

2021-11-23

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D. Jacobsen. 2021. "Preaching That Pushes Back."

<https://hdl.handle.net/2144/45137>

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Preaching That Pushes Back

The phrase I used to title this paper “preaching that pushes back” reflects a way of politely indicating difference in the wider culture. Nowadays, if someone says something that prompts a different take, another person says, “I’d like to push back on that a little bit.” I am not advocating for civil discourse or politeness, but I do think this practice of wanting to “push back” opens a theo-conversational door for dealing with differences with the scriptures. Homiletical theology is a way of doing practical theology conversationally, within earshot of hearers, and typically in the very presence of its own sources: the scriptures on the lectern, the baptismal font, and the Eucharistic table. This brief definition of homiletical theology leaves a lot to unpack, but I promise to come back to it later when its claims should be a bit clearer. What I want you to take away at this point is that the homiletical theologian does theology in a conversational mode with the scriptures. And that should help us enough to get launched on the idea of “preaching as pushing back.”

The persuasive interests of preachers have usually meant that preaching accounts for difference by anticipating objections or misunderstandings of a text. Because of its authoritative sources in the Bible or the tradition, preaching has tended to use persuasion to urge hearers to align themselves with that authoritative tradition and identified it with the preacher’s words. Rhetoric is useful for this task. Rhetoric anticipates difference in its very concern for argumentation. But its persuasive goal is to overcome that difference by assuming its interlocutors are merely holding intelligent misgivings.

A classic version of this is seen in David Buttrick’s *Homiletic* from the 1980s. Buttrick identifies what he calls “oppositions” as a typical feature in human consciousness in preaching. When preachers make a theological claim in relation to a text, oppositions naturally arise in the consciousness of hearers. Buttrick, using his phenomenological rhetoric, aims to anticipate these oppositions in the course of sermonic development. Oppositions, for Buttrick, are not to be minimized or ridiculed, but rightly anticipated and defused. Buttrick identifies four sources of oppositions (30-32). There are:

1. hearerly oppositions that result from the reality of human sin,
2. cultural oppositions of world view (cosmologies),
3. cultural oppositions of reigning social attitudes, and
4. and oppositions born of religious distortion (misunderstandings)

The tool Buttrick uses for this is a “contrapuntal,” a brief section of a sermon that names the opposition with the goal of simply defusing it. The contrapuntal might involve clarifying a misunderstanding (When Jesus says X, he doesn’t mean Y) or it might mean locating and thus relativizing an opposition as a contemporary cultural product, or in extreme cases as a reality to be resisted. In any event, the goal is not to demonize opposition, but to name it without giving it imagistic weight or rhetorical power relative to the gospel claim itself. Contrapuntals mention oppositions charitably, but really for the purpose of “letting off steam” (47) so hearers can better hear a gospel claim through metaphor, image, and illustration.

Buttrick offers good advice for most sermons. But since our premise today is that sometimes preaching “pushes back,” what do preachers do when the struggle is in the scriptures themselves?¹ On some occasions when preaching needs to “push back,” it is not just against the culture, sinful human proclivities, or misunderstandings, but against the Biblical text itself. At this point, the problem of oppositions and resistance move from a purely rhetorical one to an explicitly theological one. How can preaching the gospel ever “push back” on the scriptures?

As a purely intellectual matter, this may prove a difficult problem to discuss. The relationship of the Bible to preaching is both theological *and* cultural. From the standpoint of preaching practice, I want to return you to the sanctuary just for a moment. The way such problems become real are not in lectures like this one, but in actual practice. Those of you who like me worship in a white mainline liturgical tradition that includes responses to the gospel reading from the Bible may know what I mean when I read the final verses of the lectionary text about the Unforgiving Servant in Matthew 18. Imagine some Sunday where the gospel reading is from the Matthew’s parable of the Unforgiving Servant and your liturgical response follows immediately:

“And in anger his lord handed him over to *be tortured until he should pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.*”

The Gospel of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Was there anyone here for whom the liturgical response stuck in your throat a bit? I have been in worship settings where these words, “Thanks be to God,” turn from a statement to a question in the embodied speech of some listeners: “Thanks be to *God?*” There are some Biblical texts that are so disturbing in their theological claims, that our bodies react and prompt even small vocal inflections of resistance that cannot be ignored. Heavenly Father and torture? Really? “Thanks be to *God?*” The problem is no longer just rhetorical, but deeply theological. We can feel it in our bones.

For those who argue for some way to discern where to “push back” in preaching, precisely these theological distinctions become important. Theologian Edward Farley illumines this for practical theology with his “principle of identity” as expressed in popular religion.²

Farley views popular religion as a particular venue for the practical theologian’s work—in no small part because Farley’s own view of theology encompasses both theology as science and theology as wisdom, as evidenced by his groundbreaking work *Theologia* in the 1980s. At the same time, lurking behind this issue is a deep concern for the ordering of congregational life and its own propensity toward idolatry. For Farley, piety in popular religion is involved in the practice of what he calls “finitizing idolatry.” To be involved in religious life in a community is to be ever tragically connected to a finitizing move about God in relation to these people, these traditions, and yes, *these sacred texts*. Finitizing idolatry for Farley is not intrinsically evil, but more tragic in nature. Finitizing idolatry occurs under the conditions of religious life and makes sense in connection with the reality of faith. For Farley, this relationship is marked by the social particularity of religious communities, natural egocentrism and the level of life and emotions, the

¹ Buttrick can be of use here, too, since he sometimes extends contrapuntals to make entire moves.

² Edward Farley, *Practicing Gospel* (Louisville: WJKP, 2003), 44-57.

role of popular religion in world construction, *and ultimately the value that piety gives to religious certainty in the face of ambiguity*. As Farley says, no one argues that “there is a 70% probability that Jesus died for our sins.” (48) Instead, an unspoken certainty is often extended to the authorizing texts themselves in popular religion.

Underpinning this move toward finitizing idolatry and certainty, for Farley, is what he calls “the principle of identity.” This identity begins with the why of all the emotion and certainty and focuses on the divine will. The givenness of the authoritative traditions, texts, and practices has to do with the belief that God has so willed it. This principle of identity gives religious piety and its traditions life and its underlying energy and engagement.

What worries Farley is that the tragic condition of finitizing idolatry morphs into the possibility of “malicious idolatry.” What distinguishes malicious idolatry is its incapacity to see its own tragic finite condition and to try to “escape its inescapable finitude, anxieties and fears by discovering an ultimate security in some finite good made absolute: one’s self, nation, race, corporation, and, yes religion.” Farley adds these words, “From malicious idolatry come the horrors of human cruelty, oppression, and hard-heartedness.” (50)

The importance of practical theology in such moments has to do with its exercise of the *prophetic* task. In fact, practical theology can do so because of two realities already operative in popular religion. First, religious pieties have built into them the capacity for a kind of self-criticism that allows that tradition to be opened up again. In part, this has to do with the texts and traditions themselves. Some Biblical texts and traditions *already push back*.³ Religions tend, says Farley, “to engender (prophetic) individuals, texts, and movements that interrogate and discredit both finitizing and malicious idolatry.” (51) Second, says Farley, religions tend to engage in their work primarily through narratives and metaphors. Because these narratives and metaphors are focused on God, they are intrinsically indirect and not direct in nature. The narratives and metaphors themselves resist the kind of absolutizing that make the shift into malicious idolatry so tempting. All language of God in metaphor and narrative carries, says Farley, a “hidden qualification.” (52)

Farley’s practical theological frame lays an important groundwork for a practice of preaching that pushes back. This will mean pressing beyond the typical forms of objections and resistance that preachers want to overcome. By “pushing back” preachers encounter before God and everybody in the pews the limits of our texts, traditions, and pious certainties. To do so, I draw from the work of three important figures and representative preachers in my field who ask the question: how and when do you “push back” on a text?

One of the earliest advocates for the notion of preaching against the text in my field is Ronald Allen, recently retired from Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis. For Allen this problem is framed in relation to a critical-correlational theology in the pulpit. In Allen’s earliest work on the topic, a 1987 article in the journal *Encounter*, Allen envisions the following process and emphases:

1. The preacher needs to come to clarity as to the content of the gospel.

³ Think of Brueggemann’s testimony and countertestimony in his *Theology of the Old Testament*.

2. The preacher needs to come to conviction as to the nature and extent of the power of God and as to the way(s) in which the power is exercised in the world.
3. The preacher needs a self-conscious, critical theological method by which to relate the gospel (and correlate understanding of the power of God) to the text and to the world.
4. Through hard-nosed exegesis, the preacher needs to establish the theological claim(s) of the text.
5. The preacher evaluates the text and its claim(s) using the method set forth in step three (3).
6. The preacher needs to think carefully about how to say that which needs to be said.
7. In the sermon, the preacher will want to strike the note of the Good News of the gospel.

Please note that Allen is not merely superimposing a theological position over an exegetical one. His proposal seeks to bring both the otherness of the text with its theological claims and the gospel into dialogue.

In my view it is Allen's very dialogical stance that opens up the greatest possibilities for preaching that pushes back. I turn to the work of two contemporary preachers who embody this dialogical work and precisely in a way that pushes back on the principle of identity.

The first preacher and sermon I'd like to discuss is Barbara Brown Taylor's "The Parable of the Fearful Investor," preached at Duke Chapel in November 2011, around the height of the Occupy Wall Street movement⁴. The sermon is based on the Parable of the Talents from Matthew 25:14-30. Following the parable's structure, Taylor spends most of her time reflecting on the outcome for the third servant who buried his talent. Because the relation between the master and the single-talent servant who feared him is so fraught, Taylor reviews scholarly and popular interpretations that have sought to rationalize the master's behavior and the third servant's fate as "deserved." Further on in the sermon, she begins to repeat the word "seriously?" as a voiced counterpoint. She uses the vocal repetition to challenge such rationalizations in a kind of short hand *reductio ad absurdum*.

All this drives Taylor to make a key interpretive distinction about the way *we* read the parable: that the master (small m) of the parable is not exactly the same as the Master (capital M) whom faith seeks to engage. Taylor is careful here at the end to thematize what she is doing at the sermon's conclusion. Taylor lets this instantiation of a confounding parable also be a moment to reflect on the relationship of the text and contemporary context theologically. Truth is not just in the text, in the book, but something that happens when real lives poke at scripture until it yields living truth—even if it does upset the "little m" master. In the lead up to this insight, Taylor repeatedly embodies the importance of taking the otherness of the text seriously and to stay close to it. She does not let her hearers off the hook. Taylor's exegesis is hard-nosed and does not allow the "push back" to emerge easily, but as the result of a protracted homiletical struggle. By pushing back on the presumed identity of the master in the text and God, Taylor finally comes to her claim. The gospel meets us here *in front of the text and through the jagged edges of our own lives*.

⁴ Barbara Brown Taylor, "The Parable of the Fearful Investor," accessed November 21, 2021: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sEzT7hFdhLU&t=2277s>

The second preacher I would like to discuss is Lisa Thompson, Associate Professor and the Cornelius Vanderbilt Chancellor Faculty Fellow of Black Homiletics and Liturgics at Vanderbilt Divinity School. In her book *Ingenuity: Preaching as an Outsider*, Thompson argues that scripture and preaching are for the sake of sustaining life itself, especially for *marginalized* voices. Preaching from her identity as a Black woman, Thompson seeks to engage a difficult text deeply, really stay with it, and possibly even participate in undoing its history of subjugation. The key for her as a preacher is to help the community come along for the encounter with the text and the gospel. She does this by putting into conversation the community's "track" of the text and the preacher's own identity. Preaching as an outsider offers Thompson an occasion for re-engaging the tradition by tracking close enough to the text and the community's take on the text to make it recognizable, even with its subjugating readings, so that resisting that text eventually becomes possible. Such an encounter happens as an exercise of ingenuity. It involves a narrative reading between the lines that focuses on absences or even silences in the text. A key element for Thompson, especially with difficult texts, is to avoid any tidy resolution or simplistic narrative closure. Why?: because the end of the story, Thompson says, is what "lands on bodies in today's world" (99).

In her sermon on the Canaanite woman and her daughter in Matthew 15, Thompson encounters just such a difficult text—a text where Jesus himself refers to the Canaanite woman as a dog.⁵ Thompson begins by giving the names Sharon and Tina to the Canaanite woman and her daughter. This naming allows Thompson to appeal to the fullness of lived lives as well as to preach and narrate the text in the present tense. Thompson is clearly unsettled by Jesus's dog comment. So she turns to the track of her hearers to bring it to speech. Thompson's sadness and outrage begins with the text itself but jumps quickly into experiences from Jim Crow to the 21st CE prison-industrial complex for people of color. In her sermon Thompson surfaces a deep recognition of how a text like this can be coopted by a history of subjugation. The beauty here is that Jesus's troubling comment, which Thompson does not allow scholars or hearers to rationalize, also opens up a new contemporary space for theological reflection. The struggle allows her to "bring out into the open" what is often unspoken both in the story and today. Once this conversational space, made possible by pushing back on Jesus's comment, has been opened up, it becomes possible to press the text's operative metaphors in the direction of human thriving. Thompson celebrates Sharon's rhetorical agency by having her turn the "dog" metaphor from Jesus into a "house dog" with a rightful claim; and likewise yielding more than just human crumbs for food, but "*God's* crumbs." Thompson closely tracks the text, but only to open up with ingenuity new theological possibilities. She does so for the daughter and the hearers' thriving.

CONCLUSION

Preaching that pushes back is hard. But preaching that pushes back is not altogether new. It may just *seem new* to those of us enmeshed in contexts of privilege. Our contemporary figures have given us some hints as to what may be valuable for the *practice* of preaching that pushes back:

⁵ Lisa Thompson's sermon on the Canaanite woman and her daughter (Matt 15:21-28) is from the Bartlett worship service at the Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School's Fall Lectures on October 24, 2017. Video accessed November 21, 2021: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z-tjlbxBBUg>

1. Be aware of how a scripture text is being poured out on real bodies, including your own. Trust that you and your hearers bring something important to the hermeneutical table. Hearers may be misunderstanding the text in which case we need to think more deeply about it. Sometimes, however, a feature of the text that sticks in our throat and thus needs to be named and wrestled with and resisted. A theological question may be lurking right there in our bodies.
2. Love the scriptures and the tradition, but remember that they, too, are subject to the “principle of identity.” Theology in interpretation does not have to mean imposing an external confessional ideology on a text. Sometimes it follows the scriptures’ own interrogations as to what constitutes God or the will of God. God is God, and not the text.
3. When you preach in the mode of pushing back, do track the text closely, even if it causes you to keep posing questions. Struggling with the text over time makes it possible to interrogate difficult texts more deeply and allows hearers to make a difficult trip with you.
4. When you preach, track also with your congregation, as Thompson suggests. This helps to make the sermon as a whole “recognizable” from the standpoint of a local tradition and opens up the possibility of real theological encounter.

Homiletical theologians still need to ensure that their theological interpretations nonetheless proceed from a tradition and scriptures in recognizable ways. Homiletical theologians will also need to do so humbly, because the gospel which it aims to name remains a mystery that is being disclosed—where every theology remains unfinished and provisional under the principle of identity. But the beauty of homiletical theology as I conceive it is that it is done in the very presence of its conversation partners *and its sources*: the ambo with the scriptures laid open; the font with its baptismal waters, and the Eucharistic table, too. But homiletical theologians also preach in the presence of the bodies of the hearers, whose lives and identity rightly shape the theological moment. For a homiletical theologian to speak, is to speak in the very presence of the sources and with these bodies in whose company it does its theological work. That is why it is so hard and uniquely challenging, when preaching pushes back.

And yet from time to time, preaching does push back and make room for common thriving. The widow of a well-known Lutheran theologian attends my wife’s church up in Woburn, Massachusetts—she’s given permission for me to share this story. Beth had grown up Missouri Synod which means she had a very high theology of the scriptures in catechism and in liturgical practice. Now ELCA, Beth actually participates as a communion steward in my wife’s congregation. And many times, after the sermon, Beth prepares the space for all those who gather for Eucharist. What’s interesting is how she does it. Beth crosses her arms and places her hands on the scripture lectern which sits on the slippery marble floored chancel. And then she pushes. Beth pushes until the scripture lectern leaves enough room in between for everyone to receive bread and wine. It’s an interesting idea. Sometimes preaching pushes back, yes, but it pushes back to make room for life together.