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Storytelling the word: homilies and how to write them

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terms of prayer, diet and lifestyle. Epperly uses incidents from his own personal life to show the relationship between spirituality and health. The book fails to mention that there are other notions of health and spirituality both in the biblical record and the tradition of Christianity. Also, the book does not address one of the major problems in this relationship between spirituality and health. Medical science seeks to find in spirituality an important variable that it can manipulate for better health. Spirituality, however, is based on an encounter with the living Spirit of God that Karl Rahner describes as "Uncontrollable" and "Incomprehensible". The Spirit of God is not a variable that can be controlled for better health. Right methods of prayer and meditation, proper diet and lifestyle do not necessarily produce better health. Despite these shortcomings, we recommend this book for those beginning in this area.

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Storytelling the Word: Homilies and How to Write Them

William J. Bausch

Mystic, Connecticut: Twenty-Third Publications, 1996

287 pages

World of Stories for Preachers and Teachers

William J. Bausch

Mystic, Connecticut: Twenty-Third Publications, 1998

516 pages

Father William J. Bausch, a Roman Catholic priest serving in the diocese of Trenton, New Jersey, observes that preachers are not very effective and congregations are, by and large, made up of sleeping seniors. He is convinced that story sermons will rouse the sleepers and rally the strayed. "There *are* other effective ways of preaching, from the expository to the exhortatory, from the deeply scriptural to the meditative, from the inductive to the phenomenological. Still, this book focuses on just one approach...the way of the story...I would even venture to say that storytelling the word has a better chance of bringing the Bible back to its appreciation of first being a many-centuries (old) oral tradition." (*Storytelling the Word*, p. 5) For one third of *Storytelling the Word* he instructs preachers on how to go about the task of preparing a sermon. In this didactic portion he enlivens the pedagogy

with anecdotes and illustrations. Then he shares 42 of his homilies which demonstrate how stories can be stitched together into sermons.

In *World of Stories*, he offers 350 tales that he thinks can be told from the pulpit. His organization of the material is playful—and not too helpful. Longer stories are in the “Papa Bear: Big Portions” section; shorter ones are in the “Mama Bear: Medium Portions” unit; and snippets are under “Goldilocks: Snacks”. This gives the reader no clue as to what might be found under these headings. The 21 sermons included in this volume are called “porridge”.

Preachers, he observes, face an almost impossible task of being lively and engaging in the pulpit while honouring their call to share good news because they are too busy. By helping them to use stories he hopes to correct this situation. His books are to help preachers and teachers become better communicators of the good news.

There is an urgent need for compelling proclamation because church people are dying for lack of convictions. They are suspicious of all authority, curious and unsure about angels and the after life, perplexed by evil, wonder about transcendence, and want their children exposed to the Christian faith, but not indoctrinated. On top of this ambivalence, they are unreachable through books and lectures. They are children of the media age and need well-told stories to call them into the kingdom.

The good Father lists 21 guidelines for good preaching. The first two are most significant. 1. Proclaim the word. 2. Preach about the signs of God in their lives. The other 19 are little helps and hints that vary in helpfulness and importance. Probably the best help for struggling preachers is in chapter 8, “Scripture and Story”. There he demonstrates how hearers can be helped to participate in the biblical narrative. As Bausch talks about blind Bartemaeus we discover that Jesus is touching our eyes and helping us to see the coming kingdom.

Engaging as story sermons are, this type has limitations. We discover them in both *Storytelling the Word* and *World of Stories*.

The first is that the stories are multifaceted and can blur rather than illuminate the Gospel. This occurs when Bausch tries to persuade us that narratives are more effective than propositions. For example, he states that noble sacrifices have made today's freedoms possible. That, he says, is a true statement, but bland. Then he tells us about a king who wanted a special bell to honour Buddha. The bell maker could not get the tone right until a young maiden was thrown into the molten metal. Then he poured a bell that had a sound more beautiful than any other. Bausch concludes: “Both versions tell the same truth...But the second version—the story

version—is good imagination, a good verbal visual, and gets a response of the heart. And it ruminates and lingers longer” (*Storytelling*, p. 72). However, the story version has a very different message than the propositional one. The proposition is noble and the tale is cruel and sadistic. Stories are delightful because they carry many messages, but in so doing they make selection more important and the task of the preacher who would use them, demanding.

Also, on a number of occasions the stories used are distractions rather than aids to hearing the good news. For example, Bausch seems to love the old joke about heaven being “where the cooks are French, the police are English, the mechanics are German, the lovers are Italian, and everything is organized by the Swiss. Hell, on the other hand, is where the English are the cooks, the Germans are the police, the French are the mechanics, the Swiss are the lovers, and everything is organized by the Italians” (*Storytelling*, p. 252-253). In sermon #30 this joke is to lead us into the Parable of the Sower and in sermon #36 it is to help us appreciate the mystery of the Trinity. Actually, in both cases the preacher seems to struggle to get the congregation back into the Gospel.

Stories can also substitute sweet sentimentality for the objective atonement of God. Bausch wants to avoid that. “I have tried to shy away from merely ‘cute’ stories. They are literary twinkies, all sugar and no nourishment” (*A World of Stories*, p. 1-2). However, he’s captivated by the story of Erik. Erik is a pudgy one-year-old who keeps smiling at a tramp in a restaurant on Christmas day. When Erik’s mother passes this unshaven and ragged man on the way out of the dinner, little Erik lurches toward him and reaches out his fat little arms demanding to be held by this derelict. The mother would like to keep her child from him but is too embarrassed to pull her enthusiastic son out of the arms of this grimy man. After Erik has pressed himself up against him, the tramp says, “You take care of this baby...You’ve given me my Christmas gift.”

This is a beautiful story, and is full of sentiment. Bausch wants it to say, “The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us” but that is asking too much of this anecdote. It wonderfully expresses the power of human love, but fails to express “heaven’s gates opening wide” through the birth of Christ (*A World of Stories*, p. 461).

At the end of *Storytelling the Word* the author provides a helpful index showing where, in four of his books (*Timely Homilies*; *Telling Stories*, *Compelling Stories*; *More Telling Stories*, *Compelling Stories*; and *Storytelling the Word*) one of his sermons for a particular Sunday can be found. In the Appendix to *World of Stories* Bausch reprints the lectionary readings for the three cycles of the church year, but fails to indicate which of

the stories in this volume he considers appropriate for a particular text. There is a thematic index which is useful, but it seems to me that an index correlating a tale to a text would be even more helpful.

Preachers will find these volumes very helpful in developing their homiletical skills. In studying the writings of Father William Bausch they will discover how stories can help to announce God's story, and how sometimes they don't.

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