Unified for Mission

1 Corinthians 12:12-31, Luke 4:14-21
Sunday, January 26, 2025
Rev. Dr. Chris Keating

The late Fred Craddock is considered to have been one of 20th century's finest preachers and teacher of preachers. Initially, however, Craddock was a New Testament professor, making the move to homiletics reluctantly. "I worried that my ear would be bombarded and I would grow homiletically deaf," said Craddock. "I feared that I would get to a point where I was not really listening to the student up there quivering through that first sermon—that my mind would be wandering and I would be groaning (to myself), "Here we go again."[1] Craddock explains that he found himself to be the "first" listener of many preacher's first sermons, some of which were, he said, indeed as "rough as a corn cob." But others caused him to want to stand up and sing the doxology and leave—though he still felt compelled to give feedback since the student had paid for the class.

What happened, said Craddock, is that he learned the single most important skill for preaching is learning to listen. In teaching preachers, Craddock said, this is the first of many skills: to learn how to listen, because "it is the person who can hear the gospel who can preach the gospel." If you do not have the ear, you cannot have the voice.

He wrote that "preaching is a matter of drawing breath in pain to tell the story. That's why it is so difficult to preach: to stand up in a room and see strangers there and yet share with them matters that are more intimate than those in your family—more important than life—to folk that might have been just passing by or stopping in."[2]

Someone in a Facebook group of pastors asked, "What is you sermon creation process?" Some people wrote detailed explanations of the work they do every day; others wrote about engaging the scriptures, studying commentaries, writing drafts.

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[11] Craddock, Fred B.. Craddock on the Craft of Preaching (p. 5). Chalice Press. Kindle Edition.

[2] Ibid.

One, who was perhaps more honest than the others summed up what he called a "two stage process." Step one: You realize it's Saturday night. Step two: You get to work.

There is much truth to that. But there is something else I have learned, and it is a lesson drawn from Paul's imagery in 1 Corinthians 12. As Paul sees the church, the battles over who is in and who is out, who is important and who is not as important, have no place in the kingdom. The community of Christ, says Paul, is a body that is strongest when it draws upon the unique gifts and graces of all its members. And that is something that I have learned about preaching: it is not so much the word I bring but the capital "w" Word that God brings to each other. Paul says the church is a body – not all legs and arms, but legs, arms, hands and feet working together. God gives gifts to the community for a purpose, and it is in hearing the Word together we discern that purpose. For Paul, the issue is one of grace and mercy: the love of God in Jesus Christ is poured out for all.

Preachers do well to remember that they are not isolated from the body, but are rather a part of a unified body. Churches do well to remember that they do not exist in isolation from each other, but are instead part of an interconnected, interdependent body. The preaching of the Word of God emerges from this deeply connected environment.

That is what happens as Jesus draws a big breath and steps into the pain and struggles of his hometown. He comes to the synagogue, joining with all those who had watched as he had grown. He enters, as Luke says, "full of the Spirit," guided to that place to declare God's liberation.

As everyone takes their places, an attendant hands Jesus a scroll, and he begins to read.

I've had the opportunity to stand in the pulpit of my home church a couple of times. Once when I was in seminary, which thankfully is likely an occasion no one else remembers. The other times were at the funeral services of my mom and my brother, and both times I stood at the pulpit our family had given as a memorial to our father. Talk about the weight of expectations! All I could think about were the times I had sat in the congregation as my friend's dad was preaching. We were all middle school boys,

sitting in the front row, exhibiting the sort of behaviors that you would expect from middle school boys. And, sooner or later, one of us would say something and we'd all start to giggle, and then Johnny's dad would stare at us. So, returning to preach at home brings those memories. At my mother's funeral, all I could remember was the time in the 1970s that a woman came and did a liturgical dance wearing a flowing caftan. While I hardly had the knowledge to critique her dancing, she also hardly had the ability to dance. Again, my friends and I were trying so hard not to burst out in laughter that the insides of our cheeks were raw.

It's easy to imagine that hometown crowd looking on with pride as Jesus reads. The passage is from Isaiah, mostly from chapters 61 and 58. It is a word of hope and comfort to those who have experienced exile. It is a word to those whose burdens are heavy, whose lives buckle under the pain of brutality and oppression.

He declared this good news. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

And then he looks at those gathered around him and says, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your midst." Notice what he says: today. Not someday. Not in the future, not even in the past. Today all these things promised by God have taken place.

The crowd quickly becomes hostile. Next week I'll finish this story, but let's just say that for now, what Jesus has said has turned the tables against him. Pretty quickly, they want to have him deported—in this case, deported right off a cliff.

It should have been good news. Isiah's prophecy is a word of promise of mercy and relief. It is the promise of a jubilee year from Leviticus 25 – a time of relief to those who are enslaved, a time of Sabbath release and healing, a time for justice to those long denied. In a Jubilee year, land is returned to those who have ancestral claims. Yet that good news is not so good news to those who have bought up other's lands. The good news Jesus proclaims turns sour when people begin to realize that the work of God means a rearranging of the world's priorities. It requires embracing a unity found in our differences. God offers mercy, and grace, but that requires remembering that God

calls us to work together as one. As Paul says, the foot cannot say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body.”

Rather quickly a desire to be independent, to not be in relationship with others emerges. It is a claim that God’s promises are only for some emerges. We’ll hear more about that next week, but the bottom line is that the crowd wants Jesus to get out. They are willing to deport him—right off the side of a cliff.

Jesus has preached a tough sermon. It is a word not everyone wants to hear.

Sermons can do that. Indeed, some would say that most do that. If the most important part of preaching is listening, then there are times when the preacher and the congregation must listen together. Sometimes sermons entertain, sometimes they make us smile, something they may tug at our hearts. Sometimes they confound and confuse. They provoke all sorts of emotions. This is why so many preachers begin their sermons by praying the words of Psalm 19, “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.” Preaching is more than just making people feel good. Preaching is about hearing God’s word.

Last week, a preacher stood in a pulpit and spoke about unity and mercy. To some, Bishop Mariann Budde’s words were uncomfortable. And perhaps some of you felt that way, and maybe a few wonder why I even have mentioned this. My intent is not to delve into politics, but to remind us of the calling we have to be one in Christ. We ought to be wary anytime any government threatens to silence a preacher, including those with whom we disagree. One pastor wrote that he believed the President should order troops to seize the National Cathedral and turn it into a fundamentalist church. Instead of debating Bishop Budde’s sermon, I suggest you find it and read it in its entirety. It may challenge you. You may not find it comforting. But you may hear God speaking through it.

Jesus’ words challenge us. They call us to think in new ways. They remind us we are connected to one another in ways we might not fully understand. But ultimately, the proclaim good news. Amen.