

Finding the Treasure Within: A Woman's Journey into Preaching

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Introduction

The beginning of the third millennium is a trying time for the Christian family. In the Roman Catholic Church, an article written some 35 years ago might as well have been written today. Back in 1967, Avery Dulles SJ, who is now a Cardinal, compared the historical character of the Catholic church in the past few centuries to key stages in faith development. Leaving behind a relatively uncritical and protected "childhood" mentality (before Vatican II), the North American Catholic Church in the past 40 years has passed swiftly from this rather benign and obedient phase into a turbulent adolescence, opening the third millennium with the challenge to grow into full maturity. Others speak of a major shift in world-views, spurred on by a rapidly changing contemporary culture, increased contact with other world religions, and a healing of denominational rifts in the Christian family. Whether we live in the academic world of theology or in the world of rural parishes and remote missions, shifts are shaking the church, just like plates rub deep in the earth's belly and cause an earthquake.

This book reveals just such a fundamental shift. In some places the story features sharp contours and clear lines, yet in other places the ground shakes deep beneath the surface, making everything feel incomplete, unstable and blurred. Language proves highly inadequate when attempting to name and contain the new thing God's Spirit is effecting. I ask the reader for a spirit of patience, openness and courage, willing to seek the faithfulness behind the struggle. I share as a child, who inadvertently took an unknown turn in the road and finds herself in a new part of town. I share as an adolescent, whose critical faculties work overtime, whose enthusiasm for the new and untried makes her adrenaline flow, and whose self-centered tendency gets her caught in pain and disappointments at times. I share as an emerging adult in faith, who yearns for wisdom, clarity and the capacity to live pain with integrity in a hurting yet redeemed world.

Despite the fear of inadequate naming, I believe my experience of liturgical preaching is a witness to the "Word-made-Flesh" and to the power of resurrection faith in Jesus Christ our Lord. Standing in the company of the first disciples who were startled by the reality of the risen Lord, I too am slow to understand what is happening. Hiding in the upper room, I too fear the authorities. Feeling the power of the Spirit, I nevertheless feel courage, love and wisdom infuse my words, my gestures, my heart. In the revealing light of this faith, I continue to love and respect that which I scrutinize and question. Committed to testing the spirits, I pray for ongoing surrender and humility, placing the good of the community before my need to be right. I offer my childlike wonderment about the greatness of God, wrapped in an adolescent zeal for the renewal of the church and the whole earth, gently held by maturing wisdom and sacrificial love.



To experience zeal for the spreading of the Gospel and for the proper functioning of the church is not new for a woman like myself. I stand in the company of countless women who gave their lives, their hearts, and sometimes their material wealth to build up the church throughout history.

Even today, very few parishes would function properly if women withdrew their active participation: the cleaning, the coffee, the office work, the pastoral visiting, the altar serving, the sacristy work, and the music (to name but a few) would simply not get done. For many years I too have been a part of the army of female volunteers that kept a parish humming. However, this radical giving of self seldom, if ever, earns women roles in leadership, liturgical and otherwise, in the church. Historically, women's contributions, however extensive, are viewed as voluntary sacrifices of love without leading to any institutional recognition in terms of formal authority, liturgical leadership or decision-making influence on matters of doctrine and theology. My claim of being called to liturgical preaching is therefore constitutively different from all the usual female contributions. This claim places me not only in the liturgical leadership of the faith community, whether ordained or non-ordained, but also employs my insights in Scripture, theology and life from a distinctly female point of view in ways that give value, authority and respect to women's perspectives everywhere.

As a Roman Catholic woman, my claiming a call to preach, therefore, leaves me caught in a contradiction, a paradox, a conundrum. Roman Catholic teaching upholds the prohibition on the ordination of women to Holy Orders, and the same teaching does not allow claiming such a call in any formal way apart from ordained ministry. A quick conclusion could lead to either denying the action of God in this matter or denying the validity of the church's teaching on women's ordination. Yet, in many ways, either denial risks short-circuiting God's plan for both the church and myself. This book attempts to share hope and inspiration, witnessing to God's unlimited creativity in working within church structures and rising above these structures.

The shifts presently felt in both the Church and the world are reflected here. Old terms and understandings are being reevaluated and redefined. The barriers between denominational linguistic worlds are breaking down. My ecumenical formation in theology and ministry has resulted in adopting language not always fitting into exclusively Catholic categories. For example, I studied at a theological institution called a "seminary."(*) Unlike a Catholic understanding of this word, referring to the place of formation for ordained priesthood, the Lutheran seminary I attended welcomed a wide range of students preparing for ministry in the church: women and men, married and single, first and second or third career people, ordained and lay preparation, Lutheran and Catholic and many other traditions. I speak of Eucharist when referring to the Catholic Mass, to the Lord's Supper, Holy Communion or Holy Eucharist. I speak of preaching in the pulpit during worship when referring to breaking open the Word, from the ambo or lectern, in the liturgy. I speak of sermons, homilies and reflections. I grew comfortable with a theology of preaching that includes both lay and ordained, that is both Eucharistic and non-Eucharistic, and that is learning to move back and forth between different denominational worlds. Being formed in a theological setting which speaks openly about the possibility of a woman's call to ordination, I learned to shed fear and ignorance on an issue which remains unresolved for many Catholics.

It ought not surprise the reader, therefore, and most likely the Catholic reader, that he or she may at times share in the confusion of living between worlds, and may at times share in the pain, wondering whether one is dealing with adolescent impatience, real injustice, or a Spirit-filled birthing. I do not pretend to offer answers and fixed conclusions, but rather search for the questions by revealing pieces of an ongoing journey. Catch the spirit of childlike wonderment, adolescent risk-taking, and adult wisdom peeking around the corner once in awhile. Our God is a God of ongoing creation and regeneration. If nothing else, we are all called, each in the particular features of our lives, to bear witness to this universal gift of a loving Creator.

In a spirit of prayer, faithfulness to both God and the church, and openness to the Spirit, our only task is to share that which we come to know as true and good. As we grow to know God intimately we learn to recognize the features of God's activity, features which always point to a liberating spirituality -- liberating of both God and ourselves. Kenan B. Osborne, OFM, writes:

A spirituality which takes into critical account the view of God presented in traditional Catholic Christian spiritualities has not yet been fully explicated, but there is a pressing need to "liberate" God from the human made constraints which disallow God from being sovereignly free. Humans do not tell God how God can be God. Human beings, Christians included, listen, both in the sounds of creation and in the sounds of revelation, for God's own voice telling us what the sover-eignty and freedom of God is all about. God is not a Roman Catholic. God is not even a Christian. God is not Jewish. God is not Islamic. Rather, God is a God of all. God is a God in whom women as well as men can believe. God is a God in whom the marginated and the poor, as well as the comfortable citizens, can believe. Indeed, only that understanding of God which sees God as preferentially the God of the poor, the God of the marginated, the God of the second-rate, will stir up any embers of human faith.

This approach to a loving God who loves the entire world and who loves each and every part of creation, above all human creation, is revealed throughout the wide canvas of creation. When a given religious leadership attempts to speak in persona Dei, such statements will be tested against a creation which also speaks in persona Dei. Such statements will be tested against the voice of the Spirit which enters into the very heart and conscience of each and every human person, a voice that also speaks in persona Dei. Women as well as men can speak in persona Dei, and sometimes more clearly as well. The marginated and poor speak in persona Dei, and most of the time in a very loud and powerful way. Only a spirituality which honors the Spirit of God in all will be a spirituality of the third millenium.

The story in this book bears witness to the way God can speak in a liberating fashion through one woman in the ministry of preaching. To use Osborne's definition, women as well as men, the educated and rich as well as the marginal and the poor, can and do indeed speak in persona Dei.

The sermons offered here claim to speak in this fashion. However, they are merely the written part of an entire event, each of which represents a personal landmark in my journey with God. Preaching is mostly an oral event; giving a written text of something that was spoken always falls short of the real thing. There is nothing like "being there" and "doing it." A big aspect of preaching lies in the delivery of the words: the body language, the pace and tone of voice, the silences, the eye contact.

Each chapter features one sermon/homiletic reflection preached in the past eight years. The term sermon is employed when the preaching took place in a non-Catholic church. The term "homiletic reflection" is used for those texts preached in a Roman Catholic liturgical, albeit non-Eucharistic, context. The term "homily" is avoided in order to comply with the Vatican instruction on the involvement of the laity in priestly ministries. However, the term "preaching" refers to the same activity in both contexts. It is assumed that there is no difference in how the preaching is experienced, whether it is called a homily, a sermon, or a homiletic reflection. Whenever deemed necessary, I use a fictitious name for certain individuals who have played a significant role in this journey, simply in order to protect their privacy.

I have made extensive use of my own journal entries. Journal writing has many advantages for me: it provides a safe outlet for strong feelings and intimate experiences, the writing out of intense moments helps to articulate the journey of becoming a person of faith, and writing itself can be an intimate form of prayer. Having a log which documents my inner journey with God, especially when reading things over after the fact, also helps to clarify and to claim where God is moving in my life. Putting words on something that is often so beyond words grows trust and confidence that God is active and close, even in the painful times.

Just as earthquakes reveal the strata and substrata of the earth's geological make-up, each sermon/homiletic reflection contains several layers of story and meaning. There is the direct story and meaning conveyed in the preaching of the words. Those who preach on a regular basis, whether ordained or lay, may find insights to incorporate in their own preparation and preaching. The narrative section in each chapter intends to break open the stories and meanings behind each sermon/ homiletic reflection, revealing my own spirituality, my struggles with the Scripture texts, my relationship to the church through the act of preaching, and my attempts to formulate a response to God. This latter layer in particular reveals that God does not abandon anyone. Once God raises up gifts in ordinary women and men, ways do open to use these gifts in the church, even if those ways are not always "in the book." In the end the church herself is all the better off for God's activity of opening unexpected doors.

The feminist reader will find that this story of giving birth to, liberating, my female Catholic voice in the preaching task is glaringly void of feminist analysis and terminology. There are several reasons for this absence. First, I simply had little occasion, apart from reading books, to grow and learn in an explicit feminist social, academic and spiritual context. Because of this, I am still "in process," connecting my experience with a feminist perspective. The incompleteness of this process is illustrated in those places where I show difficulty stepping out of traditional and limiting mind-sets. I really do feel like a fish trying to study the properties of the water she swims in. Secondly, I found the elements necessary for liberation and birthing in the person of Jesus and in the Scriptures that witness to his mission of bringing God's reign here and now. Thus my journey is first and foremost of a deeply spiritual nature with its own demands of accountability and integrity. This spiritual grounding provides a prism through which I evaluate and test everything else, including feminism. Even in the absence of feminist terms and concepts, I hope that the reader steeped in a feminist world-view and spirituality will still recognize the movements of inner liberation without much effort. In places I do draw on insights from Christian feminist authors. Thirdly, the few brushes I had with feminism moved me into a position of caution. While my Christian spirituality leads me to embrace similar values

and goals, and offers me critical tools for analysis and reflection in the same way as does feminism, I experienced the latter too much in an unbridled form. Unbridled (i.e. uncontrolled) forms of any ideology run the risk of being excessively driven by our own personal hurts and anger, ego trips, insecurities and fears, or political agendas of power, even in Christian circles. Too often I experienced feminism as divorced from a solid spirituality that could provide some measure of depth and accountability outside of itself, and could caution it about its own traps. This may well be one reason for the suspicion of things feminist that I observe in many who sit in our church pews on Sunday mornings. Fourth, feminist analysis, including Christian feminism, seems quick to name the sins of patriarchy, but rarely admits to sins of its own. We are all sinful creatures, women and men. To promote feminism as the absolute good feels dishonest and misleading to me. Fifth, the door between my Christian spirituality and feminism remains open, inviting an ongoing process of interactive reflection, evaluation and appropriation of the two. Most importantly in this process, however, is that my relationship with Jesus informs and sheds discerning light on my feminism, not the other way around.

St. Therese of Lisieux deserves special mention here, as she became a steady companion on this journey of uncovering the treasures of God. Even though the external features of her life story are vastly different from mine, it is the "substrata" in her life that bears striking resemblance to my experience, in particular her deep conviction of the authenticity of her call despite the dismissing, the ridiculing and the ignoring she experienced from those around her. The external pressures to deny her calling did not detract Therese nor made her bitter or angry. Instead, she drew from the wellspring of her calling even before she was allowed to enter Carmel, letting God's love take hold of her whole being and of the way she related to those who were trying to dismiss her. It is thus that Therese became so remarkable in her virtues, capable of fostering patience, perseverance, courage, gentleness and wisdom. I share the story on these pages with the strong conviction that God can use the experiences of one individual, provided her driving force is love. Therefore, with Therese of Lisieux, I offer this book to the church in love: "I have found my place in the bosom of the Church and it is you, Lord, who has given it to me. In the heart of the Church (...) I will be love."

(*) The seminary I attended is part of the ELCIC, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada. This is not to be confused with the Evangelical Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod.

i. America, Vol. 184, No. 7, March 5, 2001

ii. pgs. 601-602, Ministry: Lay Ministry in the Roman Catholic Church, its History and Theology, Paulist Press, 1993