

Preaching That Links the Word to Our Mission in the World

At the entrance to St. Agatha in Chicago is posted a sign that reads “No Guns Allowed,” per the archdiocesan mandate. Next to it, I have added another with the message: The only arms allowed in this place of worship are those with which to embrace each other as brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ!

The first Sunday that the sign was on the door, I preached about the growing culture of fear and the necessary response in faith. I preached about violence as being a choice, and about the better choice, born of faith, which is the way of peace. I could have spoken about the proliferation of guns. After all, St. Agatha is situated in a community where gun violence is a part of daily life.

But it is also a community where verbal and physical violence are very much a part of the home life of many children in our community. It was Palm Sunday, and the Gospel was Luke’s Passion narrative. I focused on Jesus’ words “Father, forgive them, they know not what they do.” The “them” I focused on were the parents in our community who are often pointed to by outsiders looking in as irresponsible and uncaring. I talked about how we as a faith community are called to respond to this violence by seeking to accompany families and to model for them what a loving family looks like, and what it feels like, to enter into the trauma that is imposed on many of our families by a multitude of societal forces, and to participate in bringing restoration and resurrection into the life of these families.

More recent national events, involving the demonization of immigrants, the rise of racist extremist groups, and the lack of firm condemnation of this hatred and these hate groups by those entrusted with moral leadership, have provided opportunities for preachers to address such discrimination and hatred, raising up the Gospel mandate to defend the rights of the poor and disenfranchised while at the same time decrying those forces that fan the flames of division and conflict.

CONNECTING SCRIPTURE TO EVENTS

One of my early mentors, Msgr. Jack Egan, encouraged me to read the Scripture every day alongside the newspaper, taking time to reflect on the connections between the living Word of God, how it speaks to what is occurring in the world around us, and how the Scriptures might inform our response to the pain and injustice often reflected in those news stories. That has been my daily routine for more than twenty-six years.

Many years after Egan provided that advice, the *Homiletic Directory* (Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, 2014) quoted Pope Francis as it directed



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The homilist needs to preach on the Scriptures but also should contemplate the needs of the community in his preparation.

homilists to begin preparing the homily days in advance, giving attention to the Word as well as what is occurring within the parish and society. The directory states:

Along with reading the Scriptures within the context of the whole Tradition of the Catholic faith, the homilist also needs to reflect on it within the context of the community who will gather to listen to the Word of God. In the words of Pope Francis, “The preacher also needs to keep his ear to the people and to discover what it is that the faithful need to hear. A preacher has to contemplate the Word, but he also has to contemplate his people” (EG, 154). This is one reason why it is helpful to begin preparing the Sunday homily several days before it is to be delivered: along with study and prayer, attention to what is happening in the parish and the wider society will suggest avenues of reflection about what the Word of God has to say to this community at this moment. Discerning again and again the pattern of Christ’s death and resurrection in the life of the community and the world will be the fruit of such meditation. It will strongly shape the content of the homily. (33)

Jesus tells us how to live in Matthew 22:37–40, stating, “You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments.” The job description of a disciple, then, is to love God, love their neighbor, and love themselves. Adopting that job description, the question for homilists considering the need to speak to a certain current event is this: Is the issue raised by the events a strong violation of any aspect of that job description, one that demands I raise this up to my congregation to clarify where we as disciples of Jesus Christ need to be resolute in standing up and speaking out? Is it an event that requires me to remind the congregation of God’s pain at the harm being perpetrated upon those suffering injustice? Is it an event that requires me to call the congregation to stand against that injustice in a specific way, to accompany those who are suffering, to be the Good News that God asks us to be especially for the poor, disenfranchised, and forgotten?

All too often some homilists will avoid voicing anything that could be regarded as political or a topic that will elicit strong support from some and sharp criticism from others. Some congregations may prefer for the homilist to not rock the boat, but a boat that is not rocking is also not moving anywhere. Some congregations do not want to hear about anything that would cause them discomfort. Many are familiar with the adage, “We are called to comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable.” How could a God who expects us to love our neighbor as ourselves desire our comfort when others are suffering? Disciples are “to be vigilant at all times,” as we hear in the Gospel reading from Luke on the First Sunday of Advent. Disciples are vigilant when they are ready to act when Jesus appears to them in the faces of the suffering.

The wise and caring preacher will be aware of what is occurring locally, nationally, and across the world that invites mentioning within a homily, or that may even give rise to a homily focused specifically on an event that requires a public outcry, invites collective prayer for healing and restoration, and which may even invite a collective response from those gathered who claim discipleship in Jesus Christ.

Before preaching about a current event, priests and deacons should be clear about how they feel regarding the topic. The pulpit should never be used to promote personal beliefs, but the beliefs that emanate from our faith, informed by the Scriptures, informed by the tradition, by our moral teaching, and the best information possessed on the issue. As preaching is prepared, inspiration needs to be requested of the Holy Spirit to help us frame our message in a way that people will hear and take to heart in order to elicit the response that God would ask of each of us to respond in faith, hope, and love.

ACTION PROCEEDS FROM THE WORD

The *Homiletic Directory* notes the necessity of action in responding to the Word of God. Quoting from Pope Benedict XVI’s apostolic exhortation *Verbum Domini*, the directory explains that action concludes the *lectio divina* that preachers use to prepare the homily.

Pope Benedict XVI added a coda to the traditional fourfold process of *lectio divina*: “We do well also to remember that the process of *lectio divina* is not concluded until it arrives at action (*actio*), which moves the believer to make his or her life a gift for others in charity” (VD, 87). Viewed in its liturgical context, this suggests the “*missa*,” the sending out of God’s people who have been instructed by God’s Word and nourished by their participation in the Paschal Mystery through the Eucharist. (36)

Preachers walk a fine line, finding a balance in preaching that is not too focused on social justice or current events and preaching focused solely on individual reflection and conversion. Ongoing reflection and conversion should lead to opening ourselves to the difference that can be made in the world. Sometimes preaching needs to speak to the call for self-reflection, the invitation to continued conversion, deepening our relationship with God and answering God’s call to add value to the world. But there are times when the Spirit is calling us to bring the power of the Scriptures, the power of Christian faith, hope, and love, to bear witness to confront the forces of injustice that occupy the public consciousness at the time.

A number of lay friends related that, with the events of violence by white supremacists in Charlottesville in August, their priests preached about hatred and the need to publicly stand against such hatred that discriminates against people of color, against a group because of their religious belief, against any group that would label another group as inferior, disordered, or unworthy of the respect and dignity due any child of God. Parishioners want us to help them make sense, in the light of faith, of what our collective response as Catholic Christians should be to the social sin that is so prevalent in our world. The opportunity should not be missed to allow God’s Spirit to work through our preaching to communicate clearly to the gathered community that the Christian message is one of hope and healing, that says that there is no situation in our society that is so dark with despair that the light of Christ cannot dispel it, that there is no hatred or discrimination so strong that the love of God is not able to overcome it, that there is no pain or hurt so deep that God is not deeper. As preachers at our best, we are humble, yet powerful instruments of this encouraging message to the people God has given us to shepherd. — Larry Dowling ♦

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