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Hear Then a Story: Plot Possibilities for Story Sermons

Eduard R. Riegert, Contributing Editor

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The subtitle of Riegert's work: *Plot Possibilities for Story Sermons*, underscores the significant and timely issue being addressed by this work, namely the multiple options available for story preaching.

Apparently, there is a flawed notion in some North American homiletical circles that presumes all narrative sermons (including story sermons) to be the same in form. In fact, one writer once characterized my understanding of a homiletical plot by placing his description of it under a chapter subtitle: "Eureka: One Size Fits All." (Tom Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, p.97.) The musical corollary of such a notion would be to suggest that "Sonata Pathetique," "The Nearness of You," "Holy, Holy, Holy," and "Sunny," are all the same because they all utilize the same form of four-four time.

Riegert's volume sets such a notion to rest quickly with his identification of five categories of options: "Re-telling the Text," "Re-creating the Text," "Re-voicing the Text," "Incarnating the Text," and "Metaphoric Pairing." He also identifies several different kinds of sermonic treatments under each of the five categories – for a total of eighteen different possibilities.

Moreover, his typological specificity – together with included sermonic examples—provides readers with the kind of clarity that can prompt not only affirmative understanding, but also significant reservation to some of the possibilities offered.

For example, the first illustration for the "Re-telling the Text" option considers the rather straightforward elaboration of a text that so many of us do regularly when preaching a parable of Jesus. That is, we retell the parable utilizing an expanded or elaborated version of the tale. His description of this kind of re-telling is quickly defined and, hence, can be easily affirmed. When, however, he suggests another form of re-telling that consists of changing the crucial action of the text, one's own Biblical hermeneutic may begin to arch its back. In the illustration provided, Zacchaeus chooses not to accept Jesus' commitment to go to his house and, hence, refuses to accept the offer of salvation. Frankly, I do not know how this can be portrayed as "Biblical preaching" when the result is a contradiction

of the text. Riegert put it well earlier by noting that the text “confronts us as an authentic entity” (75).

Perhaps the greater danger with some of the examples included is the tendency of many preachers to employ subjectivist assumptions about motive, speech and behavior that result in eisegetical treatment. Riegert is on target in citing Paul Scott Wilson’s warning about such “psychologising of the text” together with “our hunches and [presumed] hidden motives of the ... characters.” (21)

Most troubling with some of the illustrative sermon manuscripts provided is the turn toward first person preaching – which I classify as acting rather than preaching. When someone throws a scarf over a shoulder with the words: “Good morning, my name is Martha, and I am a friend of Jesus,” my likely response is: “Oh, really now! We’ll see about that.” The “willing suspension of disbelief” often is not willing enough.

Nonetheless, the book is much broader in scope than these several reservations I bring to some of the many forms he proffers. The bottom line is that this writing serves as a summons, an invitation, to consider multiple strategies for story-type preaching that many preachers may not yet have considered.

More particularly, Riegert’s section on “Metaphoric Pacing” is a powerful presentation of the multiple modes of metaphoric power. Just these several pages are worth the price of admission. Carefully, Riegert has named numerous options for story preaching and enlarged greatly the scope of our imagined possibilities.

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