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Rolf Nosterud

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Congregation as Text: A Hermeneutic for Ministry

Rolf Nosterud

*Pastor, Redeemer Lutheran Church,
Winnipeg, Manitoba*

In how many ways do we rely on our interpretation skills when doing ministry? Pastors and teachers recognize interpretation as a tool or method for deciphering what biblical texts say. Would it enhance our ministry if we were to use interpretive principles as a way of assessing how to respond in other pastoral situations? No doubt, some pastors already do that intuitively, but this paper explores some implications of making this a conscious, deliberate process engaged with the laity.

It is generally understood that pastors, teachers, evangelists have been trained in interpretation methods. For example, pastors often labour over the Bible texts on which they are preaching or teaching. The pastor may try to determine what the Bible text was saying to the audience back in that ancient context. However, this is merely the first step in the discipline of interpretation. A final and more important step comes when the pastor determines what words and images will translate that message relevantly to a new context facing the pastor's congregation today.

The study of interpretation (hermeneutics) has a long and distinguished history in the Church. Indeed, theologians over the centuries have even influenced the way many literary scholars study all kinds of literature. That makes interpretation one of our strengths; however, little is written about how pastors or evangelists of the gospel might apply this strength to their whole practice of ministry. In other words, how can the whole congregational situation become a "text" for our interpretive principles in a way that allows the Holy Spirit an opportunity to open up insightful ways of responding in our ministry with laity?

To suggest that interpretive principles should be a key orientation for whole-ministry is to draw attention to the lack of meaning and purpose that currently plagues our changing world. In times of change, perhaps the primary role of a pastor is as evangelist, that is, an evangelist in the sense of one who walks with people and tells God's story in a way that helps them make sense of their experience (Luke 24:13-35). Using our interpretation principles to help people make meaning together not only gives renewed authenticity to pastoral ministry, but it may help congregations contribute to the transformation of their communities—perhaps even their culture.

People are desperate to make their world make sense. Indeed, there are those who have given up on making sense of the world; they have become content just to savour a few moments of happiness in a hapless world. Yet an authentic opportunity that invites people into meaning-making will likely tap that regenerative power of hope in the human breast. Meaning is important for sustaining hope. If we invite them, the laity will want to try.

Pastoral ministry has a responsibility to initiate a deliberate process for meaning-making. After all, interpretation is the long-standing strength of Christian scholarship. Moreover, the meaning of current realities is seldom apparent to those closest to the experience. They need help sifting the meaning for themselves from all that happens. Although meaning-making is a human need, it is not readily recognized or done by the actual participants in history. Rather, it is too often done later by the "pundits in the gallery" who were not even there!

Imagine how it might affect people's attitude to change and their enthusiasm for work and witness in the world, if they have opportunity to *name* their experience as they see it and feel it. People are generally more open to hearing about alternative perspectives when they have first been helped to articulate their own side of the story. Of course, one must begin where people appear to be stuck. We might use interpretive principles to help both pastor and laity in a congregation to understand and resolve some local tensions. In worship, for example, how would an interpretive inquiry into certain peculiarities of the community's past practice inform current plans to make their worship experiences more hospitable and relevant? Or how might such a disciplined inquiry help a pastor and congregation

“do” festive celebrations or anniversaries in ways that help the community re-interpret the past, heal the present, and embrace its future?

It may sound simplistic, even dangerous, this idea to have pastors ground their whole ministry in the foundational principles of one discipline. However, interpretation is actually an inter-disciplinary exercise, and thereby it embraces a holistic perspective. Moreover, I would argue that ministry today needs integration under a sound Christian principle. We ought not continue the fragmentation of pastoral ministry by borrowing pieces of identity and practice from other secular professions without centring it in a distinctively pastoral orientation. An interpretive orientation could keep church workers focused on clarifying purpose and meaning in their work, regardless of what role or task they happen to be doing.

It may lead both clergy and laity to some clarity of roles in ministry. There is a lot of variance among pastors and laity on the role and practice of ministry. Many pastors experience frustration and/or burn out when trying to balance different lay expectations against their own vision of pastoral role. Besides leading worship, laity usually want pastors to be on the front lines with the youth, the elderly, the sick, the new members, and so on. Pastors, however, although they accept their role as worship leader, will often see themselves acting primarily as professional administrators, counsellors, or volunteer coordinators. And, in our culture, these latter roles are easily divorced from Christian interpretations of life and nurture. Thus, a “whole-life” interpretation strategy has the potential to keep church workers intentional and focused on nurture. It also keeps their varied roles from being fragmented and alienated from Christ, the centre of meaning for all Christians.

Some would insist that interpretation principles should be used for written *texts* only. This suggests that it is not appropriate to deal with people in the objective way of scientific, impersonal inquiry. I couldn't agree more. However, that kind of objective, impersonal accounting is modern *quantitative* science. That is not the only kind of disciplined inquiry today.

Hermeneutics has become a *qualitative* science today, even when applied to biblical texts. At one time, however, pastors were encouraged to use higher critical methods of study as though they were attending to an autopsy. The pastor was the

subject or agent. He or she acted on the texts and the texts became *objects* under his or her critical tools. As pastors, we were encouraged to apply higher critical methods with objective distance. In this mode, we studied the text to pieces (literally). Unfortunately, the result often gave us a post-mortem on the syntax of language rather than a better sense of where God's Word was taking us. This kind of critical inquiry may be helpful for explaining how words and literary forms are used in certain contexts but, at some point, the text has to address the pastor too.

Qualitative inquiry works at revealing objective truth in a situation or text precisely by entering into the subjectivity or "personality" of the text. The inquiry becomes a person to person encounter. The pastor is still the "subject", but one who recognizes and interacts with another subject—namely, the text. In this approach, the interpretation process goes both ways. The text as "person" is able to inform and transform the inquirer. The qualitative approach reviews nuances in the writer's communication (or people's communication in the case of congregations). Once all is accounted and gathered, qualitative inquiry probes for the meanings lurking in the hidden perceptions, the unspoken assumptions, the gestures, and so on. These are evident only to the sensitive observer.

The context of congregations is like that of ancient texts; only when we imbibe deeply from the life-walk of people can we imbibe the meanings that surround their talk. In the process, we not only learn new understandings of the text (or people) involved, but we may also understand ourselves differently—particularly how we relate in and with them in this context.

To reach the insights of the people (the "text"), there are qualitative strategies that can be practised by the pastor. Firstly, one must be aware of and bracket out one's own presumptions about the subject under study. This is in order to "be with" the text deeply enough to understand the "context". It's like the ethnographer trying to understand another culture from inside. It's a fitting role for one who would be the mentor of her/his congregation.

Secondly, sensitivity to people *as persons* is critical in doing this kind of inquiry. The focus is to clarify people's perceptions, not to defend the church's dogma or practice. So an important strategy for us as inquirers is that we respect the people's

“right to perspective” over our need to “right their wrongs”. Be patient. The Holy Spirit will show us how to bring God’s Story into people’s lives in ways that will shed light upon their journey—and ours, too. The key question in evangelism today is not, “Am I right in this matter?” Rather the question is, “Am I turning the lights on for people?”

This paper is not intended to build all the parameters and details of the hermeneutic principle for Christian ministry as a whole. Rather, I am presenting a brief rationale or scaffold whereon such an approach can be built. Basically, this is a re-working of an idea heard before. It’s the idea that the pastor must learn to hear with understanding what the people’s word is in the streets if God’s Word in the mouth of the pastor is to have any chance of being heard. In Karl Barth’s words, the pastor should preach with the Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other.

What may be new, however, is how far we go with our newspaper inquiry. Many situations strongly beg a pastor to participate in a disciplined inquiry and analysis of the social milieu. The intent is that the pastor or evangelist learns to study her/his people and their context just as carefully as he or she studies the sermon text and its context for preaching. It means that the pastors learn to observe and exegete the people’s walk as well as their talk in life. It initiates a process that helps pastors and lay church workers learn to give equal love and attention to the people in the parish as they do to the Word of God in their private study.

I credit Paul Ricoeur for alerting me that the communication and activity of a congregation could become a “text” for interpretive study. In 1971, Ricoeur wrote a pivotal article in which he argues that “meaningful action” that occurs now can become legitimate “texts” for interpretive inquiry just as well as ancient writings. Social action events, he points out, have similar traits in common with written texts.¹

There are a lot of possible applications of this principle in the life of the church. For starters, I am asking: How could such an interpretive principle work in orienting pastors for the rest of their week, once the sermon is on the way? For example, how might a little disciplined inquiry into the people’s daily perceptions and practice of religious devotion inform the pastor’s preparation of the whole worship experience? We might

learn a lot by disclosing the many meanings "written" into the people's daily rituals at home and at the market. And concerning the church's worship, it might surprise us what the people understand by this action or that symbol. In the end, both pastor and congregation will likely reflect more on what nurture is and on how they can improve faith-nurture in the community.

I think a few well-placed questions about our life together in community could be seed for a lot of transformation and maturation in faith. At least, it will open up more meaning-filled conversation between laity and clergy about the purpose of ministry and what it means to nurture Christian faith in the world today.

Notes

- ¹ For more information on a comparison of these common traits, see Paul Ricoeur, "The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as a Text," *Social Research* 38/3 (Autumn 1971).