In any cultural context preachers stand on holy ground. We pray for the grace to bring the Word of God alive in a way that transforms both preacher and community for the transformation of the world. Holy ground, indeed! In a sense, all preaching is cross-cultural. Preaching is, at its root, the crafting and sharing of words that communicate the ultimately unspeakable Word between the cultural universes of preacher and parish community.

Every human being represents a unique culture, or interpretation of the world. It is also true that there are certain basic characteristics that are shared by many people in a given racial, ethnic, or cultural group. In this column I will define cross-cultural preaching as preaching in which the preacher’s cultural and/or linguistic background is significantly different from cultural characteristics that many in the congregation share in common.

Cross-cultural preaching is on the rise in the United States, as the influx of immigrants from many parts of the world continues, and the churches strive to accompany them and respond to their pastoral needs. Many times, preachers of Western European heritage are called upon to preach before both established and new immigrant communities. And, increasingly, missionaries are coming from India, Latin America and other countries to serve largely Western European communities in the United States. Here are five important things for preachers to consider as they stand on the holy ground of cross-cultural preaching: listening, inviting congregational participation, using an inductive approach, making cultural connections with Scripture, and creative imaging.

**Listening**

The first step in preparing to preach is to listen to the voice of God in Scripture and in the lives of the people in the community. This is particularly important for cross-cultural preachers, as they must learn from the people the language of faith, the symbols, and the images that sustain them.

This listening is not only for obtaining information about the cultural group(s) in the congregation; it is listening for transformation. Part of the transformation comes from the mutuality of authentic dialogue, where all reveal something of themselves. It is being with, living with, walking with

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people, until the community becomes part of who the preacher is. Preachers will never have the same cultural background as their congregations, but they can be connected, and their lives can be forever changed by the people—if they really listen. And it is precisely out of this place of connection that preaching flows.

A practical suggestion for regularly incorporating intentional listening into a busy minister’s schedule is to have weekly meetings with people from the parish in order to share reflection on the following Sunday’s scriptures. As ministers invite people to reflect on how this Word touches the real circumstances of their lives, they receive insight into the life of God in this community at this time.

Eric Law presents a simple but effective methodology for small group intercultural dialogue in his book The Wolf Shall Dwell with the Lamb (Law, 113). His approach has a facilitator sharing a perspective on a particular question being considered, then inviting someone else in the group by name to speak. That person has the option to speak or to pass, but, either way, then invites someone else. The process continues until every person in the group has been invited to speak.

Inviting Congregational Participation

Depending upon the cultural context in which the preaching takes place, there are ways that the preacher can invite the participation of the congregation in naming the grace in the community—and its demons as well—in the actual preaching event. For example, one Sunday, when preaching on the story of the mustard seed and the beautiful, lush tree it becomes, I asked the congregation to speak in dyads about what nourishes and gives life to the tree of the parish community. A few people volunteered to share the substance of their reflections with the whole group. Then, I asked them to return to dyads and discuss the barriers to growth of the tree of the community. One woman stood up and said that the ways she and other established Latino immigrants rejected the recently arrived immigrants were stunting the growth of the tree. Another woman, a recent immigrant, stood up and agreed with what the first woman had said, in a way that invited future dialogue. They named a significant grace and challenge in the community much better than I could, with my Western European and relatively economically privileged background.

There are many ways to invite participation. Another simpler example is the Pentecost sermon that begins: “They came from Greece, Rome, Perga and many other places—and they understood one another’s speech. Today, in this church, we come from (here invite people to call out where they are from)—and how well do we understand one another?” The essential value of inviting participation is that bringing the Word of God alive becomes the sacred task of the whole community, of all who are called to go forth and witness to that Word with our lives.

Using an Inductive Approach

As Kenneth Davis says, “the artful use of incongruity is essential to homiletic form” (Davis, 249). Central in the lives of many recent immigrants is an incongruity between the way people lived in their countries of origin and the cultural norms in the United States. These norms embrace everything from personal and communal identity to how to attain life’s basic necessities. Many immigrants feel “betwixt and between”—no longer part of the cultural context they left behind, yet not really part of the United States cultural context either. Thus, an approach to preaching that brings out that incongruity and the
resulting ambiguity often inherent in even the most fundamental life decisions, and that speaks a word of hope and affirmation, is likely to be more sustaining than one that begins by laying out a proposition. In addition, this approach demonstrates respect for the congregation as companions on a faith journey, and avoids the potentially paternalistic role of the preacher as “answer person.”

An inductive approach to preaching, centering on some particular aspect of communal experience, is not only effective in confronting the dissonance and social dislocation experienced by many on the margins of society, but it also may sustain the interest of those who have adopted the dominant cultural tendency to become “anesthetized” to propositional God-language (Davis, 249).

The inductive preacher begins by laying out a real life incongruity upon which the Gospel sheds some light. Then the body of the preaching is the journeying of preacher and congregation toward that Gospel insight. Of course, the homily does not necessarily clear up the incongruity or the resulting ambiguity, but it may deepen the question and offer another perspective or lens through which members of the community can view life and themselves. The work of homiletical theorists Eugene Lowry and Fred Craddock, pioneers in inductive preaching, may be helpful in crafting an inductive homily.

Making Cultural Connections with Scripture

There are many resources available that offer insight into the cultural realities of ancient Palestine at the time of Jesus and the earliest Christian communities. Scripture scholars John Pilch, Bruce Malina, Richard Rohrbaugh, Maryann Tolbert, and Fernando Segovia are among those who have published books and commentaries that may be helpful to the preacher in understanding ancient cultural trends.

Consideration of these ancient cultural influences can lead to rich connections with contemporary cultural reality. For example, a cultural reading of Acts 15 reveals the ambiguities and prejudices with which Jews and Gentiles viewed one another, as well as the conflict over whether Gentiles needed to conform to all Jewish traditions and ritual expectations in order to become Christian. Laid out in those terms, a congregation of recent Latino immigrants may see a strong reflection of the pressure that they experience to conform to dominant United States culture, language, and mores in order to fit in and “be American.” The resolution of the question in Acts gives the contemporary immigrant congregation a word of grace and challenge in their struggle to maintain their own heritage while figuring out how they fit into their new reality.

Creative Imaging

A key question in homiletic preaching is “What does this Word look like in this place and time?” Creating and communicating evocative images is crucial to any effective preaching. Preachers in cross-cultural situations need to be especially attentive to making images strong and culturally relevant, in part because an image that is evocative for the preacher may not speak to many people from a different cultural context.

I recall a homily I heard years ago in a largely Mexican immigrant community. The preacher was of Western European heritage, and it was Advent. The homily focused on the exchange of material gifts, which was important to the preacher but foreign to the experience of many in the congregation. Advent and Christmas observance in rural Mexico tends to center on novenas, posadas (i.e., community celebra-
tions on the eight days before Christmas that re-enact Mary and Joseph’s search for shelter in Bethlehem), and other community events flowing from popular religious experience. As a result, this homily, while it may not have fallen on deaf ears, may also not have resonated very deeply with this congregation.

Imagining may be particularly challenging if the cross-cultural preacher is not preaching in his or her native language and has a limited vocabulary. Here we come back to the importance of listening. Spending time with parishioners at key moments in their lives tends to reveal their intimate vocabulary of faith. And there may well be more than one vocabulary represented in a single faith community. Legends, sayings, personal stories of great pain and of hope, memories from countries of origin, generational experiences of inculturation—all of these and more can inspire the preacher with images to engage diverse members of the parish over time.

Preaching is essentially about standing together on holy ground and listening to one another’s experience of faith. Preaching, particularly in cross-cultural contexts, is more than the actual preaching event. The relationships and shared experiences of preacher and congregation till the soil of the holy ground. Dialogue plants the seeds of grace that will be nourished by the preaching. If preacher and community approach their encounters with vulnerability and respect, dialogue and preaching can change the preacher and the community forever.

References


