

A View from the Pew: Recurring Disconnects with the Preacher

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Of as much I have become certain, that I am being addressed. By whom or to what end, I am less sure.

You are puzzled, preacher, that I find so little comfort hearing your certainty regarding who it is addressing me. I appreciate your enthusiasm, but, as I have tried to tell you, having the right answer is not my concern.

I sense this address requires a response, and that I am not yet prepared to respond. I tried to tell you, but you jumped ahead to inform me how the Bible would tell me all I need to know on how to respond.

You understand that your job is to proclaim to me what God has said. But I don't really care what your job is. I want to interact and engage with this one who might be God. I have not the time, energy or interest in sitting quietly while you distill timeless truths from another time to then hold me responsible for failing to implement in this time.

I am drawn. I am repelled. I move closer. I recoil. I stand in this moment in the presence of some personal force—overwhelming and underwhelming at the same time. Overwhelming to imagine that God in some form and some manner is interested in me. Underwhelming because so many of my neighbors continue to harm and hate each other.

I believe my nervousness arises out of a desire to comprehend the terms of this address and its necessary response. Your answers are not helpful, because my response must ultimately be my own. No one can do this work except me. You do not ask how you can help with this work I need to do, but assume you know, and simply, naively, and—I can't help wondering if not—arrogantly draw conclusions on my behalf.

You draw conclusions when process is required. You judge motivations when I have much to learn from my ambivalence. You insist on dogmatic proclamation when intriguing suggestion might open suspicious hearts—like mine.

I am not hoping to explore an encounter with the living God by myself. That my response needs to be my own does not mean that I arrive at that response on my own. I am eager to explore with you and others. I am thrilled that the others include so many from so many places and so many times. I would be the fool to cut myself off from those who have journeyed this path before, from those who are seeking to journey this path now.

That you and others have knowledge or experiences that I do not, does not mean that I will learn best from you by listening passively and responding unreflectively. I may simply need you to back off and slow down. Even if you are correct about the conclusions to which I will eventually arrive, announcing those conclusions ahead of time merely robs me of process.

If you'd like, I suppose we could change the subject. Is there anything I can do for you? I tried to tell you.

Sunday after Sunday I sit politely in the pew, attending to the preaching of God's word as best I can. I hear the text expounded with great care and passion. You, preacher, are convinced that these timeless truths have profound implications for my time-bound life.

But somehow it all just doesn't fit. It doesn't fit my life. Or my life doesn't fit the great and inviolable principles of scripture. My messy, complex life. Trying to stand outside my culture in order to learn how to live in my culture. Trying to get objective distance in order to gain subjective meaning. Not to discount what others have seen and

heard and handled, but I have but my own eyes, ears and hands through which to learn and live.

I find your delineation between biblical principles and life application arbitrary and forced. Every choice of every moment is a response of some sort. Your principles hover too far above me. Your applications are but compartmentalized fragments with no place to fit. Yet the suspicion lingers that it is I who does not fit.

I feel you are insisting there exists some sort of ideal state we are somehow responsible to both grasp and apply. Though it in fact, and by virtue of its ideal, conceptual nature, remains always just out of reach. What is the good news, then, when that which is absolutely true in principle is absolutely ambiguous in practice?

Part of me wants to insist that proclamation of the simple truth must be accompanied by empathetic understanding of the complex choices its implementation and integration involves. But in fact, life takes place the other way round. There is only implementation. We desire to have the moment by moment living we do reflect a loving and faithful response to the timeless and occasional initiatives of God—yes, even be characterized by many of the principles you have articulated conceptually.

You are certain of much. All at such a distance. The farther away you stand the more certain you become.

I know I should be excited to hear that Jesus is the answer, but I'm not sure you heard my question. I'm not sure you heard me. No, let's just say it. I'm not sure you know me. In fact, does it really matter who's in the pew if all of the Bible is all of the time true for all of humanity in all places?

I gather up your myriad of propositional truths into my arms and lug them into my day trying not to drop any. If it's really that important to you, I suppose I will continue to

carry them around. Is there anything else I can do for you? This pile of propositional truths that I lug with ambivalent faithfulness. So much truth clouded in the name of truth.

Yes, I agree your proclaimed principles are quite beautiful—though in a pristine, distant sort of way. I couldn't imagine my messy life soiling so clear and solid a standard. Small wonder you are so often disappointed with the partial and awkward compliance of the people of God. I must say, though, it is small consolation to be forgiven by God when each Sunday I am saddled with another circular sin-confession-forgiveness scenario to appropriate where it doesn't quite fit. Like I don't already know that all is not right within.

The seven steps towards... The ten principles of... the five rules for... the eight characteristics of... Three key values... The first point is... Simply follow this process... Dutifully complete these tasks... Stay away from almost everything around you while you boldly share your faith with those with whom you should not be associating.

All I can do is step into my today and extend my hand to my neighbor, for whom whatever I choose will impact both for good and for ill. How do I go about making such choices in light of the one who is addressing me? Who will reflect with me about such mysteries for which there can be no definitive answer?

There is no room for me in your kingdom. To infect me without being infected by me is to usurp control of the relationship. To woo without being wooed. To persuade without being persuaded. The underlying assumption that you are right and I am wrong is offensive beyond my capacity to bear, damaging beyond repair any semblance of relationship—community—because all you really offer is a place where I relinquish anything that might threaten your tidy worldview. Traversing the minefield of orthodoxy in search of a faithfulness defined by whom? There is no room for me.

You worry that you may abdicate authority by inviting discussion. But authority seems actually the most secure of all places. If your God is the only one, if these

Scriptures are true and alive and infallible—then let him defend himself, let the Scriptures speak for themselves. Let him speak to me. And let me hear him, mis-hear him, respond to him, defy him, grow in my understanding of him—yes, have my own encounter with this one who is addressing me.

Who is speaking anyway? It seems to be you. You are confident it is God. You assert your responsibility to exhort with authority, but I can't help wondering whether you are merely angry. You check in regularly to gauge your effectiveness, but I wonder whether you are merely eager to please.

I hear so many voices. Extracting God's from the mix is no small challenge. The sermon, minimally, is both your and God's voices. Even those are difficult to distinguish. Often I don't hear you distinguishing either. What is the word from elsewhere spoken into this moment and what is the word that arises from your need to be liked or need to be in control or frustration with your church?

If your listeners are somewhere other than where you want them, isn't that your starting point? To insist we all have to agree about the nature of propositional truth, or the perfection of scripture before we can have a conversation is naive at best. That is to say we converse on your terms or not at all.

Get over it. Like it or not, easy or not, we are your starting point. It will matter little that you were right and we were wrong, if you inadvertently sabotaged any chance of dialogue —of influence. Even if you are right, what good is that when there is no one else in the room? We do not get to set the terms by which we are heard.

I feel robbed by you of the startling experience of another reality breaking into my own. You miss a communication opportunity by wasting your time and what little credibility you have remaining trying to get me to agree that my experience is not a valid basis for constructing reality. But my experience is all I know. The word of God has

spoken to, broken into, reached out toward all human constructs in all times. He will speak to me also. And I will be able to apprehend the initiative of God, but not because of how I construct my experience of what is absolutely true in another realm, but by how I wrestle, grope, falter, try— yes, chose to live each moment in my own realm.

God may intend nothing more than to meet me in my experience in order to draw me into his experience. He knows the only place he will find me is in my experience—however problematic. He knows the only place I will find life is in his experience—however outside my capacity to comprehend.

I stand at a great divide between an ultimately self-referential experience and an ultimately authentic relationship with God. Both involve a rather significant place for myself. The central place or the adopted child's place. That I am not central does not mean that I am not significant. Conversely, that I am enthusiastically loved by God does not mean that I become the point and purpose of creation. I will not avoid the opportunity to experience the one because there is so much risk of the other. I find myself willing to risk eternal death in order to risk eternal life.

We are not community because we give up what might smack of individuality for the sake of the corporate whole, but by fully stepping into our individual places and moments and completely owning them within the larger community and context.

You have, in effect, changed the subject and moved the conversation away from the gospel. I tried to tell you. Whatever you do in the pulpit, I must for my part encounter the living God. Excuse me now, I have a life to live.

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