate critique.

In the latter half of the book, Webber gives substantive attention to both the content and practices of contemporary liturgical worship. Such matters as the environment of worship, the individual components of the eucharistic prayers, the liturgical calendar, the role of arts in worship, and even the importance of the gestures that accompany worship leadership, are laid out in such a way that the reader is more apt to say, “Now I get it!” than to be grumpy about undue liturgical fastidiousness.

At the end of the book, Webber takes the liberty of addressing his own primary constituency, the evangelical free church tradition. He encourages these brothers and
sisters to see what they do in worship not as programmed worship but as a narrative. “Programmed worship occurs,” he says, “when worship is seen as presentational, when the leaders are performers and the congregation is the audience. Generally, any worship that is dominated by entertainment, instruction, evangelism, or a particular theme is programmed worship. On the other hand, narrative worship recognizes that a meeting is taking place between God and [God’s] people. Worship narrates this meeting. It assembles people into the body of Christ. It orders and narrates God’s communication with these people in the service of the Word. It narrates the proper response of thanksgiving at the table of the Lord. It narrates the people’s movement out of worship and into the world to love and serve the Lord. This kind of worship is a participatory drama in which each person plays a part” (263).

Indeed it is. Webber challenges evangelicals, and all of us, in his own words, “to recover the content of worship, restore the ancient structure of worship, and integrate the evangelical style of worship … A worship that will have staying power is a worship that is firmly grounded in the old, yet aware of and concerned for new ways to respond to the old, old story” (264).

Again, I commend this book as an accessible resource for a church school class or a Worship Committee or for any pastor interested in brushing up on the biblical and ecclesial roots of our tradition that are always available to sustain us here and now. Having used this book in my liturgics class in June, I now wish I could have known Dr. Webber while he was still alive and very much on top of his game. Apparently, he was a delightful, somewhat iconoclastic figure—an “in but not of” sort of evangelical—who is remembered fondly by those at Wheaton and Northern Baptist Seminary with whom he taught. I’m told that once, a fellow faculty member greeted Webber on a particularly gray and slushy wintry day in Chicago. “Well, Bob,” said his colleague, “this is the day the Lord has made,” to which Webber responded: “Yeah, but God’s done better.”
window. It is a slow world of writing, cutting apples, and seeing and hearing cows. This poem was a bolt of lightening that opened the world of poetry to me. I suppose it was the last stanza that did it:

Then I knew that she was only announcing
the large, unadulterated cowness of herself,
pouring out the ancient apologia of her kind
to all the green fields and the gray clouds,
to the limestone hills and the inlet of the blue bay,
while she regarded my head and shoulders
above the wall with one wild, shocking eye (13).

I know cows, but I have never had the words to describe them. I giggled and got goose bumps when I read these words. With careful description and close attention to the creature before him, Collins captured the essence of the cow in this seemingly silly poem.

Yet it is not a silly poem at all. In a time of multi-tasking, rapid-fire Twittering, and media bombardment, the notion of someone taking time to describe the “blue door,” the “black and white maps” of the cows’ sides, and one’s wonderful “wild, shocking eye” made me stop and take assessment of all that was before me. The mess on the table, detritus of family dinner, memories of laughter and bad boy jokes, the music playing in the other room, old jazz that still sounds new, and the stare of my border collie waiting to be given her next task. The beauty of the ordinary stole my breath.

Billy Collins taught me that poetry is to the written word what sculpture is to the visual world. Each word builds a structure. Without a particular word, it cannot stand. Prose is different. Every person who writes prose needs an editor. We cannot always see what needs to be snipped from our compositions. Without certain words, prose stands stronger. The poet claims his words and his punctuation; without them, the poem would not be his poem. Sometimes it is the combination of words that makes all the difference. In “the rasp of the steel edge against the round stone,” or “as one hour sweeps into the next” (25), Collins captures the lyrical quality of the combination of words. He crafts his sentences so that the words sing in the ear even if the reader does not understand their meanings.

Collins is a master of holding life and death in a single poem. Humor, grace, appreciation, eros, fear, and finality may find themselves companions in one of his compositions. “This Much I Do Remember” (49-50), seems to be a description of the beauty of eternity. While the author sits with someone (we don’t know who the other person is, but there is an intimate quality to the creation that indicates it must be someone he loves) after dinner, he observes and appreciates everything that touches any of his senses. This moment, out of all the moments of life, is recalled, savored, honored. Nothing more is needed. I read this poem as an example of Sabbath ... a moment in time where all is provided.

The burden of seemingly never-ending responsibilities is a complaint I hear from pastors. In their busyness many regret their lack of time to read. Stacks of books decorate bedside tables, bookshelves, and floors, collecting dust, awaiting free time in which they will be read. I have those stacks, too. Someday, perhaps, those stacks will shrink. In the meantime, I have collections of Billy Collins scattered at home, in my car, and at my office. He comes with me on vacations and business trips. In a few stanzas he says what would have taken me pages. With old words he opens my eyes to new worlds. He even helped me learn how to read those poets I never quite understood, and yes, taking a different path has made all the difference.

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**Coming in the Spring 2010 issue:**

**PROFESSOR ALLAN H. COLE JR. ON CONFESSION**

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This past April, the statue of Thomas Starr King was removed from the National Statuary Hall in the United States Capitol, a kind of national hall of fame where 100 statues, 2 chosen from each state, line the rotunda and hallways. Since 1931 California has been represented by Father Junipero Serra, the Spanish Franciscan priest (1713-1784) who established the California missions and is often considered the father of California, and Thomas Starr King (1824-1864), a 19th-century Unitarian minister sometimes called the “the orator who saved the nation” because of his pivotal role in keeping California, and its gold, in the Union during the Civil War. As a native Californian, I have always been amused that my quirky state was represented by two religious figures. In May, Starr King’s likeness was replaced by a 7-foot...
Christianity and Culture

Few people remember Thomas Starr King. Raised in New England, and inspired by Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry Ward Beecher, Starr King began his ministry in Massachusetts where he became a noted preacher and orator. In 1860, King accepted a call to the influential First Unitarian Church in San Francisco where he preached to over a thousand people on Sunday mornings. A fellow minister described the congregation as “a truly grand one both in size and quality. In that pulpit the public opinion of the whole region is manufactured. It is a kind of legislature sitting every Sunday.”

King continued to build a reputation as a legendary orator and civic leader; his patriotic speeches would draw audiences in the thousands. Starr King was also a wiz at stewardship, leading at least two congregations out of significant debt during his tenures.

A frail man with chronic health, and a mere 120 pounds, he struck few at first glimpse as a celebrated preacher, much less a wilderness explorer. On a trip into the Sierra Nevada mountains, King received a typical first impression: “We reached Strawberry Valley about five p.m. and found an admirable public house kept by Berry and Crossley. Mrs. Crossley is a Universalist and has had a great desire to see me. She expected to see a fine-looking man and was disappointed.”

Despite his frail appearance, King’s fiery oratory was legendary. He traveled the lecture circuit ceaselessly, speaking out against slavery, poverty, and oppression, and raising money for state flood and drought relief. King believed that the religious community had a special obligation to help bring racial justice to the United States. He was keenly aware of California’s treatment of minorities, especially the large Chinese and smaller black populations. In 1860 King was invited to give an address at a British Emancipation Day celebration, an annual gathering of the black community in San Francisco to commemorate Britain’s end of slavery. In his closing sentences King spoke these words:

Wherever we find many races brought together, there God has his greatest work to do—there is room for the noblest work of Christianity … The Almighty has a great mission for this nation—here the Church is to proclaim the equality of the races. Wherever the oppressed are congregated, there Christ is present—and not on the side of power! … It is always easier for a person to look with reverence to those who are above, but it is greater to revere the man who is below.

During the Civil War King organized the Pacific Branch of the Sanitary Commission, a national organization that cared for wounded soldiers. He raised 1.5 million dollars for the cause, one-fifth of the total contribution from all the states in the Union.

Starr King deserves accolades for all these accomplishments, even if now mostly forgotten. But I have another reason for appreciating his work, stemming from my interest in how preachers in the last half of the 19th century engaged the American West in the imagination of the nation, infusing it with theological and spiritual values we still carry today. Starr King is one of several notable preachers of national reputation during this time who traveled widely, often as a respite from the physical and emotional demands of preaching and lecturing. Ministers wrote about their travels and, as preach-
ers do, framed their experiences in theological language. Starr King was no exception. Influenced by the New England Transcendentalists, his sermons, essays, and letters inspired a sense of wonder in a national audience that had little concept of appreciating the beauty of the natural world. While in Massachusetts, King wrote a guide book for hikers and visitors to the White Mountains of New Hampshire. Published in 1859, *The White Hills; Their Legends, Landscapes, and Poetry* was more widely read at the time, and perhaps even more influential than Thoreau’s *Walden*. Arliss Ungar, a compiler of King’s nature writings, considers it one of the first attempts to entice the city dweller “back to nature.”

In California, King kept an astonishing schedule of lectures, often traveling to isolated communities and mining camps, interspersed with treks into the mountains. Inspired by these encounters with monumental landscapes, King infused his preaching with a deep wilderness spirituality that sought to lift the mundane into natural expressions of divine grace:

> We are not to live outside the world, but in it, feeling its passions, working in its interests, striving to do our duty in its trials. And yet large districts of our life and feeling should be above the world, on the Sierra heights from which the world and our toil and our home cares and our surroundings look noble, previous, bathed in light … If thou dost catch at times some gleams of the divisings of charity, of the glory of sacrifice, of the grandeur of faith, of the sky-piercing power of prayer, like mountain-peaks jutting through fogs, or slopes afar off in the horizon light, believe in them with more enthusiasm than in the stupid dust of the beaten roads; make your home where they will inspire you, and where you can easily ascend their slopes, and see the world from a higher point, and feel the everlasting presence of God. Believe in them, for they are the mountain-principles and alter-piles of life. Breathe the air that is freshened on their heights. Drink of the streams that flow fresh from the channels in their sides. And in every season of doubt, temptation, or despair, lift up thine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh thy help.

Privileged to experience epic scenery few other Euro Americans had yet to see, King wrote about them in an extravagant rhetoric that captivated audiences with its sensuous spiritual consciousness. His meditation on the Bible is a poetic hymn to divine and natural revelation true to his Transcendentalist and Unitarian heritage:

> This purity of nature is part of the revelation to us of the sanctity of God. I read under the pines of Lake Tahoe, on that Sunday afternoon, some pages from a recent English work that raises the question of inspiration. Is the Bible the word of God, or the words of men? It is neither. It is the word of God breathed through the words of men, inextricably intertwined with them as the tone of the wind with the quality of the tree.

> We must go to the Bible as to a grove of evergreens, not asking for cold, clear truth, but for sacred influence, for revival to the devout sentiment, for the breath of the Holy Ghost, not as it wanders in pure space, but as it sweeps through the cedars and pines. No book is so deep, so rich, so tender, so awakening as the Bible after the freest criticism has been expended upon it. Nothing can take the tone out of it.
It will be as true, as deep, as uplifting, to the hearts of centuries to come, however cultured, as the voice of the pines will, in future ages, be the deepest natural music that the human ear can receive.  

Starr King stands within a long and rich tradition American preachers who were drawn to nature as a way to communicate spiritual truth and explain the concept of God. Starr King’s love of the epic, natural landscape joined the growing chorus of late 19th-century artists, authors, and orators who communicated an inspired, albeit romanticized, notion of Western landscape. Painters like Albert Bierstadt, William Keith, and Thomas Hill helped open horizons of possibility for a new, optimistic national identity in the midst of a cataclysmic Civil War. As Richard Rodriguez notes, this was an era “when America was splitting in half, North versus South. But along the East-West axis, the railroad was binding America together … So there was this irony. At the same time that the nation’s soul was tearing in half, the American imagination was expanding West toward the infinite.”  

Images of western landscapes created by artists and photographers redefined a national perspective, restoring optimism and wonder. They depicted the power and symmetry of creation that used the vastness of wilderness landscapes to inspire awe and terror. In doing so, they upset conventional ways of seeing and thinking. They communicated an optimistic sense of our rightful place in this Eden, but also an astonishment at this land that we dared to inhabit. King’s sermons communicate this ideal of the sublime. En route to a speaking engagement in Yreka, at the very northern tip of the state, King wrote about the arduous journey and his first glimpse of Mt. Shasta:

The journey has been quite fatiguing. From Shasta to Yreka we were 27 hours on the road, and I had an outside seat day and night without a shawl. But I am all right, and my brain has settled again right side up, I believe. From Shasta town I caught my first view of Shasta Butte … It seemed like a morning psalm of the Earth, a Te Deum borne upward from the untainted heart of nature in the visible harmony of hues and form. There it soared 60 miles away by air-line whiter than the clouds that rolled away from it 14,000 feet above where we stood, sovereign of the valley and the stream along whose windings, marked by ridge behind ridge, my eyes wandered to its unsullied priestly glory … the whole region is sublime.

At their most powerful, Western landscapes were magnificent places of shared democratic commonality that evoked a sense of divine blessing and national pride. King embraced these ideals whole heartedly in his sermons with their blend of patriotism, spirituality, and environmental awareness:

Love of nature has its root in wonder and veneration, and it issues in many forms of practical good. There can be no abounding and ardent patriotism where sacred attachment to the scenery of our civil home is wanting; and there can be no abiding and inspiring religious joy in the heart that recognizes to present and touch of God in the permanent surrounding of our earthly abode.

This fall, PBS is airing a new documentary series by Ken Burns, The National Parks: America’s Best Idea that is filled with lush, magnificent photography and histor-
cal biographies that chart the rise of the “high ideals and enduring inspiration” we bring to our love of the national landscape. King had a small but significant role in creating this ideal. His awe struck enthusiasm for Yosemite and his encouragement of Carlton Watkin’s photographic series of the “indescribably unique and beautiful” views of the area brought it national recognition. King, along with the likes of Frederick Law Olmstead and John Muir, joined a growing political movement to protect the area from further logging and homesteading. In 1864 President Lincoln signed a bill giving limited protection to Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Grove. The act became a precedent for federal environmental conservancy and the eventual establishment of the national part system. King’s love for Yosemite is memorialized in a 9,092 ft. peak in the national park that bears his name. A copy of John Soule’s 1870 Stereograph of the mountain, “Mt. Starr King and South Dome, from Buena Vista Peak” is one of my prized possessions.

In June, King’s statue was relocated to the second floor rotunda of the California State Capitol building in Sacramento. It was a homecoming of sorts. On the news of King’s death in 1864 at the age of 40, less than five years after his arrival in San Francisco, the state legislature in Sacramento adjourned for three days so that members could attend the funeral, joining some 20,000 other mourners.

Starr King’s popularity and influence is hardly remembered today. In light of Burns’ documentary, it is a worthy thing to remember King’s contribution in bringing the American West into the mind’s eye of our national identity. Chances are, if you watch the program, you will see images and hear stories about the almost spiritual power of our shared, national landscapes and the efforts of individuals to protect them.

NOTES


9. King, “Lessons from the Sierra Nevada,” in Christianity and Humanity, 286-287, quot-
ed in Ungar.


Pastors’ Panel

Continued from page 27

cially in its original languages. I am grateful to Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary and in particular to Prescott Williams, a former professor, dean, and president, for my exposure to the biblical languages. Another practice that developed quite unexpectedly was when my son (four years old at the time) asked me to start telling him stories at bedtime. I began this chore at first by reading to him from a book. Then one night my son asked me to tell him one of my “own” stories. Then my daughter decided she ought to hear my stories too. Doing this for my two children each night over the years has honed my story-telling abilities and instincts—my children have taught me how to keep a story interesting! This has had a huge, unexpected impact on my sermon preparation and delivery.
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