

## GETTING IN FRONT OF THE TEXT: RICOEURAN HERMENEUTICS AND BEYOND

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### From Sermon to Social Action

*"But her brain was not interested in the future."* - From *Beloved* by Toni Morrison

*Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest; whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.—Philippians 4:8 (KJV)*

*"Preachers have to learn to live in eternity, while in the midst of time."* - Samuel DeWitt Proctor

*"We are called upon to wrestle with the great idea."* - Howard Thurman

The text is an action and the word "action" means to be propelled forward in a certain physical sense. So getting in front of the text means moving forward in a new and transformative way. Moreover, this further means that at some point, sooner rather than later, the preacher has to move from the high and lofty elevation of the pulpit podium to the ground level of the street where the rubber meets the road—where the words of the scripture text and the sermon itself become embodied in the life and actions of the preacher and the people. The sermon is not simply a verbalized mental construct. The sermon is not an ordinary speech to be spoken or a saying to be said and then forgotten, but the sermon must rise up from its repose on the page and create an action—a powerful transformative action. The sermon must always **do something**, that is, the words of the sermon are compelled to engender in the preacher and in the hearer/congregation a desire to do, to act—to become not just a hearer, but a doer of the Word. (James 1:22) An active participant in making the meaning of the Word, God's Word, come alive like a spark of fire or an electrical current that can shock the dying body and soul back to life.

When this happens, the action itself is not only the embodiment of the scripture text, but the action itself becomes an eventful corollary text. This new text is representative of the Word of God i.e., the gospel in creative transformative action. The gospel or Good News preaching is not meant to be limited to words or writing and speaking or preaching as the speech, the spoken, but the *λογος* is also an action. A sharp, bold, and blatantly unforgettable action. It is the ultimate creative action. Action i.e., the action of the preacher and his or her words is now itself a text—not just the performance of the existing scripture text, but the new created text born out of struggle and hope, and the power of the Holy Spirit, resulting in transformative social action. Not just concern for the poor, but action on behalf of the poor and oppressed. To be "concerned" is too passive and distant. Jesus' words in Luke 4, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me" suggest that the mysterious, magisterial, meaningful language and Word is grounded in the power of the preached Word and the Holy Spirit which create and necessitate action. The sermon that doesn't leave the pulpit is a wanton and worthless wrangling of earthly words. It is in fact an affront to God and the Holy Spirit. It is the antithesis of sermon discourse. As our ancestors, who could not read or write because it was forbidden by law and custom in Virginia and throughout the South, often said, they'd rather "see a sermon than to hear one any day." The seeing of the

sermon is the action of the sermon manifested in doing something like feeding the poor, helping youth and young people graduate from high school and college, advocating for the elevation of poor and oppressed individuals and seeking to transform the larger community, fighting against illiteracy, injustice, and the pipeline to prison that seems to engulf and incinerate the hopes and dreams of too many Black people—children, youth, and adults.

### **FROM GETTING IN FRONT OF THE TEXT TO ACTION THAT TRANSFORMS**

My approach is neither synchronic or diachronic—meaning that I am not too interested in the world within the text nor the world behind the text. This means further that the social or political conditions that created the literary and contextual construction of the text are not my ultimate focus or concern although they may be important. Rather, my contention is that discovering and explaining the world in front of the text is the locus of transformation and liberation. So getting in front of the text is where we want to be and it is to explore “the world that the text creates.”<sup>1</sup> This is so powerful and freeing because it allows for the love and grace of God to make a direct axis through your life in a way that is not encumbered by the baggage of the past or the limitations of the present. It is the future and all that it promises including the possible negation or neutralizing of past transgressions, missteps, and mistakes that allow us to rejoice and shout, “Hallelujah! Praise the Lord!”

The scripture text which gives rise to thought and action is the driver of the sermon.<sup>2</sup> It is not enough for the text to cause one to think, but the text must cause and compel one to act, i.e., to get up off your assiduous assumptive posterior, your gluteus maximus and do something in a literal sense. The text however, the problem of understanding and explaining a text, is not solved by the so called intentions of the author. The text often has an inherent plurivocity or multiplicity of meanings that are not arbitrary. There is a surplus of meaning in every text not just what Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, and I dare say St. Augustine meant. Every interpretation is not equal, which means that some interpretations are not only inferior to others, but some are negatively “off the chain” and downright irrational, off base and wrong ethically, socially, spiritually, and otherwise. Some interpretations are socially and theologically inept, racially offensive, and oppressive if they do not speak to the physical, spiritual, and social needs of the community—especially those persons on the underside of culture, at the bottom of the barrel or as Derrick Bell says “at the bottom of the well.”

The text is, unfortunately, too often used as a pre-text for the preacher to say what he or she wants to say—apart from the *meaning* of the scripture text. This is a problem that I observe over and over again among students, preachers, and pastors. There has to be a commitment to the text that does not end in an adulterous promiscuity or what I call “sermonic adultery or sermonic fornication.” I think that the language of sexuality is appropriate here because it has a level of universality that the preacher and all elements of humanity can understand easily, mainly because it is inherently and grossly human. All too human, to use the language of the philosophers, Friedrich Nietzsche and Hannah Arendt.<sup>3</sup> And, if mammals such as whales could talk, they too would testify to the truth of my claim.

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<sup>1</sup> See Michael J. Gorman, *Elements of Biblical Exegesis* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc, 2001) 17.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Ricoeur says that “the symbol gives rise to thought” in his book *The Symbolism of Evil*; however, as he moves from being a philosopher of symbols to one of texts, I have interpreted his focus on textuality to create the analogue stated above, “The text gives rise to thought.”

<sup>3</sup> See for example Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Company, 1915).

The fact that there is or seems to be a proclivity, i.e., a strong tendency to choose a text and then abandon it for another text that may or may not be analogous to the chosen text, appears to be inherent to the preacher's lack of commitment to textuality in sermon development. This is problematic because it scatters the preacher's thoughts all over the place and undermines every element of the sermon. For example, once the preacher abandons the chosen text for another text in the middle of the sermon, this means, in effect, that the title of the sermon has also been abandoned and by implication, the sermon's proposition has been abandoned as well. Switching from John 3:16 to I Corinthians 13:12 changes the focus of the sermon from God's love of creation to creation's or humanity's lack of understanding the meaning of love as a revolutionary and transformative act. One text, the John 3:16 text, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only son, that whosoever believes in Him shall not perish" is theocentric to the core, "For God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten son" and the I Corinthians 13:12 text is grounded in a weak and fallible anthropology that makes a mockery of both agapeic love and erotic love. So, as a rule, you can't be jumping from one text to another just because they sound alike or seem to be related or because it makes you look biblically literate and smart—what it does is makes you look and sound like somebody who doesn't know the difference between theology, Christology, and anthropology. In one text, Christ is the center and in the other text He, Christ, is not. They have their own integrity apart from each other. So, stay focused on the chosen text and leave the other texts alone until another day and time.

#### **SERMON METHOD: POINT DEVELOPMENT-THE BODY OF THE SERMON**

It seems to me that one of the difficulties faced by the preacher is to learn how to carve and craft "points" or "moves" from the chosen scripture text, the text that the sermon is based upon. Notice now that I am a bit Freudian, that is, obsessed and fixated on insisting that the sermon be textual and not topical. My philosophy is that one doesn't have to be much of a preacher to talk about topics, though topical preaching has received lots of accolades and quite a large following—maybe for that very reason. But, it is my assertion that biblical/scriptural/textual preaching has a greater chance of being transformative if it is grounded in a scriptural text and not in a topic that often takes you from one text to another *ad infinitum* and *ad nauseum*, "turn to John 3:11, now let's turn to Revelation 6:1, now turn to Exodus 4:13; now turn back to Genesis 1:16." The preacher is tossing and turning throughout the sermon, unable and unwilling to commit to the development of the particular, uniquely chosen text. Allow me to overstate the case in my own language. This is what I call over and over again "textual abandonment." In fact, it is more than that. It is textual promiscuity. It is a type of "textual adultery." It is being completely unfaithful and uncommitted to the chosen text! A type of textual "whoredom" in search of unrequited pleasure, however fleeting, moving from text to text, like moving from "sex to sex."

Preachers are compelled to do the following few things to begin to advance the preaching process through commitment to the chosen text and to try to get in front of the text and not stay lagging behind it. This is what I suggest as a prelude to sermon point development and as an effort to get in front of the text.

1. Start with a scripture text of your own choosing or choose from the Lectionary texts or develop your own system for choosing a scripture from which to preach on a week to week or month to month or year to year basis.
2. Spend a lot of time, hours and even days, reading and studying the language or words of the chosen scripture text. You don't have to know Greek, Aramaic, Hebrew, German, or

French. By language, I mean the translated or untranslated text. Translations are tricky and subjective, though naturally some are better than others, but all of them, in my view, must be approached with a healthy degree of suspicion. A hermeneutic of suspicion. I am suspicious of all Biblical texts. And yet, I love them all. Study, learn, and seek to know the meaning of every word or phrase in the chosen scriptural text. If you are using a scripture text as the source of the sermon, and this should always be the case, then you as the preacher are bound by it and wedded to it and compelled to labor with it, to wrestle with it until you have some modicum of understanding of it, at least for today! Remember that you cannot explain any text that you don't understand. Understanding precedes explanation.

3. From the semantic autonomy of the text, that is, based upon your understanding of the meaning of the particular chosen text, come up with a sermon title that reflects your interpretation or understanding of the text and what it is trying to say to you and your people given your social context. As you start, try to come up with not just one title, but five to six titles that will be competing for the number one spot come Sunday morning or whatever day you are assigned to preach. Write these titles down on a separate sheet of paper and put them aside for a day or so in order that they can saturate your consciousness. Before that, you should write out the chosen text or pericope in the scripture version you prefer and try to memorize the text. Write it with your own hand as a way of making it resonate in your heart and soul. Then, translate or interpret the text in your own language, so put it in your own words as a type of recontextualized version of the text or what I call an "unreading of the text." At this point, it is necessary to understand other things such as the angle or direction of the sermon, the main emphasis of the scripture text, auxiliary and ancillary foci of the text, what the text means to you and your particular congregation and community today, or what you think it should mean given your particular social and cultural context etc. After working to extricate, extrapolate or pull as many titles as possible from the language of the text, now you have to work to eliminate all the textually suggested titles except one. **Every sermon only needs one title.** This one particular title should be the best of the list for now and should lend itself to clarity, plain sense, simplicity, and ease of understanding and ease of explanation when the preacher finally mounts the pulpit. Remember that as the preacher, you cannot explain what you don't understand! A scripture text needs to be understood by the preacher first. And, if you try to preach what you don't understand you will only be fumbling, mumbling, tumbling and bumbling along—don't do a disservice to God, the people, and preaching the gospel by being unprepared and unfocused.

Now, after working through the introduction which should be tight and focused on the scripture text and the sermon title, which itself should be thoroughly textual, then the sermon can proceed to ask a relevant, meaningful, powerful, practical question that can be answered by the scripture text itself and your understanding and interpretation of that text. This question should be made obvious by the introduction of the sermon, which sets up the direction of the sermon. And, you should not ask a question that the scripture text cannot answer because folk are seeking answers to practical issues and problems, not theoretical and hypothetical musings about things that don't matter to the folk on the ground. At the very moment you ask a question that is driven by something other than the scripture text, you have just set yourself up to travel down a road to destruction where your sermon will end up imploding and falling apart or morphing into

something that *you* want to say apart from the meaning and integrity of the scripture text. Remember that it “ain’t about you” in any ultimate sense. It’s about the grace and love of God. This understanding allows you as the preacher to get out in front of the text in order to help transform the world.

Now, let’s deal with the body of the sermon or the point or points that the preacher has extrapolated from the text. Let me say unequivocally that the point or points of the sermon are determined by the scripture text and the adeptness and creativity of the preacher—not by another text! This means that there is no such thing as “three points” unless the scripture text has in it three things that demand to be developed. There is nothing sacred about having three points when one, two, or four are called for by the chosen text. So, all I can recommend is that the sermon—all sermons should have at least one point. And, it is better to have one well developed and highly textual point than to try to manufacture three points out of a one point scripture text which leads ineluctably to a “pointless sermon” that bounces to and fro all over the place.

The architecture of a point is critical and this is rather theoretical. I want to say a word about the complex interplay between two modes of perception—presentational immediacy, as I have reconstructed the meaning of the term, and causal efficacy. Actually this interplay is termed symbolic reference.<sup>4</sup> In developing a point, the preacher should focus on the immediacy or epidermal nature of the point. This means that presentational immediacy is that which presents itself on the surface in the text. It is what “jumps out” at you on a very visceral level as you read and extrapolate a point from the chosen text. This extrapolation may lack depth and sophistication, but it is enough to be characterized as a “point” that will need more development and depth. This depth is what I’m calling and what Professor Whitehead called “causal efficacy.” This is moving from scratching the surface or saying what is obvious to the average reader to digging for a deeper meaning using all your resources to help in the understanding and explanation of the point. This symbolic reference, in the language of Alfred North Whitehead’s linguistic nomenclature, is akin to Paul Ricoeur’s ostensive reference inasmuch as they both point to a direction in front of the text that makes the scripture text come alive in the real lives of real people. When people testify that God healed them from a disease or delivered them from an addiction, they mean this in a real way, not as a metaphor, but as a metonym, i.e., as a literal healing that transformed them from sickness to wellness, from weakness to strength, from faithlessness to faithfulness.

### **THE WORD OF GOD: SHARPER THAN A TWO-EDGED SWORD**

Preaching strong, well developed sermons that are tightly constructed is a difficult and continuous process that requires a broad understanding and love for people, knowledge of the biblical text, and the social and spiritual concerns and needs of the congregation and community. In addition to these basic requirements, there is the need to know why and what to do in order to put together a sermon that speaks to the heart and soul of folk who come to church week after week in order to “hear a word” from the Lord via the preacher and the sermon. And, they expect this sermon to positively change their lives. This is really a miracle and a mystery in an age of social, cultural, political, and technological change. In an age of Twitter, Facebook, Snapchat, and Instagram; In an age of addiction to the cell phone and addiction to pleasure and feel good desires twenty four hours a day sustained and fueled by toxic substances that have become cravings like the fructose in everything we eat and the caffeine in everything we drink and the opioids we feed ourselves as if they were Vitamin C or Vitamin D. This is an awesome responsibility for which none of us has been adequately prepared; however, I endeavor to outline

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<sup>4</sup> See Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York, The Free Press, 1978), 121-183.

the process of sermon development and then demonstrate that process and method as much as possible. I know that the African American preaching professor does not have the luxury of being completely theoretical such as some historians, philosophers or theologians. I say this because the sermon itself is undoubtedly the best speaker and demonstrator of the spiritual and reasonable nature of the homiletical task. It must be your best work at all times.

Preaching remains the heart and soul of the Black church, as Cleo LaRue, Frank Thomas, and Henry Mitchell and others have explained<sup>5</sup>; and the metaphor of the sermon as a “two edged sword” represents, for me, the value and importance of dialectic textual preaching. Preaching does cut both ways, left and right. By this, I mean that the real and the ideal are brought together by this image of the sword with its two sharp, even serrated edges. One edge is construed as the thesis or the ideal as seen in the scripture text and the other edge of the same sword is the antithesis or the real life situation. Together, in terms of preaching method, they constitute the introduction of the sermon which is often grounded in negativity, but NOT absolutely. In simple dialectical terms, the real and ideal are designed to create a tension mimicking that of the life we all live—where good and evil, right and wrong, justice and injustice, joy and sorrow, pain and pleasure, and love and hate have to be negotiated and mediated every day in the physical body and in the social and cultural community and world. The Book of James makes this clear when it asserts that out of the same mouth comes blessing and cursing. (James 3:1-7) We also find in the Book of Hebrews these words about the Word of God.

*“Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”* (Hebrews 4:12)

The antithesis would postulate that according to the textual words above that we live in a word infested world. These words in the real world, in the rough and tumble of real life are not always alive and active nor sharp and encouraging and enlightening; they are not always exciting and enlivening, not always enriching and empowering—but sometimes they are dim and dull; empty and envious—encircling our experiences of joy with ugly expressions of enmity and evil and hate. The words that people use, the things that we say to others and what is “said” to us and about us and by us, can do good or harm. These words can build up or tear down. As a pastor and preaching teacher, I try lovingly to build up the preacher’s confidence and efforts, but I’m not always understood easily because some stuff that the preacher puts forth posing as a sermon is in fact “mess” and must be discouraged and disallowed with my carefully chosen words; words, they can create hope and love or they can cause fear and despair. Some words that are written, spoken, read, or heard are plain ugly and mean. For example, as a preacher, and homiletics professor, I encourage you today to refrain from saying about another preacher such demeaning and derogatory words as this fellow preacher called by God “cannot preach.” Don’t say that he can’t preach or she can’t preach. Think about what those words mean and think about how debilitating and destructive those words are. And, ask yourself saying “How did I become *the* judge of whether a person can or cannot preach?” And, what do you mean when you say such words? Are you talking about the architecture of the sermon or the methodology used in the construction of the sermon or are you talking about the lack of correlation between the scripture text and the sermon’s title? Are you talking about the language and logic of the

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<sup>5</sup> See for example Cleophas LaRue, *The Heart of Black Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000) and Henry Mitchell, *Black Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990). Also, see Martha Simmons and Frank Thomas, editors, *Preaching with Sacred Fire: An Anthology of African American Sermons, 1750 to the Present*. Also, James Henry Harris, *The Word Made Plain* and *Preaching Liberation* (New York: Fortress Press, 2006).

sermon? Are you talking about the diachronic or synchronic message of the sermon? Or more than likely, you are making a judgement about the preacher's style, antics, orality and/or even the acoustics of the setting. Or, is the language grounded in a statement about the preacher's personality, demeanor, reading, or speaking ability. We have to know and understand what we mean when we say something about any subject—especially the sermon and the preacher. O certainly, for sure in some particular cases this may be justifiable; however, to make such a judgmental statement is to show also your own limitations alongside the shortcomings of another preacher who is being maligned by your words. In your understanding and view of preaching that particular assertion may be true, and yet I advise you not to say it to your fellow preachers or anyone else. To keep it to yourself and allow others to come to their own conclusions because preaching is not a competition, and **it is not** a song or a dance. It is not a carnival and it is not a circus show. And, what are you saying anyway when you say that “Reverend Sister or Brother so and so” can’t preach? Think about what that language means. In a certain sense, it can be an indictment not only of the subject, but of the self and it distances you from another preacher in a way that is psychologically and spiritually arrogant and just plain ugly. And, certainly you don’t think of yourself that way. As a preaching teacher, coach, and mentor of preachers and as a pastor for many years, my calling, my responsibility as a preacher and to preachers is to do the best that I can to constantly prepare myself to become a better teacher and preacher, and to help others who are struggling to prepare and enrich themselves. Preaching and teaching preaching is an awesome act of love for me and can only be done out of love. If you are preaching to people and you don’t love people, then you are a joker and a fraud in danger of bringing hellfire and damnation upon yourself. This is the wrath of God. And, if we judge prematurely other preachers as “can’t preach preachers,” we are setting ourselves up as little judging gods when the truth is that we have no right or authority to judge. Listen up, my beloved, just because you may be popular as a preacher, surrounded by thousands of people on Sunday and folk are telling you that you are a great preacher, stroking your ego and patting you on the back with accolades and giving you money, satiating your senses, and bowing down at your feet—this doesn’t mean that **you are in fact** a great preacher. There is a qualitative difference between greatness and popularity. Think about it, I know it’s hard to face, but you may have crowds and throngs of listeners and parishioners not because you are saying something great and transformative, but it could be that you “ain’t saying nothing” to challenge folk, nothing to help them take a serious look at transforming their lives, much less transforming the community and world. Jesus’ preaching and teaching lead to death on the cross, not popularity, but unpopularity! Unpopularity is to me more Christological and more theological than popularity. And, preachers have no interest in saying that which will lead to social and political revolution—death. In the gospel of Mark, when Jesus preached, the Pharisees and Scribes covered their ears and began immediately plotting to kill him.<sup>6</sup> Everybody, seemingly wants to hear some of us—maybe, just maybe because what we are saying does not trouble anybody. The sermon makes folk feel good, but it “don’t” do them no good, except satiate their egos... The gifted preacher, if you are that, is not always the great preacher and the so called great preacher may not be gifted with much truth or holiness at all. Personality, yes. Style, yes. Melodic voice, yes. Charisma, yes. Handsome and “pretty” like Muhammed Ali, yes. Adorned with beauty, yes. But what about love, justice, and truth. What about possessing what Saint Augustine, that fourth century North African bishop called the “sweetness of the word” in your everyday life. Jesus says, “But he that is the greatest among you shall be your servant.” (Matthew 23:11) This word, this declaration of Jesus

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<sup>6</sup> Mark 14:1.

in Matthew's gospel clashes with our being waited on hand and foot as pastors and bishops seeking to be served rather than or more than anything else.

Listen, I tell you the truth: I've never been considered a "great preacher." And not too popular either—even in my own church and community. I have to work hard. I have to study hard and I have to pray hard just to survive among these entertaining, popular culture, sound bite, telegenic, histrionic purveyors of celebrity and popularity. But, I tell you what, I may not be popular and I am surely not great, but the important thing for me is that I don't want to ever be accused of not studying and preparing in a way that advances Black life or human life for that matter. So, it is in the spirit of the ancient rabbis that I seek to be holy by believing that the preacher who reads and studies is participating in a holy act. Studying is an act of holiness and righteousness.<sup>7</sup> The preacher has to develop the whole self—not just prayer and fasting. It is not simply the voice, the whoop, the laughter, the cadence, the syncopation, but it is also the mind. The brain which has a left and right side. A cognitive and emotional side. Preaching demands the development of the plasticity of the brain in all of its dimensions. All of this helps the preacher to get in front of the text. Get in front of your own ego by leaving it behind and this should help the preacher to get in front of the text. Get the self out of the way first and then maybe God and the Holy Spirit will allow you to get out in front of the text by sublimating the destructive egoistic self and elevating the Word of God such that the grace of God can open up the text in new and transforming ways. And, prayerfully this will lead to actively doing something about the condition of our existence in the world.

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<sup>7</sup> I am indebted to my professor and friend, Peter Ochs, Professor of Modern Judaic Studies at the University of Virginia for this concept. I have taken several seminars in Philosophical Theology and Scripture Interpretation with Professor Ochs. He was also one of my thesis advisors for a graduate degree in Theology, Ethics, and Culture. A revised version was published as *No Longer Bound: A Theology of Reading and Preaching* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2013).