

The Park Road Pulpit  
*Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church*  
Russ and Amy Jacks Dean, Pastors

***Call or Sentence?***  
***Why I Preach***  
*Jeremiah 20.7-9; Mark 1.14-15*  
Russ Dean, April 2, 2005



I've known all my life that I was going to be a preacher. I have shared with you the little poem I wrote as a first-grader:

I want to be a preacher, I think it would be fun  
To study every morning before the rising sun,  
To stand up in the pulpit and preach before the crowd,  
Then you think I wouldn't – oh, yes I would be proud!

I remember my first “sermon.” It was not uncommon for our parents to call us all, when we were children, to sing together, to read from my mother's King James Bible, and to end the day with sentence prayers. I was an excited young believer, eager to share, so I volunteered to lead the devotion one night. With the soul-saving excitement of a tent-revival evangelist I entitled my first sermon, “Hurry Up, Before It's Too Late!” I was eager to preach, and nervous when the time came, hoping for some response of affirmation or confirmation, of commendation or commitment. It all sounds so silly now (though my hopes have actually not changed, to this day!), and I don't remember the response to that sermon, but to my knowledge, no one got saved there at the foot of my parents' bed!

I remember my father cautiously explaining to me that it was not enough to want to preach because he was a preacher. A calling to preach, he said, had to come from God. So I listened in that environment which fostered a sense of Calling, and my gifts were recognized and encouraged by people who cared about me and whose integrity I trusted,

and the Call came. It's never been very far from me: I want to be a preacher! *There is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones...* It was true very early in my life. It still is, today.

I've known all my life that I was going to be a preacher. It's been a lifelong calling, and for you to have given me an outlet for that *burning fire* within me, is an answer to my prayers. But I can also relate to the weary prophet who cried, *O Lord, you have enticed me, and I was enticed; you have overpowered me, and you have prevailed.*<sup>1</sup> I want to be a preacher to be sure, but the idea of a "Call to Ministry" was so deeply implanted in my brain as a unilateral decision (it was God's decision!), that I'm not sure I ever really gave a half-serious thought to anything else. As much as I love science, for example, I took only the one science course required at Furman for non-science majors. (You see, I was going to be a preacher – like it or not!)

The greatest curse of the Pastorate is that the discovery of your vocation virtually guarantees an ending to any conversation you are holding in any secular setting – no matter how much you seem to have had in common with the other person to that point. Things rock along fine until you say, "Oh, I'm a minister. And what do you do?" I generally get to hear something like, "Yeah! My grandmother was a Baptist... Now, if you'll excuse me..." *For the world of the Lord has become for me a reproach and derision all day long.*

I want to be a preacher, to be sure. But I also just want to be me, and whatever it is that we associate with the vocation of the pastor, it obviously conflicts with many

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<sup>1</sup> I did not mention this in the sermon, but I have been told that the language used here is the language of sexual violation, something akin to rape. The prophet laments that God has imposed the divine will over his own – he had no choice in response.

people's sense of regular-old-selfhood. So I can understand old Jeremiah, tired of becoming *a laughingstock all day long*, because his chosen (or assigned), mission in life had made him misunderstood by so many for so long.

So I have learned to ask, only a little tongue-in-cheek(!), "Is it a Call to preach that I'm answering? Or is it really a life Sentence!?"

I don't think that I'm alone in my feeling. Ministers almost universally view their vocation as "lonely work," but the thing that keeps many of us in the pulpit week after week is the pulpit itself. Who else in our society enjoys such a position? Call it privilege or opportunity, call it counsel or comfort, call it power or influence or a simple ego-driven need to hear your own voice... Call it what you will, it is amazing, in a fast-paced and driven world like ours, that you give anyone twenty minutes of undivided attention every week. It is amazing, in a high-tech world such as ours, that you simply sit and listen. No gimmicks. No graphics. It is amazing, in a politically-charged and polarized society, that week after week you come to hear one person offer his or her opinion on the world.

The Orthodox and Roman Catholic traditions view the Word of God as first and foremost conveyed in the sacraments. Pentecostals view the Word as most powerfully conveyed in charismatic acts of the Spirit. Between these two poles, Protestants have made a rather dramatic proclamation, namely, that the Word of God, the living Word, which inspires and transforms, is best conveyed in and through the spoken word. The sermon has always been at the heart of Protestant worship, too much so, at times. This Lenten season we have sought to emphasize all of the aspects of our worship, each one in

which we can “listen now for the Word of the Lord,”<sup>2</sup> each one, your staff believes, as important as the other. No one steps into a pulpit, though, without knowing that for many people the sermon is the reason for being here.<sup>3</sup> So let me make several brief observations about this important task.

First, I want to tell you that preaching is a high privilege. I don’t need to tell you that preaching is emotionally-laden for me, but perhaps I need to try to tell you why it is so, and that is simply because I find it continually awe-inspiring and humbling that you come, at least in some small measure, week after week, to hear what I have to say. Wow! Who am I to tell you what I think? Especially about God? And about people? And about God-with-people?<sup>4</sup> Without overselling the role or overstating the task, it is clear to me that what is said from the pulpit is still important. That what I say does influence, at least to some degree, the way you think and act and behave. And, who am I to offer such a word? I never step into this pulpit without being humbled by this privilege.

Second, I want to tell you that preaching is difficult. The well-known preacher and professor of homiletics, Thomas Long says preaching is “a wild river, wide and deep...”<sup>5</sup> As much as I love it, I don’t mind telling you that it is also a great burden! (I would have enjoyed our three days at the beach this week so much more if I had not had to return to write a sermon!) It is like writing a five-page research paper each time I stand here. What can I say, again, that will be well-informed, contemporary, informing and

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<sup>2</sup> In place of the traditional call/response to the reading of scripture, we use: “You have heard the ancient story. /Let us listen now for the Word of the Lord,” and have an ongoing conversation to explain why we believe this response is more theologically accurate than to simply say, “This is the Word of the Lord.”

<sup>3</sup> Much to the chagrin of Ministers of Music and other Associates in ministry, we used to speak of going to church as “going to preaching.”

<sup>4</sup> In one of his books, the late John Claypool refers to ministry as the act of staying close to God and staying close to people, and helping people to stay close to God.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, p.19.

challenging?<sup>6</sup> And, more importantly, how do I make subjects, that I believe are of ultimate importance, interesting and accessible to such a wide audience of listeners? Ernest T. Campbell has rightly noted that “Sundays come toward the preacher like telephone poles by the window of a moving train.” Can it really be time, again!?<sup>7</sup>

Not to play for your sympathy, I will tell you that I go away from it more days than not believing I have failed more than I have succeeded. Like two weeks ago when I preached down the street at Holy Comforter Episcopal Church and the woman said at the door, “That was hard. And that was dark. And, I feel hopeless after listening to it!” (I wanted to say, “And how cheery is “*Take up your cross and follow me*” really supposed to be?<sup>8</sup>) And the comment that someone made to me just a few years ago: “I almost never understand a single thing you say.” I have come to appreciate in five years of preaching, that communicating in words is one of the greatest challenges human beings face. So, preaching, is for me joy and pain, and serves as a microcosm of the world at large. How do we learn to talk to and hear from and understand one another?

Next, let me tell you that I believe in “the sermon” as an art form and as a means of communicating truth. Last night as we were returning from the beach, Amy was reading *Summer of the Monkeys* out loud in the truck. This is a wonderful story, and at the close of each chapter her mouth hardly shut before both boys urged, loudly, “Don’t stop. Read some more. Momma, read another chapter!” When many preachers are turning to graphics and gimmicks, power point, videos and music, and fill-in-the blanks study guides distributed with their bulletins, I still believe there is power in the naked

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<sup>6</sup> I have read that Karl Barth, the great theologian of the last century, once remarked after only a few months in the pulpit that he had already said everything he knew to say!

<sup>7</sup> Quoted by Thomas Long. See above.

<sup>8</sup> The sermon was, admittedly, not an easy one, which I had entitled: “Damned for the Glory of God: Jesus as Disciple.”

word, if it is spoken well.<sup>9</sup> And because English is such a rich language, I want the sermon to be an art-form, using our language well, painting pictures with words, using similes and metaphors, utilizing poetry and prose.

I know that sometimes my sermons are too much, too dense, too difficult, but I have a hard time letting go of what one of my professors called a “high literary style,” because I believe in the beauty of spoken language, and I simply refuse, perhaps at my own peril, to dumb-down the sermon to three points and a poem and to preach self-help, or feel-good, or God-and-country theology – all of which are much too prevalent in pulpits today. I believe scripture is filled with great truths, but I believe that scripture and theology are difficult, because they are about life, which is difficult. And I believe that dumbing-down the sermon will not make your life any easier. It will only serve to make life and our faith in it more of an illusion than a reality.<sup>10</sup> So thank you for humoring me, and for listening. Keep complaining if you need to. I promise you that I do not take this task lightly and that I struggle every week with how to communicate the Good News, being true to my own deepest instincts, and aware of your very diverse needs as well.

Fourthly, I want to tell you why I believe in the power of the spoken word, and that is because I am a product of it. It was the spring of 1984. I was a sophomore at

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<sup>9</sup> The opening meditational thought in today’s order of service was this, from Craig Brian Larson: Given our turbo-powered world of communications, on occasion I’ve wondered if [preaching can compete]... preaching is as low-tech and scant-budget as it gets. Most of my listeners are accustomed to movies powered by special effects, by Hollywood budgets that can soar beyond \$100 million... Can preachers compete? The question stares me in the face: When I take my stand behind the podium and for some thirty minutes do nothing more than talk, can mere words engage listeners and, more important, change lives?”

<sup>10</sup> From the article, “Preaching to Human Need” by M.F. Camroux,: “The temptation is to try and ignore the depth of the challenge and offer a ‘dumbed down’ Christianity which shuts out the awkward question and settles for simple palliatives and emotional escapism. If we do that we shall simply dig ourselves into a deeper and deeper hole. If in our preaching we are to make belief in god credible and keep hope alive the real questions must be faced with passionate honesty... The temptation is to try and ignore the depth of the challenge and offer a ‘dumbed down’ Christianity which shuts out the awkward question and settles for simple palliatives and emotional escapism. If we do that we shall simply dig ourselves into a deeper and deeper hole. If in our preaching we are to make belief in God credible and keep hope alive the real questions must be faced with passionate honesty.”

Furman and visiting my father, who was the guest musician for a revival at First Baptist Church in Clemson, SC. The guest preacher was Ken Chafin, and his text was John 10.10, “*I have come that you might have life and have it more abundantly.*” The message was this: “Too many Christians,” Dr. Chafin said, “are ready to die, who aren’t ready to live, yet.” I don’t know what else he said, how he reinforced that idea, but I know that in one sermon my entire theology turned upside-down, and with it, my life. The message of Jesus, the whole of Christian faith, is about living. Not dying. Today. Not tomorrow. Here. Not there. It is about faith for the journey, not religion for the destination. I am who I am, today; I believe what I believe, today; I live how I live, today, without exaggeration, because of one single sermon.

M.F. Camroux says: Harry Emerson Fosdick understood the limitations of preaching, comparing it to a person at a third-story window letting go a drop of medicine in the hope that it would land in the eye of an ailing person in the crowd below.

If I was the only person who ever got a full dose of eye-salve from Ken Chafin’s third story window, I would say it was worth every hour he spent in sermon preparation, and if I could only change one life in the course of my life’s work, it would be worth it for me as well.

I preach because I know that one sermon can change your life.

I believe in the power of the sermon. I am called to its joys. I am sentenced by its responsibilities. I believe that mere words, spoken from one person to another, can change the shape of our world, our understanding of humanity, our picture of God, and in so doing, words can change our lives. But what I believe ultimately about the sermon is

that it's not my sermon. It's never my sermon, as if some truth delivered from on high.

Kathleen Norris says:

The sermon is an oral art form, always more of a thought-in-progress rather than a finished product... the listener is the one who completes the work.<sup>11</sup>

So, the sermon, is our sermon. What did you hear? How will you interact with it? How will any particular mere words from my mouth inform your thinking, your acting, your faith, your life? And, how will you, in turn, inform my life? I preach to a captive audience. For whatever reason you are here, you are here. But, you preach, too. And your words, spoken in the midst of life in "the real world" have much more power to affect real change in our world.

Mark says, strikingly, *Jesus came, preaching...* And so should we. The kingdom is here! Change your life! Believe in yourself and one another and God and goodness and hope and faith and love and forgiveness and today... and tomorrow will take care of itself!

So join me in the joyful call. And let me impose upon you the life sentence: "Preach the gospel always. And, if necessary, use words."<sup>12</sup>

May it be so!

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<sup>11</sup> Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*, p.182. This, also, from Richard Lischer: "The sermon is better viewed as an experiential process of discovery than a proclamation, a process whose end is self-recognition, repentance, new vision, and participation in the life of the community. Narrative preaching does not proceed from above. The word does not knife downward through history toward its target as much as it rises from below out of the shared humanity and Christian identity of its hearers."

<sup>12</sup> Attributed to St. Francis of Assisi.