

Looking Out My Window, March 11, 2022



This will be my final reflection about preaching. The previous ones addressed these topics—what IS preaching, what is my intent as a preacher, how do I prepare. Today, reflect with me on preaching as a dialogue.

The Right Rev. Joe Burnette, retired bishop of Nebraska and a former faculty member at The School of Theology at Sewanee once asked me about how I prepared. We were leading a single adult retreat and hearing each other's sermons and reflections. We agreed that thorough preparation is essential but that writing a manuscript and reading from it was too fixed a method, one that did not allow for flexibility. We discussed an essential tension between thorough preparation and flexibility geared to audience response.

You exude energy during a homily. And, your nonverbal signals are always quite visible. I suspect many of those get picked up subliminally during the homily. My preparation is stored in memory, four pages of typed notes. But, I find myself moving things around and adding stuff in and taking stuff out during the delivery.

My conclusion—there's an unspoken dialogue going on between me and you. So, in spite of my determination to keep a homily under 15 minutes, occasionally that does not hold true. Sometimes, it's 12-13 minutes, and occasionally 15-18. If one adopts this perspective—preaching is dialogue, then no standard exists for how long a homily should take. And, different people speak at different rates.

Those intuitive changes of content during the sermon—leaving out sometimes and sometimes adding in in response to the energy I sense coming at me from you. That is a Spirit thing.

We all might benefit from putting our watches in our pockets or purses during worship and living in God's time. The odds of an Episcopal service lasting longer than an hour to an hour and ten minutes are slim indeed. But, if we relaxed more about that, we'd be more free to enjoy the liturgy and the community and be counter-cultural—free from our addiction to pace.

Lastly, inspiring and transformative preaching involves the entire community. A preacher becomes better than he or she is with a prayerful, responsive community engaging in the homily. And, a preacher will be less than he or she is, if the community is lethargic and resistive. You bring out the best in a preacher. You listen well. By your prayers and your level of engagement, you make me a better preacher than I otherwise would be.

God's peace,

*David* +

Fr. David