

The Living Pulpit

Dedicated to the Art of the Sermon

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The Reign *Of* God

**“The entrance fee into the
kingdom of God is nothing;
The annual subscription
is all we possess.”**

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Preaching: Creating an Oral Cathedral

Dan P. Moseley

It was time to go to worship. The sun bore down with unusual intensity in western New York. Thousands were gathering for Sunday worship. Barbara Brown Taylor was the preacher of the week at the Chautauqua Institution.

My friends and I took our usual position some distance from the pulpit. As a recently “liberated” pulpit person, I didn’t want to be too close. My few experiences of sitting in the pew at worship services since my wife of thirty years died of cancer had taught me that. Preachers seemed to overwhelm a wounded and vulnerable listener, so it is always good to keep your distance if you don’t want your boundaries violated.

But, that morning in the steamy heat, we sat and listened. And when we went to worship the next morning, we moved a little closer. The third morning, we were in the second row. We leaned into every word, allowing each word to take up residence in our soul. We heard the preacher as she spun stories of grace. My soul didn’t recoil in fear.

As one who had broken the Word with parishioners each week for more than thirty years, I was intrigued. What was it about this preaching that drew us closer? Why were we not driven back against our seats?

I decided, since I was heading to a seminary to teach preaching, I should ask Barbara to help me understand what shapes her preaching. Over coffee I asked her, “What do you think makes your preaching effective?” In good Socratic style she said, “What do *you* think makes it effective?” (As a seminary professor I have discovered that a question in response to a question is always better than saying “I don’t know.”)

I had not expected her question. So, sipping coffee, stalling with “hmmms” and “uhs,” I finally said, “I don’t know, but you seem to create a safe space into which a listener can move. It’s almost like you create a space for the spirit of the listener to move toward your words, and in that encounter, the Holy Spirit creates community.” I don’t know what all was said after that, but her answer (or was it my answer?) has haunted me since that day. I

had been preaching for more than three decades and I had read and listened to preachers and teachers of preachers and I had never seen preaching quite that way. She created a sanctuary where the listener was safe to encounter a community-making spirit.

As I began to teach preaching, I helped students think about how to create a sanctuary with words—how to create a safe space into which the listener might move so that she or he can imagine and “word their way” into some new way of living. Later I was visiting the National Cathedral in Washington, DC, and I realized that I had been trying to help students learn to build an oral cathedral in which all people might gather to explore the grand mystery of the divine. I tried to help them create space within that mystery in order to know themselves and their world in a new way.

Preaching is creating a space in which persons find words to know who they are and how they can live life faithfully. Some listeners are learning it for the first time. Others have lost their ability to voice their own story and need to learn new words. We are constantly in the process of rewording our lives. We redefine ourselves with different stories. Words that had once defined me—*pastor—preacher—husband*—had become devoid of meaning. I had to find words that were more resonant with my current experience. In the empty spaces between known and unknown, familiar and unfamiliar, we huddle in fear and confusion hoping for a sanctuary in which our fragile and stuttering voices may whisper new possibilities.

When Barbara spoke *she created an oral cathedral* where I could go and whisper my own words. And in that space, I discovered that I was surrounded by a cloud of witnesses to the same journey I was traveling. My lonely, ragged, scared, frightened, and coarse voice of grief was joined by the anguish and ecstasy of the voices of those who lived in the walls of memory. In the company of the saints, I found courage to speak truth about my own life. The way Barbara spoke and the words she used gave my voices permission to be heard. It was almost a resurrec-

tion of the dead voices of my soul.

How does one know if one is in an oral cathedral?
How do we preach to create such a sanctuary space?

Cathedrals

A cathedral is entered through gigantic doors. They are taller and wider than one person would need to enter. They are doors welcoming all who come to enter. Their size is invitational, not demanding. One has a choice—to enter and be swallowed by shadowed mystery, or to turn and retreat into the light.

Through these vast doors a whole community—stranger and friend, alien and enemy—gathers in the presence of a mystery grand beyond each and all. A cathedral is a space where light and shadow wrestle on the floor, where knowing and unknowing play tag among the pews. A cathedral is not a space where color and light are fixed and unchanging. It is a place where light pierces color and creates changing images in the air. Colors tumble over each other in a kaleidoscopic delight.

Cathedrals create a space in which the soul's cacophonous voices can be drawn out into a safe space. They create stimuli to seduce the words from the depth of the repressed and controlled world in which many live and encourage them to center on a mysterious reality who is gracious and merciful. Cathedrals create communities whose character is formed by the space.

A cathedral is a space where words are bathed in beauty and language is laced with incense. It is a place where music reaches beyond the heights and below the depths. It houses fire that flickers, casting its heat to warm cold hearts and its light to illumine the frightening dark.

A cathedral is also a place where time has an eternal quality. It is a place where the immediacy of urgent time is stretched into the expanse of timeless time. It is a place where time reaches back through the ages in memory and stares ahead into eternal wondering. A cathedral is a place where there is time to wander through the stained-glass stories, allowing ourselves to be stained by their humanity, their divinity. It is a place where ordinary people seem to dance from the windows with a quality of illuminating life, saint-like.

How does preaching create an oral sanctuary? How do we speak so that there is a sanctuary space in which the listeners might move without fear? How do we speak to create space between the tongue and the ear so that the spirit might have room to embrace both?

Oral Cathedral

Central to creating an oral cathedral is respect for boundaries. If the speaker has the need to fill up the room with his or her own presence, there is no room for others. A speaker who knows his or her own boundary

does not intrude on the space of others. The speaker's presence will allow room for the soul of another to be present. The architecture of the sermon represents itself for what it is, not intruding into the sacred space of another and demanding that the listener be something that she or he is not.

I remember attending a large convention and being so overwhelmed by the way the person who was preaching filled the room that I had to sit under the bleachers at the back of the convention hall. There was no space for me. When a preacher is driven to change others, she may be tempted to push into their space. If, however, she understands her role as one who bears witness to understandings that have overtaken her, she can offer them to the listener without needing the listener to affirm, agree, or accommodate. A preacher who is centered in her own soul can allow the fire to burn deeply and furiously and keep it contained so that it warms the heart of the other rather than burning the other with blistering pain.

A person who bears witness to that which has overtaken him is able to speak with humility. When a preacher knows that he is speaking out of a power that he can't control and manipulate, he can then speak with the humility of one who knows some things but whose knowing is encompassed in an expansive universe of

