

A Terrible, Wonderful Place to Preach

For the past twenty years I have had the task of preaching the gospel from a pulpit that offers the preacher quite a challenge. As one of our guest preachers commented, after the service at which he had preached, “Duke Chapel is one of the most difficult places in the world to preach.”

Perhaps he overstated the challenge, but I knew what he meant. At the beginning of a sermon the preacher looks into a dark, cavernous gothic expanse. Because of the lighting, or lack of it, the preacher can see no farther than the first five or six rows of pews. Preaching is not only an acoustical but also a visual phenomenon, and Duke Chapel is a place where it is difficult for a preacher to see or be seen while speaking.

One Sunday, after I had preached as well as I knew how, a woman grasped my hand as I stood at the door and said, “Would you please tell the lady who preached this morning that I thought she had a thoughtful sermon?”

I prayed that she had been seated in the last row.

As for the acoustics, the natural but unnerving reverberation of the Chapel’s limestone walls and floors was, during the installation of the Chapel’s third organ in the 1970s, “enhanced.” An already unmanageable acoustical environment was exacerbated, for the sake of the music. The reverberation level increased more than three seconds. A speaker hears the sound of his or her voice coming back a few seconds after the words are spoken; the congregation must sort through a cacophony to get the point that is being made. Sounds bounce off the walls and ricochet back and forth. A baby’s competing squeal is amplified. A dropped hymnal becomes a thunderous peal.

After a high-volume sermon by a distinguished African American Pentecostal, both preacher and congregation emerged from the experience shaken by auditory overload. And after one of my sermons, when my tendency to drop the endings of my sentences had proved lethal to the reception of my message, one grande dame of the congregation told me, “I could tell from your gesticulation that you were agitated about some matter of importance but, unable to make out a word of your sermon, I had no clue about the object of your disease.”

Duke Chapel is a tough place in which to preach.

But any church, limestone walls or wood, small steeple or tall, in Durham or Durban, offers a challenge for the articulation of the Christian message. In

1928, about the time that James B. Duke was forming his dream of a university built around “a great towering church,” a young pastor in Switzerland, Karl Barth, was beginning what was to become a revolution in Christian theology. Barth encapsulated the challenge that preachers faced: “As ministers we ought to speak of God. We are human, however, and so cannot speak of God. We ought therefore to recognize both our obligation and our inability and by that very recognition to give God the glory. This is our perplexity.” (*The Word of God and the Word of Man*, trans. Douglas Horton, 186.) Barth points to a perplexity inherent in any attempt to put God into human speech. If God is the God whom Christians claim God to be, then there will be an unavoidable dissonance, a disconnect between almost anything we say about God and the reality of God.

Yet it is the Christian claim not that God is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent but that God speaks, that God speaks to us. It is the nature of the Trinity to be communicative, to establish, through speech, communion, and community. All Christian preaching rests upon a conviction of God’s discourse. The same God who, by speech, brought a world into being (Genesis 1) continues to create, to bring something out of nothing, to order chaos, to shed light, and to raise the dead through the power of the word. It is the nature of the God of Israel and the church to be loquacious. All Christian homiletics has its right and its origin in the statement of faith, “And God said . . .”

Paul believed that “faith comes through hearing” (Romans 10:17). The Christian faith is a peculiarly acoustical affair, a uniquely auditory phenomenon. Each Christmas Eve, about midnight, when in the Service of Lessons and Carols I rise before the packed congregation and read those sonorous phrases from the first chapter of John’s gospel, congregation and preacher are reminded of how very much is at stake in the church’s speaking of the gospel. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory. . . .”

When James B. Duke directed that this new university in the South would be known by its “great towering church,” he seems not to have had any particular program or mission in mind for this neo-gothic building other than some sort of vaguely “spiritual influence” on the youth who studied at the university. The Chapel was a lovely place for periodic university convocations, for monthly moral exhortations from President William Preston Few, and for quiet meditation. Speaking at the 1931 baccalaureate, President Few saw the Chapel, then being built nearby the auditorium where he spoke, as

a sort of sermon to the university, a bulwark of a civilization's "great and enduring values," an architectural embodiment of Duke's motto, *Eruditio et Religio*:

The architectural harmony and strength . . . suggest unity and fullness of life. Here stand side by side science and religion—science . . . given to the full, untrammled pursuit of the truth and religion with its burning passion for righteousness in the world. The Chapel, hard by the library and laboratories and cooperating with the University in its every effort to promote truth and serve humanity, will dominate this place . . . symbolical of the truth that the spiritual is the central and dominant thing in life . . . Can this ideal be realized in our world and can religion and education engage successfully in a great formative, common undertaking to make this a better world . . . ? Duke University . . . and its Gothic architecture . . . will proclaim the beautiful hope that righteousness and truth, gentleness and strength, goodness and beauty can live together . . . can build a world that will sustain a civilization with great and enduring qualities.

Larger than even Few's vision, from the very first Duke Chapel became a center of vibrant articulation of the Christian faith. When the Chapel was dedicated on a hot June afternoon in 1935, President B. R. Lacy of Union Seminary in Richmond, Virginia, enthusiastically portrayed the Chapel as a sermon in itself: "The Chapel says to the world that here God has the preeminence and that all life should be lived under His shadow, within the sound of His voice, and under the influence of His beauty and holiness."

Shortly thereafter, a group began gathering at the Chapel on Sunday mornings for worship, calling themselves the "Duke University Church (Interdenominational)." A "Preacher to the University" was secured, a professor from the Divinity School, and a tradition began. In the early days, most of the guest preachers came from the ranks of the university faculty. But before long, services were attracting large numbers of worshippers, the great choral tradition began with the formation of the Chapel Choir, and the Chapel ministers were seeking the great voices of mid-twentieth-century American Protestantism as guests in their pulpit. James T. Cleland, a transplanted Scot and a popular preacher on the collegiate circuit, served as the Chapel's beloved and longest-tenured Dean of the Chapel. Cleland developed the tradition of linking Duke Chapel to the teaching of homiletics in the Duke Divinity School, a linkage that continues in the work of the present Dean.

Over the years, the chaplains and university ministers who have led Duke Chapel have invited the best preachers in America to the Chapel pulpit, and over the years the very best have come, have preached their best sermons; nearly all of their sermons have been carefully preserved in the Duke University Archives. This collection, spanning seventy-five years, represents a remarkable display of homiletical art, a testimony to the extraordinary intellectual vitality of this particular medium of communication, and a sweeping panorama of American preaching from one century to the next.

The sermons in this seventy-fifth-anniversary collection have been selected on the basis of their meeting most of these editorial criteria: *The sermon is interesting; the preacher is a noteworthy practitioner of a particular type of preaching in a particular period of homiletical history; the sermon, even today, is memorable and exhibits why millions of Americans, and many more millions elsewhere, still listen to sermons with attention and care.*

Without much fear of contradiction, I think that the reader of these sermons will find among those selected the greatest preachers, at least the greatest in American Protestantism, over the past seventy-five years. The toughest task was not selecting a preacher, but selecting only one sermon from a preacher, for some of these preachers have preached many great sermons here. Over half of these sermons had to be transcribed from audiotapes because our collection of printed sermons is uneven. Though transcription was a large undertaking, sermons that are transcribed from tapes probably give readers a better indication of how the sermon sounded in its original presentation than could be had in the edited and printed version left by the preacher.

The first woman to preach in Duke Chapel was Dr. Georgia Harkness, renowned Methodist theologian, in 1939. Sadly, neither tape nor transcript remains of that groundbreaking sermon. We lack many sermons from the first decade of Duke Chapel Sunday worship; our earliest predecessors probably had little appreciation for how prominent and vital would be the tradition they were initiating. After Georgia Harkness, the Chapel has been host to just about every prominent woman preacher in American Protestantism. I counted about a dozen Catholics and four rabbis who had preached at Duke Chapel over the years. The representation of African American preachers is commendable.

During the months that I spent in the Duke University Archives selecting the sermons for this collection, I was reminded of how many great sermons have been preached in this place and also somewhat surprised by how

many not-so-great sermons have been heard here. Many of the early sermons sound somewhat pompous and pedantic to my contemporary ears, suggesting not only that the preachers are using a style that is long passé but also that they are intimidated or at least overly deferential to both the building and the academic setting. Those early sermons that begin with, “In this great center of learning and erudition, I would invite you to ponder the following . . .” rarely rise above the status of an ill-timed lecture.

Before beginning this project, I had assumed that preaching was in decline from its former eloquence and brilliance. But now (and this may again be a sign of my contemporary prejudices) I think that many contemporary preachers are more biblical, more engaging, and more theologically faithful than some of our predecessors. There is a confidence bordering on smugness in many of the early preachers, as if they speak in the sure conviction that they are addressing “our” world, a world in which Protestant Christianity reigns supreme. By the late 1960s, one senses that Chapel preachers felt that they must contend for a hearing, that they must exercise some degree of artful persuasion. Perhaps some of these contemporary interpreters of the faith are a bit too troubled by the prejudices and limits of a contemporary academic congregation and are apt to be just a bit too sly, giving away a bit too much of the faith to modern sensibilities. Still, it is probably a good thing for preachers not to assume too great a level of interest among their listeners.

Another observation: sermons through the 1950s are full of annotations and references to contemporary social scientists and works of drama and fiction. These preachers seem awfully concerned to demonstrate to the congregation that they are well read and fully conversant in the best products of contemporary high culture. By the 1970s, Chapel preachers appear to have lost interest in reading anything but the Bible. There are few references to extra-biblical material and many sermons that are mostly a walk through the various movements of a biblical text. This move away from the preacher as presumed cultural critic to the preacher as biblical expositor may be attributed to interesting advances in biblical studies and theology in the later part of the twentieth century and to the explosion of Lectionary-based biblical study aids for the preacher. There may also be a sense among preachers that Christianity’s “cultured despisers,” as Schleiermacher would have labeled many in the Chapel’s Sunday congregation, ought not be flattered by a preacher’s references to their passing cultural icons.

The turn toward the Bible and the retelling and paraphrasing of biblical texts in the sermon may also be part of the preacher’s recognition that

increasingly the congregation is becoming biblically illiterate. Subtle references to a biblical text, vague allusions to an episode in the life of Jesus, are no longer sufficient for a congregation that has not been nurtured in scripture. Therefore the text must be told, retold, reiterated, walked through, and explicated in full detail.

I hope that readers of these sermons might find them to be a challenge to my opening assertion of the grave difficulties of preaching in a place like Duke Chapel. Although this building—inspired by the High Middle Ages, when preaching was not highly regarded in the church’s liturgical life, a building that is more kind to the sound of the organ than to the preacher’s voice, a place where seeing and hearing (stock in trade of oral communication) are difficult—makes preaching a challenge, by the grace of God something significant is said and heard here. It is probably a good thing for preachers to feel that they must really work to get a good hearing.

When I came to Duke Chapel in 1984, after four years in an inner-city parish, a friend told me, “You may find that chapel pulpit difficult. You have been able to get away with saying some wild things because you are such a conscientious pastor. You visit your parishioners, give them close pastoral care. Therefore they let you say almost anything in Sunday sermons. At Duke Chapel you won’t have any of that pastoral work to prop you up. All you will have is your preaching. It may be tough.”

There was truth in some of what my friend said. It was as if at Duke Chapel I was part of a controlled experiment in the power of preaching. Here, with many of the typical parochial props removed—the personal relationships with listeners, the full range of pastoral care, the halo effect that surrounds “our” pastor—it was as if we had created a liturgical setting in which preaching was the sole means of contact between pastor and people. How much weight could preaching bear? How much could be heard when most of my Sunday listeners knew me no further than the sound of my voice?

In twenty years here, I have come to an even more extravagant view of the preaching office. I am routinely amazed at what people hear. I am astounded by the students who make major moves in their lives, major steps toward the faith on the basis of nothing more than what they heard in a sermon. Thus I have learned that Duke Chapel is a wonderful place to preach because it is proof of how much people continue to value preaching as well as a validation of how much spiritual weight a twenty-minute sermon is able to bear.

The contemporary university, with its competing truth claims, its mix of voices, its limited modes of thinking, its innate prejudice against many of

the claims of the Christian faith, is not always congenial for the proclamation of the Christian message. Dr. Few's originating faith, which proclaimed Duke Chapel to be an enduring testimony to the fact that "the spiritual is the central and dominant thing in life," and that here religion and education would "engage successfully in a great formative, common undertaking to make this a better world," has proved to be problematic in the Chapel's intervening years. Though the Chapel's current Sunday congregation is the largest of any at a university chapel in America, only a minority of the Duke community is present on Sunday at eleven. More people hear a Chapel sermon on the web than listen to the sermon at the Chapel. Most Duke faculty and administrators see the Chapel and its programs to be on the periphery of university life, just one option among others for students on a weekend, rather than the dominant and organizing focal point of the university. The self-confident, mainline Protestant hegemony that one summer's day saw its dominance over American life confirmed in the erection of Duke Chapel is now being sidelined in the new American religious pluralism. The central, dominating building on Duke's campus is as much the new parking deck as Mr. Duke's "great towering church."

Yet Christian communicators have always shown great resourcefulness in their ability to speak their truth to various competitors and counterclaimants to faith. The contemporary university and those inculcated into its peculiar forms of thinking can be a challenge for Christian preachers, but the preachers in this volume demonstrate that it is not an insurmountable one. The hundreds who gather in this Chapel on a Sunday, or the thousands who download sermons from the Chapel website, are evidence that Christian preaching can hold its own against any other competing testimony within the university. At Duke Chapel, a crowd still gathers on Sunday expecting to hear a good sermon, confirming the continuing vitality of the seventy-five-year-old tradition that is celebrated in this book.

As Barth went on to say in his lecture on the difficulties of Christian preaching, a sermon is ultimately to be judged not on the basis of its ability to evoke listeners' interest, its preacher's rhetorical expertise, or its poetic shape, but by the truth. Our best listeners come to church, said Barth, not simply asking, "Is this relevant and useful information?" but rather, "Is this true?" Is this a truthful account of what is really going on in the world? Is it a living representation of the One who is called not only Jesus but also "the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6)?

As long as the university is dedicated to the pursuit and the enjoyment of truth, then these sermons indicate that a place like Duke Chapel is a wonder-

ful location to hear a good sermon. I hope that you will agree after reading these sermons from seventy-five years of preaching at Duke Chapel.

WILLIAM H. WILLIMON

Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost

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Duke Chapel

Duke University

Durham, North Carolina