

## An Hour of Study: Sermon Preparation as a Spiritual Discipline

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*From the movie version of How Green Was My Valley (1941): A minister (Mr. Gruffydd) is speaking to a boy (Hugh) recovering from paralysis caused by falling in freezing water. Mr. Gruffydd asserts Hugh's suffering has given him a chance to make a spirit within himself and then advises,*

*As your father cleans his lamp to have good light, so keep clean your spirit."*

*"How, sir?"*

*"By prayer, Hugh. And by prayer I don't mean shouting and mumbling and wallowing like a hog in religious sentiment. Prayer is only another name for good, clean, direct thinking. When you pray, think. Think well what you are saying. Make your thoughts into things that are solid. And that way your prayer will have strength. And that strength will become a part of you—body, mind and spirit."*

I have a recurring conversation almost every time I lead a continuing education workshop for seasoned preachers. Regardless of the topic on which I am speaking—preaching in postmodernity, preaching during Advent in Year C, or preaching through the Gospel of Mark—usually during the discussion time I find myself pushed by some question or comment to assert that there is a correlation between a preacher's interior, spiritual life and the effectiveness of her or his sermons. Then someone always raises an honest—sometimes confessional, sometimes defensive—concern: How are we to find devotional time in the midst of *all* our pastoral responsibilities?

Laity, at times, joke that preachers only work an hour a week. Of course, they know it is not true, but underneath the joke is nevertheless a hurtful perception that pastors do not really work the same kind of hours those in the "real world" do. Pastors do not work as hard as "real people." Well, it is true that congregational ministry is not an 8 to 5 job. It is not a job where you clock in and clock out. Indeed, pastors are *always* on the clock. It is a sunrise to midnight job, and far too often overtime is required. While there are regular, scheduled tasks to be performed, there are many more that vary day to day, week to week.

The interlocutor in the continuing education workshop has a legitimate concern. Work encroaches on personal, devotional time in very real ways. Consider some representative activities in a typical week in a pastor's life. First, there's programming:

- Lead and preach at Sunday morning worship, only to pick up the lectionary on Monday morning to begin working on the bulletin and sermon for the next week.
- Join the youth group for pizza on Sunday evening before their program on dating.
- Prepare for and teach an adult Sunday School class on the International Bible Lesson.
- Prepare for and lead a midweek Women's Bible Study on Job.
- Prepare for and offer a five-minute devotional on the importance of community before the Wednesday night fellowship supper.
- Cook for the Men's Prayer Breakfast on Saturday morning.

Then, there is pastoral care:

- Pray with the member before he is prepped for 7:00 A.M. surgery for prostate cancer.
- Visit members in two different nursing homes and offer them Eucharist.
- Visit three members who are in the hospital (all at different hospitals on different sides of town, of course).
- Receive a call Monday night at 9:20 PM that a long-time member has died. Go immediately to be with her family. Join them at the funeral home to make arrangements the next morning. Visit with them again to plan the service for Thursday. Lead and preach at the service and join them for a meal afterwards.
- On Tuesday have a final premarital counseling session with Chris and Abby to make sure they are ready for the rehearsal on Friday evening and the wedding on Saturday afternoon. Then direct the rehearsal and officiate at the wedding.
- Have counseling sessions with several members who are struggling emotionally and spiritually. For some, you refer them to a

therapist you know and trust and call to set up the initial session. For others, you schedule follow-up sessions.

- Stop whatever else you are doing to visit with the widower who pops into the church office two or three times a week just to chat.

Then, there is administration:

- Tuesday morning breakfast meeting with the local ministerial association.
- Tuesday night meeting with the Trustees.
- Wednesday meeting an hour out of town with the denomination's committee on countering racism.
- Thursday morning, work with the secretary on completing, copying, folding, and mailing out the newsletter.
- Thursday afternoon, meet with the college-aged youth director to address boundary issues raised by some of the parents.
- Thursday night meeting with the Worship Committee.
- Talk on the phone with the treasurer about budget problems (several times throughout the week).

And the list can (and does) go on and on, and I have not even mentioned time required for personal commitments to family, friends, running a household, etc. Given all of these pastoral responsibilities, when are pastors to meditate, study, and pray in order to care for their own soul?!

When most of us decided to answer the call to ministry, we may have well imagined doing the sorts of tasks listed above but probably could not have fathomed how overwhelming the collection of them would be each week. We committed to a life of service, but also one of spiritual contemplation, biblical study and theological reflection. All we seem to have time for is service. We do not have spare time for our own spiritual growth. We spend so much time helping others with their relationship with God that we neglect our relationship with the One who called us into this life of ministry in the first place.

But in truth the busyness is only part of the problem. The rest of the problem is that we view our own faith formation as separate from that very busyness of the pastoral life. We live with a dualism of professional and personal, of pastoral and spiritual. Offering spiritual care and direction to others is not necessarily spiritually uplifting for

the caregiver. We have been taught (and many of us are hardwired) to sacrifice our own needs for those whom we serve. We desire to pray and study in order to work on our own relationship with God, but such devotional time must be relegated to times when the pastoral work is completed. And the problem, of course, is that the work is never finished.

Pastoral spirituality cannot and should not be relegated to time that we can spare apart from the real work of ministry, like change we collect in a jar on our night stand and occasionally redeem for real (i.e. paper) money at the coin machine at the grocery store. In the fast pace of contemporary pastoral existence, spirituality must be part and parcel of our daily work. Of course, we all have need of regular (even disciplined) Sabbath renewal—a few moments of silent prayer in the evening, a weekday away from the church, a retreat at a nearby monastery, a sabbatical every few years. But if we who work in the church today cannot find spirituality *in* our work instead of just during spare moments away from our ministry, we become as schizophrenic in our faith as those in the pews we accuse of being religious on Sundays and secular the rest of the week. As Raewynne J. Whiteley writes in *Steeped in the Holy: Preaching as Spiritual Practice*,

[S]ometimes we [pastors] get swamped by the things that need immediate attention; it can feel like we are losing our connection with the Holy. As I have reflected on this, it strikes me that one of the problems is that we tend to view our own spiritual lives as somehow separate from our ministry. One is something we do for ourselves; the other, something we do for the church. But it's a false division. They are integrally connected. Without a life in active relation with God, our souls shrivel and our ministries suffer.<sup>1</sup>

The minister's life in *active* relation with God is the best locale for developing our spiritual lives. As St. Benedict said, "*Orare est laborare, laborare est orare*," ("To pray is to work, to work is to pray"). Ministerial activity is (or can be) personal devotional time. In *The Active Life: Wisdom for Work, Creativity, and Caring*, Parker J. Palmer argues that we do best when we come to embrace the idea that action and contemplation are not polar opposites, but paradoxical

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<sup>1</sup> Raewynne J. Whiteley, *Steeped in the Holy: Preaching as Spiritual Practice* (Lanham, MA: Cowley, 2008) 2.

partners.<sup>2</sup> In a culture that correlates busyness and activity with success and value, Parker observes three postures toward (or stages of) activity and contemplation. The first is that of frantic activity. We choose work to the exclusion of contemplation and exhaust ourselves. The second stage, that of alternation, is an attempt to address this exhaustion. It is a vacation approach (or to draw on language we have used above, a sabbatical approach) to activity and contemplation. We work until we exhaust everything, then vacate into contemplation for refreshment, and then dive back into activity again.

Beyond this, Palmer argues, is a third and better possibility—a life integrating action and contemplation, an integration that Palmer indicates with his use of hyphens in the phrase “contemplation-and-action.” He writes of this posture,

In the stage of integration we learn that contemplation-and-action are so intertwined that features we associate with one are always found at the heart of the other—just as the Chinese symbol of yang harbors a dark spot of yin, and the symbol of yin harbors a light spot of yang. *Action becomes more than a matter of getting from here to there, but a contemplative affair as well, a path by which we may discover inner truth* [emphasis added].<sup>3</sup>

While Palmer writes for a broad audience, his words are especially relevant to those who are claimed by the vocation of parish ministry. Personal spirituality and pastoral activities must become hyphenated for the health of both pastor and congregation.

#### Defining Spiritual Discipline

Anyone who knows me will likely question whether I am the best person to write anything about spirituality. I am not exactly the poster child for spirituality, at least as it is often understood. Look up spirituality in a thesaurus and you will find my name in the list of antonyms. I am allergic to the word itself, sneezing violently and breaking out in hives whenever someone invokes it in my hearing. Similar to Luther’s assessment of the “enthusiasts” of his day, I think of many of those who speak of spirituality often and with ease as ones who have “swallowed the Holy Spirit feathers and all.”

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<sup>2</sup> Parker J. Palmer, *The Active Life: Wisdom for Work, Creativity, and Caring* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1990); see especially chapter 2, “Action and Contemplation,” 15-34.

<sup>3</sup> Palmer, 16-17.

Yet even though I would rarely admit it publicly (before now and even now hesitantly) for fear of guilt by association, I do think of myself as a spiritual person, that is, as long as I get to qualify what is meant by spirituality. My aversion is to the way “spirituality” is popularly portrayed and experienced as a left-brain, individualistic, esoteric, touchy-feely, pseudo-mystical, uncritical, ascetic, breathy, sometimes anti-religious, usually anti-institutional, ecstatic, navel-gazing approach to making meaning.<sup>4</sup> Of course, I have neither the desire nor the expertise to offer an overview of Christian spirituality that corrects such popular approaches. Thankfully, there is already a variety of works dealing with this topic.<sup>5</sup> Neither do I intend to present a spirituality for the whole of ministry. There are a number of works already do this as well.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Linda J. Vogel, in “Reckoning with the Spiritual Lives of Adult Educators,” in *Addressing the Spiritual Dimensions of Adult Learning: What Educators Can Do: New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 85, ed. Leona M. English and Marie Gillen (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000) 17, writes, “Defining *spirituality* is a nebulous task; there is no commonly agreed-upon definition. Some find the term to their liking; others find it too vague and without substance. Some feel that the word spirituality diminishes their religious faith, whatever it might be; for others it is a preferred term precisely because it does not contain particular doctrinal, historical, or theological content.”

<sup>5</sup> Some that I have found helpful are Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Spirituality: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999); Kenneth J. Collins, ed., *Exploring Christian Spirituality: An Ecumenical Reader* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000); Cynthia A. Jürisson, “Pop Spirituality: An Evangelical Response,” and Lisa E. Dahill, “Spirituality in Lutheran Perspective: Much to Offer, Much to Learn,” *Word & World* 18.1 (Winter 1998) 14-23, 68-75; William O. Paulsell, *Taste and See: A Personal Guide to the Spiritual Life*, rev. ed., (St. Louis: Chalice, 1992).

<sup>6</sup> See especially Urban T. Holmes, *Spirituality for Ministry* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982); Ben Campbell Johnson, *Pastoral Spiritual: A Focus for Ministry* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1988); and Ben Campbell Johnson and Andrew Dreitcer, *Beyond the Ordinary: Spirituality for Church Leaders* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001). See also, Michael I. N. Dash, “Ministry, Spirituality, and Disciplines for Engagement,” *Journal for the Interdenominational Theological Center* 32.1-2 (Fall-Spr 2004-05) 17-50; Graeme Chapman, *Spirituality for Ministry: An Exploration* (Mulgrave North, Vic, Australia: CCTC, 1998); John R. Donahue, “The Foolishness of

In this essay, my aim is the much narrower task of making a case for viewing and experiencing one central pastoral task as a *spiritual discipline*. It is easier to describe something as a spiritual discipline than it is to define the broader concept of spirituality itself.<sup>7</sup> Put simply, in Tillichian terms (if anything can be considered simple when using concepts and language borrowed from Paul Tillich), a spiritual discipline is

*a practice through which we take any and all of the concerns of human life and see how they are connected with the One who concerns us ultimately.*

The theological assumption behind this definition is that they *are* connected—that any and all of our mundane, human concerns are related to our Ultimate Concern, God-in-Christ. In our frail, finite, mortal existence, however, we are often oblivious to these relationships. Many things block our awareness and stifle our imagination—suffering, evil, technology, emptiness, busyness, sin, isolation, commitments, ignorance, egoism, illness, shallowness, habit, despair, the cacophony of life itself. Spiritual disciplines are practices through which we open ourselves to having our perceptions altered, to death being answered with resurrection. We use spiritual disciplines to break through those things that surround us and block authentic vision like the curtain around the wizard in Oz.

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God: New Testament Foundations for a Spirituality of the Priesthood,” *Worship* 66.6 (1992) 517-35; Ashley Smith, “The Theologian’s Spirituality,” and Howard Gregory, “The Pastor’s Spirituality,” *Caribbean Journal of Religious Studies*, Special Commemorative Volume, July (1984) 22-30, 31-54; Robert L. Charpentier and William L. Malcomson, “The Minister’s Spirituality,” in *How to Survive in the Ministry*, ed. William L. Malcomson (Valley Forge: Judson, 1982) 47-54.

<sup>7</sup> Although I do not share some of the postliberal tendencies of some in this approach, my thinking about spiritual disciplines is informed in part by those writing about “Christian practices.” For a broad introduction to the dialogue, see Dorothy C. Bass, ed., *Practicing Our Faith* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997) and Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass, eds., *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002). For views of teaching preaching as a Christian practice, see Thomas G. Long and Lenora Tubbs Tisdale, eds., *Teaching Preaching as a Christian Practice: A New Approach to Homiletical Pedagogy* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008).

God is always present—this is the meaning of the Holy Spirit. In the Bible, the Spirit is a metaphor for the *present* experience of God’s power, judgment, grace, and calling.<sup>8</sup> A spiritual discipline, therefore, opens disciples of Jesus Christ to the sight, sound, feel, smell, taste, and knowledge of the Spirit of God revealed most fully in the Christ event and yet present in all aspects of our contemporary lives. To expand our initial definition, then, a spiritual discipline is

*any potentially perception-altering, imagination-opening practice that connects us (and our concerns—all aspects of our activities and our world) more deeply and personally with the One who concerns us ultimately.*

Spiritual disciplines open us to revelation concerning Ultimate Meaning.<sup>9</sup> As Barbara Brown Taylor puts it in *An Altar in the World*,

Anything can become a spiritual practice once you are willing to approach it that way—once you let it bring you to your knees and show you what is real, including who you really are, who other people are, and how near God can be when you have lost your way.<sup>10</sup>

Although I have learned much from Palmer’s approach to contemplation-and-action, the description of spiritual disciplines I have just offered differs from his in a significant way. He speaks of contemplation in terms of discovering “inner truth.” My description places a high value on locating our Ultimate Concern outside of us. God is Other. The doctrine of incarnation proclaims that God is *with* us, not that God is within each of us. Rarely will we find God in our navel. Through Christian spiritual practices, we seek to discover God, to be discovered by God, in the world.

Every pastoral task holds the potential for being such a spiritual discipline, to point us to new revelations of God-with-us out there, if we pastors are willing to risk being open to revelation in those tasks instead of only being a means of it for our parishioners. In this essay, I examine one pastoral task that should be an obvious invitation to

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<sup>8</sup> James D. G. Dunn traces the scholarly discussion of the Spirit of God as “an experiential concept” in the Bible in “Religious Experience in the New Testament,” in *Between Experience and Interpretation: Engaging the Writings of the New Testament*, ed. Mary F. Foskett and O. Wesley Allen, Jr. (Nashville: Abingdon, 2008) 1-13.

<sup>9</sup> Not the difference here between spirituality as an opening to revelation (something outside of ourselves) and Palmer’s understanding of contemplation as focusing on discovering “inner truth.”

<sup>10</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009) 82-83.

contemplation, but because of the rush of the week is too often experienced only as a demand. That task is sermon preparation.

#### Sermon Preparation as a Spiritual Discipline

Instead of viewing sermon preparation as getting in the way of and taking time away from prayer, we preachers should value it as being at the very *center* of our prayer life. Sermon preparation should not begin with prayer. Sermon preparation should not end with prayer. Sermon preparation should *be* prayer. Action and contemplation is never as obviously connected in the list of regular pastoral responsibilities as they are in the preparation to enter into proclamatory conversation with the sacred assembly every Sunday.

There is nothing particularly inventive about this claim. Homiletics and preachers writing about sermon preparation have often argued that it is a spiritual practice.<sup>11</sup> As Paul Scott Wilson puts it:

“Effective sermons result from preparing throughout the week—more, if one preaches twice on Sundays. This time should be regular protected time when one’s energy and concentration are at their peak. Many of my students lament that their traditions do not have a practice of spirituality such as that developed by Ignatius, yet from the perspective of preaching, preparation of the sermon is the traditional spiritual discipline of preachers.”<sup>12</sup>

Two recent books have followed this line of thought thoroughly but with different approaches than I would offer. One is the work by Raewynne J. Whiteley, whom I quoted above. She later, however, abandons critical exegetical study for *lectio divina*. The other is W. Dow Edgerton’s *Speak That I May Speak: A Spirituality of*

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<sup>11</sup> In addition to those discussed in the following paragraphs, see Donald Goergen, “A Spirituality of the Preacher,” *Liturgical Ministry* 15 (Winter 2006) 18-24; Kevin W. Irwin, “Presiding, Preaching, and Priestly Spirituality,” *Liturgical Ministry* 14 (Fall 2005) 197-204; Joan Gray, “Reclaiming Preaching as Spiritual Gift at the Approach of the New Millennium,” *Journal for Preachers* 23.4 (2004) 16-21; George Carey, “The Spiritual Life of the Preacher,” *Preaching* 13.1 (July-Aug 1997) 2-7; Steven L. Anderson, “The Dynamic of Spirituality in the Preaching Task,” *The Covenant Quarterly* 48.2 (May 1990) 19-28.

<sup>12</sup> Paul Scott Wilson, *The Four Pages of the Sermon* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999) 34.

*Preaching*.<sup>13</sup> Edgerton's book is inspiring in the tradition of epideictic rhetoric. It is a praise of the spiritual discipline of preaching meant to refresh those who find themselves "hesitating" at the thought of preparing yet another sermon. It does not, however, offer the kind of *practical* spirituality I believe is important to reclaim sermon preparation as spiritually enlivening.

Some of the voices that were most evocative for me in shaping my thoughts about sermon preparation as a spiritual discipline are found in shorter articles instead of full monographs. For example, Jennifer Lord in her essay, "An Acceptable Offering: Preaching as a Spiritual Discipline," argues that we should locate the work of sermon preparation as part of our spiritual life *in general*. Specifically, she reminds us that through the Holy Spirit all Christians are marked as Christ's in baptism and that preaching is simply one way some of us live out our baptism. She writes,

"Preaching as a spiritual discipline does not mean that when preachers are engaged in the preparation for preaching they receive special spiritual favors or necessarily become more sanctified. However, in this work preachers do participate in some activities that are recognized as normative ways that Christians experience the work of the Holy Spirit: prayer, biblical study, meditation, mutual conversation with the writings and insights of the communion of saints...and openness to individual inspiration that is then checked against other means of interpretation."<sup>14</sup>

Similarly, in "Preaching, A Spiritual Act," Larry Paul Jones offers a litany of reasons to consider preaching as spiritual for the preacher. One of the reasons that is most important for our consideration is found in Jones' conception of the relationship between the pastor's spiritual experience in the study and what she or he has to offer in the pulpit. He argues,

A preacher cannot help a congregation to experience publicly the presence of a God whom the preacher has not experienced or sought privately. That makes preaching a spiritual act. We prepare for preaching by listening for God, seeking God in the absence, wrestling with God, conversing with God,

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<sup>13</sup> W. Dow Edgerton, *Speak to Me That I May Speak: A Spirituality of Preaching* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2002).

<sup>14</sup> Jennifer Lord, "An Acceptable Offering: Preaching as a Spiritual Discipline," *Call to Worship* 38.2 (2004-05) 32-38.

challenging God to become manifest, standing in stunned awe of God, and striving to know and love God. Without accepting such a discipline we may give pretty talks, deliver stirring speeches, or present entertaining monologues, but we will not preach.<sup>15</sup>

One item Jones lifts up in a list of signs that preaching is a spiritual act, Richard Lischer makes the focus of an entire essay. It is the intimate connection between the individual spiritual life of the preacher as exhibited in sermon preparation and the effectiveness of the sermon offered to the community of faith in the pulpit. Lischer, however, comes at the issue from a different angle than Jones. In an article entitled, "Before Technique: Preaching and Personal Formation," Lischer laments how preachers turn (and the homiletical guild fosters such turning) to new homiletical techniques to renew preaching without giving due attention to the role the *character* of the preacher plays in the effectiveness of preaching. His insight is worth quoting at length. At the conclusion of the essay, he says,

The spiritual formation of the preacher is reflected in the weekly process of the sermon-formation. In the "first naiveté" in which the preacher experiences the pre-critical power of the text, there must be time for the meditative reading of the text, for praying the text, and for praying for those to whom we will preach. We will not distill the process into a series of discrete skills and separate it from our own spiritual and pastoral life. Preparing to preach is a prayerful dialogue with the text. It is a spiritual and imaginative exercise of the gospel in which the preacher plays a central role. But we must not confuse the real, theological work of the imagination with inserting sensitive stories or poetic images into the argument of the sermon. It is not even discovering elements of analogy between the text and the contemporary situation. Rather the theological imagination, which is central to the preacher's *habitus*, is knowing how to read texts in such a way that they will be allowed to release their witness to Jesus Christ. The genius of preaching lies in the discovery of this witness, which occurs amidst prayer, struggle, and exegesis in a moment of

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<sup>15</sup> Larry Paul Jones, "Preaching, A Spiritual Act," *Lexington Theological Quarterly* 31.4 (Winter 1996) 284.

theological insight. When understood as a personal, spiritual, and theological activity, preparing to preach will not be a frantic search for a new technique but rather what it was from the beginning: the formation of God's people by one already formed by the word of God.<sup>16</sup>

#### An Hour of Study

To preach effectively—not only to speak the gospel but to effect a hearing and assimilation of it—preachers must first experience the gospel in their study. The time preachers spend developing a sermon is sacred time in the vein of Advent. Exegesis, analysis of the congregational context, developing a sermonic claim, searching for the best language and imagery to convey the intended message, determining a rhetorical structure are all elements of an eschatological process of preparing for the coming of the Lord. We do not simply wait for God to come to us. We do not simply hope Christ might appear incarnate. We *prepare* to meet God-in-Christ each week in study so that we can name God-in-the-world as part of our conversation with the congregation each Sunday from the pulpit. For preachers, the study is a unique location of the already/not yet that is the cornerstone of the Christian experience of salvation.

A traditional Jewish saying holds that an hour of study is an hour of prayer in the eyes of God. For preachers to experience the God who is out before us in the sermon preparation, we must come to view study as God does, instead of simply as a task to be accomplished and then checked off our weekly to-do list. I once heard Karen Armstrong asked whether she prayed, and without blinking she answered, “I experience the transcendent when I study.” Pastors will end up frustrated if they constantly look for time *away* from work to pray. Instead, they need to broaden their definition of prayer and spiritual disciplines. Their work must become their prayer, and study the central spiritual discipline of their prayer life.

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<sup>16</sup> Richard Lischer, “Before Technique: Preaching and Pastoral Formation,” *Dialog* 29 (Summer 1990) 181-82; compare an earlier discussion of the same concern in Lawrence L. Lacour, “The Spiritual Formation of the Preacher,” *The 1980 Meeting of the Academy of Homiletics* (Princeton Theological Seminary, Dec 11-13 1980) 102-13; and a later discussion in Thomas H. Troeger, “Keeping in Touch with God: Why Homiletics is Always More than Method,” in *Purposes of Preaching*, ed. Jana Childers (St. Louis: Chalice, 2004) 113-30.

This does not mean, however, that we do not need regular time alone for the contemplation-and-action that is sermon preparation. We need to reclaim the space in the church where our desk sits as the pastor's *study* instead of the pastor's office. Paul told the Christians in Thessalonica to pray unceasingly (1 Thes 5:17). The desert fathers took this literally and withdrew from society to pray on behalf of those in the church who could not pray without ceasing due to all of the commitments and responsibilities of their lives. For preachers who connect study/action with prayer, however, we must study without ceasing. Indeed, the center of pastoral calling is to study on behalf of those in our congregation at a level that is unavailable to them. To speak in terms of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, everyone in the congregation has experience to draw on in interpreting the gospel, and many in the congregation are better equipped to reason than we are. But we pastors have access to scripture and tradition in a way they do not, not because the Bible and church teaching/history are the possession of the clergy, but because the congregation has set us aside to study these sources of revelation on their behalf.<sup>17</sup> In sermon preparation, we do not separate ourselves *from* the congregation; we separate ourselves *for* the congregation.

Of course, finding this alone time for sermon preparation is not easy either. Every pastoral search committee claims to want a "gifted preacher," but few realize how much of that giftedness is expressed in time-consuming study. They want inspiring sermons, but they do not want the secretary to tell them you are not receiving calls because you are studying. They do not want the sick or the isolated neglected because you are studying. They do not want the church finances or evangelism ignored. There are a thousand pressing issues for the day, and Sunday is still a little ways off.

But we preachers must resist the idolatry of our contemporary age of equating the immediate with the Ultimate. Before he retired as senior pastor of Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago, John Buchanan must have been an awfully busy man. He was (and still is) the editor and publisher of the *Christian Century*, a biweekly magazine with a circulation of over 35,000, while serving a congregation of 5,800 members. Pastoral, administrative, and editorial tasks must have constantly knocked on his door, called on his cell phone, and alerted him on his PDA, all saying, "Pay attention to me...NOW!" Yet one

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<sup>17</sup> For a fuller discussion of this dynamic in relation to the authority of the preacher, see O. Wesley Allen, Jr., *The Homiletic of All Believers: A Conversational Approach* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005) 38-57.

piece of advice he offered during this time about thriving in pastoral ministry is:

*Do the most important thing first.* At the heart of surviving and loving ministry is time management, and for most of us that means sermon preparation. It means organizing the rest of our time around sermon preparation, not vice versa. The strong inclination is to squeeze sermon preparation around the edges. There is so much to do, so many meetings and people to see. My own life improved immensely when I acknowledged the fact that sermon preparation was my most important responsibility and deserved prime time. So that is what I give it.<sup>18</sup>

Sermon preparation must be given its proper due if we are faithful to our call as pastors. We never do more pastoral care than when we stand in the pulpit with a word of comfort and mercy. We never do better church administration than we proclaim God's vision for the church. We never teach better than when re-tell a biblical text or call on church history to identify a way God is with us now. So study for preaching is preparation for proclamation, pastoral care, administration, faith formation, and teaching. While there are many important tasks of ministry, and many of those cannot easily be herded into a manageable schedule, none are more important than sermon preparation and preaching.

Therefore, preachers must set aside time *each work day* for sermon preparation that is at the same time prayer. The title of the essay is an obvious reference to the Jewish saying quoted earlier. But I also intend another, more subtle reference to be found in the phrase "hour of study, hour of prayer." Praying at fixed times during the day—for instance, sunrise, noon, sundown, bedtime—is a discipline found in many religions. Parts of the church throughout its history have held such a practice, maintaining watch like soldiers who change shifts on the hour. The canonical hours include Lauds (at dawn), Prime (first hour, 6:00 AM), Terce (third hour, 9:00 AM), Sext (sixth hour, noon), None (ninth hour, 3:00 PM), Vespers/Matins (evening prayer), and Complin (before going to bed).<sup>19</sup> For preachers to experience sermon

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<sup>18</sup> John Buchanan, "Why Stay in Church?" in *Best Advice: Wisdom on Ministry from 30 Leading Pastors and Preachers*, ed. William J. Carl III (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009) 29.

<sup>19</sup> For a popular introduction to praying the divine hours, or divine offices, see Phyllis Tickle, *The Divine Hours—Prayers for Summertime* (2000), *Prayers for Autumn and Wintertime* (2000), *Prayers for Springtime* (2001) (New York: Doubleday).

preparation as a spiritual discipline, they will be best served (and will best serve God and the congregation) if they do not simply squeeze time for sermon preparation in each day, but set aside a *particular* time each day for study-prayer, as regular as morning and evening prayer. By disciplining time, the hour of study can become more than simply the chronological passing of time spent in work (*chronos*). It can be *kairos*—existentially-filled, opportune time—in which God confronts, calls, forgives, and empowers us, in which our perceptions are altered and our imaginations opened.

But how do we prioritize study-prayer in the midst of all we have to do as a pastor? I wish I had an easy word here. I wish I could say that I have found just the right time management strategy to offer that will allow pastors to please everyone, fulfill all their weekday responsibilities, and spend hour upon hour each day in study-prayer. But I possess no such panacea. In a word, you must simply do it. That is why it is called a spiritual *discipline*. It takes discipline to do it! When Jesus tells the disciples to stay alert as they keep watch for the advent of the *parousia*, he does not then offer them a method for doing it easily. He just says, “Stay awake.” It has to be done; you must do it, so just do it. Choose the time when you are most effective as a student, most attentive as a pray-er, and write it in your datebook from now until the rapture. Hit the recurrence button in your online calendar and in the slot asking when to end the repeating appointment, write “Omega.” Sure, there will be times when you have to break the study-appointment for something else that comes up, but be disciplined and make those the exception instead of the rule.

Actually, the regularity of study-prayer is freeing. After revering the fixed hour for a while there will be little adjustment period at the beginning of the time due to shifting from one task to another, from what you were doing before to sermon work. In the same way that a disciplined guitarist places her fingers on the right frets and strings without thinking about it because her muscles have “memorized” the position over time, so will a preacher’s eye float habitually down to the biblical text while her mind lifts up to God and her heart reaches out to her congregation when the clock’s ring announces that study-prayer time has arrived.

We must be honest that fixing a regular time during each workday for sermon preparation, does not mean that the whole of sermon preparation will/can take place during this time. An essential element of almost all creative endeavors is that of fermentation. You must lay work aside and leave it alone for it to continue to develop. Ignore your sermon in-between your fixed hour appointment, and it will get jealous and call out for your attention. While driving to the

hospital for a pastoral visit, an exegetical insight will pop into mind. While sitting in a Bible study, someone will be forced to use the exactly right words for the theological claim you have been trying to discover. In the middle of the night, the perfect image for the conclusion will wake you up with a jolt. Thus we must be receptive (stay awake) at times other than those sitting at our desk with our Bible open, commentaries highlighted with a yellow marker, and the computer screen blinking at us. But there will be little to be receptive of if we have not spent the disciplined time in study-prayer in advance. Our senses will not have been tuned up. Our imaginations will not have been stirred. Our curiosity will not have been whetted. Our perceptions will not have been altered.

#### An Hour of Prayer

Being disciplined enough to set aside time each day for sermon preparation does not ensure that preachers will experience the task as a *spiritual* discipline. It may just feel like being disciplined. A change in perspective is required for the action to be experienced as contemplation.

So far I have primarily focused attention on the busyness that characterizes the pastor's life and the way in which it hinders his or her spiritual life. I actually believe, however, that there is a much larger hurdle to overcome for preachers to experience sermon preparation spiritually. The primary reason preachers experience sermon preparation only as a professional requirement and not as a spiritual gift is that we come to the process focused on its goal. This is certainly not an unreasonable approach to the task. We spend time preparing a sermon *so that* we have a sermon to preach on Sunday. But the damaging result of this teleological orientation is that *the process is experienced only as means of production and not as a mode of reception.*<sup>20</sup> While studying a biblical text, analyzing an issue theologically, or searching for the right language and imagery to

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<sup>20</sup> In similar fashion, when speaking about "the relationship between homiletics as method and homiletics as spirituality," Thomas H. Troeger, writes, "In learning to balance labor and receptivity in the creation of sermons, preachers are involved in a particular type of spirituality whose patterns are replicated in various ways in the lives of those to whom they preach." "Keeping in Touch with God: Why Homiletics is Always More than Method," in *Purposes of Preaching*, ed. Jana Childers (St. Louis: Chalice, 2004) 120-21.

embody our claim, we are not “in the moment” but only leaning toward the sermon we must offer our congregation.

Preachers would do well to approach the various steps of sermon preparation in the manner Thich Nhat Hanh suggests for washing dishes. He writes,

In the United States, I have a close friend named Jim Forest. When I first met him eight years ago, he was working with the Catholic Peace Fellowship. Last winter, Jim came to visit. I usually wash the dishes after we’ve finished the evening meal, before sitting down and drinking tea with everyone else. One night, Jim asked if he might do the dishes. I said, ‘Go ahead, but if you wash the dishes you must know the way to wash them.’ Jim replied, ‘Come on, you think I don’t know how to wash the dishes?’ I answered, ‘There are two ways to wash the dishes. The first one is to wash the dishes in order to have clean dishes and the second is to wash the dishes in order to wash the dishes...’

If while washing the dishes, we think only of the cup of tea that awaits us, thus hurrying to get the dishes out of the way as if they were a nuisance, then we are not ‘washing the dishes to wash the dishes.’ What’s more, we are not alive during the time we are washing the dishes. In fact, we are completely incapable of realizing the miracle of life while standing at the sink. If we can’t wash the dishes, the chances are we won’t be able to drink our tea either.<sup>21</sup>

Because Sunday comes around so often, so regularly, so relentlessly (like dishes after every meal!), preachers are prone to experience sermon preparation as if it were a series of tasks on an assembly line. First, put the text on the conveyor belt. Next, rip a message out of it. Then, add imagery to the message. Finally, connect the parts together and you have the finished product ready for delivery to the consumers on Sunday. Henry Ford would be proud, but preachers are left as unmoved by the process as Charlie Chaplain in *Modern Times* where he tightens the same nut on the same bolt hour after hour, day after day, week after week until his body jerks uncontrollably in the repeated

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<sup>21</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Miracle of Mindfulness: A Manual on Meditation*, rev. ed., trans. Mobi Ho (Boston: Beacon, 1975) 3-5.

motion.<sup>22</sup> It is no wonder so many preachers experience such high levels of vocational burnout.<sup>23</sup>

Perhaps we seminary professors bear much of the responsibility for this problem. (As I confess this, I am beating my chest muttering, “*Mea culpa. Mea culpa.*”) We take students whose commitment to Christian discipleship has led them to a commitment to Christian ministry. In seminary we train them in the critical, theological skills needed for ministry. We believe with all our hearts that these skills lead to a deeper spirituality. We absolutely believe that study and prayer are lovers. Because we believe it so strongly, we assume it is obvious *how* to relate intellectual biblical, theological, and ethical skills with one’s life of faith. We assume it, usually, because it has been so for us. But in reality, the seminary environment we create is one focused on assignments, tasks, examinations, competencies and grades. In other words, it is focused on action, with contemplation assumed but neither required nor demonstrated. We require students to produce without showing them how to receive. We teach them theological, ethical, historical and exegetical methodologies, but fail to help them experience these as means of grace.

There have, of course, been attempts to correct this orientation—not to remove the need for production and evaluation, but to include spiritual development as part and parcel of that production and evaluation, to help students appreciate study as a spiritual discipline. One such attempt is found in Stephanie Paulsell. She tries to help students “embody in their ministries a reinvigorated sense of the ‘learned minister.’” She hopes her students will

enter into a life of ministry that takes its shape from the formation offered by the practices of reading, writing, learning and teaching: a life of rigorous and loving attention, a life that turns toward the world and its troubles bearing the best resources it knows how to gather, a life that eagerly embraces and embodies the creativity that faith demands.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> *Modern Times*, DVD, directed by Charles Chaplain, 1936 (Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2003).

<sup>23</sup> For a different sort of spirituality of the preaching task dealing with burnout, see Mike Graves, *The Fully Alive Preacher: Recovering from Homiletical Burnout* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006).

<sup>24</sup> Stephanie Paulsell, “The Inscribed Heart: A Spirituality of Intellectual Work: Reading as a Spiritual Practice,” *Lexington Theological Quarterly* 36.3 (Fall 2001) 141.

Paulsell's phrase "a life of rigorous and loving attention," is a reference to Simone Weil's "Reflection on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God," which Paulsell requires her students to read as they begin their seminary education. Weil suggested over fifty years ago that school study (and, I would argue sermon study) has the potential to develop one's attention in a spiritual fashion. She opens her famous essay by saying,

The key to a Christian conception of studies is the realization that prayer consists of attention. It is the orientation of all the attention of which the soul is capable toward God.<sup>25</sup>

This essay is the start of my personal attempt to repent of the pedagogical practice of focusing on production over against reception, at least as far as sermon preparation is concerned. It is my attempt—with guidance from the likes of Palmer, Lord, Lischer, Paulsell and Weil—to help preachers learn to attend to God's Spirit in new ways in the midst of preparing sermons. Even with the need to have produced a sermon at the end of the process, I am confident that preachers can learn to study in order to study, write in order to write, pray in order to pray, *as* we prepare the sermon. By focusing our attention in study, we focus it *on* God, not only on the sermon. To maintain sustained attention fostered by critical study in homiletical practices is to open oneself to the possibility of personal transformation. When we focus not only on the task of producing a sermon, but stay in the moment of study, reflection, and contemplation along the way, we open ourselves to having our perceptions altered, our imaginations stirred. We open ourselves to a constantly renewed relationship with the One who claimed us in baptism and called us to preach.

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<sup>25</sup> Simone Weil, "Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God," in Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1951) 105; Paulsell, cited earlier, draws heavily on Weil; see 140-41.