Narrative and Preaching: Sorting it all Out

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It is nearly twenty-five years since the "narrative and preaching" movement began and, in my estimation, there is still a tremendous amount of confusion about what is meant when the two words "narrative" and "preaching" are juxtaposed. As this movement begins to undergo yet another set of changes, its significance and the confusion it has caused have prompted me to attempt briefly to "sort it all out" before we move on.

The Roots of the Movement

By the mid-sixties, poetics and literary criticism had become cognate disciplines for biblical scholars and theologians. In 1964, Amos Wilder published *The Language of the Gospel: Early Christian Rhetoric*. Wilder demonstrated that the form and the content of early Christian communication were inseparable. In 1969, Elie Wiesel asserted that storytelling constitutes an essential element of what it means to be human.[1] In 1970, Sam Keen published *To a Dancing God* in which he explored the metaphor of story as a way to understand personal identity. That same year, John Dunne's *A Search for God in Time and Memory* applied narrative directly to religious understanding. In 1971, Michael Novak treated story as a way to relate human experience and sociopolitical action,[2] and Stephen Crites published his seminal essay "The Narrative Quality of Experience" in which he identified the structure of consciousness and narrative form. Since then, the literature on narrative and theology has proliferated, including significant works by Hans Frei, George Stroup, Paul Ricoeur and others.[3]

In 1980, three books appeared that adopted "story" as a starting point from which to understand the nature, purpose, and method of preaching, *The Homiletical Plot: the Sermon as a Narrative Art Form* by Eugene Lowry, *Preaching the Story*, coauthored by Edmund Steimle, Morris Niedenthal, and Charles Rice, and *Telling the Story: Variety and Imagination in Preaching* by Robert A. Jensen. Since that time, there have been many other homiletical books and essays that attempt to put narrative and preaching together.[4]

Sorting it All Out

When a preacher or a homiletician uses the words "narrative" or "story," it is important to observe carefully how these words are applied to the actual process of preaching. Typically, there are four ways that the word narrative is

used in relation to preaching and four questions which will help to determine usage. There are also several key textbooks to help the preacher understand each approach to narrative and preaching.

1. Narrative Hermeneutics

Is the word narrative used to refer to the use of biblical material in preaching?

Usually, when a *hermeneutical* approach to narrative and preaching is invoked, narrative aspects of the biblical text are related in some way to the form or content of the sermon that the preacher is to compose. For some, it is the narrative or literary *form* of the biblical text which should guide the preacher in forming the sermon. The beginner at this formal approach will find a helpful resource in *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible* by Thomas G. Long. For a more complex model that is applicable to a variety of forms of biblical literature, read David Buttrick's article "Interpretation and Preaching."[5] Another helpful book is *Preaching Biblically: Creating Sermons in the Shape of Scripture*, edited by Don Wardlaw.

There are other ways than drawing out formal correlations between the biblical text and sermon to incorporate aspects of narrative into the preacher's use of biblical materials. Richard Thulin, for instance, invites the preacher to retell biblical narratives as the foundation for preaching.[6] Henry Mitchell and James Sanders want the preacher to identify creatively with characters in biblical narratives.[7] Charles Rice asks the preacher to discover how the contemporary human story can be imaginatively discovered in the metaphors and images of the biblical story.[8]

Regardless of the biblically oriented approach to narrative used, confusion is possible unless clarification is made. Whenever narrative aspects of the biblical material and preaching, it is helpful to speak of a *narrative hermeneutic* in order to clarify the aspect of the narrative and preaching interface under discussion.

2. Narrative Semantics

Is the word narrative used to refer to the management of ideas or meaning in preaching?

In this approach to narrative and preaching, the form of logic in sermons is narratival or "plotted." Typically, the preacher is encouraged to organize sermonic meaning so that it resembles a narrative plot. Instead of making sermonic form faithful to the plot or shape of the biblical text, the preacher is invited to learn how stories of different kinds function (movies, sit-coms, novels, fairy tales, parables, and such) and then to plot sermons according to these models.

Sometimes this approach is confused with so-called inductive preaching. This is because both of these approaches are connotative, that is, they promote sermon forms built around the delay of the arrival of the preacher's meaning,

concepts, or ideas. In both narrative and inductive styles, what the preacher "means" is delayed and sometimes arrives only figuratively in the sermon.

Typically, semantic approaches to narrative and preaching will include suggestions for how to "plot" or "shape" a sermon in order to imitate certain narrative patterns. *The Homiletical Plot* by Eugene Lowry is a standard text for the beginner at this narrative approach. Sometimes preachers are actually encouraged to make sermons into stories. For preachers interested in crafting story-sermons Richard A. Jensen's *Telling the Story* is a good basic text.[9]

It is difficult to keep narrative semantics distinct from narrative hermeneutics. There are clear overlaps because both approaches are interested in appropriating narrative forms of logic for preaching. At the semantic level, however, rooting sermonic forms in particular biblical forms is not essential. There are many extra-biblical narrative forms which are equally helpful. Narrative semantics is the study of ways of managing the delay of sermonic meaning in a narrative fashion, rather than how to appropriate biblical narrative forms for preaching.

In order to avoid confusing this level of discussion with the hermeneutical level, it would be helpful if those who are speaking about this aspect of the narrative and preaching relationship would acknowledge that they are focusing principally on *narrative semantics* or on narrative semantics as derived from a narrative hermeneutic.

3. Narrative Enculturation

Is the word narrative used to refer to the use of culture and human experience in preaching?

Whenever elements of narrative (image, simile, synecdoche, metaphor, personification, etc.) are used as ways to think about illustrating or "imagining" sermons in order to relate the meanings or ideas within a sermon to human culture and experience the homiletical discussion has moved to yet another level. We are now speaking about the narrative qualities of the *enculturation* of sermonic meaning.

Recent homiletical theory bears testimony that for the time being. Brunner has won the debate with Barth regarding whether there is a "point of contact" for the gospel in human culture and experience. There is tremendous interest today in gaining access to every possible cultural/experiential point of contact for the meaning of the gospel: everyday experiences, pastoral practice, art, film, news media, liturgy, theatre, music, literature, and science. Preachers are told that they are to use their imaginations and learn to think metaphorically in order to "name grace" in human experience.[10] For some, even the personal life of the preacher is fair game for a certain amount of imaginative exploration from the pulpit.[11] At every turn preachers are expected to transform everyday experience into a narrative of the discovery of the grace of God.[12]

On the more conservative side of narrative enculturation, the reader will want to look at chapters eight, nine, and ten of David Buttrick's *Homiletic: Moves and Structures*. This would be well supplemented by chapter eight of *The Witness of Preaching* by Thomas G. Long. For more open-ended

approaches, read *The 'I' of the Sermon,* by Richard Thulin, and *Imagining a Sermon* by Thomas H. Troeger.

Again, in order to avoid confusion, this type of correlation between narrative and preaching needs to be clearly dilineated. I suggest that when we shift to speaking about narrative qualities of the relationship between sermonic meaning and culture or human experience, it would be helpful to speak of various forms of *narrative enculturation,* in order to mark the narrative quality of preaching that is under discussion.

4. Narrative World View

Is the word narrative used to refer to the theological world view or "faith-story" which sermons are generating in a congregational context?

Most recently, homileticians have begun to see the potential of narrative categories for exploring the theological world view which preaching sponsors over a period of time in congregational life. Congregational studies research, especially cultural anthropological approaches, have shown that congregational world views are expressed in many different aspects of congregational life: preaching, worship, visitation, counseling sessions, education, and so on. James Hopewell has suggested that congregational world views are narrative in shape. In the book *Congregation: Stories and Structures,* he created a typology of world views based on literary critic Roland Frye's four mythoi: comic, romantic, tragic, and ironic.[13]

Walter Brueggemann and Ronald Allen seem to suggest in *Preaching as a Social Act: Theology and Practice,*[14] that preaching plays a leading role in the cultivation of the theological world view of congregations. If such is indeed the case, it may be possible to develop methods to compare and contrast the world views that congregations and preachers respectively bring to the preaching event so that preachers could learn ways to be more strategic in their theological communication from the pulpit.

In my view, this is the cutting edge of "narrative and preaching" research. What are needed are clear, usable methods of determining both the content and structure of a preacher's homiletical faith-story or world view. This would include a way of determining the principal "plot-line" that the preacher tends to accentuate within the larger faith-story told. Attention could then be given to aspects of the larger theological system of the Christian tradition which are missing or weakly characterized in a preacher's homiletical faith-story. Preachers could learn ways to reenergize parts of the larger Christian story which have fallen into disuse in their preaching and to think strategically about deepening or even changing theological world views in congregations.[15]

Into the Future

The fascination with poetics and literary criticism in contemporary homiletics is not likely to subside quickly. It is very fertile soil for rethinking older rhetorical categories in the context of a narrative based tradition. It is natural,

however, that these poetic categories have begun to evolve into a new rhetoric for preaching, one which subsumes older rhetorical and poetic categories in a larger semiotic and ethnographic rhetorical theory. In this theory, sermons will be understood as purpose-driven (rhetorical) theological sign-systems operating within larger sign-systems of congregations and society.

For those who are concerned to understand future theoretical developments in the narrative and preaching movement, therefore, it will be necessary to broaden the base of reading from homiletics, classical rhetoric, literary criticism and poetics to include cultural anthropology, linguistics, sociology, and cross-disciplinary readings in semiotics. The next wave of narrative based homiletical research is located at the point where narrative elements of preaching begin to suggest the narrative *functionings* of preaching in congregations and society.

A Plea for Clarity

As a new wave of narrative and preaching materials begins to break forth on the homiletical scene, it is important to organize our discourse on this subject. Students in seminaries and practicing preachers deserve to know what aspect of the narrative and preaching interface a homiletician or fellow preacher is discussing. It is unhelpful to talk about narrative, story or metaphor, or any other narrative element without also clarifying what aspect of the preaching process these categories are used to illumine. Perhaps the categories of hermeneutics, semantics, enculturation, and world view will prove helpful in our attempts to sort it all out.

NOTES

[1] "The Modern Storyteller and the Ancient Dialogue," lecture delivered at Temple University, Philadelphia, Nov. 15, 1969.

[2] "Story" in Politics, (New York: The Council on Religion and International Affairs, 1970). See also, *Ascent of the Mountain: Flight of the Dove* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971).

[3] Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (New Haven: Yale University, 1975); George Stroup, *The Promise of Narrative Theology* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981); Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984). Other important works include Johann Metz, *Faith in History and Society* (New York: Seabury, 1980); Sallie (McFague) Teselle, *Speaking in Parables* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975); and B. Wicker, *Story- shaped World* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975); Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981); Frank McConnell, *The Bible and Narrative Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983); Jack Dean Kingsbury, *Matthew as Story* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986); Michael Goldberg, *Theology and Narrative: A Critical Introduction* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1982); John Dominic Crossan, *The Dark Interval: Towards a Theology of Story* (Niles, Ill,: Argus Communications, 1975); Gabriel Fackre, *The Christian Story: A Pastoral Systematics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987); Wesley Kort, *Narrative Elements and Religious Meaning* (Philadelphia: John Knox, 1975); James F. Hopewell, *Congregation: Stories and Structures* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987).

[4] See Fred Craddock, *As One Without Authority* (Enid, Oklahoma: The Phillips University Press, 1974); Fredrick Buechner, *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy and Fairy Tale* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1977); Charles L. Rice, "Preacher as Storyteller." Union Seminary Quarterly Review, 31: 182-197, Spring 1976; Edmund A. Steimle, "Preaching as Storytelling," Thesis Theological Cassettes 7, no. 11, Dec. 1976; Don Wardlaw, ed., *Preaching Biblically:*

Creating Sermons in the Shape of Scripture (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985); Ronald J. Sider and Michael A. King, *Preaching about Life in a Threatening World*, (Philadelphia: the Westminster Press, 1987); Thomas G. Long, *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989); Wayne Bradley Robinson, ed., *Journeys Toward Narrative Preaching* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1990); Bruce C. Salmon, *Storytelling in Preaching: A Guide to the Theory and Practice* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1988); Richard L. Eslinger, *A New Hearing: Living Options in Homiletic Method* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987); Art Van Seters; ed., *Preaching as a Social Act: Theology and Practice* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988).

[5] *Interpretation 25*, no. 1, Jan. 1981.

[6] See Richard L. Thulin, "Retelling Biblical Narratives as the Foundation for Preaching," in Robinson, ed., *Journeys Toward Narrative Preaching*.

[7] See Henry H. Mitchell, "Preaching on the Patriarchs," in *Biblical Preaching: An Expositor's Treasury*, ed. James W. Cox (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983); *The Recovery of Preaching* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1977); and James A. Sanders, *God Has a Story Too: Sermons in Context* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979).

[8] See Charles Rice, "Shaping Sermons by the interplay of Text and Metaphor" in Wardlaw, ed., *Preaching Biblically*, See also Paul Scott Wilson, *Imagination of the Heart: New Understandings in Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988).

[9] More recently, Michael E. Williams has written on this model of preaching. See "Preaching as Storytelling" in Robinson, ed., *Journeys Toward Narrative Preaching*.

[10] Mary Catherine Hilkert, "Naming Grace: A Theology of Proclamation," *Worship 60*, no. 5 (Sept., 1986): 434-449.

[11] See Richard Thulin, *The T of Preaching* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990): Buechner, *Telling the Truth*; John R. Claypool, *The Preaching Event* (Waco: Word Books, 1980).

[12] See Wilson, *Imagination of the Heart*; Thomas Troeger, *Imagining a Sermon* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990); and Charles L. Rice, *The Embodied Word: Preaching as Art and Liturgy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991).

[13] (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987). Hopewell reinterprets these mythoi in congregations as gnostic, charismatic, canonic and empiric world views.

[14] ed. Arthur Van Seters.

[15] In my book *The Four Codes of Preaching: Rhetorical Strategies* (Fortress Press: 1991), I explore one method of analyzing congregational world views as they are sponsored by the "theosymbolic code" in preaching.