From Resistance to Jubilee: Prophetic Preaching and the Testimony of Love

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In recent years homileticians have focused a good deal of attention on ethical models for preaching that accentuate the task of prophetic resistance. In most cases these models involve esthetic or rhetorical strategies through which preaching becomes, and attempts to promote, a re-scripting of reality in order to resist the dominant materialistic and oppressive discourses of modernity in the West. While all of these ways of preaching can help preachers create sermons that do battle with significant evils in society, it will become evident in what follows that homiletical strategies of resistance leave largely untouched a deeper substratum of forces that conspire to corrupt the benign, defensive way that we use language, or what the developmental psychologist Jean Piaget calls the human "semiotic function,"¹ for idolatrous purposes.

Paradoxically, these forces are supported and maintained precisely by the (appropriately) defensive language of prophetic resistance. What is required, therefore, in order to overcome these forces, is sustained attention to transforming the way that we use language, including the language of resistance. This can be accomplished by re-framing the interhuman context for resistance in worship and preaching, moving from one dominated by the defensive self-securing of identity to the celebration of the self's and community's ability, in response to the Word, to move beyond the securing of identity, and to respond to others in love. Testimony helps to accomplish this because of its unique role in creating a context for the repair of speech by heightening awareness of the reality of sheer interhuman proximity (being-with, affinity) in church and society. Testimony, in the first instance, is a "language of jubilee." At the heart of this language of jubilee is a second language through which the human semiotic function is actually released from its defensive posture and reoriented toward others through the giving and receiving of signs of peace and love. This is testimony as the "language of love."

*Preaching as a Language of Resistance*

Christine Smith, in her book *Preaching as Weeping, Confession, and Resistance: Radical Responses to Radical Evil*, asserts that in our day and age preachers must learn to speak the language of resistance, of prophetic assertion. This is the language of refusal and reclamation, in which the potentially violent references and rhythms within our common language are taken to task, exposed for what they are, and re-scripted. Currently a variety of homiletical models encourage preachers to engage in prophetic resistance through re-scripting or "re-languaging." In some of these models (Black, Smith) the focus is placed on scripting an inclusiveness that will resist discourses of patriarchy, ageism, ableism, heterosexism, etc.² In other models (Bond, McClure, Ramsay) preachers are encouraged to script new, non-oppressive theologies that will defend against theological ideas that may condone abusive power and increase the likelihood of suffering.³ In still other approaches (Hauerwas, Willimon, Brueggemann, Campbell) biblical-rhetorical metaphors such as "resident alien," "exile," and "principalities and powers" are used to evoke alternative forms of imagination that will resist prevailing worldviews.⁴

Another, more subtle strategy is required, however, if preachers are to resist, not only the content of discourse, but also its embeddedness within unredeemed interhuman (intersubjective, interpersonal, and social) structures.⁵ A large body of research that extends through the psychoanalysis of Anna Freud and Jacques Lacan, the cultural anthropology of René Girard and Eric Gans, the practical theology of James E. Loder, and the biblical theology of Regina Schwarz, indicates a profound susceptibility within the human unconscious to give over...
the way that we use language relationally to the business of securing the ego and its identity in the world. It appears that one way humans orient themselves toward and within language and speech is in a defensive and self-securing posture. Words are used to cut boundaries between people, and to attach us to things that we believe will secure us in the world. Language becomes something to ward off perceived dangers, and to link us to persons, ideas, or groups that we think will provide us with the security that we need. Although this natural defensive orientation of the way that we "language" ourselves and the world in which we live is not in itself evil or immoral, and in spite of the fact that it serves a necessary function as one tool for self-preservation, we can easily see how this way of using language can be derailed toward any number of would-be idolatries that promise to secure us in the world: consumer goods, military or social power, racism, etc.

According to the political philosopher Louis Althusser and the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, part of the trickery and deception of language within the larger social setting is the way that semiotic socialization creates a mirroring process through which the dominant ideologies within a culture "hail" or whisper to us as individuals and groups, telling us who we are or should be, and encouraging us through thousands of different attractions to identify ourselves within a certain range of self-images or identities. Althusser calls this process "interpellation." This is a kind of "fitting" process, similar to trying on clothes. As one comes closer and closer to fitting within the dominant ways of using language for becoming a "subject" within society, one feels more comfortable and secure.

Antonio Gramsci developed this further with his idea of "hegemony." Hegemony is simply the established set of notions that constitute common sense within a society. It includes those values, beliefs, practices, and forms of knowledge that "go without saying." This language that goes without saying constitutes a massive hidden script for all of our lives. Most important for our purposes, however, is the way that this script works in relation to the human semiotic function—which it does to the way that we think we have to "use" language. Semiotic hegemonies establish themselves, in large part, by preying upon and exploiting the natural defensive quality of the way that humans use language, promising comfort and security in exchange for allegiance or interpellation. This has the cumulative effect of establishing the defensive, identity-securing aspect of the semiotic function as primary to the way that we use language, at the expense of ways that language can be used to move beyond the securing of identity on behalf of others. At a communal or social level, this amounts to a persistent saming of language-use at the expense of its othering.

What this means is that preachers are not up against potentially dangerous everyday language scripts alone. They are also up against the myriad ways whereby a set of dominant ideologies seduces the benign defensiveness of the human semiotic function, potentially turning it into a malignant interhuman structure of self-securing idolatry. It is crucial to realize that this structure exists as the larger complex within which all of our "scripts" find themselves embedded. Regardless of the languages or scripts that we adopt and use, this deeper structure is busy undermining the way that we use language, including these scripts, toward forms of interhuman defensiveness, separation, and distance that promise to better secure us in this world. As this structure attaches itself to univocal ecclesial, racial, national, gender identities it co-opts the redemptive scripts we preach in increasingly sophisticated ways, shaping our experience toward exclusion, oppression, and violence.
Although re-scripting our language will offer some help, providing an initial line of defense against the dangerous scripts of materialism, patriarchy, racism, etc., which confront us, it does not go to the core of the issue. This is because even if we are able to re-imagine, re-script, and re-language the world in which our congregations live we cannot assume that this will adequately address the deeper unconscious binding of the semiotic function itself by this malignant defensive structure of semiotic interpellation.

This problem becomes even more complex when we consider that the appropriate justice-seeking defensiveness\textsuperscript{10} inherent in homiletical practices of prophetic resistance mirrors and supports precisely the defensive orientation of the semiotic function required by hegemonic semiotic interpellation. Paradoxically, practices of prophetic resistance support precisely the defensive identity-preservation-through-boundary-cutting way of using language that semiotic interpellation relies upon in order to function properly as an interhuman structure.

Here we confront, on a contiguous track, an insidious double-bind in the way that cultural hegemony, the language "center" in society (our common sense language), actually requires the language of resistance to further its own purposes. The heart of the problem is this: the center (semiotic hegemony, set of dominant ideologies) in a society requires the margins in order to be the center. This creates a double-bind, because any struggle against the center (re-scriptings, re-languaging, inclusive language, etc.), indeed all of our strategies of resistance, paradoxically prop up the center as the center. All of these efforts ultimately only set off the center in more bold and striking relief.

To use only one small example, this is what has happened to the inclusive language movement in worship and hymnology on many seminary and college campuses. It appears that these good efforts at resistance and the reclamation of language have had the reverse effect in many situations, reinforcing a dominant idea of the language-center or tradition. In some instances efforts at re-scripting have spawned a powerful backlash from people representing the language center against so-called "politically correct" language, and against those representing the language margins who insist upon such language.

What preachers and liturgists are up against is this: the lived experiences and language of everyone are only made sense of from the cumulative linguistic vantage point of an all-defining center. The realization of this, of course, elicits a deeper and more volatile struggle from many who are a part of the speech and language resistance. This resistance is sometimes met by an increasingly strident response from those who choose to represent the center as language police. And so preachers and liturgists find themselves deeply within a spiraling double-bind, a situation in which they are damned if they do and damned if they don't. We know now that no matter how re-scripting is done, it doesn't go far enough. It leaves the deeper, unconscious problem of defensive self-securing in relation to what is "other," and the parallel problem of the language center and language-margins, virtually untouched.

\textit{Preaching as the Language of Jubilee}

In the face of this double-binding problem, it is possible that a new opportunity for preaching, and perhaps for liturgy and music, can emerge from listening to marginalized persons in society who have, out of many years of experience, created ways to unravel this self-perpetuating center-margin double bind and the malignant defensiveness that underpins it. In homiletics we have begun to ask with real seriousness: What do persons of color, women, and other so-called
marginalized folk have to say that might help us to deal with this larger unconscious and pervasive problem that is co-opting even our best prophetic strategies of communication?

To summarize, these friends are teaching us that our languages of resistance can and should be re-framed entirely by being placed within the larger context of liturgical and homiletical languages of jubilee. Jubilee is an opening or space within social and semiotic reality in which there is an opportunity and a vision for repair. It is a language-constructed "time out" in which a reorientation within language becomes possible. In our case, what is to be repaired is the violent rhythm or double-bind that exists between the center and the margins, the same and the other, that dominates human speaking. And what is reoriented, ultimately, is the human semiotic function itself, the way that we speak and "language" our lives, from a defensive and self-securing orientation, to an orientation toward others in compassion.

Within homiletics today, there seems to be some convergence by those who are seeking to identify this language-redemptive form of proclamation around the word "testimony." This is not simply personal testimony, at least not exclusively. Testimony is a powerful speaking out of the context of one's life, but it is done on behalf of an entire community who are struggling for speech, for words, and for the acknowledgement and reception of new traditions of interpretation and meaning beyond the center-margin double-bind.

There is a crucial theological difference at the heart of this kind of testimony that is not found in most preaching today, including prophetic preaching, a difference that is important for undoing the largely unconscious double-bind between the language-center and the language-margins. At the deepest possible level, testimonial preaching relies on a very different understanding of the Word of God than we find in our usual theologies of preaching. Typically the Word of God is closely associated with a particular core message of preaching, the kerygma: the identifications and representations of the Word of God in and through Christ as disclosed in Scripture and the Church's proclamation (what the theologian Karl Barth called the threefold form of the Word of God). One implication of this has been the powerful impetus toward Logos as the hub of a comprehensive set of rhetorical topoi (Newman), a dogmatic system (Barth), a cultural-linguistic totality (Lindbeck), and supervenient models of rheotorical rationality and truth (Murphy).

For those within testimonial traditions of preaching, however, Logos is understood not so much as an "ordering" element as a re-ordering, converting, and re-creating element in human speech. Its rhythms are less appropriate to myth, epic, and the beautiful, and more inclined toward the parabolic, the ironic, and the sublime. Rebecca Chopp has done an admirable job of re-defining how the Word of God is understood within so-called marginal traditions of testimonial speaking. She calls the Word of God a "perfectly open sign," and places it within the economy of an infinite God's infinite ethical re-ordering of human life.

Why is it important in a world of increasing center-toward-margins violence that the Word of God be considered a "perfectly open sign" within an ethical infinity, rather than the guiding force of rationality and order within a theological system seeking comprehensiveness and totality? The primary reason is that as an open sign the Word refuses to secure referencing for God's redemptive activity in Christ to only one hitching post liturgically, existentially, theologically, socially, etc. The "perfectly open" dynamic within the Word introduces a wholly non-defensive, "othering" (kenotic) way of signifying God's redemptive relationship to the world. Emmanuel Levinas has argued that it is God moving toward humanity under the aspect of "infinity," rather than God moving within and toward God's own being under the aspect of
"totality," who determines testimonial speech inasmuch as it has the power to interrupt dangerous linguistic and structural totalities. In short, the Word of God as perfectly open sign is a word of shalom to others, a sign that opens itself toward an infinity of human others and their ways of speaking and hearing the redemptive activity of God in (and into) the world. This is not simply a word of "inclusion" in a pre-established system of communication. It is rather recognition that there are, and indeed always have been, others (other faces, other voices, other words) on the originary Logos-scene, on the scene of verbal-linguistic representation itself. This means nothing less than recognizing all other origins of speaking, and speaking of God, in this world, a deeper and richer intertextuality and heteroglossia than is usually admitted, and thus other origins of distinctively Christian speech, beyond and beneath those usually heard.

Anna Carter Florence makes use of Rebecca Chopp's language to describe what she thinks is happening throughout the history of women's testimonial speech with respect to the homiletical appropriation of this kind of Word. Speaking of the testimonies of women, and her own life, Florence asserts that "our lives are not the testimony, and our lives do not prove the testimony; rather our lives are sealed to the testimony [and here's the crucial part of the sentence], sealed to the narrated and confessed freedom the testimony proclaims: the Word as perfectly open sign." In other words, women's testimonial speech is sealed to a Word of jubilee that is absolutely free from the violent rhythm that exists between the center and the margins. When women preach, there is a tacit understanding among the women who preach and listen that the Word that they are speaking and hearing is open, "testifying" them, along with an infinity of others far and near, into God-speech. This testimonial Word opens up a new space in worship and preaching, not simply a space in which to re-script faith and reclaim symbols, but an infinite space of interhuman proximity (being with), or affinity that makes the space occupied by the defense-driven warfare between the center and the margins seem small, insignificant, even irrelevant. In this space there exists no longer any center and margin, same and other, just the faces and words of "others" and of other others: sheer, infinite, interhuman proximity such as one might experience within a huge cosmic conversation.

In a different way, African-American homileticians have highlighted a kind of absolute freedom or openness that accompanies the liberating Word, a freedom that marks the "celebration" that occurs within many traditions of black preaching. Part of what is happening in these moments of celebration is that the infinity of the Logos (indicated, but not exhausted, in things like spiritual glossalalia and ritual ecstasy) is intervening and shattering all forms of linguistic and communicative totality. Similar to Florence's idea of "sealing" preaching to the Word as a perfectly open sign, Henry Mitchell speaks of a deep "internalization" of and "saturation" by God's liberating Word. Warren H. Stewart calls this a deep and sudden awareness that God is involved in one's "wholistic liberation." Olin P. Moyd tells us that this experience at the heart of preaching is literally unstoppable, another way of expressing the infinite and expanding welcome at the heart of this understanding of God's Word.

These forms of testimonial preaching open up something like what is described in the Bible as jubilee. Testimonial preaching creates a new non-defense-driven, "othering" context for the use of language, a context in which there is a divinely sponsored freedom for repair, especially freedom to repair the double-bind that exists between the center and the margins, and in the space of that freedom, a place in which perhaps the defensive orientation of the human semiotic function itself can be redeemed.
The Language of Love

We now need to ask if yet another language can emerge within the context of repair opened up by language of jubilee. This would be a language that actually releases the human semiotic function from its defensive posture and brings it onto the ground of others and otherness. Is there a language that we would speak in preaching and worship that can transform the way that we use language from boundary-cutting, grasping, and self-securing functions in relation to others, into a "letting be," a "letting flourish" compassionate aspect with others? Can preaching harbor a separate non-defensive, or defense-transforming, language that can even transfigure the self-securing aspect residing within the language of prophetic resistance? Is there a language that may draw forth the kenotic, self-giving aspect of the prophetic word within a new freedom from the center/margin double-bind brought into existence by the perfectly open sign?

The answer to this question is this: This almost unspeakable language is the language of love, because it is love that seals preaching to the Word as perfectly open sign. We are not here talking about a verbal language, or not that only, but about a particular "signing" of love. This signing of love is desperately essential if we are to keep the human semiotic function turned toward its deepest purpose—the one that is waiting on the other side of its defensive posturing. This signing, or what can now be called "the testimony of love," is a direct and in most cases simultaneous extension of the jubilee-testimony that brings the perfectly open sign into preaching. The testimony of love exists as the final signifying form that is assumed by the divine infinity that invades preaching when it is sealed to the perfectly open sign as the Word of God.

The testimony of love exists as a largely passive language through which our preaching becomes a signing or saying to others of love, of our proximity to one another, our infinite and mutual exposure and vulnerability. When this signing of love begins to appear in preaching, it signals that in this moment the semiotic function, the way that I "language" myself and the world, has turned—turned away from self-securing idolatry toward the faces of others, and toward the God who passes by every time that turning, the turning of love, occurs. The signing of love in preaching signals a disruption and undoing of the double-bind between the semiotic center and the semiotic margins. It is a signing of our freedom from the power of the double-bind and of our ability, as those whose lives are sealed to the Word as perfectly open sign, to use language solely as a means to respond to one another in love.

How can our preaching become a testimony of love? In many respects this is the fundamental question behind the tremendous turn toward the listener in recent homiletic theory. These homiletic theories are straining, sometimes in a kind of excessive, overdrawn way, toward the other (meaning toward all others) in the preaching event and beyond. Recent efforts go far beyond the measured move toward the listener in Fred Craddock’s inductive method, which intended, through a kind of Burkean identification, to bring the hearer into a more participatory role in preaching. Ronald Allen and Lucy Rose have created different forms of conversational and testimonial homiletics; Nora Tubbs Tisdale works to integrate congregational studies and local theology into homiletics in order to promote a kind of folk dance between preacher and listener; Chuck Campbell and Stanley Saunders take preaching students into the homeless shelters and onto the streets of Atlanta where they preach to the powers; Kathy Black encourages preachers to listen to the lives of those who are most marginalized in society and congregations, especially persons with disabilities; Christine Smith urges preachers to stand in
solidarity with the oppressed, especially victims of classism, ageism, homophobia, and sexism; and I have supported methods of collaborative preaching in which lay people, and even the unchurched, are involved in sermon brainstorming. All of these are attempts to bring the barest glimmer of shalom into the preaching process, shalom that has the potential, in some cases, to signify love. These are, of course, only methods. They require certain forms of character and rhetorical ethos, as well as attention to a new range of emotions or pathos in preaching. In short, we in homiletics have only begun to scratch the surface of how a signing of love might be "mid-wifed" into preaching (or worship).

In conclusion, in a world increasingly shaped by violence toward others, preaching can and should pay close attention to the business of reshaping our experience as users of language, speaking agents, at the deepest possible levels. Preaching can help us to consciously resist the scripts of greed, violence, and loveless power that dominate our interpersonal, social, and political consciousness. But most important in our generation, preachers will have to begin to address these deeper questions: How can preaching become a form of speech that unravels the violent rhythm between language-center and language-margin? And how can preaching help to shift the balance and turn the ways that we use language away from strategies of self-securing defensiveness toward ways of speaking that will foster jubilee and signings of love?

ENDNOTES


Nowhere, rather than toward neighbor. The kenotic move toward neighbor envisioned here self motivated by fear, avoidance of self (Plaskow's "hiding"), or loss of self (the self that goes nowhere, rather than toward neighbor). The kenotic move toward neighbor envisioned here...


18. Preaching as Testimony (note 11), 168.

19. Florence, following Mary Fulkerson, chooses this word which signals "a new kind of hospitality for the stranger" that "resists domination of the other and even acknowledges love's inability to know the other." Preaching as Testimony, 161. For more on the concept of "being with" see Jean-Luc Nancy, Being Singular Plural (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2000).


23. For a good overview of the biblical concept of jubilee, see Maria Harris, Proclaim Jubilee!: A Spirituality for the 21st Century (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996).

24. Perhaps this is why the kiss of peace—signing the peace—is one of the most ancient and fundamental liturgical practices in the church.
25. It is the testimony of love that ultimately distinguishes homiletical testimony from courtroom testimony or testimony as a form of forensic disputation. It moves preaching beyond the oppositional rhythm between testimony and counter-testimony, which in ways similar to those just discussed can once again keep us from the other. For more on this see my essay "The Way of Love: Loder, Levinas, and Ethical Transformation through Preaching" in *Redemptive Transformation in Practical Theology*, ed. Dana R. Wright and John D. Kuentzel (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004).


27. *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997).


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