

11-1-1996

Grapes of Wrath or Grace: Stepping inside the Story; Summer Fruit (3 books)

Peter Lisinski

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus>

Recommended Citation

Lisinski, Peter (1996) "Grapes of Wrath or Grace: Stepping inside the Story; Summer Fruit (3 books)," *Consensus*: Vol. 22 : Iss. 2 , Article 21.

Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol22/iss2/21>

This Book Reviews is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Consensus by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

Grapes of Wrath Or Grace? Sermons for Pentecost (First Third); Cycle C, First Lesson Texts

Barbara Brokhoff

Lima, Ohio: CSS Publishing Co., 1994

92 pp.

Summer Fruit. Sermons For Pentecost (Middle Third) Cycle C, First Lesson Texts

Richard L. Sheffield

Lima, Ohio: CSS Publishing Co., 1994

74 pp.

Stepping Inside The Story. Sermons for Pentecost (Last Third); Cycle C, First Lesson Texts

Thomas G. Rogers

Lima, Ohio: CSS Publishing Co., 1994

92 pp.

This trilogy from the prolific presses of CSS Publishing in Lima, Ohio offers sermons for the long Pentecost season. Each volume contains ten sermons based on the First Lesson texts appointed in the Revised Common Lectionary. The set reflects style and content as diverse as the geographic locale of each author, and their respective ecclesiastical traditions and the offices each occupies within them.

As I began reading through the first book of sermons by Barbara Brokhoff of Largo, Florida, a general evangelist of the United Methodist Church, I lamented my dual role as a reviewer who is also a preacher. My "listening" to sermons is likely much more conditioned by the question, "Would I say that?" than by questions I expect more regular hearers would ask: "Can I believe this?"; "Do I need this?"; "What am I to do with this?", etc.

Though the title of Brokhoff's book is *Grapes Of Wrath Or Grace?*, I recognized little of either. Most of the grace is works oriented, and therefore not really grace. And most of the wrath has its source not in God but in Brokhoff's own inflammatory statements. For example, in a sermon based on Elijah's fiery chariot ride to heaven, we are told that "Reincarnation is a sick joke of an unbelieving world..." (72). And in the concluding paragraph of the preceding sermon, Buddhism is "the equivalent of slow suicide. Hinduism is too vague to be very joyful. Islam is too fierce to find anything very amusing..." (66).

Another recurring irritant is the consistent use of illustrations to prove stated propositions. The introduction to the sermon for Pentecost 7 is typical: "Some of the most profound precepts we ever know come clothed

in very basic and elemental forms. A 'Peanuts' cartoon strip shows Charlie Brown... " (75).

Omission of unnecessary propositions, as in this example, would have made for much briefer sermons (every one of them is eight pages). Simply beginning with, "A 'Peanuts' cartoon..." holds one's attention much more effectively, and allowing the story to make its own point seems much more compelling.

The above example also highlights another recurring hindrance to one's concentration and, perhaps more importantly, to the understanding of many in the congregation—language. Words like 'precepts' and 'elemental' abound. On page 26 alone we find 'typology', 'enigmatic', 'prototype' and 'poignant'.

These, and other weaknesses—such as the dominantly moralistic tone of the sermons—may reflect Brokhoff's vocation as an evangelist who may only rarely stand in the same pulpit twice. But that consideration aside, and even allowing for the loss that occurs in translating the sermon from its proper setting as an auditory event into a printed form, I found very little in this collection to be original, compelling or even useful.

I am pleased to say that the same is not true for the remaining two books in this set. I would recommend both, especially to preachers struggling, as I am, with the appropriate use of stories—both in the form of illustrations or anecdotes (as in the second volume), as well as in fuller narrative style (as in the third).

Summer Fruit by Richard Sheffield, pastor of Market Street Presbyterian Church in Lima, Ohio, offers consistently solid preaching through effective use of his parish context. Local colour, controversy and congregational experience and history serve to illustrate sermons which are prophetic in their focus on issues of social justice, yet without being moralistic. Sheffield holds up a mirror in which we are invited and able to see the truth of ourselves, even to be judged, but without being condemned. Though I thought I heard an occasional, albeit implicit, justification for self-serving altruism, these sermons offer much food for thought in their understanding of life's goal as "worth living forever" (47).

The same is true of Thomas Rogers' *Stepping Inside The Story*. Rogers is Associate Professor of Homiletics at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary, Berkeley, Ca. These sermons are presented primarily in full narrative form. I enjoyed each of them thoroughly. They are full of helpful insights, personal challenges, practical suggestions and calls to renewal. These are sermons of grace—gentle invitations to live in God's covenant with us. Reading them was a good experience for me, as it would be for you.

But I had to work hard to get beyond my need to know if the stories told were part of Rogers' own pastoral experience, or second-hand, or outright fictitious compositions. Perhaps it makes little difference; or perhaps this is, again, the consideration of one who also preaches, and not of the laity. Perhaps this is *my* problem and, therefore, an unfair criticism. *But* it re-kindled my perpetual suspicion that narrative preaching is unable to

carry the full weight of the gospel alone. And I wonder if Professor Rogers would disagree. In most, if not all of these sermons, he interjects personal commentary, ranging in length from one sentence to several paragraphs.

In light of this, I venture a personal, yet-tentative, conclusion that second-hand stories and/or fictional stories are limited carriers of a gospel that is incarnational. In other words, if I as a preacher tell a story, I have to have experienced it first-hand if it is to be authentically received. Particularly in the case of fiction one could, of course, manipulate a story to say whatever one wishes. Such a temptation is riddled with trap-doors and pit-falls for both preacher and congregation.

The *Lutheran Book of Worship's* collect for New Year's Eve expresses well what I think I'm trying to say: "...through the events of our lives..." we are blessed with God's love (41).

Having read and reflected on this trilogy of sermon books, I can affirm the truth of this prayer.

Peter Lisinski
Faith Evangelical Lutheran Church,
Fergus, Ontario