

Several Days in the life of a pastor

Matthew 28:16-20

May 18, 2008

Boy, this girl is in need of some time off—which I will be doing next week at a conference. This week, I had a lot of trouble coming up with any fresh ideas. Rather than bore you with the little bit of research I dug up, I thought I would do a “days in the life” kind of thing, just to give you an idea about what it takes to write a sermon.

Sunday night. Pull out calendar. Note that next week is Trinity Sunday. Color white. Read over the lectionary passages. Old Testament passage is from Genesis--how God first created the heavens and the earth. It's long—too long to read in its entirety during worship. Also, can't see how it relates to the trinity. Can't see how it relates to the Sunday following Pentecost either. The Apostles have received the Holy Spirit, now Genesis? What were the lectionary composers thinking? Read the lectionary Psalms passage. This too, has to do with creation. “What are humans that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them, yet you have made them a little lower than the gods.....Beautiful poetry and it ties in so well with the Genesis passage. Still can't see why the lectionary composers chose Genesis for Trinity Sunday.

On to the Gospel passage. It's from Matthew. Now this is a good one. There are so many aspects to it. There's the whole evangelism thing, “Go and make disciples of all nations.” Definitely a good topic, but haven't I preached on evangelism in the not too distant past? Well, there's also the trinity theme. Good, predictable choice for Trinity Sunday, “Baptizing them in the name of the father, son and holy spirit.” To tell you the truth not too fond of the Trinitarian theme, though. Hard to preach a sermon on how the trinity intersects with peoples' lives. The trinity is a concept. It's a head thing. I want to engage the heart, too. But wait, why not preach on Baptism? That's definitely part of the passage, it's relevant, and haven't preached about Baptism since John the Baptist appeared in the lectionary. That was before Christmas. Baptism is about life changes. That definitely could intersect with peoples' lives. But we'll be doing some baptisms this summer—Annie and Rachael. Better to wait to a few weeks before tackling baptism.

What to do? Have not exhausted all possibilities yet. Just love the last part of the scripture from Matthew: “I will be with you always, even to the end of the age.” To the very end Jesus is thinking of his disciples. Leaving them with an oh, so comforting thought. I will be with you ALWAYS. Yes, that DEFINITELY HAS POSSIBILITIES!

Not done with the lectionary though. One more lectionary reading to go. This one is from the epistles— Paul’s letters—Second Corinthians. Ok. Here’s the thing about the epistles—they are almost always loaded with “shoulds” and “oughts.” I don’t like shoulds and oughts. Don’t think that the people in the pews like them either. Also, continue to fault Paul for belaboring his points. How often do I come away from Paul feeling preached to? Want my sermons to be porous enough that my listeners can read into them—wander around inside them, come to their own conclusions. I try NOT to belabor. So even before I turn to second Corinthians, I have settled on Matthew. Still, got to admit-- 2nd Corinthians is a good Trinitarian passage, “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.” What more you can say about that, though? Isn’t that complete in itself? It’s like that Billy Collins’ poem about poetry, where he accuses his poetry students of wanting to “tie the poem to a chair with rope and torture a confession out of it.” That’s what I would be doing with this scripture passage from 2nd Corinthians if I tried to preach on it--trying to torture a confession out of it. No, it’s back to Matthew, “I will be with you always even until the end of the age.” Sweet.

Monday morning. It’s time to crack the books. Search my bookcase for all the Matthew commentaries. Also consider articles, particularly this week’s article in Christian Century. Read, read, and read some more. Go to a few on-line commentary sites, too. Nothing strikes my fancy. Need an entry to the sermon. A joke? A story? SOMETHING. Nothing immediately comes to mind. Three hours later I’ve got three pages of notes, that’s all. It’s time to take a break. Eat lunch, then on to church.

It’s 2 p.m. The 2 p.m. appointment is with a couple who will be marrying in August. This is our first meeting. Glory be! They have actually THOUGHT some about how God and the church are going to fit into their married lives. The bride-to-be is a Presbyterian. I know her family. She tells me that she belongs to a Presbyterian Church in Chicago that is full of questioners. It’s her kind of church. She feels good about her faith. Ah, but the groom-to-be. His mother is a Jehovah’s Witness and his father is Catholic. He is confused and he admits this. His whole life he’s felt tugged and pulled. When he was little he used to accompany his mother going door to door handing out pamphlets and “Witnessing.” I am thinking, “Gee, here is someone who actually did what Jesus commands us to do: Go and make disciples of all nations! Would love to get his take on the lectionary passage! Maybe I could weave his story into Sunday’s sermon. But of course, that is not the purpose of our meeting.. He is here to talk about his wedding. Do the pastor thing--listen. Fear have missed an opportunity for a frank discussion on evangelism from a former evangelist. Ah well.

Tuesday. Read over the scripture passage from Matthew. Remember the King James Version and find the KJV on my book shelf: “And lo, I will be with you always, even until the end of the world.” Get stuck on the word “lo.” L-O. What does THAT mean, for heaven’s sake? Decide to read the passage in French. Now this is interesting. In French, the scripture reads, “Et voici: je suis moi-meme avec vous chaque jour, jusqu’a la fin du monde.” Translating that word for word, it reads, “And here, I am myself with you each day, to the end of the world.” I like the chaque jour part in the French, each day, instead of the English version, “always..” Surely, each day has more of an impact than “always.” Always is many days clumped together. Each day. There’s more specificity in that. Jesus with me when I rise, and when I go about my chores, when I sit at my table working on a sermon and when I go to sleep. Yes, “each day” is definitely preferable to “always.” Maybe I could put that into a sermon?

The writing begins. Start off with a true story—not a very good one though, and it’s a third hand story. Can’t be sure of the details. Should I just make up the details to fill-in-the blanks? The page begins to fill up. One page of sermon by Tuesday, that’s not bad. Want to get the whole thing done by Thursday, so I can stew on Friday, rewrite parts on Saturday if need be. Work until noon. By now the page is full. Before I go to lunch with a colleague, reread the thing. Not too good. This is turning out to be one sucky sermon!

After lunch, it’s on to the lectionary group meeting. Each of us is preaching on a different scripture passage. We struggle with 2nd Corinthians some, with the Psalms some, with Genesis some. When it’s my turn, ask the group what lo means in the King James Version. No one has a clue. David has a joke though, about lo. It’s a very bad joke. Eyes roll. Toward the end of our time together someone mentions a family friend in need. It is a sad situation. Someone else mentions the earthquake in central China. We speak in general about some of the sadness experienced by our church families. We hold hands and pray together, asking God to relieve the world’s pain.

After lectionary group, it’s off to another meeting. This one is with an IMPACT representative. We talk until after 5 p.m.

Home to dinner. Still fretting over my “sucky sermon.” Go to Barnes and Noble to peruse the aisles, perhaps to get inspired by some of the books there. Settle on a nice short one on pastoral care—find a chair and skim book until after 10 p.m. Decide not to buy book. Drive home. Get ready for bed. Step on the scale. The scale has a solar battery. Instead of my weight, the little glass panel on the scale tells me that the scale’s battery power is low. The message reads Lo, L-O. And so I start my day with Lo, L-O

and I end my day with Lo, L-O, and I still don't know what that darn word means. God, I hear you loud and clear. You're laughing now, right? Lo, I am going to bed.

Wednesday morning. Back at the computer and my books. First thing is to look up the word LO on the internet. L-o: used to call attention or to express wonder or surprise. What Jesus says IS a wonder and a surprise. "Guys, even though you won't see me anymore, I'll still be with you." That surely raised some eyebrows. He may be talking about the holy spirit, but remember something Buechner said in relation to death and the thin veil between the living and the dead. Go to my bookshelves. It's in Buechner's book **Sacred Journey**. The page is dog eared. Cried the first time I read that passage. Return to it more than would like to admit. Buechner says: *Memory is more than a looking back to a time that is no longer; it is a looking out into another kind of time altogether where everything that ever was continues not just to be, but to grow and change with the life that is in it still. The people we loved. The people who loved us. The people who, for good or ill, taught us things. Dead and gone though they may be, as we come to understand them in new ways, it is as though they come to understand us - and through them we come to understand ourselves- in new ways too."*

And then I think of what I read at Barnes and Nobles' last evening. Even wrote it down. Find my notebook. What I wrote down is this: "Therapists increasingly focus on how (their clients) can maintain meaningful connections with the dead rather than primarily how to detach them and return them to an emotional status quo. Whatever the nature of the bond, loved ones never leave us after death, they simply move their residence from the outer world to the inner and accompany us for the rest of our lives." (from the book **Death Benefits**, by Safer).

Isn't that the truth? Think of the times my parents have been with me even in death. How my journalist father sometimes leans over my shoulder as I work at the computer and whispers, "You need a transition word there. Remember what I taught you?" Or my mother. Saw her smiling face clearly in the delivery room when my first daughter was born, even though by then she had been dead six years. It is true. People may die, but relationships never do. They have a life of their own.

Jesus is no longer with the disciples. He sends the spirit. Maybe that is another way of saying that he has been internalized by the disciples. And in their retelling of their stories about Jesus, Jesus was internalized by others, as well. Jesus may have meant more than that, when he said, "I will be with you," but he meant at least that. You can't get rid of me. I am in your memories and your dreams. I will continue to influence you. I will continue to influence the world. Lo, I will be with you each day.

And then, think about Genesis. One of the other lectionary passages for Sunday? Maybe that's what the lectionary writers are getting at.. Once you have internalized Jesus, go back to the beginning of the Bible and read it all again. Now Genesis takes on a whole new meaning.

Yes, I want to put the part about internalizing Jesus, and the part about a whole new meaning for Genesis into my sermon for Sunday, Ah, the sucky sermon.

Pull it up on the computer screen. Time for drastic measures. Hit delete. How about pulling a James Joyce? Doing a stream of consciousness thing? No, a journal! Now THAT has promise. Amen