

Very early this morning (27Aug84), the sun's rays, almost parallel with the garden, spiked their way through the althea, which is in high bloom with hundreds of blossoms. My heart was singing praises as my eyes looked down on the beauty from upstairs--and suddenly I saw a yellow hummingbird darting in and out of the purple flowers. My eyes and heart could HOLD the hummingbird because they'd HELD the flowers: if one never looks steadily at flowers, one never sees a hummingbird--nor does one if one picks the flowers....so here's one more thinksheet on a familiar theme of mine, viz., ATTENTION --in this instance, vis-a-vis preaching.

1. Have you ever held in your hand a small bird and felt its throbbing life? An ancient story I find repulsive is of a king who, holding a very small bird in each hand, asked a condemned criminal to guess which bird was alive, the criminal to go free if guessing correctly. When the criminal chose, the king squeezed to death the bird in that hand--and the criminal was sent to his death. Some things are to be held, but gently, without squeezing; congregations, e.g., during the sermon.
2. And violins. A favorite Yehudi Menuhin quote of mine (the Jewish fiddler who knows how to hold life, also, without squeezing): "Holding a violin is like holding a young bird. It is vibrating under your touch and you must hold it without squeezing it....It is a good thing to cultivate the feeling of those sympathetic vibrations in dealing with people." Life-wisdom! A transfer-value from the skill of sound to the skill of soul, of self, of society.
3. Preaching's two primary energies are (1) love and (2) the control and release of transfer-values, "meta-phors." Underneath is the experience and conviction of continuity in reality: a truth discovered/revealed somewhere is transposable everywhere; and, love-driven, the preacher explores for the otherwhere(s) that can most persuasively bear the burden of the truth s/he's trying to convey--bear the burden, and illumine.
4. Preaching's search for the most useful otherwhere(s) is a kind of re-ordering of reality in the interest of seeing, of vision, of attending to a pattern having power to shape life. Pattern-recognition is important in both the natural and the human sciences, and in the arts including preaching, which both (1) points to patterns in "nature" and "grace" and (2) creates patterns--in which action it's similar to music, of which our Jewish fiddler has this to say: "Music creates order out of chaos; for rhythm imposes unanimity upon the divergent, melody imposes continuity upon the disjointed, and harmony imposes compatability upon the incongruous." Preachers may profit from meditating on each of these three dimensions of music. A good sermon has rhythm, melody, harmony.
5. I have some gift of love and more gift of metaphor, but only gradually have I learned to hold (attention) without squeezing (overdemanding of my hearer). Yesterday I had to preach a sermon with a harsh edge, cutting across the behavior of most of my listeners. In preparing, I prayed for the grace that though hardness must abound, gentleness would even more abound, communicating that censure (whose proper mood is anger) be under the control of concern (whose proper mood is love). After worship, many expressed conscience-strikeness, three said they'd amend their lives accordingly, one said (a visitor from Greenwich, CN) he'd never before heard every word of a sermon, and none seemed angry. Not that a faithful preacher of the gospel can always so preach as to raise no anger--but much anger I've raised in the past has been unproductive of love and of life-amendment, and that because my love was insufficient and my skill less than it is now.
6. I cannot finish without dealing with humor (in which I'm as much gifted as I am in metaphor). Mort Sahl and Sammy Davis Jr.: great humorists with great messages. Humor, a cultivable preacher-skill.