

THE VINEVILLE PAGE

Helping us all grasp the big picture of where we are and what our challenges are as we face the future.

Making Sense of Preaching

Issue # 9



Preaching does not normally have a good reputation. In vernacular speech, we use it to describe someone who speaks down to us, telling us what we ought to do. Yet, it is a word which describes the hope of most believers that God may well have a message for us—and the whisper of that word may be found in the weak and very human words of a preacher one Sunday morning.

We all have our preferences as to what we like to hear, who we like to hear, and how a sermon is to be preached. We like humor. We like to feel good. We like to hear again how God will take care of us. We like to hear something relevant to our lives. As beneficial as those things can be, do we really want God to tell us only what we want to hear or do we not harbor a deep hope that he will tell us also what we need to hear? Aren't there larger truths beyond the borders of our private, sheltered worlds that need to lay claim to our lives, gifts, and energy?

We live in a society that is filled with words and information. Richard Lischer reminds us how difficult it is to hear deeply the message of faith, “*The average American is subjected to approximately six thousand messages per day. Why would one of them called ‘gospel’ stand out? What is one little message among so many?*”¹¹ How do you get people to hear becomes the nagging question for preachers. For preachers, the temptation is often too great. We feel the need to become amateur psychologists, storytellers, and

comedians who dispense simple remedies for living in stressful times. *The abundance of words and messages in our world has made it difficult for people to hear the words of God* (After all, to truly hear the message of God with all its paradox, challenge to our normal ways of thinking, and demand takes time and thoughtfulness—things which are at a premium in our time).

At our best, we preachers still remember that the act of preaching is supposed to be delivering a message from God. While daunting, humbling, and feeling inadequate, we must discover in our spiritual journey the passion of God's own interest in humanity and convey to our people what God thinks of the

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While the sermon may help you with practical tips in dealing with anger, family, stress, forgiveness, and the like, the deeper message is that a recurring encounter with God will heal you of your brokenness and create fresh joy in your life. Only the Spirit resident in our lives enables us to have love, peace, joy, faith, patience, goodness and the like.

Like the prophets of old, the sermon is intended to open for you an alternative world in which God is King.

No power can rival his. He speaks to us as subjects and children. In love and faithfulness we are made whole. Our greed is replaced by generosity. Our worries are replaced by trust. Our selfishness is supplanted by gratefulness. Our narrow vision is swept away in the large panorama of God's doings in our world. In hearing God, we discover that our world is in need of redemption. The same old strategies which never before brought peace need to be rejected in favor of those radical, sacrificial, suffering paths which Jesus lived. We are to be a people ready to offer grace, right injustice, and care for the weak—even when they don't deserve it. We begin to see this world as God sees it rather than through the sullied culture of our time. We must be on guard against the spirit of the age and seek to be transformed by the spirit of God's Kingdom.

In the higher purposes of God, the sermon is not a self-help lesson or a religious lecture. It is not a Bible study which unveils all the hidden gems of understanding on a text. It is not a dog and pony show which entertains. And, (God forbid) it is not a message which soft pedals both culture and faith so that the boundary between the two can no longer be distinguished. If the Christian faith is ever embraced by society, you can be assured that the message of the cross has been decentralized and that pop psychology along with a shallow religion that is nationalistic in tone has supplanted faith.

Sermons may often encourage and teach, but some of them must jar and upset. Every person is different and differs in his or her ability to hear what is being said. Sometimes sermons are duds; on the other

hand, sometimes we are the duds, dull of hearing and caring—content to live sheltered lives untroubled by the trouble of others and the unwelcomed summons of God. We normally think of sermons as the craft of a preacher. The hope of preaching, however, is that somewhere between the crafting and delivering, Christ is attempting to seize our attention and give us a life filled with promise

and peril. While we must respect the tradition of biblical interpretations which we have grown up with, we must also be open to reevaluating those traditions in the light of new challenges, new needs, new crises,

and greater understanding of what God wants to do in our world in our own lifetimes.

It has been my own experience that God takes the sermons that are duds as well as the gems and works his mystery in them. The very sermons that I think are miserable failures are often the very ones that renew hope in people who hurt. It is truly a God-thing. It is not unusual for people to hear things I did not say, as the Spirit takes a single word or sentence and leads a person to think about their lives in poignant and renewing ways. Not every sermon will mean the same thing to every person. People come to the sanctuary with different needs, different visions of God, different perspectives on the Bible, different personalities, different thresholds of what they are able to hear and what it takes for God to get through, and different lenses through which they process all the information about our world. Preaching is such a weak thing to change the world; yet, God seems to delight in taking weak things, blessing them, and changing our world.

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▮Richard Lischer, *The End of Words*, p. 13

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