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The Preacher as Colossus: Reflections from the Parish on Hermeneutics and Homiletics

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The Colossus at Rhodes has “gone the way of all flesh” yet it is not erased from human memory. It stands recorded as one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. The Colossus was a magnificent, if not miraculous, statue which spanned the harbour of the island of Rhodes in ancient Greece. Past its gigantic bulk sailed ships bearing the commerce of the world. Under its very legs sailed the vessels entering port, for the statue was situated in such a way that the two legs of the Colossus spanned the harbour entry. Each leg was firmly anchored upon *terra firma* while its weight loomed ponderously over the waters below. It was a wonder of the ancient world.

The preacher as interpreter can learn much from the stance of the Colossus. Surely the preacher faces a truly colossal task each time the pulpit is ascended and the saints of God addressed. Frederick Buechner tells of it with these words:

So the sermon hymn comes to a close with a somewhat unsteady amen, and the organist gestures the choir to sit down. Fresh from breakfast with his wife and children and a quick runthrough of the Sunday papers, the preacher climbs the steps to the pulpit with his sermon in his hand. He hikes his black robe up at the knee so he will not trip over it on the way up. His mouth is a little dry. He has cut himself shaving. He feels as if he has swallowed an anchor. If it weren't for the honor of the thing, he would just as soon be somewhere else. . . The preacher pulls the little cord that turns on the lectern light and deals out his note cards like a riverboat gambler. The stakes have never been higher. Two minutes from now he may have lost his listeners completely to their own thoughts, but at this minute he has them in the palm of his hand. The silence in the shabby church is deafening because everybody is listening to it. Everybody is listening including even himself. Everybody knows

the kind of things he has told them before and not told them, but who knows what this time, out of the silence, he will tell them?¹

Given the colossal nature of the homiletical task, the preacher as interpreter might be well served by adopting a colossal stance. Literally! The stance of Colossus defines the hermeneutical stance of the pastor who must interpret both text and context. The homiletical enterprise always evokes a two-legged hermeneutical response. One foot of the preacher must be grounded upon the interpretation of the sacred text of Scripture. The preacher's words must be anchored in the Word. But at the same time the other foot must be grounded upon the interpretation of the congregational context. When hermeneutics takes place in both realms—text and context—prior to preaching, then it is far more likely that the preacher will be a channel into the harbour of the Word, not a treacherous shoal.

With the exception of the one citation above this article has been designated a "FFZ": *Footnote Free Zone*. This is not to suggest that reflections from the parish are without scholastic structure or substance. It is meant to convey that much of what I reflect upon emerges from situations and people which are, by nature, flesh and blood, not print and page. This does not make them any more or less reliable—but far more difficult to reference and footnote!

Hermeneutical Similarities of Text and Context

Almost without exception a preacher will hear the word hermeneutics or interpretation and rush to one word in association: text. Well schooled at seminary in hermeneutical theory and critical tools the preacher is apt to assume that the interpretative task applies only to the text of Scripture. This is especially true if the preacher approaches the Scriptures as one would a nut with a tough shell, believing that if one can hermeneutically crack through the shell it is homiletically easy to pass out the meat of the nut to those who come to be fed.

The "colossal" preacher, standing upon text and context, senses that both the text of the Scripture and the context of the congregation present similar hermeneutical challenges and demand a consistent, oft-similar hermeneutical approach. That approach involves interpretation of both the text's and context's languages, traditions, *Sitzen im Leben*, and trajectories.

I wish to reflect briefly upon the similar interpretive tasks involved textually and contextually.

A Language Different from Our Own

With few exceptions, the languages of *both* the text *and* context are different from the preacher's. This is an *a priori* assumption in consideration of the hermeneutical similarities between sacred text and the "saintly" context. In many instances both even embrace "ancient" languages!

Even in relatively new congregational contexts the preacher cannot assume that the language of that context will be free from nuances and connotations which colour its language with meaning long before the preacher encounters it. Most who preach recognize that this holds true for the text of Scripture. Hence the need for language study, bible dictionaries, and a myriad of lexicographic aids. But what about the language of the context? Does it warrant translation, study, and interpretation skills?

Perhaps a brief example will clarify the nature of this problem. In one of the parishes I served it concerned the word *worship*. In the "language" I spoke worship described the actions of praise and thanksgiving that believers offered to God in response to God's Good News that first addressed them. In the word "worship" I understood that God spoke, we responded.

Not so within the language of the context where I regularly preached. There, for many reasons which I chanced to discover far later than I might have, the word "worship" described a pattern completely reversed. Worship described the actions of praise and thanksgiving the believer entered into to "reach" a spiritual experience. These actions were not in response to a Word of God first addressed to them, but actions that took place in the life of the believer first to "get them in the mood" to hear the Word. When I used the word "worship" in my preaching I naturally assumed it had the same meaning in my language as it did in the congregation's. Such was not the case and much of my preaching and teaching related to worship "shipwrecked" over misunderstanding one another's language. Too little, too late I learned that not only the language of the sacred text need to be studied and translated for effective preaching, but also the *koine* of the context. The colossal preacher functions in the role of interpreter for both text and context.

Threads Woven into the Fabric of Tradition

Much as the tradition inherent in the Scriptures cannot be approached hermeneutically as a proverbial “seamless garment”, neither can the tradition of a congregational context. It too becomes a fabric woven from many strands, many layers. And if the preacher will span the waters between text and context to bring the Word to bear, one must interpret not only the language of the congregation but also its tradition and its own experience of the traditions of *Heilsgeschichte*.

Here I always marvel at how hermeneutical principles from the realm of textual interpretation can inform the realm of context. Each context has its oral traditions as well as written traditions, taking shape in many and various genre. There are often congregational redactors who will edit and interpret the congregation’s story better to reflect some particular truth they hold dear, or a particular axe they wish to grind. Some of the dynamics of form criticism or canonical criticism are most interesting to apply to such congregational stories to discern better the needs and wants and fears of the audience to which one proclaims the sacred story that calms fears, supplies needs, and addresses wants.

The preacher who assumes that the final published or public form of the congregation’s story bears all the truth of the tradition fails to appreciate the need for hermeneutical approaches to tradition within both text *and* context. Often the sermons which connect with people at the deepest level are those preached from an equally deep understanding of how the levels and layers of tradition have formed within the context and how the Word can unravel, reorder, and inform such traditions.

Encountering Unknown History

Part of the textual/scriptural hermeneutic proceeds from the humble confession that we shall never know all of the history behind the words we seek to interpret and proclaim. Commentaries *ad minutiam* if not *ad nauseum* notwithstanding, we enter into a task which of necessity calls for humble conjecture.

How often, however, the preacher approaches the interpretation of the context with the thought, “I know *exactly* what these people need to hear!” It is tempting to feel that we know

the history of each family, each day in the congregation's life, well enough to prescribe categorically for them all.

Like the hermeneutic of scripture which assumes that there will be history, facts, nuances and circumstances unknown, so the hermeneutic of the context assumes the same. In fact what is said and written between the lines and behind the page is often most valuable for the homiletical task both as regards text and context.

Not only does the "unknown history" of the text bring a certain humility, it helps to move one away from unequivocal interpretations which often miss key elements of a scriptural message. If one approaches scripture certain that one knows what is being said and why, how would one ever be surprised by the new or not-yet-known, the unfolding revelation of the truth? Not surprisingly, that same dynamic holds coin in contextual hermeneutics. A rigid interpretation not open to the unknown, new or undiscovered gives one a jaded perspective which makes it most unlikely that one will be surprised by the new or undiscovered history of the context.

Here it has been helpful for me to keep in mind that each member of the congregation has a story that is, in part, unknown to all others, including the pastor! I sat down one day with a parishioner who is a charter member of the congregation I have served for five years. Leafing through the parish directory family by family we were soon overwhelmed by how little we knew of their stories of life, much less their stories of faith. That experience offered a personal witness of how difficult it would be for a preacher even many years into a parish setting to say, "Now I've got it all figured out. I know exactly what has happened and is happening here. Voila! The Word from God you need to hear."

Encountering An Uncertain Trajectory

Just as it is hermeneutically essential to discern from where a text has come—the *Sitz im Leben*—so it is also vital to get a sense of the setting, audience, issue, and focus—the trajectory—which the text addressed. Consider how important that is to gospel study or the prophetic genre. Yet that does not suggest that the trajectory of the text can be any more certain than its history. One must acknowledge that textually

there remains an uncertain, and in some instances unknown, intent which applies.

The context into which the Word is proclaimed also participates in an uncertain, if not unknowable, intent. Much as the preacher cannot know all the contextual history so also the preacher is rightly humbled by the contextual trajectory. How can one speak with any certainty of the where, how, when, why or with whom of a congregation's future? That future, guided by the Spirit that blows where it will, is in many ways unknown.

Yet seeking to interpret that trajectory is crucial in the homiletical task. To preach as a Colossus, standing balanced over text and context, the preacher seeks to discern and interpret the signs impinging on the context which will direct its future. How important this becomes is readily evidenced through the preacher's files of past sermons. It is a humbling experience to look back upon some of those and see that the uncertain trajectory of the preaching context has rendered more than a few of those sermons irrelevant, if not downright laughable. If the preacher approaches the text seeking to interpret the intent of the author and the trajectory of her or his message, is it any less vital to seek to discern the same for the context?

Crafting a Hermeneutic for the Homiletical Context

The application of a contextual hermeneutic begins with the awareness of its need. If the preacher remains unconvinced that the context presents a hermeneutical challenge little can be done to alter such a stance. Thus the beginning point of any contextual hermeneutic is the awareness that the text and context represent two "legs" of the same hermeneutical task as scriptural exegesis moves towards congregational proclamation.

This truth, now obvious to me, was not so obvious either in my seminary preparation or internship or first-parish experience. If my homiletical training could be taken as somewhat typical, and I have no reason to believe otherwise, little focus was given to this vital contextual hermeneutic. Our homiletics instruction sent us scurrying for commentaries and scripture notes, desperately searching for a thought or anecdote that

would make the text somehow relevant to the listeners. Few skills were given in interpreting the context either through course work in parish administration, homiletics or pastoral care. In continuing with the analogy of Colossus at Rhodes, most preaching preparation would have us believe that only one foot—the textual one—wears a shoe labelled “Hermeneutics”. The other contextual foot is unshod hermeneutically, leaving the mighty Colossus prone to pratfalls and disaster.

Once awareness of the need for contextual interpretation is achieved, often through the school of hard (i.e., first parish) knocks, one gains an appreciation and desire for the basic elements of contextual hermeneutics. Let me comment upon several.

Learning the Language

Key among these is a desire to learn the “language” of the context. Much like learning a new language in another, living setting, the task of learning contextual language is best accomplished by “swimming” in the language. And one of the keys to swimming is learning to keep your mouth shut! Little of the language of the context is learned if the preacher’s language is imposed unilaterally upon it. To err by doing so reflects neither an interpretation skill, nor basic common sense. For if the preacher’s voice dominates to the exclusion of others as one moves into a new preaching context, the people cannot be expected to reveal their own language’s idioms, definitions and connotations.

I have found that one excellent hermeneutical “tool” for contextual language study is the discipline to look back through the Church Council minutes, Sunday bulletins, annual reports, etc. early on in a new parish setting. One soon learns what “words” are important to that setting. One quickly discovers what phrases touch the nerve endings of the people in that context. And the discovery—the interpretation—of the contextual language in this way is far less detrimental to preaching than a trial-and-error testing of words and images. Much as the scriptural text unveils its idioms and images for interpretation, so the written documents of the context also yield secrets of the language. Time and study are required to obtain such knowledge, but the preacher stands a far better

chance of *two-footed*, colossal preaching if that homework is done.

Discovering History and Discerning Intent Through Visitation

A reading of the documents of the context is important for the preacher upon arrival in a new setting, but what about the preacher who has lived in that setting for some time and knows the language of the context well? Is the hermeneutical task accomplished? Hardly. For as we mentioned above, each context, like each text, challenges us with an unknown history and trajectory.

For that reason a second contextual, hermeneutical tool, visitation, is essential for effective preaching. This tool more than any other allows the preacher to ground the text upon the context of the listeners. A context's history and intent is a formative process. Misperceptions notwithstanding, history is never static, the future never monolithic. Pastoral visitation opens up the history and intent of the context as a whole, and the smaller units of "family" context within a parish or institution. This happens as the preacher moves off the "home-turf" of Scripture, doctrine and formal seminary education and onto the turf of the context.

I know for a fact that most of the times I have felt good about my preaching have been when I had the sense that I stood upon the text but also touched solidly upon some of the history or intent of the people with whom I visited that week.

Pastoral visitation, unfortunately, is often regarded as a function merely of pastoral administration at worst, or *Seelsorge* at best. I feel it must also be regarded as a significant hermeneutical and homiletical tool. It is the means by which one is enabled and invited to interpret the context of the community which is addressed by the Word. I believe visitation would happen more frequently and with greater *mutual* benefit were it viewed as the way in which one learns how best to preach standing upon both context and text—a colossal, yet realistic, task.

Preaching Out of Text and Context: A Case Study

The believer knows there is enduring significance when the Word becomes flesh and dwells among us. In this last section I

would like to “enflesh” the notion of the “Preacher as Colossus” by putting some of these thoughts, admonitions and principles into the flesh of an example. Specifically, I’d like to consider the task of preaching upon Luke 10:38–42, the familiar story of Martha and Mary. How does one approach and apply a textual and contextual hermeneutic to preach this passage with legs planted firmly upon the Word of the Scripture and the life of the people?

First, a bit of background to set this text in its own scriptural context. This pericope is appointed for the Ninth Sunday after Pentecost in Series C of the three-year lectionary. It is appointed to be read “standing on its own” that day. I say “on its own” because this passage is set within a clear and lengthy context that properly begins at Luke 10:25 with the lawyer’s testing question of Jesus, “Rabbi, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” The reply of Jesus is nothing new, representing a conflation of Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.”

Utilizing a familiar chiasmic device Luke then follows Jesus’ words with two accounts which serve as commentary upon his call to love God, love neighbor. The account of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29–37) addresses the latter. It is a parable told as commentary upon how the priestly command contained within Leviticus can be interpreted and practised within the spirit and not just to the letter of the law. The parable of the Good Samaritan functions as Jesus’ sermon to those gathered round. Jesus stands with one foot upon Leviticus and one upon the context of pharisaic legalism.

Having used the parable of the Good Samaritan as homiletical and hermeneutical device for the injunction to love one’s neighbor, Luke then uses a similar device to interpret and proclaim the meaning of the call to love God, with heart, soul and body. The account of Mary and Martha provides the balancing element as the worshipful love of Mary is contrasted with the frenetic busyness of the consummate good samaritan, Martha. As much as the Good Samaritan portrays a love of neighbor, so Mary’s and Martha’s dinnertime behaviours preach and teach of love of God.

Given this Lukan device it is unfortunate that the question of the lawyer which prompts Luke's two-fold reply is read on the *Eighth* Sunday after Pentecost. It makes it all the more difficult to assume the colossal stance, for the preacher must, of necessity, make sure a big toe of the foot placed upon the text is in contact with a passage 10 verses and seven days removed!

At the same time the preacher must ground a foot upon the context. Here is where contextual exegesis is vital. Clearly it would be helpful for the preacher to know whether the life and practice of the context being addressed would identify with Mary or Martha. The message of Jesus, first of all, and the message of Luke at a later level, is shaped with significant impact depending upon whether one identifies with Martha or Mary. Let's look at how that different contextual identity and a sensitivity to a contextual hermeneutic might affect the preaching of this pericope.

For those contexts which are Mary-like there is a word of affirmation in this text that is immeasurably comforting: "Mary has chosen the good portion, which shall not be taken away from her" (Luke 10:42). The pastor who is fortunate enough to preach within a context where worship and devotion are a clear choice of that parish will probably want to affirm that choice as a measure and reflection of that parish's love of God. What a shame it would be if the text were proclaimed "one-legged", addressed to believers in general without making an immediate connection with the faith and life of the parish context. A key opportunity to affirm corporate worship, study, devotion and constructive piety would be forfeited.

The preacher who has interpreted the context as Mary-like will also want to bear in mind not only vv. 38-42, but also the scriptural context surrounding this passage. For the affirmation of Mary takes place *after* the affirmation of the Good Samaritan as one who embodies the love of neighbor in actions that clearly bring people out into the paths of daily life. The temptation for those addressing a Mary-like context is to hear the injunction of Deuteronomy 6—love God with heart, soul, strength and mind—without hearing the succeeding corollary which enjoins the faithful to love of neighbor with equal fervor. If that temptation holds sway the preacher could easily fail to connect the text to the people upon the basis of the context's needs, fears, goals, and potential dangers.

How different the sermon might be if the preacher interprets the context as Martha-like! The text, bear in mind, is exactly the same, and the stance one has as preacher over against the text might not be any different. The "textual" leg would be in the same position, one could say. But the stance of the preacher toward the homiletical task might differ vastly in a context which would lean toward a Martha-like profile and practice. There the preacher would not have a word of affirmation as much as a word of admonition to bring forth from this very same text. The call to Martha to "chill out" and rest and reflect in the presence of God would be one which might come upon the context not with an uplifting warmth but a far more brittle reality. The preacher would ascend the pulpit, I imagine, with far more trepidation and a far greater sense that the Word to be proclaimed is a two-edged sword.

There would, of course, also be a place for affirmation and Good News, especially if the preacher stays in contact with the parable of the Good Samaritan which precedes. Nonetheless, the colossal contextual foot would not commend one to linger long over the Good Samaritan when the call to Martha is immediate and decisive.

This whole dynamic of text and context is made all the more interesting when one considers that individuals come bringing their own personal context too. A parish or institution might show a tendency to be identified in its history, intent and language with Mary or Martha. But the individual also brings a tendency to "lean" one way or another. That being true, the preacher, ever standing on the solid ground of this text, must be mindful that this text will be heard and applied differently as it is proclaimed to a Martha-type in a Mary parish, or vice-versa.

That being true, it would behoove the preacher to use this contextual reality as a way of lifting up a truth which the whole of the Good Samaritan-Mary and Martha pericope raises. This whole passage (Luke 10:25-42) might be one which would lead people to consider the dynamic interplay of love of God and neighbor which is a part of their own spiritual journey. It could, indeed, be offered as paradigm for that. As a spiritual journey tends one way or another, there is ever the balance—the individuation, to use a Jungian analogy—that is blessed balance. In a sense not only the preacher but all gathered that

day must stand upon this text while standing upon the context of their own lives to see how this Word enters into their faith story.

I have chosen the text of Luke 10:38–42 with some intentionality. It puts the dynamic of the colossal hermeneutic in sharp relief as it surfaces the many possible combinations of text, corporate context and personal context. Perhaps this pericope is atypical in that regard. Nonetheless, it serves well to remind us that homiletics and hermeneutics live together in a fascinating, and at times frustrating, web of relationships.

Frederick Buechner had it right: “If it weren’t for the honor of the thing [the preacher] would just as soon be somewhere else.” There is honour in the call to preach. That honour carries with it responsibility and accountability. It brings with it the need to stand with feet firmly grounded, hermeneutical thought and effort well-defined, as we attempt to let the people of God draw closer to the harbour of comfort and hope and life that the Word of God brings. When such a stance allows that to happen through the weak and wavering instruments that we often are, it is truly a wonder of the world that far surpasses any, past or present. Indeed, it is the wonder of the Word.

Notes

- ¹ Frederick Buechner, *Telling the Truth* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977) 22f.