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Preaching to a House Divided

INTRODUCTION

A short time ago a good friend, one of the most dedicated lay-women I know, said during a group discussion, "To be quite honest, I'm not sure where I will be ten years from now, as far as the church goes. I really don't know if I'll still be part of it." It was one of those moments when I felt a great sadness. This person's work for the Church touches many lives, both in the parish setting and beyond. Yet she is "battle weary," tired of being caught in the crossfire of individuals and groups.

Shortly after this incident, I was with another friend who had just finished two terms as pastor in a city parish. I asked him whether the divisions in the community present six years ago had healed to any degree. Like many inner city parishes, this one was composed of a group of parishioners whose families had been there for generations, and a growing, energetic group of Spanish-speaking parishioners. He replied, "To be quite honest, I really don't think so. Apart from Christmas and the Triduum, it's very hard to get them to come together."

All who work in ministry today realize that the average parish is often made up of individuals with opposing views, conflicting ideologies, and marked differences in operational theologies that, consciously and unconsciously, influence speech and action. Forming any kind of true community can often seem beyond human possibility. The late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin's introduction of the Catholic Common Ground Project and the document *Called To Be Catholic: Church in a Time of Peril*, with its attempt to begin a process aimed at creating more "Catholic common ground" within the Church, "centered on faith in Jesus, marked by accountability to the living Catholic tradition, and ruled by a renewed spirit of civility, dialogue, generosity and broad

and serious consultation" (National Pastoral Life Center 1996, 1), has hardly met with universal approval. Our century seems to be ending on a note of discord on many levels.

This article will consider preaching's role in addressing conflict. After a brief overview of some of the conflict situations that affect those gathering for Sunday worship, I will note the rationale for the preacher's engaging these issues, then go on to ground this in the centrality of the word of God, taking into account the word's role in liturgy, in the process of preaching preparation, and in evoking the gifts of the preacher in the preaching event. Finally, I will consider the word that addresses conflict, proposing some ways a biblical text might intersect with a conflict situation and offer an example of a homily that attempts to do this.

A CONFLICTED COMMUNITY IN A CONFLICTED WORLD

When the Roman Catholic Christian community gathers for worship on Sunday, people bring more than their bodies into church, they bring their divisions and conflicts. Often the preacher is called to address a community characterized by many fault lines corresponding to divisions between the community and the world around it, between various segments of the community, and between and within individuals themselves. We are members of a Church that calls us to care for the least, and citizens of a republic that has accepted a welfare reform bill that will weigh heavily on the poorest among us, especially poor children. We are members of a Church that has strongly condemned abortion as an evil, and of a society whose president has vetoed a partial birth abortion ban that moves us into the sphere of infanticide. We are members of a Church that calls us to be attentive to the needs of the spirit, and of a culture whose consumerism frequently leads us to confuse desire with need, and whose entertainment industry continues to desensitize us by offering increasingly mindless, violent fare (the movies of the summer of '96 being the latest example). We are members of an ecclesial community that is called to live united in one faith and one spirit, yet whose official teaching on such matters as birth control, divorce and remarriage, abortion, and homosexuality finds varying degrees of acceptance among a significant number. We are part of a community whose restrictions on the role of women in official leadership positions is a cause of much pain and dissatisfaction for an ever growing number, and whose treatment of dissenting theologians has caused concern among many of those who value academic freedom and the reality of a pluralistic society open to multiple and divergent viewpoints.

Then there are the personal areas of conflict that people bring with them every Sunday, ranging from disagreements among family members, troubled marriages, difficulties at work, dissatisfaction with one's place in the world, inner battles with discouragement, despair, self-destruction, alcoholism, drug addiction, and other destructive forms of behavior. Even our children carry with them fears unique to our age, moving beyond fear of the dark and of monsters under the bed to fear of gangs, of drive-by shootings, and violence at school. In the face of conflicted individuals in a conflicted community of faith in a conflicted world, we continue to gather on Sunday to offer worship to God. We come together to realize a communion of mind, heart, and spirit. Is such a thing possible in our day? Or is this another dream that harkens back to a more innocent age. Is the Sunday gathering anything more than huddling against the darkness and the deadly winds that continue to blow over us as we come to the end of the second millennium? The life-giving potential of the Sunday celebration of the Eucharist has much to do with the nourishment provided by the two tables: the table of the word and the table of Christ's body. It is the goal of this article to focus on the table of the word, particularly the task of the preacher.

"THE PULPIT IS FOR THE GOSPEL"

On occasion people will say that they do not come to church to hear about the social, economic, or political issues of the day but to hear the gospel preached. But it is not a question of either/or. Almost twenty-five years ago George Higgins, then secretary for research of the U.S. Catholic Conference, addressed this viewpoint when he wrote that the pulpit is "not the proper forum in which to *pontificate* on complicated and highly controversial political and socio-economic issues" (Higgins 1972, 213, italics mine), nor is it a place for partisan politics that alienate and make worshipers of a different view feel unwanted, thereby splitting the community. However, Higgins went on to say that the preacher "has a serious duty to instruct the faithful on the moral implications of social and political issues" (213) and to provide a forum in which discussion can take place, allowing people to come to a deeper understanding of the views held on all sides.

During the same period, Charles E. Curran wrote about the "crisis in preaching the Word of God," calling on preachers to proclaim the "whole Word of God" (Curran 1972, 113ff.), not just its moral aspects, which Curran saw as secondary, but to pay primary attention to "the Word of God as gift. The gospel itself is literally and really the good news—the gift of God to us and our freedom and salvation in the new life in Christ Jesus" (115). After laying out a theology of the word that

saw it as gift, promise, and challenge, Curran carefully noted the limitations of looking to the Scriptures for concrete advice on the major issues of our day, but strongly affirmed that the word of God, which includes but does not exhaust the Scriptures, has something to say to us in all the truly human decisions of our lives. Curran warned about dividing the sphere of the human from the Christian, and separating the legal, political, and economic from the human and Christian. Preachers, however, must be careful of proposing a particular response as the *only* Christian response to a question.

In our own day, Walter Burghardt, S.J., who has been promoting the preaching of social justice in his workshops on “Preaching the Just Word,” has also addressed in a very astute and pastorally sensitive manner this question of raising controversial issues, noting both the limits and the resources needed to address such areas of conflict. I would summarize his insights in the following way. First, the pulpit is not the place to *resolve* complex issues in areas such as the economy, welfare, health-care insurance, capital punishment, or military intervention. But it is the place to *raise* these issues in order to bring them to the consciousness of the community, insofar as such issues relate to their identity as God’s people sent into the world to bring about God’s justice. Second, preaching that makes an effort to raise consciousness must be characterized by competency, compassion, and conviction. Competency involves knowing the issues, not as the ultimate authority but as one who has done some “homework” and as one who has drawn on the expertise of others. Compassion is at the heart of all preaching whose end is to touch the heart. The preacher’s care, concern, and abiding love for the people must be evident in word and deed. Finally, the preacher’s conviction is rooted in the preacher’s own conversion. People want to see in our lives the convictions we speak.

Aristotle wrote in his *Rhetoric* that the effective orator makes use of three appeals when speaking: the appeal to the head (logos) made by the cogency and logic of the argument, the appeal to the heart (pathos) brought about by stirring up the appropriate feelings of the listeners, and the appeal effected by the speaker’s own character (ethos) as it is embodied in the words of the speech. Burghardt’s requirements of competence, compassion, and conviction can be heard as homiletic updates of Aristotle’s rhetorical virtues, grounded in a speech-event placed under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Higgins, Curran, and Burghardt provide a pastoral perspective on the appropriateness of preaching’s role in addressing conflict and the importance of the preacher’s preparation. Other voices that contribute to the conversation from various perspectives of the Protestant tradition include

William Willimon, David H. C. Read, Ronald Sider, Michael King, and the authors of *Preaching as a Social Act* (VanSeters 1988). A common link is found in the recognition of the centrality of the word of God in this endeavor

THE CENTRALITY OF THE WORD

The Word in Liturgy

When the people who have been baptized into Christ gather on Sundays, they first listen to the word of God, that two-edged sword that brings both death and life. The readings in the lectionary are meant to take us into the story of salvation whose focal point is the risen, crucified Jesus through whom we have entered into the new covenant in his blood. Kevin Irwin writes that the liturgical proclamation of the Scriptures is “intrinsically soteriological and ecclesiological,” that is, it invites contemporary communities into the same saving relationship that formed Israel into the holy people of God and the followers of Christ into an *ecclesia* (Irwin 1994, 87). This action is “a rehearsal of salvation.” In hearing and responding to the word of God week in and week out, we undergo an ongoing process of appropriating the salvation won by Christ and entered into through baptism. The liturgy “is the ritualization of the story of the relationship of the faithful to their risen Lord, who is at work shaping and molding them into the pattern of his death and resurrection” (Bonneau 1996, 52). However, this action, when fully engaged, can place us ever more deeply in conflict with the values of our society and culture, which also have been appropriated over time into our lives. Thus, liturgy can give rise to and deepen conflict at the same time it serves to unite us in Christ.

The Liturgy of the Word is inherently dialogical, renewing the ongoing conversation between God and God’s pilgrim people. It involves a process of listening and responding that calls for and effects an ongoing conversion, provided the hearers are willingly engaged. The word addresses us, allowing foundational events to occur anew, then, through an “obedient listening” (Irwin 1994, 116–8), the assembly as a community of disciples are re-created and shaped into the image of God, which as Christ’s body is ready to give praise and thanksgiving in the act of Eucharist, and empowered by the Spirit to continue the ongoing saving work of Christ in the world. While at the beginning of any liturgy the condition of the community is more likely to be characterized by a sense of separateness and isolation, even on occasion by discord, by the conclusion of the Liturgy of the Word there should be a readiness and awakened desire to celebrate the mystery of

Christ ever made present in this very assembly. Such is the work of the proclamation of the Scriptures and the preaching that flows from it.

Fulfilled In Your Hearing, the 1982 USCC-NCCB document on the Sunday homily, calls on preachers to take seriously the diversity that cuts across racial, ethnic, economic, and social lines, yet reminds us that "this diversity should not blind us to another, even greater reality: the unity of the congregation," rooted in baptism and the common faith that binds all together (Committee on Priestly Life and Ministry 1982, 5). But in our own time there is more to it than diversity: there are fundamental differences and disagreements among those who come together. And in order for these to be transformed in the act of worship, those responsible for liturgical ministry must take certain steps. For unity to be realized beyond a superficial level, liturgical ministers must help the assembly be attentive listeners to the texts presented in the Liturgy of the Word. To effect this depends a great deal on an effective performance both of the introductory rites that move a group from a gathering of discrete individuals, each subject to the many inner voices competing for attention, to a group enabled to give a focused listening to the voices of the selected biblical texts and to the homily that follows.

In her most recent work, *The Cloister Walk*, Kathleen Norris witnesses to Scripture's power to disturb and provoke us. During a prolonged stay at a Benedictine monastery her attendance at morning prayer brought her into the world of the prophet Jeremiah. Over a period of two months his words were read each morning, causing one monk to say that this was "one hell of a way to get your blood going in the morning; it puts caffeine to shame." Norris notes how phrases of the prophet such as "break up your fallow ground" or "know what you have done" served to dig deep into her soul throughout the day. In the course of this prolonged exposure, another monk said he was glad Jeremiah was being read in the morning and not at evening when visitors were more likely to be present, because "the monks can take it but most people have no idea what's in the Bible and they come unglued" (Norris 1996, 34). The word's power to unglue us is one of its gifts. The Liturgy of the Word often provides an opportunity to be disturbed. But for this to happen, attention must be paid. This takes us to the work of preparation prior to liturgy.

The Word in Preaching Preparation

One of the first steps in preparing to publicly read or preach is to allow the word of God to set up conflict in our own hearts as part of the process of preparation. This begins by attentively listening to it

prior to the liturgical celebration. During preaching workshops, I ask participants to take one of the texts of the coming Sunday and to read it aloud in the following way. I ask them to put a finger in each ear, not only to block out distracting sounds, but so one's voice can be heard and experienced as coming from within one's body. There is an intimacy, an interiority to the embodied voice that moves words softly spoken from the center of one's very being to the center of one's consciousness. Read the biblical text, and hear it addressed to you. Attend to both the thought and the feeling of the text. Repeat any phrase that eludes or attracts you. If you want to, pause after a phrase. Savor it, taste it. I allow about five minutes for this. Sometimes I ask participants to read the passage again. Then, people are invited to share what particular word or phrase spoke to them most forcefully. Finally, participants are invited to share their reaction to this word or phrase; perhaps it evoked an experience, an image, a memory. The result for many is a new experience of God's word. The text is no longer an *it*, perceived as print on the page, an object to be decoded; rather, the text has been restored to life by bringing it to sound, and in the process of being embodied, enfolded, it has become a *Thou*. One can enter into an ongoing relationship with a *Thou* and this relationship can change one's life.

Novelist Eudora Welty has recorded her earliest experience of words in her autobiography, *One Writer's Beginnings*. She writes:

Every time I was first read to, then started reading to myself, there has never been a line read that I didn't *hear*. As my eye followed the sentence, a voice was saying it silently to me. It isn't my mother's voice, or the voice of any person I can identify, certainly not my own. It is to me the voice of the story, of the poem itself (Welty 1984, 11).

A lectionary text makes a variety of voices available to the community, each arising out of the conflict of a particular time and place, inviting us to enter the world of the text and bring it into dialogue with our own experience and our own conflicts.

A difficulty many preachers have is being overly familiar with a text. And so we merely glance at it and look elsewhere for material to make our preaching fresh. It is true we might know the story line of the gospel narratives, or the flow of words from a Pauline excerpt, but texts retain a power to speak in new ways. Meaning arises out of a meeting of this text and this listener in this situation. Like old friends, the biblical texts can surprise us by what they suddenly say on a par-

ticular occasion. Listening to the Scriptures as if hearing them for the first time, or listening through the ears of some of the different people who sit out in our congregation, can subvert our familiarity and present us with a new way of hearing familiar words.

The Word in the Preaching Event

Only after hearing the word does the work of preaching begin. Preaching's task is to address the word of God to the lives of a particular group of listeners, lives that know doubts and demons, questions and conflicts. Preaching continues the proclamation of the word, with the potential to focus the biblical texts on the lives of listeners in a number of ways. Sometimes the preacher may need to take on the role of the teacher, or the herald, at other times the witness, or the interpreter of the life of the community, to name a few of the preaching tasks assigned by Church documents (Wallace 1995, 10–15; for a different delineation of the preacher's roles in addressing conflict, see Willimon 1987, 70–86). Deciding which role is primary on any given Sunday is the responsibility of the presider, ideally assisted by those who help prepare the liturgy, drawing on the pastoral insight of the group into the needs of the community. If catechesis is needed to shed light on a conflict, the voice of the teacher is called for; if a clear proclamation of some aspect of the good news is needed to support, encourage, and strengthen the assembly, specifically as a community of faith, the voice of the herald may be most helpful; if a conflict is particularly difficult and allows for various ways of responding, preachers may offer themselves or provide another to speak to an issue as a witness, testifying to what the texts have enabled them to know of the gospel's power and how God's word may be calling this community to respond at this time. But for our own day, it is the voice of the interpreter that may be most helpful for approaching conflict.

FIYH calls on the preacher at the Sunday Eucharist to offer "a scriptural interpretation of human existence" to the gathered assembly (27). The interpreter is exhorted first of all to be a listener, both to the biblical and liturgical texts and to the community. It is the task of the interpreter-preacher to bring together text and communal experience, so that in the interaction of these two God's word might be heard and a communal response evoked. The meaning of the text arises out of the intersection of the text and the situation of a particular community. Of course, the goal of the interpretive homily is to enable the community to enter more fully into the reality of the paschal mystery of Christ, both by liturgical action and through action in the world. The

interpreter-preacher is envisioned as offering certain gifts beneficial to a community in conflict. Four gifts can be noted.

The Gift of Language. *FIYH* calls us to remember the importance of words. Conflict often arises because of the difficulty of finding the right words to name what is happening—between individuals, between groups, between different institutions. Eva Hoffman has eloquently written of “linguistic dispossession,” seeing this condition of not having words to express one’s state of being as a motive for violence because

it is close to the dispossession of one’s self. Blind rage, helpless rage, is rage that has no words—rage that overwhelms one with darkness. And if one is perpetually without words, if one exists in the entropy of inarticulateness, that condition itself is bound to be an enraging frustration (Hoffman 1993, 124).

Not to have the words to adequately express the conflicts that erupt leaves a community in the dark; being linguistically dispossessed will eventually leave a community in despair.

FIYH states that one of the principal tasks of the preacher “is to provide the congregation with words to express their faith, and with words to express the human realities to which this faith responds” (6). The preacher turns to the Scriptures, to the Judaeo-Christian tradition, and to the personal appropriation of these resources by study and prayer, to provide words that can help to name the conflict and provide a way of seeing, often an alternative to the way the world offers. The preacher offers words that unite the community in a common vision.

The Gift of Insight. The language offered in the homily is to be rooted in the biblical tradition. “The homily is not so much *on* the Scriptures as *from* and *through* them” (20). By listening to both the text and the experience of the community, the preacher prays to be guided by the Holy Spirit to bring the two together in a way that moves the community forward, sometimes in resolution, but sometimes to a position in which a struggle is more bearable, where one can humanly deal with unsatisfying ambiguity. Scripture does not always serve up a simple answer, but it provides encounters with the God who can speak to the heart of the community and offers stories of other struggling situations that encourage today’s pilgrim people to continue on the journey. Entering into the world of the text and looking out on the present situation can provide a fresh perspective, not possible until one has passed over and entered into the experience of seeing *from* and

through the imagery of the text. Insight comes from investigating the metaphorical possibilities of the imaginal text.

The Gift of Motivation. The interpreter's ability to relate the world of the text to the world of the people is always done with a mind toward communal response, immediately moving the community to a renewed sense of God's activity in their lives, their unity in Christ, their Spirit-blessed existence in the world, and the appropriate response of gratitude to be given expression at the table of the Eucharist. The language of the Scriptures and tradition is to provide a faith vision that motivates action in the world. The community is sent forth at the end of Eucharist to witness and to work to bring about the kingdom of God. They are empowered to address areas of conflict for the sake of the common good.

The Gift of Artistry. *FIYH* observes that since the homily's immediate function is to enable people to lift up their hearts in praise and thanksgiving, it will do this if the language of the homily is "specific, graphic, and imaginative" (25). Therefore the interpreter-homilist will turn to the language of the artist, particularly the poet and the storyteller, for evoking a response from the heart as well as the mind. The language of metaphor and imagery is the language of the heart, addressing at the same time the senses, the mind, the will, and the imagination. It is this language that also has the greatest potential to energize God's people to give their lives over to the work of stewardship of our world and involvement in our society.

These four gifts, then, call on the homilist to make use of the skills of three great artists of language—the poet, the storyteller, and the orator. Each of these is important in bringing the word to bear on a community that is divided, because each offers language in a way that has the ability to be transformative. Since Chrysostom and Augustine, the preacher has been called on to learn the lessons of rhetoric and employ its power to persuade, to engage by "sacred eloquence," and to continue to make use of the seminal insights of Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, and other practitioners of this ancient art, who took seriously the capacity of language to move a community toward the common good. In more recent years, the figures of the storyteller and the poet have been added as models for the preacher. All are helpful. We will now consider some of the possibilities for interplay between the biblical text and conflict.

THE WORD THAT ADDRESSES CONFLICT

Walter Brueggemann writes that "there are no 'textless' worlds. . . . People come to the preaching moment with texts already in hand that

describe the world" (1995, 316). The dominant text of the people of the United States has been a variation on what he calls the "Enlightenment script" with its emphasis on the autonomy of the individual, the primacy of reason, a vision of reality that has the self and human initiative at its core, and an agenda that concentrates on personal achievement, accumulation, and advantage. It is this script that many people live out of during the week and come clutching when they gather for worship on Sunday. The biblical text offers an alternative script with emphasis on hearing God's call to holiness and entering into the new covenant founded in the saving life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In this script, individuals are invited to be disciples and the holiness of the community is central, with love of neighbor as the primary agenda.

Preachers have to realize where different scripts are in conflict. Only then can they help integrate more fully the script of the gospel into the community's life. This necessitates engaging the imagination. Brueggemann observes that "the preacher . . . does not describe a gospel-governed world but helps the congregation imagine it" (1995, 321). The world envisioned by the gospel, the reign of God, is not readily at hand, not real, until the text is appropriated by people. The preacher proposes that the world and our lives be seen *as* under the aegis of the gospel. This *as* is an invitation that can liberate us from the old script and allows us to see life through a different lens. Garrett Green calls *as* "the cupola of the imagination" (see Brueggemann, 321). The community is called to perceive metaphorically, seeing life as some aspect of God's rule. Such a major shift is best done in small pieces. Each sermon can be envisioned as "providing yet another detail to the very odd and very different description of reality being enacted over time in the congregation" (323).

Preaching addresses first of all the imagination, building patiently and faithfully an alternative vision of this world in the light of Christ, and then calling those who can see it to use their minds, wills, and bodies to bring it about. The task of preaching "is an act of imagination, an offer of an image through which perception, experience, and finally faith can be reorganized by alternative ways" (323). An image is capable of doing different things, depending on its function in the text, its capacity of relating to the life situation of this community, and the particular context of the liturgy in which the community is presently participating. On being asked whether art can effect any dramatic change, South African playwright Athol Fugard responded, "Of course, yes. A play can get into the dreams of a human being, can get into their soul and stir things." I believe that biblical imagery can also

function in the consciousness of the community of believers, getting into their hearts and heads, into their dreams and hopes, stirring up things and resulting in an increasing realization in the world of the community's self-identity as being in Christ and commitment to his mission.

There are different ways that we can consider bringing a text and community together, depending on the end to be achieved.

The Text that Names

During the summer of 1996, Americans witnessed some horrendous events. There was the explosion of TWA 800 with the deaths of 230 people. And there was the bomb explosion in Centennial Park during the Olympics in Atlanta. In the face of these events, texts like the parable of the weeds and the wheat (Matt 13:24-30) provide a biblical way to name our experience. In a world often marked by goodness, there are also such instances of evil. Ours is a world in which the weeds and the wheat continue to grow alongside each other.

Other texts from last summer's readings also help name our condition. The story of Peter's attempt to walk on water (Matt 14:22-33) can serve to name the experience of faith giving way to fear, uncertainty, or a deep and sudden loss of confidence in the call of Christ to attempt what seems impossible. Matt 14:13-21 reminded us that following Christ does not take away hunger or the responsibility to respond to it, even if few resources are available. Here, then, the text serves first of all as a metaphorical way of naming what we are presently experiencing, offering a starting point for further reflection.

The Text that Subverts

A biblical text also allows the preacher to subvert a common cultural and human attitude. For instance, we are a people who take satisfaction in action. If there is something that does not belong, then pull it up, tear it out. One can see this in the present move to crack down on illegal immigrants and perhaps also in the return to capital punishment. There is great satisfaction in being a "weed-puller." It is quick and effective. Otherwise one is tempted either to a despairing inactivity or a cynical indifference to the situation. The parable of the weeds and the wheat mentioned above calls our attention first to the servants who thought they knew the will of their master: "Let us pull up the weeds." But they encounter a master who was more pro-wheat than anti-weeds, a master who was less interested in immediate action than in long-term growth. Athol Fugard recently commented that our society is one

that has totally lost faith in the concept of growth . . . a society in which it has to be instant. It has to be there tomorrow. Whether it's sex or religion. And not tomorrow, today! Now! I want to put my coin in the slot and get it. I want to buy my ticket and be a millionaire. It is a society where the concept of growth, of just waiting, is no longer (Fugard and Baitz, 1994, 4).

Matthew's parable subverts this attitude, first naming the situation of good and evil and then calling us to wait on growth, to trust that in the end God will make the necessary corrections. It is subversive of a dominant mode of action held up for admiration: act now, act decisively, act forcefully. On the other hand, the parables about the man who stumbled over a treasure in a field and a merchant who suddenly came upon a pearl of great price and their identical response of selling all to possess it subverts our tendency to play it safe (Matt 14:44-46). Here we have the call to act immediately when we either find or stumble upon the treasure. Last summer's movie *Tin Cup* offered a hero who rejected what he called "laying up," playing it safe rather than risking all to achieve his dream.

The Text that Transforms

The gospels contain many stories that witness to the transforming power that comes through Jesus. Again remember Peter's invitation to walk on water. This story not only names the experience of sinking but invites us to entertain the possibility of walking on water, of striding over the waves that threaten to swamp us as individuals, as a faith community, as a society. What is crucial in the story is where Peter is looking at the moment. Peter's request came after seeing Jesus walking toward him; only when he switched his focus to the wind, noticing how strong it was, did he begin to sink. Fear pulled him down into the sea.

The incident of feeding the five thousand, a story found in all four gospels, also offers a transformative image for reflection and invites us to transcend our self-imposed limits. "There's no need for them to disperse," Jesus says. "Feed them yourselves." And with Jesus with them they gave out what was available, and "all present ate their fill" (Matt 14:20). The gospel parables and stories, the imagery from the words of the prophets, and the letters of the first disciples of Jesus, can name our situation, subvert the attitudes and values absorbed from our culture, and transform our vision of ourselves as individuals and as a community from one that emphasizes our fears, failures, and shortcomings to one that reminds us of the God "whose power now at work in us can do immeasurably more than we ask or imagine" (Eph 3:20).

AN EXAMPLE

I would like to conclude with an example of a homily preached last summer to a group attending a preaching workshop. The homily attempts to name one way that the God we desire can be in conflict with the God that is revealed. It invites a community to consider how our response to conflict in our everyday lives can be linked to how we relate to and what we expect from God.

Hound of Heaven or Domesticated Deity?
(11th Week of Ordinary Time/Year II)
1 Kings 21:17-29; Matt 5:43-48

I find myself disappointed by this story of Ahab and Elijah.
We are set up for such a wonderful tale of crime and punishment.
Yesterday the story began with the machinations of that couple you
love to hate—King Ahab and his consort Jezebel.
The Lord and Lady Macbeth of the Old Testament.
Ahab wants a little vegetable garden, the only problem being the land
already belongs to Naboth the Jezreelite, who has a vineyard
there.
Ahab first offers a better vineyard, then a generous sum of money.
But Naboth, out of reverence for the law which binds him to his an-
cestral land, says, “No! God forbid that I should give up the land
of my ancestors.”
And Ahab goes into a pout.
He goes to his room, lies down on his bed, and won’t eat.
In comes Jezebel—a take-charge woman if there ever was one—and
says, “Leave it to me.”
And she enlists the villagers as accomplices to set up poor Naboth,
falsely accusing him of cursing both God and king.
And so, Naboth is stoned and the dogs lick up his blood.
A telling image.
Naboth, a just man, is gone before you know it, but he is never far from
our minds.
Yesterday his name was mentioned in just about every line of the story,
And today, even God sends the prophet to meet Ahab “in the vineyard
of Naboth.”
It is his blood that cries out for justice.
When Ahab sees Elijah enter the vineyard, there is no diplomacy or
pretense of friendship.
“Have you found me out, my enemy?” Ahab asks.
Now we know that Elijah was not a man to be tampered with.

He declared the drought that dried up Israel to a husk.
And he announced when it would end.
He promised a widow that neither flour nor oil would run out if she
baked him a cake.
He successfully went up against the 450 prophets of Baal and then,
after he bested them, had their throats slit.
He called down fire from heaven, not once but twice, when a captain
and his company of soldiers tried to take him by force to the king,
each time burning them to cinders.
A third captain wisely took a more supplicating approach and lived to
tell about it.
Elijah wasn't as crabby as Elisha, who set bears on some children when
they called him "Baldy," but you would not want him against
you.

So when Elijah enters the scene and proclaims that God is very angry,
we wait once again for lightning to strike.
Elijah proclaims God as the God of the devouring dogs.
"The dogs will devour the blood of Ahab and Jezebel."
Furthermore, "when one of Ahab's line dies in the city, the dogs will
devour him."
(When there's a death in the country, it's up to the birds.)
There is no mistaking God's wrath at the king and queen.
Power has been abused, not used for the good of others.
Retribution must be made, vengeance is appropriate.
But, then, Ahab once again goes into a pout, throws in some fasting
and rips up a few of his party clothes.
And rather than the God of the devouring dogs, we get a God who
rolls over.
"Have you noticed that Ahab has humbled himself before me?" God
asks Elijah. "I won't bring evil in his time. Maybe later."
Very disappointing.
I wonder what Elijah thought of it all.

Well, I would have preferred to see the God of the devouring dogs go
into action.
As a matter of fact, I would like to see the God of the devouring dogs
in our own day.
When thirty churches of the African-American community were being
burnt down this spring, I wanted to see the God of the devour-
ing dogs come on the scene.

When I read of more than five thousand cases of child abuse being reported in New York City alone last month, I wanted to see the God of the devouring dogs prowl the land.

When a young medical student just in from Germany on Holy Saturday evening, and staying with our community in D.C., was mugged on Easter Sunday morning walking up 7th street, I wanted to unleash the God of the devouring dogs. Instead of the hound of heaven we get a domesticated deity.

Unfortunately for my desire, you can see the link between Elijah's God and the God Jesus revealed.

"Love your enemies, pray for your persecutors," Jesus tells us.

"The sun shines on the just and unjust, the rain falls on the good and evil.

As for you, be perfect like your heavenly Father."

That turns out to be the language of the rule of God.

It features words like "shalom" spoken to the very ones who ran off and abandoned Jesus.

Sayings about carrying your cross, and images of seeds having to fall into the ground and die.

Questions like, "Do you love me?"

Commands like, "Feed my lambs, feed my sheep."

The crucified, risen Christ introduces us to a new vocabulary of resurrection life.

Still, it's hard to swallow.

Perhaps that's why we receive the Eucharist in such small portions—a sip from the cup, a fragment of bread.

It's not a meal to devour, but to eat with great care and deliberation.

It binds us not to a God of devouring dogs but to a God imaged as flesh impaled on wood.

A God of resurrection life who wishes to shine on all, rain down mercy and justice on all.

A God who calls on us to do the same.

CONCLUSION

In writing about *Theology Today's* custom of publishing poetry along with the expected theological essays and book reviews, editor Patrick Miller stated, "The images of poetry speak to startle and puzzle us, to provoke us and cause us to think. They set the imagination free, opening the reader to theological possibilities that might be less acceptable or even unthinkable in the essay mode" (1995, 311). I propose that the

biblical images contained in our liturgical texts, so many of which are unknown to our people, particularly those of the Hebrew Scriptures, can “startle, puzzle, provoke and cause us to think.” This is not a time to shrink our religious imaginations either by retreating to a canonized posture of only male imagery for God or by excising any hint of male imagery and replacing it with neutral images drained of emotional resonance and persuasive power. This is not a time to neglect imagery that captures the reality of the struggle for the soul, calling it from slumber and passive inaction to its full humanity. It is a time to take seriously the conflicts that we carry within our physical and political bodies, and to offer them the curative powers of words, old and new, brought forth from our storerooms, to catch and captivate the conscience of a wandering people on the way to renewal and restoration.

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