Preaching for the Plot

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Important to remember that preaching is not simply explicating a text, offering scattered ideas however thoughtful. Rather the ideas of a preacher must be assembled into a coherent whole through the plotting of a narrative. The author provides five important reasons for shaping the homily as a narrative plot.

Bishop Ken Untener’s recent book Better Preaching suggests that one of the most troubling features of contemporary homilies is a lack of organic unity. “He’s interesting, even entertaining, but it doesn’t come from him. It’s all cut-and-paste,” according to one parishioner (18). That comment probably speaks for many in the pews, but such a patchwork ascribed to the unfortunate preacher should not surprise us. In a certain sense, this is the era of the montage, cut-and-paste society in which folks “channel surf” on the television or draw down “menus” from the Internet. Moreover, in contemporary American culture, we tend to make sense of things precisely by piecing things together through associations—as we splice seemingly unrelated sound bites and striking images into coherence. The media teaches us that. After all, Hollywood and television cultures are cut-and-paste factories, in which scene after scene is cut and pasted together into continuity. Then why does the Christian assembly struggle with a loosely structured liturgical homily?

Some years ago, Eugene Lowry published The Homiletic Plot, offering a method for organizing a homily through a literary plot structure. For Lowry, homilies are “events-in-time,” collaboration narratives, which take place during the preaching moment between the preacher, the text and the assembly (12). Now for those who were taught that sermons were supposed to resemble “three points and an application,” it may seem strange to include the idea of a plot in a homily. What does

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that have to do with theology? But, as Lowry, Fred Craddock, David Buttrick and others have shown, narrative preaching—as the name implies—ought to be shaped around the assembly. *Fulfilled in Your Hearing,* the 1982 NCCB document on liturgical preaching, begins first with the Christian community as the starting point for the homily because the assembly is the historical, covenantal expression of the mystery of God’s saving will. A fine theology and even brilliant exegesis do not necessarily mean that the preacher has communicated the Word to the people of God. If the homily just explicates, then the text may still remain “cut-and-paste,” or what Untener says is “not quite a homily.”

From the perspective of communication, the preacher has everything to gain by attending to the inner workings and dynamics of plot. Plots provide the internal and dramatic logic of a narrative; it is the action that moves us toward an ending. Everyone knows that a script that discovers a great plot is able to unite seemingly fragmentary scenes together. Even amateur home video editors try to assemble a plot when recording the family vacation from beginning to end. That is a simple plot: the ordering of a series of events towards an ending. Similarly, the preacher who finds a plot usually finds direction, unity, and intention in the homily. The parishioner who complained that the homily does not come from the preacher was not responding to a lack of thoughtful ideas, but to how poorly these insights are assembled for the listener. Lowry has developed an elaborate system for creating a way to imbue a homily with plot, but I will attempt to be less formal here. I can think of at least five good reasons to use a plot-like structure in a homily: (1) plots are organic, (2) they focus on the listener, (3) drive towards closure, (4) create tension, (5) and mirror God’s master plot, or the way the tradition reads the story of salvation.

**Plots Are Organic**

When Aristotle speaks about plot in his poetics, he means to describe the “arrangement of the material” (12). The “cut-and-paste” method is at fault when the preacher fails to order the material in a dramatic way that allows the listener to organize it appropriately. The result: no unity. People often say that a homily that does not cohere lacks a central point; it simply wandered about, here and there, on various topics. Disconnected, albeit insightful, reflections do not a good homily make. By contrast, a well-constructed homily should have in mind a causative strategy from the very start; the material is deliberately arranged to follow a decisive pattern.

Although some preachers have some very colorful stories and personal experiences to share with their congregation, I want to emphasize that even having a good story is almost certainly not enough to create an organic, organized presence in the homily. E. M. Forster, the brilliant twentieth-century British novelist
and critic, famously described the difference between a story and a homily like this in his Aspects of the Novel: “‘The king dies and then the queen died’ is a story. The king dies and then the queen died of grief’ is a plot” (86). Obviously, “grief” becomes a causative element here, a mechanism which triggers a network of reasons to continue to move through the rest of the narrative and which structures its motivating features.

The media provides us with a useful paradigm for plot that may be conveniently applied to the homily. Even the earliest Hollywood screenwriting manuals advise that the writer give careful scrutiny to the principles of logic and causation. What are the consequences of this character acting this way? What are the goals that he or she must achieve? How about the obstacles which must be worked through? Successful blockbusters such as Forest Gump, for instance, often structure the plot’s causation around an extremely effective character-centered screenplay; the audience is continually asking questions about causation: What will happen next to Forest? Thus, despite the intense degree of “cut-and-paste” technology which has become the signature of a film like Forest Gump, digital imaging which inserts the main character into historical documentary footage is only the most striking example here—the narrative coheres into an organic whole.

How does “causation” work in a homiletic structure? Mary Catherine Hilkert reminds us of the role of the preacher as narrator. “The preacher’s configuring of the plot of the homily is an act of the creative imagination that tends toward a future beyond human conception” (99). If we take our homiletic strategy from Aristotle, the ability to fashion an organized homily may be only a matter of rearranging the text so that we move chronologically—say, for example, recalling incidences in the Hebrew Scriptures with some degree of causation so that a discernible plot emerges. Order evokes the procession of salvation history: creation, exodus, and exile—all move towards a definitive, historically linear expression of God’s mercy and activity in the world. The homilist should not fear history, particularly biblical history. Like a highly effective screenplay, we can structure our homilies so that God becomes the principal character who overcomes obstacles and achieves goals.

Similarly, arranging Jesus’ activity in the Gospels may be a matter of contextualizing the Sunday/Lectionary within the framework of the larger biblical narrative. Jesus comes to Capernaum or the Galilee region and, finally, Jerusalem to do something, to perform a work, or to cause something to happen. Are we just

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seeing a glimpse of the work of God that needs to be reconfigured into the larger plot of salvation history?

Maintaining a theological perspective helps to suggest an organic unity and purpose. Modern hearers of the gospel narratives know that God in Christ will cause our redemption. We await Jesus to go “complete his work on earth and bring us the fullness of Grace.” That is a plot. Jesus came into the world, and then we were freed from sin because (causative) God loves us. Variations of causative narratives are echoed often in the biblical text itself, of course, particularly with temporal references to the formation of the faith community. “What we have heard from the beginning is this,” or “in the fullness of time God sent his only Son.”

Plots Focus on the Listener

In a way, homilies come into existence in the “now,” or the very act of proclamation, echoing Jesus in Luke 4:21: “Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” Fulfilled in Your Hearing begins its exemplary explication of the homily in the Sunday assembly, then, with the assembly itself, the historical community, gathered to receive God’s Word through the Scriptures to be interpreted by the preacher. The homily, then, is a space where meaning is made and where, “the preacher represents this community by voicing its concerns, by naming its demons, and thus enabling it to gain some understanding and control of the evil that afflicts it” (FIYH:7).

Creating a plot in a homily helps the preacher proclaim an “assembly-centered” text. Plots anticipate the audience’s reaction. Communication theorists tell us that there is a transactional relationship between the speaker and the audience. In other words, it is always a two-way street between the preacher and the congregation. To preach for the plot means anticipating your audience like any good writer. “Will the arrangement of my material make sense to them?” “What is the effect of how I have put together the homily on the assembly?” Even before the homily is preached, the preacher can imagine the congregation if the text is shaped around a plot that the congregation itself will assemble. Plots force us out of private ownership of the homily and into a shared hermeneutic, a collective bargaining.

Plots are pastoral because they help shape the function of the homily and give it purpose and plan. People see the workings of God in the plot of their own lives. Again, Fulfilled in Your Hearing reminds us that inductive, narrative preaching is at its best when the homily functions “as a means of enabling people to recognize the implications, in liturgy and life, of the faith that is already theirs” (26). That realization of faith occurs through a life examined—or
rather, a life-plot examined and discovered. To ask “where is God working in my life and those around me” in faith is to encounter the Creator at work, shaping a marvelous, mysterious plot for the human subject.

Further, although the purpose of the homily is clearly not to be therapeutic, the conditions of a narrative recollected through plot mimics the self-revealing story process of psychoanalysis. Certainly, psychoanalysis and storytelling have an intensely pastoral function. It is not a coincidence that the path for making meaning out of life and finding breakthroughs and redemption occurs in a plotted, narrative context—as every writer from Homer to Freud knew well. Remembering, remembering, and remembering: we make sense of our present by recalling the trajectory, the life-plots of our history. And our loved ones will make sense of our lives by the stories and plots that they tell about us when we die. That is what the eucharistic assembly does collectively and individually. As Alyosha says in Dostoevsky’s The Brothers Karamozov, “If one carries many such memories into life, one is sane to the end of one’s days, and if one has only one good memory left in one’s heart, even that may be the means of saving us.”

**Plots towards Closure**

We might say that plots are about internal and external action which cohere around the intention of the author. So here is a good, preliminary question for any preacher: What is the destiny of this particular homily? We know that narratives with plots tend to drive towards closure, or into what Frank Kermode has famously called “the sense of an ending” (3-31). Thus, homilies that use plots must have a trajectory or mightily intend an ending. That finishing moment should be anticipated from the very beginning by the preacher and his congregation, as Thomas Long and others have suggested. What is the focus (what does it say) of this homily? What is its function (what is it supposed to do for the hearer)? As I have already suggested, the arrangement of the material in the homily can shape its narrational destiny. We also need to recognize that the listener is waiting for an ending. That is not to be confused, of course, with waiting for the homily to be over and done with! Some homilies have endings, but lack the anticipation that comes from waiting for an ending.

There is difference between a homily that moves towards an ending because it has been designed that way, on the one hand, and tacking on a conclusion in order to stop the preaching process on the other. Good homilies are narratives assembled by the preacher and the liturgical assembly that together ask in both conscious and unconscious ways through the homily: “what next?” That question, of course, prevents the congregation from asking: “where is he going with this?” The assembly awaits for God’s revelation in Christ to be fulfilled in their hearing. They are awaiting a wild, astonishing finish—a resurrection, an apoca-
lypse. The longing for closure is very biblical and only the most obvious instance is the book of Revelation. We also know that creation waits with eager longing, groaning to be fulfilled. What is fulfilled in our hearing at the homily-event is an eschatological sign of things to come.

Homiletic musing is never helpful, except when the preacher is in the early stages of the text. Sometimes serious, gifted theological reflections during homilies remain at the level of rumination; these are the thoughts or “points” stripped of a destiny and fail to move the listener towards closure. Or, a story might be a useful illustration of a particular point but fail to move the homily towards its ending. From a practical point of view, it is well to note that good homilies often use the first sentence to create a kind of theological suspense. Consider, for example, Robert Waznak’s homily for the Fourteenth Sunday of the Year (A). Preaching on Matt 11:25-30, he begins with: “On the night of the Fourth of July, while we celebrated our nation’s freedom, the champion of homeless people, Mitch Snyder, hanged himself in the nation’s capital” (135). Waznak has proposed a kind of mystery, waiting to be solved. We say, “How could such a tragic event happen, and, paradoxically, on a day of freedom?” And the anticipated ending is already in place: it will be Jesus who solves the horror story by telling his disciples, “Come to me, all you who are weary and find life burdensome, and I will refresh you.” The ending of the homily is well projected and, hence, cleverly plotted.

Plots Create Dramatic Tension

The anticipation of an ending creates tension. Homiletic plots that move us towards endings are like good whodunits. A master of the thriller in Hollywood was certainly Alfred Hitchcock, a director who frequently structured his films around trick mysteries to keep the tension going. We might think, for example, that Psycho is really about a young woman stealing money so that she can run away with her boyfriend, but the real plot turns out to be much more elaborate. Hitchcock teases us along a chain of suspenseful moments until we reach the end of the film. With modern media deploying computer-generated graphics, visual rhetoric allows for an abundance of manipulation. And audiences have come to expect a narrative to hold them in suspense. People love drama and it is naïve to think that we can expect the congregation to sit very long while it listens to a pious discourse that does not provide them with much creative tension.

To allow for tension in the homily to find its resolution in the Word of God is to stretch the gospel out before the Christian assembly like an elegant, intricate tapestry. The disclosure of the Scriptures is not an explanation, but a proclamation of the Good News. To this end, Eugene Lowry says that the assembly ought to reach a kind of dramatic climax when the clue of the “why” of the homily
comes as a surprise, or a “principle of reversal” (48). A frequent problem, especially for inexperienced preachers, is to solve the “mystery” too early in the homily without allowing the plot to develop fully. For instance, let’s take the clearest instance I can think of to illustrate a collapse of homiletic tension: the funeral homily. More often than not, the congregation that assembles at funerals must have the opportunity to work through a period of intense questioning from the start of the homily: Why did it happen? What am I going to do without my loved one? Where was God in all this tragedy? These are moments of grief but they are also moments of drama and tension.

If the preacher does not create an environment in the homily that allows for this action to play itself out and resolve like a good plot, the text will simply be spouting out clichés—simple solutions to the problem of death. Rather, there ought to be a degree of tension, even dissonance, that shapes the armature of the homily as the congregation waits for the Scripture to provide clues and shed light on the mystery of God’s love. The early stage Lowry rightly calls “upsetting the equilibrium” (28). We should not be afraid to say: “We are rightly confused and angry at this death.”

The preacher and the congregation move towards resolution (for Lowry this is the “aha” moment of the disclosure) not because the preacher has a majestic insight into the power of death, because the Scriptures themselves provoke meaning and understanding (59). God’s Word interprets the mystery of Christian death and resurrection. In the context of the funeral liturgy, grief is gradually disclosed and then enlightened by the power of God’s mercy and life in Christ Jesus.

Aside from funeral preaching, it is possible to build such tension from the very start of the homily. Consider Walter Burghardt’s weekday homily for the Twenty-ninth Week, Year 2, Monday. Burghardt begins: “For Christians concerned for biblical justice, today’s Gospel is a striking example of biblical injustice” (Burghardt 104). That is a riddle, a puzzle that provides an ongoing, narrative tension: “What is the nature of God’s justice and how does the Gospel of Truth become its herald?” The gospel then becomes a kind of detective, shedding light on a mystery.

**Plots Recall God’s Work in Christ**

By now this aspect of plot ought to be obvious. If the homilist remembers that there is a kind of “archplot” which we might call salvation history, into which the life of the Christian community is being incorporated, then the following schema becomes rather intuitive. Human stories retold in the context of the Christian mystery are healing events because they express human intention and activity inside God’s own plot—salvation history. God has a purpose, a will. We
know that, even if we need to be reminded of it from time to time. Once again, the importance of preaching “through” the Scriptures (rather than simply “on” the biblical text) cannot be overemphasized. Preaching on any particular passage ought to implicitly acknowledge the whole; the selections given in the Lectionary have their place in the whole Bible. And the Scriptures tell the stories from creation to the apocalypse. The homily places us between these two poles, moving in the love of God, though Christ’s work of redemption in a Spirit-filled, graced universe. In a way, the homily is a continual affirmation that God’s work has been ongoing and been revealed in history—the history we are still living and will continue to abide in until the end of the ages.

Liturgical homilies with strong plots have a “spatial place” in recalling God’s saving work in Christ. The liturgical homily forms a kind of bridge between the Ambo and the Altar, Word and Sacrament. The Word preached brings the people of God their rightful and precious destiny: their place around the altar, singing songs of thanksgiving, their hearts filled with wonder and praise. When the congregation responds at the preface at the eucharistic liturgy that “it is right to give him thanks and praise,” they are doing so because they have been led to the table. Plots in homilies, then, are joyful events because they lead to the celebration of bread broken and wine poured out for us in Christ Jesus.

 Appropriately enough, there is no analogy for God’s activity in history. Yet the uniqueness of God’s masterplot enables the preacher to draw from the texts of Scripture in order to interpret that story. If God has led his people through the desert and taught them through the prophets to hope for salvation while they awaited their redeemer, we know that our Christ has come among us and has risen. The homily that anticipates the Eucharist, then, bridges Word and the eschatological meal—the thanksgiving without ending. Every time we hear God’s Word and recognize the Lord in the breaking of the bread, the Christian community once again becomes the pilgrim people, a journey shaped by a plot known to God alone.

Plots are irresistible, are they not? In her book Bird by Bird, Anne Lamott says that plot is “what people will up and do in spite of everything that tells them they shouldn’t, everything tells them that they should sit quietly on the couch and practice their Lamaze, or call their therapist, or eat until the urge to do that thing passes” (55). Plots are actions that propel people through obstacles and, beyond that, move them towards achieving even impossible goals. Plotted homilies are occasions for our own self-reflection. Plots in homilies reflect the way we live our lives and make meaning.
our lives and make meaning. It is through narrative that we discern the forces of our past or present actions. Plots help us anticipate and appreciate our historical place in the world. At the same time, we know that life will always be a mystery to be lived and will never be fully plotted. God writes in the human heart the unknowable story of our own destiny. In some sense, we make life’s meaning from plots. Preachers with plots give human existence and homilies coherence.

References


