

Preaching Across the Political Divide

By Dottie Escobedo-Frank



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Focus Scripture: Acts 10:34-36 (CEB)

Peter said, “I really am learning that God doesn’t show partiality to one group of people over another. Rather, in every nation, whoever worships him and does what is right is acceptable to him. This is the message of peace he sent to the Israelites by proclaiming the good news through Jesus Christ: He is Lord of all!”

This is a difficult time to preach. It seems like someone is mad at our words (or at us) every week. We might have experienced PTSD, becoming hesitant to open emails or return calls or check texts ... from the numerous verbal assaults sent our way. What do we do? Not preach? Not say what we are inspired to say? Take the road that is easiest? We could do these things, but we will pay the price of not being genuine, of hiding, of resisting the real gospel message. The price will be personally costly, and can even cause burnout, distress, depression, and even the choice to leave ministry.

Instead, this is a time in which we need to state clearly the wrongs that exist in our world, even when people seem overly free to respond in displaced anger if their own opinion is not highlighted in the sermon. During this time of global and national socio-political-economic divide, we need to be extra attentive to the manner in which we preach. Neither watering down the message nor speaking in a fighting tone will bring change to our communities. Our words need to share the gospel news—which is challenging to live out in real time—and to bring a calm and peaceful spirit to the discussions that will follow the message. I believe there are a few things that will help us navigate this time, without ignoring the gospel charge to bring heaven-on-earth.

Guiding Principles

First, be sure to know your guiding principles. The scripture in Acts 10 is a statement by Peter, who had already experienced his share of divisions in the early church. He takes a posture of learning and growing, saying, “I am really learning ...” We need to assume that same posture of remaining a forever-student. Life will continue to teach us new things if we are willing to listen. And we don’t know the answer to everything, which is why we were made to be in community with each other. This posture of humility and grace and mystery is necessary when trust has been broken.

Peter then shares his insight: God doesn’t favor one group over another. The message of the good news proclaimed is that, in the way of Jesus Christ, God who sees, knows, and cares for all, is Lord of ALL. We don’t get to leave anyone out of the “all.”

What are your principle guidelines, the ones that are known or unrecognized, that structure the message you are called to proclaim? When unsure about our words, we can check them against our guidelines.

What is your Metaphor?

When giving a message that will be difficult for some and not-difficult-enough for others, it is wise to use a good metaphor. Metaphors need to be culturally relevant and commonly known. When talking about being one in Christ, being truly united across all differences, I have described the metaphor of a Table that is beyond infinity. It is so large that you can’t see the end of it. And at this Infinity Table, people from around the globe, from the past and the present and the future, all have a place. Everyone is invited.

Metaphors take us away from the struggle and help us visualize a new way of thinking. Visual images, connected to common occurrences, can open our minds and souls to things we haven’t yet conceived. This is the miracle of a good metaphor. Metaphors will help invite the congregation into the desired experience, before attending to the details and specifics of living out that gospel message.

Tell the Stories

One of the best ways to get an idea across to your community is to tell a story that embodies the message. Sometimes the story is included in describing the metaphor, but not always. Stories themselves have power that goes beyond the limits of rational, linear thinking and bring us to an experience that can usher in empathy, tears, or laughter. Stories teach us what outlines, facts, and statistics cannot. Jesus used parables and stories as his main communication method. And we are still telling his stories today.

When you tell a story, weave its message in and out of the whole sermon. This helps the hearer to remember the value given in the story. We are people who need to hear things more than once. So let the story do its magic and open our thoughts and our hearts to the ways of God.

Stories don't have to be fantastic events. The simple stories of everyday actions can bring home a point just as much (maybe more) than the stories that are of miraculous events. Stories don't need to have s/heroes. Everyday stories are more relatable and "knowable."

*Stir the Imagination for Peace and:
Cooperation in the Middle of Change*

So now that we have developed guidelines, worked the magic of metaphors, and told the stories, what is required of us as preachers who give life to the Word sent our way?

In seminary, I spent some time studying the church's role/reaction in the time of the Holocaust/Shoah. What I found was that many pastors became silent in the horror that was surrounding them because they were trying to survive. While we can't imagine their situation or fears, we can learn from hindsight. When writing the series of papers on this time in history, I wondered how history would have changed if the pastors had found a way to use their voice more?

We have a responsibility to speak the truth. Our love for God and God's world compels us to be prophetic, courageous, and loving. All three are necessary during times of great divide. During this current moment, are we saying what needs to be said, or will future generations look back on us and wonder why we didn't have the courage to tell the truth in light of the gospel message? Will our children and grandchildren suffer the consequences of our near-silence on earth care, racism, global poverty, and migration of persons around the world? Will we be the ones to invite in a new way to talk to each other; one with respect, a listening ear, and a desire to learn how to better live together? Can we even begin to imagine what can happen to our world if we walk across the divided spaces to hold hands with all our neighbors?

The world needs preachers today to be truthful and courageous. And they need us to speak in the manner of love. This requires that we are strong and healthy and unaffected as we receive the often-negative feedback from the discouraged disbelievers who have no hope left. The world, and the church, needs us to imagine peace, welcoming of neighbors, care for the earth, and new ways to talk to each other.

So, take a moment, remembering Peter's words, and imagine what our world could be if love, peace, and care were central to our being. Let your imagination run free, and allow the Spirit to blow in your soul with new ideas, creative methods, and with the courage of the voice you hear within. God is near you, Preacher! Do not be afraid. "Take thou authority" of your ordination vows. And know you are not alone. God is with you. And we do this work together.