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# Sermon seasonings: collected stories to spice up your sermons

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appropriately, make punchy sentences, avoid academic/theoretical language are all excellent. One wishes the author would have focused more on these language/writing issues, which are so helpful to us speakers and writers.

Less time could have been spent on the advice and visual demonstrations of how to use computer software in preparing sermons. Interestingly, this 73 year old priest expounds the advantages and fine points of using the computer in preaching, where few other books would cover such ground. However, 22 pages of windows pasted from his computer into the book seems excessive, and details about changing font size, naming the file, underlining, etc., are not that instructive.

Stylistically, the chapters are short and well organized. There is energy on every page. Like watching a good movie or hockey game, it is easy to stick with this book to the end to see how it will turn out. The pot shots taken against those whom Capon disagrees with are stimulating at first, but after a while become bothersome as one hears arrogance more than redemption. The book is quite one-sided in that it focuses only on what one preacher believes/practices, and doesn't interact with any other literature and views from another side. Its opinionated style suggests it could be a good conversation starter at a ministerial meeting, book reading club, etc. Overall, it makes a decent, but not significant, contribution to homiletics. As Siskel and Ebert would say, "one thumb up".

Michael Rattee  
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## **Sermon Seasonings: Collected Stories to Spice Up Your Sermons**

Ralph Milton

Edited by Wendy Smallman

Winfield, BC: Wood Lake Books Inc., 1997

192 pp. \$14.95

Canadian lay theologian Ralph Milton lives in Kelowna, BC, and is the husband of a United Church of Canada minister. He is one of the founders of Wood Lake Books, and the author of more than a dozen books, and of the bimonthly periodical, *Aha!!! the preacher's research assistant*, published by that press. A popular speaker and workshop leader, he brings a wealth of experience from his work in radio, a stint as a missionary in the Philippines, and countless workshops and seminars with congregations, pastors, lay groups, etc.

Wendy Smallman has gone "through his work and picked out those stories, anecdotes, thoughts she felt would be useful to speakers and preachers and resource developers" (5). These are topically arranged in alphabetical order, beginning with "Advent" and concluding with "Worship". This

collection makes a fine introduction to Milton's thinking and his skills as a communicator. He perceives himself to be an apologist for Christianity and for the beleaguered church, and much can be learned from him of how to speak to the contemporary person.

Milton is an earthy theologian who has thought long and hard about the Christian faith (see his *God for Beginners*, Earthstone 1996) and the Bible (see his *Is This Your Idea of a Good Time, God? Discovering Yourself in Biblical Stories*, Wood Lake 1995) from the point of view of the lay hard-nosed person who is struggling with faith in the messes of life. So these stories and meditations are always "real life", full of the hard realities and hard experiences of life. But they are always faith-full, full too of wonderful humor and genuine pathos, sudden insights, and startling "translations" of Christian teachings. Some examples. Under "Suffering" he writes, "It's dangerous using human analogies to understand God, but I don't think there's a better way. Abstract definitions and descriptions don't help a bit. God is the God we experience through lives that touch ours—through people we experience—the communion of saints that we've known personally or read about in the scripture and elsewhere" (158). He becomes more daring: under "Support" he writes, "Don't play God! Throw that into any discussion and it becomes an almost unanswerable statement. But perhaps that's exactly what God wants us to do" (160). And he proceeds to tell how he dealt with a rage-filled Sunday School child: "On the way home, it came to me. I've been playing God!...God simply offers love..." (161). Under "Humility" he reflects on the broken toilet aboard the Columbia space shuttle: "...it seemed a bit of divine poetic justice when those superbly trained astronauts in a billion dollar craft had to contend with a busted biffy—a punctured privy. I thought it was hilarious. I'll bet God did too" (87). Under "Communion" he asserts, "I am firmly convinced that more 'communion' happens in the church halls over casseroles or at the church picnic over hot-dogs, than in the sanctuary over the ritual of bread and wine" (41). Yet it is in another "ritual" that the "power of what we call 'grace' struck me..." The minister (his wife, no doubt) was baptizing a baby. He muses, "Talk about undeserved love! That brand new baby couldn't do much besides fuss and cry, smile a little, eat a lot, and wet her pants." But the parents beamed at her "and all of us in the congregation smiled and felt a bit of that love too. As the minister sprinkled the water on her tiny head, made the sign of the cross on the child's forehead, kissed her gently and handed her back to her Mom, all of a sudden I knew deep down inside what the minister meant when she talked about 'grace'" (77). Milton is both the hard-eyed realist and the wondering child who sees what is there and then suddenly sees far more than is "there"—sees more deeply and more truly. "I met a woman the other day. Her face was lined and etched and wrinkled by a life of pain most of us can only half imagine. But as I looked at her face, I saw a noble, lustrous beauty there that I'll not soon forget. Her face is a pearl. A pearl is a wound, a wound that has healed into something beautiful" ("Suffering", 159).

While the book is designed for preachers, preachers in the lectionary tradition will find it harder to use directly because of its topical design. However, to aid accessibility the editor has added, under each major topic, several related topics and, more importantly, applicable biblical texts, all of which are then connected to a Subject Index and a Biblical Index. Quite apart from this direct homiletical use, Milton is always good for stimulation and sermonic start-up, for not only do his stories invite the imagination to run, his reflections also provoke. He makes one direct plea to preachers when he takes up "Death": "...if you know where you are on the subject of life after death, please for the sake of us confused souls in the back pew, preach it. If you don't know, could you do some thinking and praying and reading, so that you can help us think it through? As more of us become long of tooth and gray of hair, our interest in the subject is more than casual. What's in store? Compost or celestial choir?" (50).

We used the book profitably for devotions, and these stories, anecdotes, and reflections will serve also as fine discussion starters with educational and Bible study groups.

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## **The Witness of the Worshiping Community: Liturgy and the Practise of Evangelism**

Frank Senn

New York: Paulist Press, 1993

177 pp. \$20.00 Cdn.

Frank Senn is a Lutheran pastor, and currently president of the Liturgical Conference. This challenging book, which is a reaction to the watering-down of traditional worship by the forces of the church growth movement, has two foci: Worship and Witness. Senn suggests that these two concepts have become artificially separated, and that this goes against Scripture. This, he says, has crippled both worship and witness.

Senn criticizes clergy and national church staff for "buying into the principles of the Church Growth Movement, in a last-ditch attempt to stem membership hemorrhaging" (3). He claims that "there needs to be a more secure connection between liturgy and evangelism...that churches which take seriously the liturgy as their primary form of public witness, need to develop a liturgical evangelism" (4).

In the opening chapters, he defines "right worship" over against its contemporary corruptions: utilitarianism, evangelism, aestheticism, pietistic revivalism, and as a tool of church extension. He claims that liturgical worship, according to the model of the catholic tradition as it has been inherited and reformed in our time, when properly focussed, is a worthy vehicle for witnessing to the catholic/evangelical faith.