

SHARING THE JOY WE KNOW

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Sharing the joy we feel. This is the concluding lecture and a sequel to what was presented yesterday as understanding the burden we feel.

Charles R. Brown, one time Dean of Yale Divinity School, and a notable preacher himself, in writing about the preacher at work, commented, "If one is truly preaching, you hear them, you see them, you feel them." That is because good preaching has some very distinct and salient marks, at least four points of which I will seek to share with you in brief this morning.

A SENSE OF CONCERN FOR OTHERS

First, the perceptions the preacher evokes, the meaning the preacher mediates, the style the preacher adopts and the involvement the preacher generates, all of these must take place in sharing the joy for which the Good News comes to us.

Those to whom we preach will perceive something from our pulpit presence and our pulpit work, and if we rightly harness the burden about which I spoke on yesterday, the people will surely perceive an honest interest in their welfare. We do not preach for ourselves, although we preach to ourselves as we preach. What we do is for those who hear us. Blessed is that preacher who so speaks as to assure each hearer that God knows and God loves them. The preacher who though facing a crowd always has the individual in mind. This can be done, however large and heterogeneous the mass of persons before us, but it happens more surely when we remember our mutual involvement with our hearers in the common ventures of life. I am standing above you now because the pulpit is raised, but in life I am with you. Everyone of you—he or she who preaches—must always remember that he or she must be at home with the people, having sat where they sat and be content to continue sitting where they sit.

Dr. James Earl Massey delivered this lecture during the Beeson Lectures February 18-20, 1997, held on the campus of Asbury Theological Seminary. His theme for the three-day series was "Preaching from the Inside-Out." The text presented here was transcribed directly from Dr. Massey's lecture. Dr. Massey is a life trustee at Asbury Seminary and dean emeritus and distinguished professor-at-large at Anderson University School of Theology.

THE ASBURY THEOLOGICAL JOURNAL

SPRING 1997 • VOL. 52 • NO. 1

When we address people in the light of God's divine concern, and when we have an open, honest interest to aid them, that is perceived by the hearer. It is perceived when people perceive or understand that we are not just engaged in a professional task, but are serving with a personal commitment stirred by love for God and love for them. It happens when hearers sense that we are not only text-oriented, but person-minded. To be sure, there are text-oriented preachers whose chief concern seems focused upon a strict delineation of biblical meanings with very little, if any, tie-in with human interest or situated need. And there are task-oriented preachers who seem so bent on getting their work done that they appear aloof from people for whom the ministry was ordained. The salient mark of caring is still necessary and will always be necessary to bring people and preacher together in trust. No preaching succeeds like that done by a warm-hearted, open-spirited and concerned preacher, someone with whom hearers can identify with no fear or suspicion of calculated openness.

Alexander White, great preacher of another century, once reported a lady's comment to him. She said, "Sir, your preaching does my soul good." And he commented, "I never forgot the brave and loving look with which that was said to me."

Preaching of this kind happens when we think and plan unselfishly. The sermon must not be a selfish instrument planned in pride and delivered with pomposity. It is a means to an end. The end is the benefit of humans who hear it and the glory of God, who gave the germ from which the sermon was prepared. Our Lord is the grand model in this manner, for in standing before us, he stands as the Servant of God who in his trust in God as God's Son, received from God an approving word, and that was enough for him. He did not have to have the approval of the crowds. Never allow yourself to become dependent upon the plaudits of your congregation. For if you do, you might circumvent the truth one day and tickle their ears. Be content with the Lord's speech to you in your heart, "Well done, good and faithful servant." If you ever hear him say that to you, it is enough to carry you for a lifetime.

Altruism, concern for others, this outgoing love is written in everlasting and resplendent character in the Cross of Christ, and it is borne by every preacher who is willing to bear the burden of sharing the Good News. I call it a burden because it is one. We are never equal to the task. One must be anointed to preach. Opening ourselves to live by this kind of rule of altruism, outgoing concern for others, is something of which we are capable. Remembering the purpose of our work in the world, it can stir us to surrender ourselves with readiness and without fear that we will be embarrassed. Only in this way can we plan and share what is always good for the hearer, knowing that our preaching will thereby be the vitalizing, strengthening influence that God planned it to be when he called us.

I shall not soon forget hearing my friend, one of the most notable preachers in American history—and I mean that literally—Gardner Calvin Taylor, tell about an experience of relationship generated in part by his preaching. The close relationship was with a devoted deacon in the Concord Baptist Church where Taylor was pastoring at that time. The deacon was a man who always perceived in the preaching a care for his life, and he received the preaching in the same spirit and warmth that he perceived in the preacher as the preacher preached. On the day before this good deacon died, Dr. Taylor visited

him in the intensive care unit of the hospital. The deacon was now comatose, but his daughter was sitting at his bedside, and she remembered what had been the last words she had heard her father say the day before. Knowing how much her father loved his pastor, the daughter told the pastor, "Pastor Taylor, the last thing I remember Dad saying was, 'I wish I could hear him preach one more time.'" Something is perceived when we preach. Let it be a caring attitude for those who are our hearers.

A SENSE OF PARTNERSHIP

Second, as we preach, our hearers should perceive a sense of partnership with them in life and witness. There is nothing that stirs one to serious pulpit service like the warmth and flavor of what T. W. Rumsby explained as an agreed, voluntary covenanted understanding between the congregation which calls the minister, and the minister who receives and accepts that call. I know many of you are in connectional systems by which you are appointed to churches. But there is still that reception that the congregation has of you, even if you are under appointment. If that takes place, let it be a way of saying to you, you are accepted, and build upon that, because it becomes a kind of covenant between you and those who are members of that congregation, and there can be a warm relationship which develops on the basis of that. This is very crucial to a meaningful and treasured pulpit experience on your part and mine. It's no small matter for people to sit under us, to come to hear us. It is no small matter for this over-under arrangement to exist between leader and followers. Whether in symbolism or actual fact, those who sit under us can often determine the extent to which we feel happy about our work or feel harassed by it. What they perceive from us will largely determine how they will react to us. If they perceive an honest interest in their welfare, they will be hard put, some of them, to risk sarcasm, slanderous speech, and things that will knock us down. Leslie J. Tizzard, speaking at a gathering in London's Westminster Chapel in 1952, four years before he died an untimely death, told about how he had to learn proper focus for fellowship in preaching. When he was a student, he confessed, he had fantasies of spending long, long hours in the cloistered seclusion of a study, writing sermons that he would deliver with breathtaking excellence to an admiring crowd of listeners. He did not at that time think that he would like pastoral work, a service, he thought, of fussing around people. Once in the pastorate, once in the midst of a covenant with the people, he learned the strength and beauty that there is to be found in shared life and shared witness. Actually, his first ministry was in a dockland area where there was poverty and dire unemployment. So, he came into contact with life in the raw. Still confessing, he reported, "In one way and another it dawned upon me that I should never be able to preach in any way that mattered if I did not in some measure know and understand the fears and anxieties, the sins and the follies, the frustrations and the failures of the people I was sent to serve." Partnership in the common ventures of life gives preacher and people common ground on which to stand looking toward God. Preaching involves more than fluent exegesis, artistically designed eloquence. It calls for a sense of comradeship with one's people. Comradeship and the need for God's grace. Comradeship in hope for God's glory.

Theologian Martin Marty, who has been to this campus, commented in print some years ago that in all his years of preaching, ten in the pastorate with weekly pulpit duties, and then across succeeding years in and out of other pulpits, "I have been moved to learn this. The message had its greatest effect when it was most clear that the people with whom I was a hearer were participating in the preaching." They participate in the sharing of their souls. They participate in the sharing of their prayers. They participate in looking up to say, "yes, that is true and I know it." In some settings, participating is even at the level of vocal response. It does not have to be, but when it is, the preacher is encouraged.

A SPIRIT OF WORSHIP

Third, something is being perceived when we preach, and our bearing as a worshipper will aid or hinder that perception. Very seldom does the person who preaches involve himself or herself in the worship as a whole, and that is a problem, because unless the spirit of worship, the praise and celebration of God pervades everything in the service—the singing of the hymns, straight through the offertory, and in the preaching itself—something is missing. The joy of the Lord comes through when the preacher is doing his or her work when the preacher is a worshipper with all of the others who are present. God is listening when we preach. He not only gave the sermon germ, the insight, the idea, however you want to name it, that is drawn from the text, but he gives the ability to shape the sermon for public hearing of the insight, and he gives the anointing by which the hearing can be blessed, and the joy is full when the preacher recognizes that the sermon having done its work can die. But to try to save it, to try to put it there as a model and hold it up as something that is great, that's a thing of pride. Avoid it like the plague. You can avoid it when what you do is done in the spirit of worship.

Lawyer Churchman George Wharton Pepper, one of the few non-clerics to give the Lyman-Beecher lectures at Yale Divinity School, shared many years ago with those attending there in 1914 his views about how preachers are perceived from the pew during the worship service. In one of his declarative passages, he said, "Speaking for myself, I am powerfully affected by the bearing of a person during service time. I find that if someone reads from the Bible, a great deal can be gathered respecting their inner self." Just from the reading? Yes! For if a person who reads does not understand the high and the low passages of Scripture, the congregation does not get the sense of the text. Grabbing up someone to read is not always the wise thing. Someone should read who has understanding. Well, Pepper went on to warn against doing the reading with an affected solemnity or in a "Scripture voice," clearly different from their regular voice. He confessed utter disappointment when the reading showed no perceived differences, as I indicated, between the low passages and the high passages, and there are such. Your professors will deal with that. But then after stating that a preacher's prayers reveal the level of his or her personal reverence, Pepper stressed that the people in the pew expect a preacher's reverence to be felt in what is being done. Joy must be shared when the Gospel is being preached. We do not have to call for joy from them. We excite joy in them when we feel the joy. He went on to say, "You will ask me what I mean by reverence. It is not a manner or tone or a pos-

ture, it is something the effect of which is confined to the preacher himself over self. I'm inclined to describe it," he went on to say, "as the atmosphere exhaled by the person who is aware that God is present."

F.W. Boreham, noted preacher who spent most of his ministry in Australia, and whose work should be read by you to show how seminal a mind can be when stirred by scriptural insights, he was a boy when D.L. Moody visited England to preach there. Boreham went with his father to one of the outdoor services and the two of them were very fortunate to gain a spot within just a few feet of the platform where they could see and hear Mr. Moody very, very well. Young Frank, five years old at the time, was happily surprised that he could understand every word Mr. Moody was speaking. Looking back on that experience of hearing, many, many years later, Boreham wrote, "I had assumed that preachers of eminence must be very abstruse, recondite, and difficult to follow. I hoped that by intense concentration I might occasionally catch the drift of the speaker's argument. Fortunately that had not been the case because Mr. Moody preached using simple and homely speech." Stack your vocabulary. Have various levels that you can draw upon, depending upon the audience with which you are dealing. Yes, do that! Study the dictionary and the Thesaurus. But remember the gospel must come through at the level of our hearers and not to our glory but to God's glory. Let them perceive, when we preach, an honest interest in their welfare. Let it be an awareness that we are partners with them in the common ventures of life and in life and witness. Let it be a perception of us as a worshipper with them. If they are not really worshipping, let them catch the spirit of worship by being in our presence. Let our words be no barrier, but a blessing.

A SENSE OF ANOINTING

In treating this, there is another aspect that I must mention. Our hearers should perceive when we preach a sense of divine anointing. We who preach do not only present a message, we represent its Sender—large S. I hope you learn how to be comfortable with being a representative of Jesus Christ. It is not your profession. It is not mine. We represent Jesus of Nazareth, whom God has made Lord and Christ. If you seek to invest your seminary education for the sake of your own life and the benefit of your own name, you will become a miserable failure however successful you become in worldly terms. The servant is not above his or her Lord. We preach for Jesus's sake, not ourselves, and whenever God can entrust us to represent his Son, he anoints what we do, that is to say, He allows the people to perceive in our work and through our work his very presence. That's the glory of preaching and that's when the joy comes through. You see, our way as spiritual leaders is marked out for us by two basic influences, nature, on the one hand, and grace on the other. The influence of nature is seen in our personalities, our intellect, our temperament, our natural gifts. The influence of grace, this favor that God has extended to us, is seen in how his touch upon our lives has harnessed and enhanced those natural factors, so that we have been readied to serve him in such a way that we represent him. As preachers we are responsible to deal with the things of God as insiders, not talking about them from the outside, but standing within the experience of knowing God and speaking from

inside. That's the power of preaching, and it calls for more than a text, it calls for a trust on our part in God, and God's trust of us. Now this concept of anointed service or this anointed selfhood reflects four distinct features. I've written on this more fully in one of my books, but let me give a very brief summary.

As to being anointed, one thing, there is a sense of assertiveness by which we can readily do what we are supposed to do—I mean, readily. Not with hesitation, but readily. Second, there is a gripping knowledge that one is identified with God's will in what we're doing. Third, there is an intensity to what we do, because our actions are related to a higher frame of reference. And fourth, there is decisive instinctiveness for doing what we do. The anointed preacher does not fumble. Maybe with the notes, but never with the message. I remember preaching at Montreat one year among the Presbyterians. There was a gust of wind that came through the open window, and my notes fell to the floor. Someone rushed from the front seat to grab them and give them back to me, I said, "It's all right, I don't need them." The anointed preacher, under the burden of the call, seeks to prepare in such a way that the message is my own. And since it was stirred within me and involves me by nature, it also involves me by grace and so I can entrust myself to share it, notes or no notes. But I use them in order to confine myself by point of time to the ordered service of the day. There is something to be said for that.

The New Testament speaks of Jesus as someone anointed by God (Luke 4:18, Acts 10:38), and the accounts which speak about him always link his service with the fact that he was appointed by God to do what he was doing. Now Luke's interest in this theme of anointing is seen throughout his writings, and it was Luke who preserved for us our Lord's own use of Isaiah 61:2 as the apt description of his own directedness and authority. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he has anointed me to preach." What an appealing text! What a marvelous experience! Anointed! Luke highlighted this theme of anointing in treating the life and work of the preachers in the book of Acts. And all of them, filled with the Spirit, went out with the anointing. God trusted them to bear authority because he knew they had an honest interest in the welfare of their hearers. He knew they sought to be partners in life and work with their hearers. He knew they were worshippers, always interested in the celebration of the Deity.

James S. Stewart understood how this wondrous experience of being divinely claimed for service gives content and contagion not only to our selfhood, but to our service. And in his Beecher Lectures at Yale in 1952, he said to the preachers and seminarians gathered before him, "In particular, let the Christian preacher, the herald of the Good News of God think of his or her own life being interpenetrated with the very life of Jesus." You might say, "I must be more modest than that. I cannot think of myself in those terms, in that context." That's what being called to serve the Lord is all about. It grants one a context within which to view oneself with a sense of meaning. Anointing from God is imperative for our work, because in ourselves who is equal to the demands that are placed upon us, particularly in our time?

A SENSE OF AUTHORITY

The anointing of which I speak is usually sensed by our hearers through an authori-

ty that we bear. Our day, we are repeatedly told, is a day of eroded authority, religious and civil. As for the erosion of authority in religious matters, some blame this on the changing views about the nature and relevance of Scripture. Some view it as partly on the loss of confidence in the Church as a valid agency for social transformation. Some others, partly on the ineptness of preaching as a viable form of communication. I have never been convinced that preaching is not a viable means of communication. If there is an authority that tends our pulpit work then of what kind is it? Well, for one thing, it's a derived authority, it comes from the Lord. Romans 10:15 tells us, "And how shall anyone preach unless he or she has been sent?" It's a derived authority. Cultivate your spiritual life. Learn the facts. Study the theologians. Get all of this because you need all of this. But bend your knees in prayer and spend time with your Lord. Authority comes from the Lord, not from the knowledge we have attained in our course work. This is why Jesus stood out head and shoulders above all the others of his time who were teachers. He had an authority not like that of the Scribes.

That authority is also shared authority. It's not ours alone. Others in the ministry have it. We will preach as sharers in the spiritual community, and we bear credentials as ordained or authorized persons who are endorsed by some spiritual community in whose life and heritage we share. Yet again our authority issues from the scriptural truths which determine our message. I must tell you plainly, I have nothing to preach apart from what Scripture says. And usually when I stand to preach, I don't involve myself in a lot of inanities, a lot of personal stuff at the beginning nor in humor. I'm bent on doing my work when I stand up. Maybe that's a fault. Maybe I need to learn how to use humor. Perhaps. But people are not saved by humor. They are saved by the truth.

Still another authority that we bear as anointed persons is the authority of spiritual experience. To know the one for whom you are speaking grants you the kind of courage to say what must be said. My youth, so long in the past, took place during a period when the service of preaching was highly respected and even romanticized. The fact that I grew up within the Black church setting no doubt deepened my respect for the preaching task, because it was considered a high privilege to be a called person, to be able to confess and confirm that the Lord had summoned me to this task. My father was a preacher, my grandfather was a preacher. Both of them were pastors, so even the home circle blessed my perceptions of the preaching ministry as indeed a high calling. Sometime later I experienced the call to the preaching ministry, and I began to sense the demands which attend the call, familiarity with the biblical materials, trying to understand the range, the limitless range, of the human condition, trying to gain insight into the communication process, developing a love for people at the level of persons, developing a sustained openness to God in prayerful obedience. Those are the demands. Learning how to handle the demands opens one to the delights. An approved ministry will involve demands and delights. And the people get the benefit of all of this through the joy we share with them when the truth is given.

It was said of the world famous pianist Arthur Rubinstein when he was still playing vigorously in recitals at age 75. "He loves what he's doing, and he communicates that love to his audience, and the audience reciprocates." I remember sitting, hearing Rubinstein play, watching him there on the stage performing. He communicated the joy of music.

When you preach, let it be so much a part of your being that the joy comes through. At a time when it is true that no voice remains unchallenged, we must remember that many of our hearers will honestly question some truth we proclaim, and they'll question some tradition we represent. Some will exercise their freedom against being regimented by an authority we exercise, however legitimate it be. While some preachers view all of that as a curse and a problem, it can be treated positively, an occasion for love to win its way. This is why we must love people as well as the truth we are seeking to share with them, because when they sense an honest interest in their welfare, they tend finally to surrender to the truth.

We who preach must deal simultaneously on two fronts while in the pulpit. We must deal with the burden of our call, which makes us feel inadequate, and we must deal with the needs of the people, which demands that we be faithful. Interestingly, if we succeed well in handling the burden, people will experience what we have shared with them as joy because we will contagiously share ourselves, risking exposure, willing to be exposed for the sake of the truth.

A SENSE OF COMMUNITY

Preaching has been ordained by God to develop and nurture community. The end result of hearing is the bringing of a person into the fellowship of faith. Any preaching that does not involve bringing people together is preaching that only goes part way toward its goal. Togetherness, togetherness in the celebration of God. Let your witness be that of someone whose honest interest in their welfare is perceived by the hearer. Let your witness be that of someone who stands before them as a fellow worshipper. Let your witness be that of someone who is a recognized partner in life and work. Let your witness be that of someone who receives the people and lovingly under an anointing which comes from God to deal with them.

I'm closing. Like musicians, preachers have to deal sometimes with unrepentant individualists or those who initially resist authority, resist a tradition, and learning how to deal with this is a must, because the strain of it all can aggravate the sense of burden which we already feel as a preacher, because we're not up to this task by ourselves. When we are uneasy, people can perceive that. When the pressures of apparent resistance are not handled well, they know we're not equal to the task really. So our regard for the listener must be genuine. It must be genuine, even when we know they disagree with what we're saying.

Jesus had to deal with unrepentant individualists. Always He sought to make the truth clear. Always He thought to plan well so that His message would come through, so the fault would not be His as the communicator intent to be understood. The fault would always be that of the hearer who raised blocks.

Your business and mine is to effect an interaction between those who hear us and the word we are sent to share with them. And when we do that with some joy, grateful for the grace of God that called us to such a task, the preaching moment deepens and the people tend to register their affirmation to what we are accenting. There are all those times in worship when the spirit of the occasion becomes so evident, so obvious, that everyone is caught up in it. When people are fully open to it and the very

excitement stirred by this mediated meaning together with a sense of awe takes place, then the preacher is released and the people are released. Some expressiveness on the part of all is demanded. Some in our tradition would say, "Amen!" Some of us would say, "Preach it!" That's a verbal response. I hope you will have that experience sometime in your life. There's nothing that spurs you on like that. While this form of verbal response might not commend itself to every cultural setting, it is illustrative of the kind of togetherness that preaching can generate. This verbal amen from the worshipper is usually to affirm what the preacher is saying as a witness. It's periodic, it's intermittent, it's sometimes vociferously uttered. Sometimes it's encouraged by the preachers.

But these audible responses are not the only immediate indicators of togetherness. There are smiles which can assure you that you are coming through. There are other facial expressions which register. Sometimes there's a nodding of the head or a shaking of the head. When you see an intensity of gaze, when you see a person sitting on the edge of his or her seat, you know they are at one with the truth you are preaching.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was deeply moved by the expressions of togetherness that he saw between preacher and people while visiting Abyssinian Baptist Church in New York, across the six months of his stay in America during 1930-31. Albert Franklin Fisher, a Black seminarian at Union Theological Seminary at the time where both of them were studying, had befriended this young German scholar and wanted to expose Bonhoeffer to the rich and creative worship of that Black spiritual community as Bonhoeffer spent time visiting among the many churches in New York. So, Bonhoeffer did his field work at Abyssinian Church. He taught a Sunday School class there. The weekly service that he attended gave him insights into many aspects of that church's life. He saw how the programming of the church affected faith and work, piety and social outreach. A church life is more than worship when rightly understood. It is worship worked out rather than merely voiced. Well, years later, back in Germany, Bonhoeffer confessed what that time in the Black church setting had meant to his life and thought, but even before leaving America during that brief stay, Bonhoeffer told some of his German-speaking friends at Union Seminary what joy had been his to hear and see Black believers responding so openly with verbal responses even to his preaching when he preached. And he never felt so free to preach, to share the joy that was in his soul, as when he was preaching to a Black congregation. He wrote about it. It left a deep imprint upon his spirit.

Helmut Thielicke, another German theologian, also confessed how he was moved by the eventful worship he experienced while a guest preacher at a Black church in Chicago in 1962 during his second visit to the United States. As the responsive congregation entered into dialogue with his preaching, Thielicke became so uplifted, so free, that the experience registered itself as one of the most impressive in all his years of public ministry, and you know what a grand time of public and preaching ministry he had in Hamburg—some of you know. Here is what he reported in his autobiography about that unforgettable event in Chicago: "With regard to the worship services that I held in Chicago, I was especially impressed with a sermon that I gave in a Negro congregation. At first I was worried about my sermon there because people were concerned that the congregation would not understand me. However, they responded

enthusiastically and interrupted my sermon continually with loud exclamations like 'Yes, Lord!' 'Hallelujah!' 'Amen!' and many other exclamations, so that in turn inspired me in a way that I felt like I was taken by a huge wave, and almost experienced what is known in the English language as the story of Pentecost, and I became a willing instrument." There is nothing like the sharing whether verbally expressed or silently witnessed through a facial expression. When preaching brings people and preacher together in a moment of joy and glory in God's presence, there is nothing like it. But so prepare yourselves that when you stand, you can help to generate that joy so that when the people leave they are not talking about the greatness of the sermon, but they are talking about having seen the Lord high and lifted up, his train filling the temple. There is nothing that changes life more than that.