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Touchstones for Preaching Transcript of Basic Touchstone 5: Scripting for the Ear, Not for the Eye

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“Touchstones for Preaching” is a resource of Boston College School of Theology and Ministry produced in partnership with the Church in the 21st Century Center.

Jesus came to this earth at a time when oral communication was key. That’s how people always spoke to one another—not by writing, but always by speaking. His preaching, his parables all speak to this medium. So, preaching a homily really does find itself in that same family. This is the message of the Gospel, not for reading but for hearing.

A homily is the medium of hearing, not of reading. A homily isn’t an essay, a homily isn’t an article, and a homily is not a lecture. It’s meant to provide a heard encounter within the context of some kind of a liturgical setting which is meant for the congregation in front of you. Maybe one way that you can think about it—it’s not a perfect analogy, but it might help... If a conversation about the Kingdom of God and a lecture about the Kingdom of God were to have a child, it would be a homily. And so, what are some hints for writing a homily for the ear, not to be read, but for the ear?

First thing I would say is to **know your best style**. Are you skilled at preparing a homily and preaching without notes? Do you prefer bullet points? Do you write out your homily or type out your whole homily? Whatever is your preferred, and whatever is your best way, just make sure that you do it really well. I think that it’s worthwhile to experiment from time to time. I think that always helps us to grow as a preacher. But know and prepare well the type of style you’re going to use for this particular homily that you are getting ready to preach. And you want to be able to be well-prepared in that style so that the homily will be fluid and cohesive.

The second thing that you always want to remember when you are preparing a homily to be heard is just to **remember that you’re talking to people**. Your sentences don’t have to be bland and they don’t have to be boring. They shouldn’t be. But also, you want to be careful that they’re not these complex, compound sentences either.

There’s one simple rule that I always try to keep in the back of my mind: **avoid commas**. That sounds simple. Avoid commas. In general, when we speak we don’t really use commas very much, do we? This is an example of how not to do it. *As we came here this morning (comma) and as we heard in the Gospel read to us by Deacon Joe (comma) Jesus says to you and me (comma) in the Great Commandment (comma) “Love one another.”* See how it gets all garbled like that? Instead, you can put it very simply, very beautifully. What is Jesus commanding? “Love one another.” So, not too complicated, and use straightforward sentences. Now again, these sentences can be beautiful. They can be very, very well-crafted. They can even be poetic, but not tangled. That’s what you want to avoid. Our words and our sentences can be rich, but they shouldn’t be dense so that people have to try to unpack them immediately upon the hearing.

A third thing to keep in mind is that you always want to **try to use concrete images**. Here’s an example of maybe how not to do it. *Like us sometimes, the disciples were in a state of confusion.* Maybe a better way to say something like that is this: *The disciples didn’t know whether to stay, they didn’t know whether to go, to sit, or to stand. They were confused. We often get that way.* You can

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see the difference when you paint a picture of what you're trying to express. It helps to draw in the congregation and for them to identify. So, use concrete images.

Another way is to **use direct, forceful words**, forceful in a careful way. You don't want to say something like, *what Paul was trying to say, what Paul was trying to tell the Corinthians was*. It's kind of garbled. You want to use direct language. *Paul taught the Corinthians that*. So, you want to keep it as straightforward as possible so that people don't get lost in the background. Again, because this is for hearing, you also want to use words that people are familiar with, that people know. Rather than saying *Christ's soteriological mission*, you would want to say *Christ's healing and redemption*. Now, that being said, I do recommend sometimes using the appropriate theological term; but the important thing is that you tell people what it means and you just help to make sure everybody's on board with you. So, for example, we often use the phrase *the Paschal Mystery*. Well, a lot of people may not be exactly sure what you're getting at with that. I think it's important that you say *Paschal Mystery* because it's an important phrase in our faith; but you want to remind people, when you say *Paschal Mystery* you're talking about the death and the resurrection of Christ.

Perhaps the sixth idea to keep in mind as you're preparing a homily to be heard and not read is that you always do want to **give illustrations**. You always want to give stories. You always want to have anecdotes, but you want to make sure, of course, that they serve the homily. They're not meant to be distractions or detours, but they want to flesh out the message that we're offering. You want to give people something that they can hang onto that will bring back for them the message that you were communicating in that particular homily.

Another thing to keep in mind when we're writing homilies to be heard is, when you're writing sentences or phrases or words, you want to **keep in mind how might my gestures help to support what I'm saying**. We always should use gestures when we preach and so you want to prepare your homily with that in mind. So, maybe something like, if you want to say *it's not over here, but it's over there*. You want to have a sense of illustrating your point by saying *not over here, but over there*. So even in the writing to have it in mind that you might use that kind of a gesture. And, of course, it's not just for drama but it's for appropriate communication. You also want to remember just when you're making gestures because they are important, but just remember that a gesture should always precede what you're saying. You don't want to say you will *go over* (speaking forcefully) *there* and *not over* (speaking forcefully) *there*, because then you just look like a bad Shakespearean actor. So your gesture should always either accompany or precede the word that you're using.

Then finally, of course, you always want to **have eye contact**. Many preachers recommend that you choose one or two or three points in your congregation where you will occasionally, and as often as possible actually, make eye contact with a specific person or area and hold it for a good three, four, five seconds, so that there's a sense that you are really engaging with the persons who are in front of you. So, just all of this notion of gesture can really help, and if you're keeping gestures in mind as you're writing your homily, it helps to make for a much more engaging kind of presentation.

With that in mind, too, I would recommend that you want to **keep pace**. You want to always recognize effective pauses. I think that one of the bigger problems that preachers have is that they don't always recognize the power of a well-placed pause. I'm not talking about kind of not knowing what you're going to say next so there's this dead air, but a pause that is planned. So, again, when you're writing, you plan the pauses, not awkward stumbles or silences, but something that can help to get the point across in a more dramatic way. So, just for example, maybe this is how you would not want to do it: *what Jesus wants is mercy for you*. It's kind of an awkward sentence. *What Jesus wants is mercy for you*. Maybe another way to think about it, again with a pause in mind: *what Jesus*

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wants for you (pause) is mercy. You notice that the pause kind of draws people in when there's a silence when you're speaking, and it helps people to catch the exact word that you want them to hear.

Kind of tied in with that, and this will be the next point I think, is **tone of voice**. When you're writing your homily, you want to have in your mind how am I going to say that sentence, how am I going to try to get that that point across. And so, maybe just let me give an example with the sentence that I just used. So, tone of voice: (speaking forcefully) *what Jesus wants of you is mercy.* Does the tone that I just used really help to communicate what the words are saying? Again, maybe better put is something like, (speaking gently) *what Jesus really wants for you is mercy.* So, keep that in mind. The tone of your voice is going to help you communicate the words that you are saying.

Just as an aside, if you ever have the possibility of proclaiming the Gospel, always even if Jesus' words are stern, always try to not make them angry. It's always important to interpret the words of Jesus in such a way that they would have been heard by people in a way that made them sit up and take notice—again, the attractiveness of Jesus' words.

Just two final thoughts that I'd like to offer—when you're writing a homily and you know that you're at about the three-quarter mark, you're about seventy-five percent into your homily, this is a good time to **infuse it with a new energy**. So, you can kind of think of it like the seventh inning stretch, or maybe the *scherzo* after the *adagio* in a piece of music. It might be a good story, so at the seventy-five percent mark, put in a good story that's going to get people's attention. Or maybe it will just be one simple well-crafted sentence. Or maybe it will be an increase of your volume, or maybe a decrease of your volume, but something that's going to get the people's attention back if they may have wandered at that moment. And then, you always want to make sure that you **have a good, secure, and well-planned conclusion**.

The last idea: make it a practice to **retire stock phrases**. When you're preaching, just be careful not to use words like *therefore, thus*. Those are really written words, aren't they—*so therefore, thus, kind of*—get those away. I would keep away from phrases like *in other words*. That gets boring. People kind of shut you off when they hear phrases like *in other words*. Really keep away from a phrase like *let us*. People sometimes joke; they call them "lettuce" homilies. *Let us do this, this, and the other thing*. What I say is take off the words *let us* or *may we*, which is another one. It sounds like French, saying *but yes, you know*. So, *let us, may we*—let's take it out and, instead, just begin with the verb. So, instead of saying *let us pray that we will find the Lord*, take out the *let us*, and just say *pray that we will find the Lord*. Rather than saying, *may we love one another*, say *love one another*. It takes away kind of those boring, trite phrases, but I think it also carries a lot more punch and has a lot more direct power of the Word of God in front of us.

Then, just in conclusion, when you're writing for hearing, make sure that you're always using the name of *Jesus* as frequently as possible, the name of the *Father*, the name of the *Holy Spirit*, and you want to talk about the *Church*. You want to address *my brothers and sisters*, and just be careful that you're not using the word *I* or *me* too often. You can certainly use stories about yourself and you can offer your own input, but just make sure that these other words are there much more than the word *I* or *me*, because eventually that begins to wear on people as well.

So, writing a homily that is meant to be spoken, writing a homily that is meant to be heard and not read, does take some skill and it does take some practice, but it really is the medium of the preacher's call as a proclaimer of the Word of God. And it is worth giving our attention to this great way of communicating God's power and his love.

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Now, spend a few moments reflecting on the questions at the bottom of the page.

[Questions on web page]

- Listen to some of your homilies. Do they sound conversational or do they sound like you are delivering a written essay?
- What concrete suggestions can you take from this presentation to apply to your own preaching?