

"GREAT PREACHERS" ?

OCCASION of this Thinksheet: Indirectly, I was asked, by somebody working on a doctorate in homiletics, to provide a short list of "great preachers." Indirectly, I made three responses which were indirectly sent to the student, who indirectly thanked me for "inspiring" him. (Oh, these digital minicircles of communication!). Then it occurred to me that some of you, my readers, might be interested in my three (slightly edited) finger-responses, revealing what I have to say now about preaching.

The first email

Since only God knows who're the country's "best preachers" (a question even worse than the "great preachers"), the question strikes me first as a joke and then as arrogant. My next thought: In our celebrity culture, "best" = "best-known" (on which, accordingly, Christians should exercise the hermeneutics of suspicion: is today's American sufficiently knowledgeable about preaching to be a competent judge of preachers?).

My next thought: In our culture of commodification, the self-promoting preacher (who turns him/her-self into a salable commodity) will rise to enough prominence to be in line for the judging contest for "best preacher." (In candor, at this point I gave the student the name of a nationally prominent self-promoting preacher some tout as great/best--but I'll not repeat that ungenerosity here.) Can the preacher in the Church of Id--censoring sermon topics likely to get him into trouble--qualify even as good (leaving alone "better" & "best")? Or is this doctoral student interested only in sermon-quality (not in preacher-quality)?

My next thought: Is being alive one of the specs for the "best preachers"? In my 86 years, I've heard some awesomely excellent preachers (Buttrick [my first pastor], Fosdick, Kagawa, Niemoeller, Schweitzer, Shailer Mathews, Reinhold Niebuhr,....) but they're all dead.

A final thought: Instead of choosing *living* "best preachers", the student would do better (I think) to select the characteristics of great preaching/preachers, & then identify as best preachers those, dead or alive, exhibiting these characteristics.

The second email

I must add a few comments:

1 If the list must be limited to the living, I'll add Bill Coffin. The last time Loree & I were in Riverside Church when he was pastor, he began by saying "I haven't had breakfast yet." Whereupon he descended from the high pulpit &, at its base, drank orange juice, ate a bowl of cereal, & had a cup of coffee. Returning to the pulpit, he said something like this: "For the full person, a complete Sunday-morning includes visible food & the invisible food the Lord offers those who come to church. Skipping church is starving yourself, & multitudes thus go through the week spiritually malnourished."

2 Great preaching & great listening are correlates, & the essence of great listening is great expectation. Have you been in leaning-forward audiences, the hearers in high hope as the speaker (preacher, orator) rises to speak? I can recall several such occasions--to mention one, a 1941 sermon of Geo.W.Trutt, at that time the Southern Baptists' most eminent pulpiter (& the eponymous ancestor in the name of Baylor U.'s theological seminary)....

3which raises the question of distinguishing between great preachers & great

WIZARD OF ID



by Brant Parker and Johnny Hart



orators. My father (in electoral politics & free associations) was a better orator than I am a preacher, & I prize his 10-vol. THE LIBRARY OF GREAT ORATIONS. The convergence of the two skills is rare; M.L.King Jr. is an example. Abraham Lincoln preached three times to the Illinois church I pastored for 10½ years, every time during an electoral campaign--or was he orating? Or were they orations, & the people remembered that they sounded like sermons?

4 On the apprenticeship-by-book model, the heart of homiletics used to be the study of great sermons. In Homiletics 101 (in 1937), we had to master what the professor considered the ten greatest sermons--including one I looked at today (in my 1873 edition of Fred.W.Robertson's SERMONS Preached at Brighton [838pp. of fine print]): "Obedience the Organ of Spiritual Knowledge." (On the model of Augustine's *Credo ut intelligam* ["I believe so that I may understand."], I might say this sermon's message is *Obsequi ut intelligam* ["I obey/follow so that I may understand."]: believing is the mind obeying, & obedience is knowledge in active mode.)

5 Horace Bushnell's definition of preaching as "the communication of truth through personality" brings to mind some seminary fellow-students of mine who achieved eminence in preaching, each in his own style: Carlyle Marney (word-master); Clarence Jordan (heart-master--& cofounder of Koinonia Farms, reincarnated as Habitat for Humanity); Robert Bratcher (quiet expositor, & the translator of the whole GOOD NEWS BIBLE: Good News for Modern Man); & Gordon Cosby (preaching to empower the laity, founder of Wash.DC's Church of the Savior). Among them, the specific focuser on improving preaching was Carlyle, founder of Interpreter's House, Lake Junaluska, NC--the "preacher's preacher," "priestly prophet", whose organ-like baritone was so powerful (even when he was in conversational low-voice) that I remember that everybody knew where he was among the hundreds of us as we gathered in the common room prior to meals. He was tall & handsome & diffident about the seductive beauty of his voice, which (said he) was worse than useless unless matched by the beauty & power of the gospel message through his life & mouth. In the same state (NC) a few years earlier, the young man who won the state sales contest for the Fuller Brush Co. (viz., Billy Graham) was concerned about the use to which he should put his sales-power. (Carlyle was two years older than Billy.) Few who are called to preach are in any way spectacularly gifted as were those four seminary-mates of mine, but all are gifted & able so to exercise their gifts as to hear, (as we say) at the end of the day, "Well done, good and trustworthy slave...; enter into the joy of your master" (Mt.25.21 NRSV).

But there's this further thing to be said about studying the spectacular achievers among preachers: preachers may, by this exploration, better perceive each his/r own gifts, & attend unto their care & feeding.

(Some of my readers may not know that the seminary situation I referenced in the ¶ immediately above was pre-WWII Southern Baptist, Louisville, KY. The two largest churches in the USA are highly sacramental: the central sacrament in the largest, the RC, is the mass; in the second largest, the SB, the central sacrament [though the two "ordinances of the gospel" are practiced] is preaching.)

The third email

...& of course Billy Graham, still (though barely) among the living.

Billy's a clear example of preaching-proper ("keryx," official announcer of news, as Hermes-Mercury for the gods). The Christian preacher bears news in the form of a demanding Story, a transcendent Story demanding human response--so the preacher is not Christian, or the speaking Christian is not preaching, unless at least implicitly s/he does what Billy always does: he "gives the invitation" (as do most evangelical pastors openly every Sunday morning). (In Ps.71.17-18, "tell a story" is the root meaning of the vb. twice trd. in NRSV as "proclaim".)

Preaching-proper is not teaching, but in weekly worship the pastor must teach as well as preach. In the strict sense of preaching, this eliminates pastors from the category of preachers & therefore from the possibility of being "best" or "great" preachers. Billy has always been clear on this. In his '66 National Council of Churches Triennium exchange with me, his first response to me (after saying he didn't get to go to seminary) was this: "My job [as preacher] is to provide students for Dr.Elliott [as teacher]."...Like a diamond, preaching has many facets & is hard to define; but, as a senator said of pornography, you know it when you see/hear it.