



# THE GIFT OF PREACHING



Exploring *the* 10 principles  
that bring *a* homily *to* life

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# Introduction

## *Mission Statement*

In the course of my seventy-five years, I have spent a considerable amount of time listening to preachers and practicing the art as well. Innumerable the number of sermons and homilies heard; countless the homilies I have given over the years. So many words heard and spoken, and to what effect? Only God knows. Hopefully, many of those preached words had a life-giving impact and nourished someone's spiritual journey.

One of my favorite poets, George Herbert, himself a preacher in the Anglican tradition, wrote of the preacher's place as being glorious and transcendent. His words both challenge and affirm the preaching ministry:

### THE WINDOWS

*Lord, how can man preach Thy eternal Word?  
He is a brittle crazy glass;  
Yet in Thy temple Thou dost him afford*

*This glorious and transcendent place,  
To be a window, through Thy grace.*

*But when Thou dost anneal in glass Thy story,  
Making Thy life to shine within  
The holy preachers, then the light and glory  
More rev'rend grows, and more doth win,—  
Which else shews wat'rish, bleak and thin.*

*Doctrine and life, colors and light, in one  
When they combine and mingle, bring  
A strong regard and awe: but speech alone  
Doth vanish like a flaring thing,  
And in the ear, not conscience, ring.*

The metaphor of a window captures well the invitation and imperative to let God's light pour through our words to enlighten and warm others. Herbert, a poet/preacher, challenges himself and us to have that integrity of "doctrine and life" that makes our preaching credible. Eloquence alone may impress but does not leave a lasting impression. There is in "The Window" a gentle humility as the window, that brittle and flawed glass, takes on the task of being transparent to God's Light. Here is a humility that hopefully verges on humor.

*"In omnibus respice finem"* ("Begin with the end in mind") is an adage that every preacher should attend to. What is the nature and what are the goals of preaching? In a document entitled *Fulfilled in Your Hearing*, this description of the Sunday homily is given: "[The homily is] a scriptural interpretation of human existence which enables the community

to recognize God's active presence, to respond to that presence in faith through liturgical word and gesture, and beyond the liturgical assembly, through a life lived in conformity with the Gospel."<sup>1</sup>

The starting point is human existence—the doing of laundry, voting for our politicians, heading north or south on vacation, milking the cows, burying a beloved friend, praying for peace in a broken world—all those activities that make up our personal and communal lives. We bring to human experience an interpretation based upon the word of God. That word speaks of the mystery of creation, redemption, and sanctification. That word helps us to see where God is present or absent in our daily transactions.

But a homily is more than an interpretation. It also involves a response—indeed, a twofold response. One is to take place within the liturgy itself. Through word and gesture, we thank and praise God; we ask for forgiveness and seek God's help; we are a people of adoration, gazing upon the face of Christ, who reveals the Father. But the homily takes us beyond worship out into the streets where we encounter our sisters and brothers. Preaching challenges us to conform our lives to God's demanding gospel, to be people who translate the Beatitudes into life.

The homily, therefore, is to do two things: help us to recognize God's presence in our times, and help us to respond to that loving presence in worship and in discipleship.

*Fulfilled in Your Hearing* also describes the nature of the homily. A job description is offered to the homilist. Obviously, in no single homily will all or most of these objectives be fulfilled. Yet the preacher should be sensitive to each

task and might well evaluate the effectiveness of the homily by these standards. Here are seven objectives of the preaching ministry:

- to provide the congregation with words to express faith
- to interpret life in relation to God
- to make connections between human existence and God's concerns
- to lead people to a greater unity of faith
- to face the ambiguities and challenges of the human journey
- to share a vision of life that is faith-filled
- to praise and thank God for divine providence

## #1 Fire



**PRINCIPLE:** PREACHING THAT IS GROUNDED IN THE FIRE OF PRAYER CONVINCES PEOPLE OF GOD'S HOLY PRESENCE.

*If the vast amount of time and energy invested in the search of ideas and devices for preaching; if the fire spent on the altar of oratory were dedicated to the realm of prayer, we would not find it too difficult to convey to others what it means to utter a word in the presence of God.*

**ABRAHAM HESCHEL**<sup>2</sup>

Prayer and preaching must never be divorced. In her book *Creative Prayer*, Brigid E. Herman asserts that “the prayerless pulpit is always an uncertain pulpit.”<sup>3</sup> Worse than mere uncertainty, if prayer does not precede the preaching, people will sense an absence of fervor that moves and inspires the heart. Indeed, the homily might be eloquent, filled with fine literary references, humorous and engaging, but something is missing: an intimacy between God and the preacher that radiates the quality of authenticity.

At a preaching workshop, a presenter shared this adage for preachers: “Read yourself full; think yourself clear; pray yourself hot.” Reading and study are givens lest the preacher has nothing of depth to communicate. Thinking, pondering, and cogitating are *sine qua nons*, lest the congregation finds no order or clarity in the homily. Ah, but the third—prayer! Here is where the fire of the Holy Spirit truly enlightens the mind and enkindles the heart. An enlightened mind helps to make sense of the Scriptures; an enkindled heart helps to inspire people to encounter God’s love and mercy in the preached word. No prayer, no fire, no transformation.

Robert Frost raised a question in his poem “Fire and Ice”: will the world end in a conflagration or meet its demise in the deadly paralysis of ice? Fire does have its destructive side; fire can also provide warmth and light. In prayer, we beg for the living flame of the Holy Spirit to make us agents of light and instruments of divine love. The Pentecost event is not confined to a single, past historical event. Pentecost happens time and time again when we enter into the life-giving fire of prayer.

## #2 Voice



**PRINCIPLE:** PREACHING ATTEMPTS TO EMULATE GOD'S  
LOVING, COMPASSIONATE, MERCIFUL VOICE.

*Perhaps no image is more valuable than this one to help us understand the real purpose of the word of God in our lives. All preaching, teaching, theology, and pastoral practice is really in function of this—to letting God's voice become the smiling, beckoning, caressing, cajoling, luring mother, calling the child out of fear, darkness, chaos, and inarticulateness to freedom, thought, deep feeling, self-expression, and love.*

**RONALD ROLHEISER<sup>1</sup>**

Preachers have a tremendous challenge, namely, emulating the voice of God in communicating with the congregation. At times, God's voice will be demanding and relentless; at other times, the divine voice is filled with exquisite tenderness and compassion. In speaking for God, the preacher/prophet Isaiah proclaimed that we are precious in God's sight and God loves us. Then we hear the fearless St. Paul exhorting the early Christian communities to stop their fighting and live in peace and harmony. As in the past, God continues to voice demands and affirmations through contemporary preachers.

It is that subtle interior art of discernment that enables the preacher to discern God's voice. So many voices fill the airwaves—voices of weal and woe, voices of hope and gloom,

voices that speak of death and life. The preacher must sort all this out and find God's message, whatever the situation. Often the divine voice can be detected in life-giving events; often that voice can be heard in the negativities of life, the dark night of the soul that St. John of the Cross wrote about. It is in prayer that the art of discernment finds its natural habitat.

In his novel *Do Lord Remember Me*, Julius Lester offers an incisive commentary on the voice of a preacher:

“It was the voice that made a preacher a preacher rather than a minister. Anybody who liked people, had common sense and a Bible could be a minister, but a preacher was all that plus the voice. Even when he was little, the old folks said, ‘He’s gon’ be a preacher. Listen at that voice!’ He thought everybody knew how to let their voices be as soft as sunlight in spring and as hot as railroad tracks against bare feet in August. As he got older and listened to preachers, he realized that most shouted and yelled, trying to cover up that they didn’t have the voice. Others didn’t even pretend, but read their sermons like college professors giving lectures.”<sup>5</sup>

### #3 Skin



**PRINCIPLE:** PREACHING REQUIRES EMPATHY, THE ABILITY TO ENTER INTO THE MIND AND HEART OF THE CONGREGATION.

*The preacher must always try to feel what it is like to live inside the skin of the people he is preaching to, to hear the truth as they hear it. That is not as hard as it sounds be-*

*cause, of course, he is himself a hearer of truth as well as a teller of truth, and he listens out of the same emptiness as they do for a truth to fill him and make him true. So at the deepest level all hearers of truth are the same hearer...*

**FREDERICK BUECHNER**<sup>6</sup>

**E**ach of us is unique, as manifested in our DNA, our fingerprints, the texture of our heart, yet we possess an amazing universality that forms us into a single human family. Though singular in many ways, we all experience fatigue and sin, ignorance and fear, satisfaction and disappointment. Because of our commonality, we have the potential to be compassionate and empathetic, appreciating in various ways what other people are going through even though, at the present moment, their experience is not our own. On our spaceship Earth, we all know something about birth and death, success and failure, joy and sorrow.

Through the grace of empathy and compassion, we can crawl inside the skin of our fellow pilgrims. So gifted, preachers become more and more aware of the trials and tribulations of their faith community. Such a grace short-circuits flippant judgments and insensitive observations. Preachers do well to position themselves in the back pew of the church and try to image what parishioners carry, both their joys and sorrows. Failure to do so will be evident not only in what is said (or not said), but also in the tone of voice and general sensibility.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, observing a preacher who lacked “the skin principle,” wrote: “He had no one word intimating that he had laughed or wept, was married or in love, had been commended, or cheated, or chagrined. If he had

ever lived or acted, we were none the wiser for it...The true preacher can be known by this, that he deals out to the people his life, life passed through the fire of thought.”<sup>7</sup> Emerson is not asking for inappropriate self-disclosure. Rather, what he expects and what the congregation expects is that the servant of the word of God is intimately aware of the human condition, with all its ups and down. When preachers identify with life’s messiness and sublimity, their message becomes authentic and relevant.

## #4 Rock



**PRINCIPLE:** PREACHING ASSISTS US IN OUR SEARCH FOR A ROCK OF STABILITY IN AN UNSTABLE WORLD.

*I recall attending a student Mass in late November of that year, when the readings were full of earthquakes and darkness and howling wind and fear, prefiguring the end of the world, and in turn prefiguring Advent and a new beginning. The priest, a stranger to me, picked up on the symbol of the earthquake and spoke to the students about the stages in their lives when they lose, one by one, the people and possessions and beliefs that seemed so essential to them. His examples proved that he had a firm sense of his audience. He understood what the students were going through—experiencing shifting thoughts concerning careers; realizing as seniors that majors that seemed appealing during the sophomore year were losing their appeal; coping with the death*

*of parents, the pillars of our world; harboring unstable attitudes in an unstable world—and said we were in church that day searching for the rock of stability. And, best of all, he said it in ten minutes. I left deeply moved, and thankful that the modern priest is trained in homiletics. JON HASSLER<sup>8</sup>*

One of the objectives of preaching is to deal with the ambiguities and challenges of life. By bringing God's word to bear on the anxieties of life, and by showing how life's "slings and arrows" can be opportunities for growth, a great service is rendered to the community. We all need some solid footing to deal with the mysteries of life; we all need someone or something to trust lest we lose our way.

When Augustine met Ambrose, bishop of Milan, he was deeply moved by Ambrose's teaching and preaching. Even more, Augustine felt Ambrose's concern and warm hospitality. Here was a source of stability in Augustine's turbulent life, as for years he had been searching for meaning and acceptance. Ambrose, teacher and fatherly figure, became a rock of stability for wandering, drifting Augustine.

One of the anguishing experiences of ministry comes when the pastoral leaders or preachers lose their bearings, be it because of emotional turmoil, moral failure (sin), or doubts about faith. Great courage and nobility are needed to persevere and continue in ministry. Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta, though suffering from the many dark nights of the soul, exemplified that nobility and courage. She preached by her life. She offered to others a solid footing to keep on the narrow path leading to the kingdom. Amazing grace, indeed.

## #5 Heart



**PRINCIPLE:** PREACHING ABOVE ALL DEMANDS A PASTORAL HEART ENABLING THE PREACHER AND THE CONGREGATION TO EXPERIENCE AN AUTHENTIC DIALOGUE.

*Ultimately it is the preacher with the pastoral heart in dialogue with a particular assembly who must decide which image is appropriate for particular celebrations, seasons, biblical texts, local contexts, and pastoral needs. There are times when what is needed is the herald's voice, especially when in sad times weary people wonder if, indeed, the news is good. There are times when the teacher is needed to clarify issues and remind us of the Church's tradition, especially when that tradition is misunderstood or misrepresented. There are times, also, to hear the witness who is called forth to testify to Christ in the world. And there are times when the voice of the interpreter needs to be heard, a strong poetic and prophetic voice that helps to unravel our thoughts and penetrate our hearts so that the gospel can be heard again.*

**ROBERT WAZNAK<sup>9</sup>**

**S**t. Paul urges all of us to put on the mind and heart of Christ, to think like Jesus and to love like Jesus. Preachers in a special way must heed this exhortation. As they proclaim and interpret God's word, they must attempt to align their thoughts and feelings with those of the Master. Only if preachers have the vision and

compassion of Christ will their words be truly effective.

A pastoral heart has a variety of textures. When tragedy hits a community, the pastoral heart must be filled with empathy and compassion. When doubts arise and truths are obscured by cultural voices, the pastoral heart must instruct with patience and wisdom. At other times, the preacher will be asked to make manifest the gospel by a lifestyle filled with sacrifices and self-denial. The witness to the cross will make credible the preacher's message. And then the congregation must be given images that remind the people of the prophets of old, images like the bruised reed and the potter's house and the promise of a new heart. A creative, pastoral heart is the order of the day.

Always we return to Jesus, the master preacher. As Jesus shows us the compassion of the good Samaritan and the prodigal father, our hearts are deeply moved. As Jesus speaks about the Father's providence in the lilies of the field, we know that this message arises from a pastoral heart. The dialogue here is heart to heart, filled with enduring emotions that call us to action. The preacher might well offer this daily prayer:

*Lord, give me a heart of courage, that I may follow Thee,  
a heart of joy, that I may sing with Thee,  
a heart of compassion, that I may cry with Thee,  
a heart of simplicity, that I may walk with Thee,  
a missionary heart, that I may go with Thee,  
a pastoral heart, that I may preach with Thee.*

## #6 Expectations



**PRINCIPLE:** PREACHING IS A DEMANDING ART  
AND FILLED WITH GREAT EXPECTATIONS.

*The faithful assembled as a Paschal Church, celebrating the feast of the Lord present in their midst, expect much from this preaching, and will greatly benefit from it provided that it is simple, clear, direct, well adapted, profoundly dependent on Gospel teaching and faithful to the Magisterium, animated by a balanced apostolic ardor coming from its own characteristic nature, full of hope, fostering belief, and productive of peace and unity.* POPE PAUL VI<sup>10</sup>

In any area of life, the question of expectations is significant. In marriages, in our educational institutions, in our governments, in our businesses, in our personal lives, we have expectations that, when met, bring joy and satisfaction, and, when not met, bring sadness and disappointment. And central to the matter of expectations is whether or not they are realistic or neurotic.

Preaching, like any vocation, is filled with expectations. The congregation expects a homily that is well-prepared, relevant to faith and life, and of appropriate length. Preachers expect that their message will be listened to in a benevolent fashion and will lead to some degree of growth and conversion. And the servers expect it to be short.

In his document on evangelization, Pope Paul VI articulates ten qualities (expectations?) of a good homily: simple,

clear, direct, well adapted, profoundly dependent on gospel teaching, faithful to the Magisterium, animated by apostolic ardor, full of hope, fosters belief, productive of peace and unity.

What a challenge! Obviously, no single homily will give evidence of all these qualities, but all of these characteristics of a good homily merit our attention and evaluation.

## #7 Holy Ground



**PRINCIPLE:** PREACHING IS AN AWESOME PRIVILEGE AND RESPONSIBILITY AS THE PREACHER SPEAKS ON BEHALF OF GOD.

*In the homily, the homilist is pointed in a different direction than is the celebrant in the eucharistic prayer.*

- *In the eucharistic prayer, the celebrant 'stands facing God' and speaks to God on behalf of the people.*
- *In the homily, the homilist 'stands facing the people' and speaks to the people on behalf of God.*

*When you think about it in this light, which is the more awesome task? Well, each is awesome in its own way. But while we recognize the sacredness of what the presider is about in the eucharistic prayer, we're a long way from sensing the sacredness of what the homilist is about in the homily.*

**KEN UNTENER**<sup>11</sup>

When God was looking for a messenger to send to his people, Isaiah exclaimed: “Here am I. Send me” (Isaiah 6:8). In every century, in every country, that question hangs in the air. God is constantly looking for individuals who will mediate the divine message. Down through the ages, individuals have heard the call and, like Isaiah, offered their services.

Audacious is Isaiah’s and the preacher’s response. Hopefully, it is a graced boldness and one that has a huge portion of humility. To present oneself as a spokesperson for God should be undertaken with fear and trembling. As flawed and imperfect individuals, preachers must, through tone of voice and rhetorical style, come across not as arrogant ministers of the word, but as struggling pilgrims striving to tell the truth, the good news of the gospel, as best they can. Their efforts will always be wanting, but if the ministry is entered into with epistemological humility and a sense of compassionate solidarity, the congregation will be able to discern something of God’s love and mercy.

Preachers have a double commission. They are spokespersons for God to the people, but also representatives of the people in addressing God. Although this latter task carries with it less chance of failure, the message delivered must be authentic and candid. This is not to inform God of anything new; the task is to help the congregation remember the great mysteries of our creation, redemption, and sanctification. The congregations and the preachers are in need of wrapping words around their relationship with God. George Herbert, the great Anglican priest/poet/preacher, said that every sermon should end with prayer, with addressing God directly.

This praying of the Eucharistic Prayer is the second half of the preacher's vocation.

## #8 South Wind



**PRINCIPLE:** PREACHING'S ULTIMATE EFFECTIVENESS RESTS IN THE PRESENCE AND POWER OF THE HOLY SPIRIT.

*The preacher has to beseech him [Holy Spirit] earnestly to come both into his poor words and into the hearts of those who hear them. YVES CONGAR<sup>12</sup>*

St. John of the Cross used the symbol of the south wind to describe the Holy Spirit. Preachers do well to give the ancient Latin hymn “Veni, Creator Spiritus” preeminent place in their spiritual life. Realizing the complexity of communication and the graces needed both by preachers searching for the right words and the congregation's striving to be attentive, we have in that ancient hymn a fitting plea for God's assistance. It is the Holy Spirit who enlightens our minds to understand; it is the Holy Spirit who empowers us to hear and live God's word.

Preachers realize how poor their words are. Language can never capture the fullness of mystery; words stumble in their attempt to explain sin and grace, heaven and hell, good and bad. And the congregation? The listeners in front of the pulpit are of all ages and backgrounds, from diverse cultures and experiences, often struggling with anxieties and

heavy burdens. Without the grace of God's Spirit to assist the congregation to comprehend the message, the likelihood of authentic communication is greatly reduced.

Our hope, be it that of preachers or of listeners, lies in a promise. We are never alone. God has promised to be with us. More, God promised to share the divine Spirit with us. We are not left to our own limited means, and we do well to remember that the power and wisdom of God is available. We need but open our minds and hearts, and God's promise will be realized.

"Come, Holy Spirit, and enlighten our minds, enkindle our hearts, and empower us to hear and live your word. Without you we will not see well, nor love deeply, nor act responsibly. Abide with all of us so that your word may have its effect in our lives."

## #9 Wholeness / Integrity



**PRINCIPLE:** PREACHING FLOWS OUT OF THE PREACHER'S MORAL, INTELLECTUAL, AND SPIRITUAL LIFE.

*Preaching is easy enough; practicing is the hard part. A saint very dear to the Russian people, St. Serafim of Sarov, used to say that preaching is as easy as throwing stones from the top of a church tower, whereas putting it into practice is as hard as carrying stones to the top of the tower on your back. Ideally we should only throw those stones we have manhandled up the tower in the first place, or in other words, preach*

*only what we have already put into practice. But such perfect consistency between the Word and life is pretty rare; what is more, those who possess it are the last to perceive it. Meanwhile, the Word of God cannot wait. So what is to be done? Should one keep quiet? St. Paul's words cheer us on: "We do not preach ourselves but Jesus Christ as Lord" (2 Cor 4:5). The Word is true, not for the life of the preacher but for the life of Christ, who has fulfilled every word of the gospel. We ought to sink into the dust of shame at the distance that separates us from the Word, but even so we cannot keep silent about the Word, and there lies our punishment and humiliation. RANIERO CANTALAMESSA<sup>13</sup>*

**M**any preachers might have a claim on an Academy Award because of fine acting. What one speaks and how one lives can be light years apart. But that is no reason for not proclaiming and interpreting the gospel. As long as one is striving in a serious and disciplined way to transform the word into life, one need not shun the pulpit. Despite the gap between the ideal of covenant love and the reality of our lack of authentic charity, we must continue to proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen.

Lived preaching is that graced combination in which what is spoken is also lived. But most preachers are on the way, knowledgeable about what is to be done yet wanting in the execution of the message. Such is life. That is why the tone of voice is crucial. The congregation must be able to "hear" humility in the voice of the preacher, not arrogance. There must be no pretense here. The preached word is the ideal toward which all of us strive and none have totally achieved.

*Compassionate God, look upon us with pity.  
We strive to speak and live your word  
but fail time and time again.  
May both the grace of perseverance and the gift of humor  
help us to struggle on, doing the best we can with your  
help. When we fail to live your word, grant us forgiveness;  
when we do fulfill your commands,  
may we give you thanks.*

## #10 **Metamorphosis**



**PRINCIPLE:** PREACHING INVOLVES A CALL  
TO CONVERSION, A TURNING FROM SELF TO THE MYSTERY  
OF GOD AND GOD'S CONCERNS.

*Do things happen, when he preaches? LEIF ENGER<sup>14</sup>*

**I**n all of our lives there are unredeemed areas in our minds and hearts, in our families and larger communities, in our institutions and in our churches. Preaching not only names grace, God's love and mercy made manifest in the world, but preaching also has the mandate to name sin, distortion, and division. Unless this is done, nothing will happen. Or even worse, a complacency will set in, thwarting the work of God's redeeming love.

Conversion is about change, a change of images, attitudes, and behavior. Conversion is also about changing structures

and policies that threaten the dignity of life. Courage is demanded in challenging every form of injustice. Humility is demanded as preachers are deeply aware of their own sinfulness and their deep need for God's mercy. Only when courage and humility grace the preacher's life will things truly happen and God's kingdom be promoted.

In the Roman synodal document *Justice in the World*, we hear loud and clear the call for conversion, for something to happen: "Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel, or, in other words, of the Church's mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation."<sup>15</sup> What a challenge; what a vocation!

In pondering the question of whether or not something happens in preaching, this verse came to mind:

#### **DO THINGS HAPPEN**

*It was a large congregation,  
just under a thousand souls  
(not counting women and children).*

*The sermon was not long,  
judging by eternity's standards  
(well under an hour).*

*In one of the thousand souls  
something did happen  
(hard to measure because invisible).*

*It happened in me  
sitting passive and silent  
(what happened is now I see).*

## Conclusion



This essay began with George Herbert raising the provocative question: “Lord, how can man preach Thy eternal word?” It might be fitting to give Herbert the floor once again with a word of advice:

*“For in preaching to others, he forgets not himself, but is first a Sermon to himself, and then to others; growing with the growth of his Parish.”<sup>6</sup>*

As a gift, preaching offers the possibility of touching the minds and hearts of thousands of people. When the gift is used well, people are assisted in answering the baptismal call to maturity, to growth, to fullness of life. As a responsibility, preaching begins at home. Preachers must look into the mirror and allow God’s word and their interpretation of it to pass judgment on their souls. When this duty is fulfilled, preachers too will grow and experience that peace of Christ that is beyond all understanding, as St. Paul reminds us.

What a “glorious and transcendent place” it is to be a window of God’s grace. What beauty and splendor it is when the story of God’s immense mercy and love is told again and again as Jesus crucified and risen is proclaimed, and the Holy Spirit, the South Wind of God, is felt blowing over the congregation and the world.

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