Cross and Craft: Two Elements of a Lutheran Homiletic

Richard Lischer

As you might imagine, to return to this room after an absence of twenty-nine years sets this lecture apart from any other I could possibly give in any other setting. Wyneken Hall was a sacred space for worship. Even as a senior seminarian I did not have the chutzpah to volunteer to be one of the student preachers in my final year; therefore, my memories of this room are memories of others proclaiming the Word, including my own homiletics teachers, Richard Caemmerer, Andrew Weyerman, and George Hoyer. I salute them as well as Professor Emeritus Francis Rossow of the current faculty who taught a course in English composition at Concordia Senior College and a marvelous course in Shakespeare, but since he did not teach me homiletics, he cannot be blamed for my shortcomings as a preacher.

Now I teach something called "homiletics" from an office located, quite literally, at the corner of Science and Research Drives at the center of a university that, whenever it receives a piece of mail addressed only to "Professor of Homiletics," invariably routes it through the Medical Center. There it shuttles from Orthopedics to Pediatrics to Obstetrics until some wit writes at the bottom of the envelope, "Try Anesthesiology."

Thirty years ago, when I was a student at Concordia Seminary, preaching was at low ebb around the nation. The preacher, as Amos Wilder put it, was like someone speaking into a dead microphone. We'd had enough of words for a while–Lyndon Johnson's promises, Richard Nixon's lies, the generals' doublespeak, to say nothing of the platitudes of our own parents. By the late 1960s even the civil rights movement, spearheaded by a man who simply identified himself as "a Baptist preacher," had wearied of the most glorious rhetoric of the twentieth century and had given way to the age of dialogue and introspection. During my senior year at Concordia, Paul Tillich and Thomas Merton died the same week–the one after a lifetime of dialoguing with philosophy and psychotherapy, the other on a mission of dialogue with Buddhists in Thailand. The preacher's "thus says the Lord" seemed a discordant intrusion on this "Miracle of Dialogue."

Today the atmosphere has changed. Charismatic performers such as Billy Graham, Jesse Jackson, and Robert Schuller hold a fascination even for non-

Dr. Richard Lischer is Professor of Homiletics in the Divinity School at Duke University in Durham, NC. This article was originally given as a Wenchel Lecture at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, MO, on April 1, 1998.

believers. Preachers like Tony Compollo pack 'em in on college campuses. News magazines run profiles of great preachers around the world. Even in academia social historians and cultural anthropologists are turning increasingly to the study of sermons to document the ordinary life and language of their subjects.

We Christians are a hard-to-satisfy bunch. When preaching is out of vogue, we worry about the future of the church. When it appears to be gaining in respect we worry that the Word of God may be a little too popular. When too few students register for my classes, I agonize. When there are too many, I question their motives.

In an academic career that has been entirely ecumenical, it has been interesting to me to note the high reputation Lutherans enjoy for their preaching. "We know you Lutherans take the pulpit seriously," some say. Or, "Lutheran preaching is different." Yes, but how is it different? What is it that we take so seriously? In a culture that, as Luke would say, spends its time "in nothing except telling or hearing something new" (Acts 17:21), what do we Lutherans have to offer as a witness and contribution to the church's practice of preaching?

Let me try to answer my own question by focusing on two indispensable elements in all preaching. The first is the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, those events which created the church and its proclamation. The second is the preacher's attention to the craft or rhetoric of preaching by means of which we convey the reality of God's love.

The problem that all preachers face is putting these two elements together. The preacher may have completed the necessary exegetical and theological investigations of a passage of Scripture. He's listened to the voices of his parish and to his own heart and watched CNN for the latest breaking news and scandals. The time comes to close the commentaries and turn off the TV and face the question, "What word shall I utter?" The preacher may find himself walking around an empty room or standing in a deserted sanctuary. He is full of faith but empty of the power of speech. "The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart, that is, the word of faith which we preach" (Rom. 10:8). It is so near that you can feel the breath of its power on the back of your neck, but also so elusive that you can think of absolutely nothing to say.

Little is said in the New Testament about this particular difficulty of preaching. We never meet a preacher who is having trouble thinking of something to say. Preaching may be a dangerous activity in the New Testament, but never difficult. That it will be accompanied by suffering is taken for granted. Paul simply portrays the Word of God as an act of power and identifies that power with the death and resurrection of Jesus as it is mediated to the church by the Holy Spirit. When you speak in that power something happens, something whose depth and richness causes other forms of discourse ("wisdom") to pale by comparison.

The Bible offers no explanation of or rules for preaching but only the affirmation of a mystery in which we are privileged to participate.

This sounds rather abstract until we realize that it is precisely the power that we seek in preaching. We want to participate in this mystery. I don't want to get up Sunday after Sunday, just me, armed with little more than my own

limited range of ideas and my own endearing foibles. I want my message to be a part of something larger than my own talent.

The discipline of homiletics also recognizes the urgency of this desire but, ironically, it often turns to rhetoric for its satisfaction. I have been teaching homiletics for eighteen years, and it has been fun to watch the design schemes come and go with the regularity of Paris fashions or Yankee managers. We have fiddled with points, stories, moves, and style in search of the perfect glass slipper of form, hoping against hope that it will transform the dullest sermon into an exciting princess. However, I am reminded of the line from Robert Frost: "I gave up fire for form/till I was cold." Preaching experiences renewal in theological rather than rhetorical reflection.

I remember when I was a student at Concordia Seminary one of my professors said words to this effect, "Some of you are already gifted preachers; some of you will never be." I remember thinking, "How did I stumble into a Calvinist seminary?" Contrary to this theory of double predestination, I have known over the years a number of experienced parish pastors who have suddenly and inexplicably, without warning, become better preachers. It's a miracle! On close investigation, their homiletical transformation turned out to be the result of a spiritual transformation. They had appropriated at some deeper level the disciplined freedom that is available to all of us who have been crucified and raised with Jesus. I want to say more about that later.

When preaching is spoken of exclusively in terms of technique, one is tempted to reduce preaching to communication, as if communication–and not the truth–were an end it itself. As we know, however, there is no lack of communication in the Information Age. But truth is as scarce as it ever was.

Paul's shorthand expression for preaching is "the word of the cross" (1 Cor. 1:18). He calls it "folly," that is, *moria*, stupid, a violation of taste.[1] Crucified speech proclaims an alternative word to the wisdom of culture. What CNN calls wisdom, God dismisses as empty. What the world dismisses as folly, God anoints with power. Why? Because this apparent foolishness, emptiness, is animated by the very presence of the one who was publicly crucified and raised from the dead. That violation of theological expectations surely enough produced a violation of rhetorical norms.

Paul goes out of his way to warn the Corinthians not to evaluate his sermons on their rhetorical merits: "I did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God in lofty words or wisdom. I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus and him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:1-2). For this he received some bad sermon evaluations: "For they say his letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak and his speech is of no account" (2 Cor. 10:9). All that we can conclude about preaching from the apostle's comments is that he told the story simply from the Scriptures, that he trembled at the implications of his own message, and that the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus was the heartbeat of his homiletics.

---

[1]John Beaudean, Jr., *Paul's Theology of Preaching* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1988), 97.

When we meditate on the resurrection of Jesus, we find that it too has implications for language. From the very beginning the resurrection was a speaking event. At no time does the resurrection of Jesus lie fallow as an unproclaimed fact about which one might muse, "Isn't that interesting?" In one of his sermons Luther called that approach to the resurrection *todte Historia*, dead history. The resurrection is the result of a metaphorical call: God called forth Jesus from the tomb, the way your mother used to get you up in the morning, which was an event foreshadowed by another cry, "Lazarus come out!," all of which was made possible by a creative call to the primordial chaos, "Let there be...." The disciples do not decide to preach because they have come to their senses but because they have been preached to first by the angel, then the risen One. We exist as a church because we have been "called out."

Bound up with the event–more words–is the commission to "go and tell," to baptize, and to make disciples. The angel seems to be saying, "Look, there is a kind of speech that is commensurate with this new event called *risen*. It is risen speech. Your speech did not create this event, but it completes it."

Linguistic philosophers tell us that any kind of creative speaking is like a resurrection in that it creates some new insight, relationship, or attitude. Here, in my view, the doctrine of creation touches upon the ordinary powers of language. There is a sense in which nothing exists for us until it is spoken. For example, the black prophet speaks to a rigidly segregated nation that has no image for what he is about to say: "I see a day," he cries, "when black people and white people will sit down at table together and treat one another as kin because they *are* kin." From that moment, the reality of brotherhood and sisterhood begins to exist, because someone has articulated it. Such is the power of risen speech.[2]

You attend a wedding, and if you don't hear the words "I now pronounce you husband and wife," you're not positive anything has changed. Even people who know that they are forgiven by God find it necessary to say, "In Jesus Christ, you are forgiven."

About three days after I was ordained, I was called in the middle of the night to a hospital I didn't know in a town I didn't know (Alton, IL), where a woman I didn't know had a rupturing gall bladder. I got lost on the back roads and in the fog, and when I arrived at the hospital at so late an hour I had a difficult time gaining entry. When I rushed to her room, she and her husband were gone. I dashed through several NO ADMITTANCE doors to the operating room, which was closed. I found her gurney parked in a small dark laundry alcove near the O.R. It was a dingy little space with nothing on the wall but a religious picture of St. Joseph and a fire extinguisher. My parishioner was disheveled and scared. Her husband said, "Thank God you are here," as if I had just landed in a jet to perform the surgery. She had large, frightened eyes, and I, three days into the ordained ministry, did not know what to say. All that came to me was the liturgy. So I said, "The Lord be with you." They replied, "And with thy spirit." I said, "Lift

[2]See Richard Lischer, *The Preacher King: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Word That Moved America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

up your hearts," and they said, "We lift them to the Lord." Suddenly what was disheveled and panicked regained its order, and the Lord was once again the Lord of the alcove. The presence of God among us was palpable. I don't think I "preached" in the alcove, but the Word created something that sustained two frightened parishioners and one inexperienced pastor. Such is the power of risen speech.

Every Sunday the word of preaching breaks into the silence of a room gone still. Metaphorically speaking, those who proclaim the risen Christ give voice to those who are dead and to those who are alive but languish in silence. "Prophesy to the bones," the Lord says to Ezekiel, "and say, 'O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord.'" It is no accident that so many of the great expressions of the Gospel are spoken in cemeteries. Whenever I visit my friend in the nursing home, I am always shaken by how quiet it is there. The place needs music, children, and laughter. Jeremiah's final portrait of doom is the picture of a silent world.

Preachers get as nervous as any with prolonged silence. We have filled the silence with bold affirmations of our personal survival. The Gospel certainly has to do with our persons and with our survival. But resurrection is a bigger event than that. It first witnesses to God's own divinity. To raise anything from death is exactly what one might expect from the God who mastered the chaos, created Leviathan, and parted the waters of the Red Sea. The raising of "this Jesus," as Luke puts it in Acts 2:32, testifies to God's faithfulness to those whom He has chosen. Resurrection also witnesses to God's commitment to the whole creation, especially those who suffer sickness, poverty, and oppression. Theologian Miroslav Volf recently lectured on the unlikely topic, "The Trinity Is Our Social Program." He wants to indicate that the interpenetrating love of the three persons of the Holy Trinity is not a piece of abstract theology separated from our social and political commitments, but it potentially orders all our duties and relationships. Thirty years ago Volf's teacher, Jurgen Moltmann, made a similar argument for the resurrection of Jesus. In too many theologies the resurrection is literally an appendix to the life and teachings of Jesus. No one knows what to do with it. Moltmann argued that because God was fully incarnated into this world, His crucifixion takes up the suffering of all, and His resurrection effects God's own protest against suffering. If you want to know where God stands on AIDS, Rwanda, crack-cocaine, land mines, guns, war, and death itself, look at the open tomb. The Resurrection is our social program.

Now, what kind of preaching does the resurrection produce? What is the connection between the theology of preaching and the Sunday sermon?

Like all preachers, Lutherans are always walking a line between meeting people where they are in their lives and transforming those lives–both through the agency of language. Luther repeatedly amazes with his ability to render the things of God in human vesture, to meet us where we are. It wasn't just the physical world of Germany that he reproduced in his narratives, but also *our* human feelings and failures. I think of all the wonderful Christmas sermons excerpted by Roland Bainton, my favorite passages is the following:

> Let us, then, meditate upon the Nativity just as we see it happening in our own babies. I would not have you contemplate the deity of Christ, the majesty of Christ, but rather his flesh.... Divinity may terrify man. Inexpressible majesty will crush him. That is why Christ took on our humanity, save for sin, that he should not terrify us but rather that with love and favor he should console and confirm.[3]

The language of preaching is capable of creating a world in which, over time, we all find a place. In our sermons, we meet people by creating what Fred Craddock calls "the nod of recognition."

But the sermon also contains what Craddock calls "the shock of recognition." It presents an alternative to the unresurrected chatter of our culture. One of the vexing things about our sensorium is that every theological claim we make for words our culture affirms and absorbs. If we say, "Language creates a world," Madison Avenue says, "Indeed it does." If we preachers say, "Images are so important," CNN replies, "We think so, too." "Yes," we counter, "but our word is one of death and resurrection," and before the words are out of our mouth we meet them in greeting cards and aphorisms scotch-taped to locker-room walls.

We are getting absorbed into someone else's world. It is the world of easy information, the dominant symbol of which is the monitor, the screen, by whose flickering light every knowledge is available and any experience is possible. It is the world of psychological explanation, by whose wisdom all is understood and all is forgiven. It is the world of democratic capitalism, which guarantees a common set of values and a universal language to express them. It is the world of spirituality that rounds off the rough edges of ancient creeds and exclusive claims. The only hedge against total absorption is the priority of the Christian proclamation. If we don't start *from* Christ we will never get *to* Christ.

In recent decades homiletics has been uniformly critical of sermons that begin with the priority of the Word of God, preferring instead to build the sermon on the authority of the needs, capacities, and experiences of the listener.

A recent book by the sociologist Marsha Witten substantiates this disturbing trend in Christian preaching. In her book, *All Is Forgiven: The Secular Message in American Protestantism*, Witten analyzes forty-seven Presbyterian and Southern Baptist sermons on the Parable of the Prodigal Son for their secular assumptions. Her conclusions are depressingly predictable. She finds that the preachers have accommodated the Bible's own words about God, sin, forgiveness, and reconciliation to the privatization of faith, therapeutic concerns, and utilitarian religion.

For example, she notices that more than one preacher turns the Prodigal Son into a victim of the complexity of the modern world or tells the story as a classic example of sibling rivalry. One preacher concludes that it's probably a healthy move for him to get out from under his older brother's shadow.

She notes that many of the preachers proclaim the psychological or social benefits of being a Christian without regard for the faith's integral elements

---

[3]Roland Bainton, *Martin Luther's Christmas Book* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, n.d.), 33.

such as cross, resurrection, discipleship, and obedience. It is interesting to note that in the first chapter of her book Witten personally dissociates herself from the Christian faith whose language she is about to analyze. By the last chapter, however, it is the non-believing social scientist who concludes her study with an expression of concern for the integrity of Christian preaching.[4]

Someone might ask, "What's the difference between what Luther was doing with his story telling that contemporized the text, sometimes in a fanciful way, and what these preachers are doing with their psychologizing?" It's a fair question. It seems to me that the modern preachers are retelling the story in such a way as to reduce God's role in it. God is there as the back-lighting for the set. In Luther, on the other hand, little German villages are portrayed as the theater of God's redemption. Indeed, God is so present that the ordinary is transfigured in the very telling of the story.

One of the most important effects of death and resurrection begins in the preacher's life rather than in the preacher's sermon. The preacher is set free from the burden of preaching. In a well-known passage from his lectures on homiletics, Karl Barth says that the preacher stands between two advents, the first and second coming of our Lord.[5] He means that the preacher is not condemned forever to making relevant a figure from the ancient past. Can you imagine any greater burden than having to conjure a meaningful Christ from old materials? To make him *real*? No wonder preachers burn out, if they think they have to produce a relevant God for a demanding audience. Standing between two advents means that the subject matter of our speech is not always receding into the murky past (as all things historical must) but is waiting to meet up with our words.

We could not have preaching at a funeral if we did not recognize the risen Christ out ahead of our grief. We could not speak a courageous word about justice based only on the Hebrew prophets or our own indignation, if we had not already met Christ out ahead in the poor, the homeless, and the incarcerated. Preaching is a way of joining up with the new creation already in progress. All of which considerably enlarges the discipline of homiletics from the formation of the sermon to the formation of persons who will know Jesus when they meet Him in their ministries. I know a man who became a better preacher, by all standard measurements, when he embraced his own ministry to the homeless.

If we speak under the sign of death and resurrection, something in our preaching will die. What dies is the centrality of the preacher's ego in the event of preaching. What dies is the scavenger hunt for originality, the antithesis of which was the ancient church's practice of reading the sermons of others. What dies is the quest for *my personal style*, which is contradicted by Augustine's revolution in homiletics by which he insisted that preachers allow their style to be determined by the *style* of the text.

---

[4]Marsha Witten, *All Is Forgiven: The Secular Message in American Protestantism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 60 and 140.

[5]Karl Barth, *Homiletics*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Donald E. Daniels (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 54.

Resurrection preaching belongs to something larger than my personal ability to generate joy in an audience. Think of preaching as a conversation at an enormous, glittering, delightful party. You and I arrive many centuries after the party has gotten under way and will, alas, depart long before it is over, but while we are there how blessed we are to take a small part in the conversation.

The most important recent development in homiletics is the recognition that preaching is the church telling its story. In this respect Richard Caemmerer was prophetic in titling his book *Preaching for the Church*.[6]

One Sunday morning last summer we had a service at Duke Chapel with the title, "Cancer Survivors Sunday." Officials of the university's hospital persuaded the Chapel that such a gesture would improve town/gown relations and, since nothing much happens in the dead of summer anyway, why not? The service turned out to be another Easter Sunday, with people crowded onto the back steps and standing in the aisles. I found a place to sit in a concrete niche at the back of the west transept, beside a young man from Korea. The sermon, which addressed the story of the storm on the Sea of Galilee, caused us all to think of God's presence in the midst of suffering. As we prepared for the Eucharist we exchanged the peace of the Lord. A few minutes later, the young man next to me leaned over and with no introduction said, "I had a friend who committed suicide. What do you say to that? I wonder what I could tell 'my friends' to answer that?" We had a long and thoughtful conversation in which we bore witness to one another. In fact, if others noticed, they might have thought us ill-mannered, for this conversation continued in animated fashion as we stood in line and approached the table, only ceasing long enough for us to receive the body and blood of the risen Lord. In that case, the verbal proclamation was making antiphons all over the church. And the church, through its identification with the cancer sufferers, its Eucharist, its mutual care and fellowship, and all the other "marks" of its existence, was manifesting the resurrection. The best resurrection preaching, then, occurs when the whole church is the preacher.

If something must die in such preaching, something else must rise. Here one is tempted to say that every sermon should express the joy of victory, that the preacher should be unfailingly upbeat, and let it go at that. Powerful, positive, purposeful preaching! Let every sermon be an "Ode to Joy" with no minor chords allowed. But, as Rowan Williams so astutely points out, the resurrection doesn't just cancel the crucifixion, with glory replacing defeat, but real joy arises *from* despair.[7]

In a sermon on the burial of Jesus, Paul Tillich tells the story of a man who testified at the Nueremburg Trials of how he had fled a camp near Wilna, Poland and had been forced to live in a Jewish cemetery. In one of his poems he described a young woman in a nearby grave giving birth to a baby. In her delivery she was assisted by an old man dressed in a shroud. When the newborn uttered its first cry, the old man lifted the child to heaven and said, "Great God,

[6]Richard R. Caemmerer, *Preaching for the Church: Theology and Technique of the Christian Sermon* (St. Louis, Concordia, 1959).

[7]Rowan Williams, *Resurrection* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1982), 101.

hast thou sent the Messiah to us? For who else than the Messiah himself can be born in a grave?" Who indeed?[8]

Those who preach the resurrection do so from territory that has not been fully liberated. Resurrection preaching features joy with an edge, an in-your-face, "nevertheless" quality–like a friend I had who went dancing the night before she was to begin her third round of chemotherapy. According to her Christian philosophy, the best dancing is done on the devil's dance floor.

Williams also notices that the episodes surrounding the resurrection of Jesus contain language that is both familiar and "odd." Jesus is perceived as an ordinary gardener, but He is also a stranger who can't be held. The risen Christ passes through doors, and yet He bears three-dimensional wounds in His flesh. He walks on water like a phantasm, and He cooks real fish over an open fire. But strangest of all, we can only proclaim His presence in His physical absence.

Is it possible for our sermons to be as real and as *odd* as the New Testament? We continue its strangeness by proclaiming the peace of Christ to people in the midst of social, race, gender, and culture wars. We announce the victory of Christ in dingy hospital chapels and cemeteries. We celebrate an organic relationship with one another in a society of individuals. We practice obedience in a culture dedicated to rights.

Many of us try, instinctively, to remove any trace of oddness from the Christian message. We make sermon illustrations which associate Christian truth with universally-recognized truths, whether in psychology, politics, or morality. We clutter our sermons with Duke of Wellington stories and other "illustrations" of famous heroes, but the examples of ordinary saints are left on the cutting-room floor. Somehow, they are not real. We tacitly accept the world's definition of "the world" and humbly try to accommodate the Gospel to it, as if the cross and resurrection have not deranged the old world and started a new one. We preach in churches, but too rarely do we depict the world of the church with a reality, language, and goodness of its own. Those who listen to sermons long to see a believable world of Christians depicted in them, one in which they have a speaking part.

Popular spirituality prefers nuggets of inspiration to serious talk about discipleship and suffering. The preacher can't help but envy other users of words in our culture. Politicians, gurus, lawyers, comics, pundits, savants: They are so smooth. They have but to open their lips and out flows the spirit of the age. Preachers, on the other hand, often appear to be out of place or distraught, as though fighting off a swarm of bees. Their language emerges from pastoral participation in the struggles between life and death. Commenting on the syntactically broken style of speech in the apostle Paul, Joseph Sittler observes, "Where grammar cracks, grace erupts," and then he adds a word of warning, "What God has riven asunder let no preacher too suavely join together."[9]

---

[8]Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948), 165.

[9]Quoted in Richer Lischer, *Theories of Preaching: Selected Readings in the Homiletic Tradition* (Durham, NC: The Labyrinth Press, 1987), 247.

It is not the business of theology to dictate style. But the resurrection of Jesus does have a rhetoric, and we are only beginning to see its contours. We are only beginning to notice how strange it is when compared to our own homiletical instincts. And we are not a little astonished at what risen speech can mean to those who live in a dying world.

Copyright and Use:

As an ATLAS user, you may print, download, or send articles for individual use according to fair use as defined by U.S. and international copyright law and as otherwise authorized under your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement.

No content may be copied or emailed to multiple sites or publicly posted without the copyright holder(s)' express written permission. Any use, decompiling, reproduction, or distribution of this journal in excess of fair use provisions may be a violation of copyright law.

This journal is made available to you through the ATLAS collection with permission from the copyright holder(s). The copyright holder for an entire issue of a journal typically is the journal owner, who also may own the copyright in each article. However, for certain articles, the author of the article may maintain the copyright in the article. Please contact the copyright holder(s) to request permission to use an article or specific work for any use not covered by the fair use provisions of the copyright laws or covered by your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement. For information regarding the copyright holder(s), please refer to the copyright information in the journal, if available, or contact ATLA to request contact information for the copyright holder(s).

About ATLAS:

The ATLA Serials (ATLAS®) collection contains electronic versions of previously published religion and theology journals reproduced with permission. The ATLAS collection is owned and managed by the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) and received initial funding from Lilly Endowment Inc.

The design and final form of this electronic document is the property of the American Theological Library Association.