Preaching as Contextual Truth

Each believer seeks to know and love God through the very particular struggles and joys that make up the idiosyncratic realities of lived experience. Christian proclamation is a relational kind of "local theology."¹ We testify out of what we know, and communities hear words of accountability and grace most deeply if they sense that they are known by the preacher. Preaching can be a “show,” to be sure—a visiting preacher can put on a virtuosic performance that captures the imaginations of strangers in an unfamiliar sanctuary. But most effective preaching is local. Incarnational theology invites preachers to honor as holy the material truths of specific contexts, including the truths of real congregations where they are.²

Biblical voices, too, testified to theological insights and challenges that were highly contextual. When the preacher blurs the distinct witnesses of Amos, Ezekiel, and Deutero-Isaiah through a careless formulation about “the message of the prophets,” the congregation misses an opportunity to hear the plurivocality of testimonies about who God has been in differing circumstances of stability, trauma, and reconfiguration. I guide hearers into the differences among the Gospels because the invitations of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are so gorgeously compelling in their differences. (One must avoid academic jargon, of course, and not make the point too directly, or someone in the receiving line will be compelled to object that it was not “the Matthean Jesus” but actual Jesus who spoke in that Gospel.) My commitment to honoring ancient contexts—political, theological, literary—is rooted in the conviction that preaching should invite hearers into Scripture as sacred polyphony.
I don’t tend to elucidate readings of Scripture from the history of interpretation in my preaching. Rather, I utilize the insights of theologians past in two ways: first in my preparation, as a means to broaden my own understanding of interpretive possibilities; and second, as a treasury of images and insights that, curated with attentiveness to contemporary context, may bring clarity to a congregation’s encounters with Scripture.3 Among countless gems in interpretive tradition are Augustine’s “Our heart is restless until it rests in You,” a profound articulation of the connection between idolatry and yearning for God; Julian of Norwich’s vision of God’s love for creation, which delights believers with a glimpse of the sacred in the unassuming hazelnut; and George Herbert’s lines about the agony of Christ, “Love is that liquor sweet and most divine / Which my God feels as blood; but I, as wine,” an astonishing way to trope the paradox of divine pathos in the economy of redemption.4 Steering well clear of a systematic review of theological doctrines, I prefer to work as a bricoleuse with the history of interpretation, pressing “found” insights and formulations into the service of biblically focused proclamation.

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See Nora Tubbs Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997). Tisdale urges preachers to attend to local dynamics in every congregational subculture, from the urban parish to the small country church to the prison congregation. Tisdale suggests that exemplary preaching involves a process of "exegeting the congregation" and argues that the preacher should work creatively with indigenous expressions and forms, yielding a homiletic that resembles folk art.

