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## Why Do We Worship the Way that We Do? -- IV. The “Good Word” and the Good Word

(Psalm 119:103-105 NRSV) "How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth! 104 Through your precepts I get understanding; therefore I hate every false way. 105 Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path...."

(2 Tim 4:1-4) "In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: 2 preach the word; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching. 3 For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, 4 and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths."

There is a hotel on the Big Island of Hawai`i called the Hilton Waikoloa Village. But the word “hotel” doesn’t do it justice. For it is an incredible resort. Someone once called it “Disneyland for adults.” You can ride a boat or a train to get to your room. There are dozens and dozens of activities that you can sign up for while you are there from lei making to hula to snorkeling and on and on. But one of the most fascinating activities, to my mind, anyway, is the “underground tour.” On this tour, you are led behind the scenes of this sprawling hotel complex. Actually, and more accurately, you are led *beneath* the scenes because it turns out that virtually all of nitty gritty work that makes the resort possible – the delivery of towels and supplies, getting the laundry done for hundreds of rooms, get food back and forth for room service, and on and on – is done via a system of underground tunnels and trams. Until you’ve taken that tour, you have no idea of all that goes on beneath your feet in order to create that “Disneyland for adults” experience.

Today, in the conclusion to our series on why we worship the way that we do, you are going to get a behind the scenes look at preaching. Some of you from time to time have asked me questions like: How do you pick what you are going to preach on?

How do you get from an idea to a sermon? How do you choose the scriptures? I can't answer every question this morning, but I want to talk about preaching and how this preacher, anyway, comes to the pulpit Sunday by Sunday. Now, while it is rightly said that a good craftsman doesn't leave the marks of his or her tools, nonetheless today I want to give you a peek at those tools and how they get used. For, after all, the sermon in this or most any Disciples congregation is a central part of the service – at least in terms of the relative amount of time. It is often what people tend to talk about when they leave church. I once heard somebody asked what his family had for Sunday dinner and he responded “*Roast beef and roast preacher.*” Sometimes a preacher can preach a sermon that will remain in memory for years because it was so helpful for a particular person; but sometimes even this preacher himself can't remember the sermon by the time he leaves the parking lot because, like all of us, life is sometimes so full of distractions and to-do's.

But let's start with an even more fundamental question: why **do** we have a sermon in worship at all? After all, a sermon is not *required* in order to come together and worship God. Throughout its history, the Roman Catholic Church has had a much greater emphasis on the mass – what we call communion – than on the sermon. In fact, in 13<sup>th</sup> century Catholic England, the bishop urged his priests to at *least* have **one** sermon per calendar **quarter** and to try to make it ten minutes long. But in other places and times in church history, the sermon has had a much stronger emphasis; in 16<sup>th</sup> century Holland, for example, the bishops thought so **much** of the sermon that they urged all pastors to *shorten* their Sunday morning sermons to no more than two hours long, so that people would have enough time to get home for a quick Sunday dinner before rushing back to afternoon church service for another two hour sermon.<sup>1</sup> Well, I

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<sup>1</sup>The English and the Dutch examples are from Craig Harline, *Sunday: A History of the First Day From Babylonia to the Super Bowl* (New York: Doubleday, 2007).

have decided that it probably wouldn't be a good idea to either have two-hour sermons or to have 10 minute ones, once per quarter. But, again, whether the sermon is 5 minutes or five hours, each Sunday we along with so many in our branch of the church's wider family, usually make sure that we do have a sermon. Why? What is the ***theological*** reason for this?

Let me answer in this way: Did you notice the title of this sermon? "The Good Word" and the Good Word? I didn't do it that way simply to be cute or because I couldn't think of anything else to say. A friend of mine once preached a sermon called "Beginning with the Benediction" and his point was that what we know as the benediction – the blessing that concludes our worship service – is actually a much broader idea, for it literally means "*the good word.*" In the Latin it's *bene + dictio*. To speak or say a good word. And that's exactly why, for this final sermon in this series, I have grouped the sermon with the benediction. Because my friend is right: "the good word" ought to animate **every** part of our worship service. The good word ought to be there from the beginning moments to the end. The good word ought to shine throughout service and sermon like a "lamp unto our feet" as our Psalm for today has it and as our choir so beautifully sang.

So let us return to what I promised earlier: an inside look at how one preacher seeks to manifest and proclaim that good word, this *bene dictio*. First question: Why do I choose a particular scripture? Well, the answer varies. Sometimes my sermon topic comes from our life together; sometimes I know that some of you are struggling with an issue or a problem and while I would never, ever betray a confidence, there are times when praying about those situations that some of you are facing will inspire me with an idea and a scripture to guide me. On other occasions I will preach about an issue facing society. As I mentioned a few weeks ago, the great Protestant theologian Karl Barth once said that every preacher needs to preach with the Bible in one hand and the

morning newspaper in the other. I cannot give a recipe for exactly how scriptures or topics are selected. I am grateful when the Holy Spirit moves me and the result is something worthy of your time and mine.

That said, I think there is no better place to see what a sermon needs to include than to look at Paul's words to the young and newly ordained Timothy. Did you hear his instructions to Timothy about preaching? – *“preach the word; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable”* – or as the poetry of the King James has it, whether *“in season or out”* – *“convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching.”* Let me offer some thoughts on a few of these traits, and on how I hope that the sermon on any given Sunday displays them.

***“Be persistent.”*** That's good advice for most things. It is especially good advice for preachers who sometimes find themselves up against a scripture that doesn't seem to want to yield its meaning, or a theme that seemed so promising when first announced but now feels more like a dry hole in a desert. *“Be persistent.”* There are some weeks when the sermon comes easily for me and only takes about ten hours of reading and research and writing. There are other weeks when it is like pulling teeth and it may be 15 or 20 or 25 hours that are consumed in persistently trying to elicit a word that would be worthy of being heard. On those 25-hour weeks, I take comfort in the story that I once heard regarding a sculptor who carved a magnificent marble bust of Abraham Lincoln. Now, carving on marble is a slow and unforgiving process. One false move and the thing can be ruined. But in this case, the sculptor indeed went slowly and oh-so-persistently until he had finished a wonderful likeness of Lincoln. When it was unveiled, a young girl upon seeing it went up to the sculptor and asked him *“How did you know that it was Mr. Lincoln inside of that stone and not someone else?”* Every week the preacher has a conviction that there is indeed a “Good Word” to be had inside of a text or a topic or a theme. And persistence is required to bring it forth.

**“Rebuke and encourage.”** These particular goals as outlined by Paul are sometimes more difficult to meet. There is a saying that some of you may have heard that says that the job of the preacher is to *“comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable.”* I never much liked that saying. It is much too smug and over-simple, and it is much too easy for a preacher to hide behind. It makes it too easy for the preacher to think that somehow he has the only truth and if he’s not “inflicting” it on those who aren’t as allegedly wise as he is then he’s not doing his job. It can become a very self-righteous and self-serving point of view. But that’s not the way I see things. In fact, I have never stepped into this pulpit on a Sunday morning without a sense of humility and trepidation, with butterflies in my stomach – or even, as our daughter once put it, not just butterflies but *helicopters*. For, after all, when I look at your faces in front of me, I realize the depth of the lives that have been lived here, I know what wisdom is gathered in this room, I am aware of how much you have lived. It is a daunting and humbling thing to preach to such a group of saints. And so cheap and facile words about “afflicting the comfortable” seem just that – facile and silly.

Moreover, I have to say that I cringe a little at Paul’s counsel here that part of what the preacher is supposed to do is “rebuke.” It’s such a freighted word, and it has been used by too many folks to say some pretty self-righteous and scolding things. But the more I thought about it, the more I realized that the word “rebuke” doesn’t necessarily have to mean “nasty” or “scoldy.” It can also simply mean helping put people aright when they have lost their way or being a reliable guide. Lord knows there have been people in my life who have done that for me! And so Paul, with his perhaps too-harsh-sounding word “rebuke,” is suggesting that I – or any preacher – do the same for you -- for, after all, you **have** called me to be pastor and you **do** expect me to try to say **something** that can help illumine your lives, help give you strength and to seek to be a reliable guide for the challenges that face you. So I try to do that. Where there is

complacency, I'll try to encourage movement beyond it; where there is confusion, I'll try to help find a way forward; where there is hopelessness I will try to offer with a reminder of the truth of the Gospel. The very first time I was seeking a church, freshly minted and ordained myself, I wrote this in my application: "*People find **judgment** all week long; they need a place to come Sunday by Sunday where they also receive grace and encouragement.*" I wouldn't say it any differently today.

There's another characteristic in Paul's list to Timothy that I try to heed: **Convince**. We live in an age where there is more and more the belief that there is, in fact, no ultimate truth to be had, that theologies are just different personal choices much like choices among flavors of ice cream. But that is not **this** preacher's belief. In fact, most of my sermons are an attempt to say why a Christian understanding is in fact the best, the most truthful, of this or that. Sometimes they are attempts to say why a particular *interpretation* of Christianity is better or more truthful than another one. Because truth **matters**. And in arguing for such things, in attempting therefore to convince you of a certain understanding, that does not mean that those who hold other views are unworthy. They too are beloved children of God – but on this or that occasion, with this or that teaching, I will try to say why I believe that their views just aren't as compelling. To do any less is to fail to respect those folks with whom I disagree, not taking them seriously enough to truly engage them, and it is at the same time to disrespect **you** – pretending that it doesn't really matter what you believe as long as you're sincere. Because you and I know that it does matter, it matters a lot! Your beliefs can make your life heaven or hell, harder than it needed to be or better than it might have been. So I too will follow Paul's dictum to Timothy: **Convince**.

That's enough for now. Let me return to where I began with the notion of

“benediction.” Finally, every sermon needs to always be a “benediction.” It needs to be a “good word.” That is, as one of my seminary professors once put it, no matter how dire the subject, no matter how depressing it might be, no matter how some listeners might even take offense thinking, as the old saying has it, “now the preacher’s gone from preachin’ to meddlin’,” **no matter what** the sermon must always proclaim the Gospel, the Good News, in some way. That same professor used to ask his students: *“sum up in a sentence what is the Good News in your sermon? What Good News will your listeners take home from that sermon? How will their lives be changed because they have heard that Gospel, that Good Word, this morning?”*

Every sermon that I will ever preach to you will converge, I hope, on that Gospel, that Good News, which I would define in this way: *that God loves every single person unconditionally and that God therefore wishes beauty and justice for all those God has made, that God has a promise of life abundant and eternal for you and a purpose for your life that is more than just happiness or feeling good but to be of service and in mission to others with your own particular talents and gifts.* **That** is the Word, the Good Word, the “benediction.” It is indeed a Light unto our paths and a Lamp unto our feet. Thanks be to God. Amen.