
A SERMON WORKBOOK

Exercises in the Art and Craft of Preaching

Thomas H. Troeger & Leonora Tubbs Tisdale

 Abingdon Press™

Nashville

A SERMON WORKBOOK:
EXERCISES IN THE ART AND CRAFT OF PREACHING

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*We dedicate this book to the students of
Yale Divinity School,
whose intelligence, creativity, passion, and faithfulness in preaching
are an inspiration to us.*

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Books are often many years in the gestation process, and this one comes to birth in the fullness of time—as we complete seven years of co-teaching the introductory preaching class at Yale Divinity School. To say that our preaching collegiality has been a joy would be an understatement. We have reveled in it, grown from it, been inspired by it, had fun with it, and, in the process, developed a way of teaching preaching that is different from how either of us did it previously. So our first debt of gratitude is to one another. What a gift it is to have a colleague who is a genuine complement intellectually, a partner in faith and prayer, and a fun human being to boot!

The second partner in this process has been the amazing group of students we have taught through the years at Yale Divinity School. They have challenged and affirmed us, inspired and moved us, and consistently embraced the task of preaching with energy, imagination, faithfulness, compassion, and intellect. It is to them we have dedicated this book, for they give us hope for the church and the world! They have also made this book much stronger than it would have been because many have allowed us to use their written exercises to illustrate the principles we discuss. Fifty exercises by former or current students are included in Part II of the workbook, but we could have used many times that number, had space allowed. We count ourselves privileged to teach and to learn from them.

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Nora Tubbs Tisdale and Thomas H. Troeger
Yale Divinity School, New Haven, CT
Epiphany 2013

INTRODUCTION: THE WHYS AND HOWS OF THIS WORKBOOK

Welcome to this workbook for learning preaching! Whether you are someone who has never preached before or an experienced local church pastor, whether you are training to become a lay preacher or are engaged in homiletical studies in a theological seminary, this workbook is for you. Its exercises are designed to help you think like a preacher, write like a preacher, and proclaim the good news with imagination, theological integrity, deepened biblical insight, and heartfelt passion.

What's more, these exercises are designed to help you claim or reclaim joy in the sermon preparation process. Over the years that we have co-taught preaching at Yale Divinity School, students have come into our classrooms at all stages of readiness to preach. While some have been excited about the task, others have approached it with fear and trepidation, and still others have viewed it as a necessary but cumbersome chore to be undertaken amid the myriad tasks of ministry. What they have almost universally discovered through their engagement in these exercises is that while preaching does indeed require hard work and dedicated commitment, it can also be fun. Preaching allows us to think creatively and imaginatively, to engage parts of our brain that can go underdeveloped in a purely academic environment, and to give voice to the deepest theological convictions we hold in our hearts and souls. The act of faithful proclamation not only gives hope to its hearers; it also gives joy to those who find themselves better equipped to proclaim the gospel with intelligence, imagination, and love.

Why This Workbook?

We have intentionally designed a workbook of discrete preaching exercises, rather than a comprehensive homiletical textbook with one sustained argument, for a variety of reasons:

1. The electronic age in which we live has fostered an increased aptitude for multitasking. The result is that most of us do not think or operate in our daily lives along textbook lines. Rather, we tend to think in terms of the many discrete tasks we need to address, which represents a different way of organizing human consciousness.
2. We live in an era when we are more aware than ever of the impact diversity has upon our faith and our lives. We need an approach to homiletics that honors the diverse perspectives of different traditions, racial-ethnic groups, and genders, while also allowing the preacher to discover and develop her or his own unique voice and style for proclamation.
3. Many people in this media age are used to brief communications. Consequently, one of the ways to learn to communicate is to start out with shorter exercises. We can work from the exercises to build the capacity for preparing full-length sermons. But the exercises themselves can also serve as brief sermons to be used on occasions when a longer sermon

is not desired—thus communicating with a generation that has become accustomed to listening to “sound bites.”

4. Because people enter the study of preaching at many different stages of development, what one person needs the other may have already mastered, and vice versa. We need a flexible workbook so that each person can start at his or her own point of readiness.
5. In the midst of diversity and variation, we need more than ever theological clarity about why we preach and what matters most for human life. We need an approach that has flexibility and variety, while simultaneously helping people give witness to the core of the gospel.

Pedagogical Benefits of the Workbook Model

In addition to all of the personal and cultural benefits a workbook approach to preaching offers, we also believe there are significant pedagogical benefits to be gained from it. Indeed, one of the major reasons we have moved away from a more “lecture-centered” approach to teaching preaching and toward a more “exercise-centered” approach is because it better honors adult learners and the ways they come to new understanding. As Thomas Armstrong has observed,

For most Americans, the word “classroom” conjures up an image of students sitting in neat rows of desks facing the front of the room, where a teacher either sits at a large desk correcting papers or stands near a blackboard lecturing to students. This is certainly one way to organize a classroom, but it is by no means the only way or the best way. The theory of multiple intelligences suggests that the classroom environment—or classroom *ecology*, if you will—may need to be fundamentally restructured to accommodate the needs of different kinds of learners.¹

This book represents our effort to offer a “fundamentally restructured” approach to teaching homiletics that honors the many different ways we learn.

While drawing on conventional homiletical works for some of the theory provided in this workbook, we present that theory in a new way. Instead of long chapters, we introduce a homiletical principle and then ask you, the reader, to engage in an exercise that employs the principle. After completion of the exercise, we invite you to reflect—either individually or in small groups—upon what you have learned from the theory and from putting it into practice. You will be integrating theory and practice, a process that is crucial to excellent preaching, and as you reflect upon your experience, you will be developing your skills as a practical theologian.

Our approach also incorporates the best of contemporary learning theory: using, for example, multiple intelligences and sociocultural analysis that foster greater awareness of the diverse contexts in which we preach.

The Importance of Two Voices

We have written this volume in the way that we also teach the introductory preaching course at Yale Divinity School: in two voices, one female and one male, that complement and support one another. In an era when women are still denied access to the pulpit in a number of denominational traditions, we think it critical to have homiletical modeling that posits women and men as partners in the teaching of preaching. Furthermore, we find that our teaching is greatly enriched by both the knowledge and the skills each of us uniquely brings to the task, and by the new ideas that have been sparked by our collaboration in the classroom and in the writing of this book.

After writing about homiletics and teaching preaching in many different schools, churches, and denominational settings, we find that together we are now teaching more creatively than we ever did before. We are also enjoying it more! We invite you to join in the fun.

The Structure of This Workbook

The exercises in this workbook are divided into two parts. In Part I, you will become acquainted with a series of homiletical principles and practices that are essential for good preaching, the theology and theory underlying them, and exercises for engaging them. These exercises are designed to help you to think like a preacher.

The exercises in Part II are designed to help you write like a preacher. Unlike academic writing, crafting sermons requires that you write for the ear rather than the eye and that you attend to the cadences and rhythms of oral speech. Sermon writing also requires the use of vivid imagery and engaging narrative, as well as the integration of head and heart that is often more evident in good literary writing or poetry than in academic prose. The exercises in this section will help you become more proficient in the style of writing that makes for good preaching.

How to Use This Workbook

This workbook is designed so that it can either form the structure for an entire basic course in preaching or be used as a supplemental preaching resource for individual enrichment, informal group study, lay preaching seminars, or use in conjunction with other preaching texts in a seminary course.

1) Structuring an entire course using this workbook

Our own introductory course in preaching includes the following elements, each of which we will discuss briefly:

a. Plenary class sessions

Part I of this workbook, “Thinking Like a Preacher,” is highly suitable for classroom use. Each of the fifteen chapters forms a discrete unit that can be used to plan a single class session. The chapters include the following elements: homiletical theology and theory focused on one fundamental practice for preaching, an exercise that immediately engages students in that practice, and questions for group reflection and discussion. When we teach the course, we almost always allow time for discussing the exercises in small groups of three to four. We find that small group work provides everyone, including those who are reticent to speak in a larger group, with an opportunity to share their reflections with others. We then allow the final minutes for whole-class debriefing and wrap-up.

In our course syllabus, we provide students with a list of the topics we will cover during the course, but we don’t indicate when they will be covered. Rather, we leave the ordering to our discretion, based on class interests and needs. Every year, we have either added new topics and exercises, or omitted some. We have also left open the possibility of integrating what is happening in our preaching class with other events on campus. For example, during a semester when a photographic exhibit

on the Iraq War was displayed in the hallway outside our classroom, we asked students to choose one of the photographs and write a sermon introduction based on it. We then spent the class session discussing the challenges of preaching on a social issue like war.

While the exercises in this workbook provide the core of what we teach in our course—that is, the real “course textbook”—we also have students read four additional homiletical texts in the course of the semester so that they are exposed to a diversity of voices and perspectives on preaching. We devote our entire penultimate class session to answering any questions students might have about matters we have not had the opportunity to address during the course. Students write out their questions on little slips of paper, and we collect them in our sermon “genie jar” and then take turns drawing out questions and answering them aloud.

b. Writing exercises

Part II of this workbook, “Writing Like a Preacher,” includes an introductory chapter on writing in the oral/aural style (chapter 16) and thirteen writing exercises (chapter 17–chapter 29) in which students engage the oral/aural style in order to write a one-page “mini sermon” on an assigned topic. The exercises are designed to help students break out of academic modes of writing and to engage their theological imaginations in writing that appeals to the senses and the emotions, as well as to the head and will. They are also designed to help students become more focused and succinct in their sermon writing.

In our own introductory course, students begin having written assignments the second week of class. Thereafter, they turn in one written assignment every week. One of our tasks as instructors is to read all the written assignments immediately after they are turned in to us and to jointly select the best four or five student papers. We then begin the following class session (and all subsequent class sessions) by reading aloud anonymously the best student papers turned in the previous week.

We have discovered several significant benefits from taking this approach. First, students learn a great deal about how to improve their own writing by hearing the best practices of their classmates. Their peers become their teachers, modeling the principles discussed in each chapter. Second, students are (anonymously) rewarded for good homiletical writing and are encouraged to keep at it. Finally, students often find themselves moved, inspired, and even awed by hearing the sermons of their peers. You will see why when you read the model student exercises that have been included in every chapter of Part II!

Class also feels more like worship when we begin it this way. Indeed, for our very last class session, we take the best student papers written in response to the exercise in chapter 29, in which students are asked to preach a sermon to their peers about the purposes of preaching, and design a closing worship service around them.

c. Preaching sections

The third component to our course is preaching sections. Students are divided into preaching sections (no more than ten in each) with either an instructor or a local pastor as section leader. Throughout the course of a semester, each student preaches and receives group critique on two full sermons. Students are videotaped as they preach, and they write brief reflection papers on what they learned from watching themselves on tape. A speech coach meets with them to work on delivery issues.

d. Bringing it all together

In a final course paper, students have an opportunity to integrate what they have learned through the class presentations and discussions, their reading of the four assigned homiletical texts, preaching and listening to their peers preach in their small groups, and engaging in the weekly written exercises. We are often amazed by the learning and growth that has taken place in one short semester!

2) Using this workbook in lay pastor training or as a supplemental seminary course text

One of the audiences we had in mind as we prepared this workbook is people who are preparing to become lay pastors and their instructors. The simplicity of the design and the open-ended nature of the workbook allow instructors to pick and choose the chapters in Part I and the writing exercises in Part II most needed by their particular groups, and to structure a course of any length around them. Because the book virtually teaches itself, a lot of additional preparation on the part of the instructor is not necessarily required. Class sessions could be devoted to engaging in and discussing the exercises, and to continued reflection on the homiletical theology and theory set forth in the various chapters. When the official course is over, individual participants may well want to extend their learning by working through more of the exercises on their own.

This workbook can also easily be used as a supplemental course text in seminary preaching classes. Instructors can simply pick and choose the exercises they want their students to engage and incorporate them into their own course syllabi.

3) Using this workbook informally in an individual or group setting

If you are an individual or group who has decided to use this workbook for your own enrichment, you have at least two options for how to do so. The first option is to work through it methodically, tackling one chapter from Part I and one writing exercise from Part II in each session. We have ordered the topics in Part I of the book in the sequence in which we often teach them, so they flow in a logical and progressive pattern. The important thing to remember is that the writing exercises in Part II of the book are not meant to be engaged *after* completing Part I; they are meant to be undertaken *while* you are working through Part I.

A second option is to begin at a place that would be most helpful to you—perhaps at a place where you are running into difficulties in your own preaching—and to move around within the workbook as you see fit. It is essential, however, that you undertake exercises from both Parts I and II in order to reap the workbook's full benefits.

One of the advantages of group work is that you have a ready-made community of peers with whom to share and reflect on your exercises. While face-to-face engagement is ideal, we can also imagine these conversations happening online if a group of pastors or lay pastors covenanted to work through the exercises together over a period of time.

If you are working individually, it would be good if you could find a preaching partner who would be willing to listen to your exercises and reflect on them with you. Ideally, this person might even commit to work through the exercises with you!

Notes

1. Thomas Armstrong, *Multiple Intelligences in the Classroom*, 2nd ed. (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2000), 67.

part one

THINKING LIKE A PREACHER

HALLMARKS OF GOOD PREACHING

We assume that many of you already know a considerable amount about preaching. It may be intuitive knowledge, things you have sensed and felt but not yet named to yourself. Through the years you have heard sermons—good, bad, and mediocre—whether in local churches or synagogues, on street corners, via television, in movies, or on the Internet. Even if you are fairly new to a faith tradition, our guess is that you have heard enough sermons to begin forming opinions about what makes them effective or not.

We have designed the exercise in this chapter to tease out some of what you already know and think about preaching. Through it, you will begin to identify some of the hallmarks of good preaching, as well as some of the things that contribute to poor or ineffectual proclamation.

Our goals are threefold: understanding the essential nature of preaching, developing criteria for evaluating sermons, and reassuring novice preachers that they have knowledge about the art and craft of sermons that can help them in their own efforts to proclaim the word of God.

First, when we talk about what makes a sermon “good” or “bad,” we begin to understand the essence of preaching itself. For example, if we call a sermon “good” because it stays close to the biblical texts that are read aloud in worship, our judgment reveals that we believe preaching is supposed to be rooted in the word of God as revealed in the Scriptures. The faithful use of the Bible is a part of the essence of preaching. Or, alternatively, if we define “bad” preaching as preaching in which the preacher talks about only himself or herself, rather than focusing on the congregation and its needs and concerns, then we see that another essential hallmark of preaching is attentiveness to the listeners. The exercise in this chapter provides a way for you to carry on the process of these last few sentences about “good” and “bad” sermons, to name your own assumptions about what preaching should be and do.

Second, engaging in this exercise—especially in a group—allows for the development of criteria that can be used in the critique and evaluation of the sermons preached by ourselves, our peers, and our colleagues. When we teach our introductory homiletics course at Yale, we use this exercise to compile a list of attributes that students can then use throughout the term as they critique one another’s sermons. Rather than our arbitrarily providing a list of things we are looking for, this process allows the students themselves to provide a list of criteria for evaluating the sermons they preach and hear.

Finally, engaging in this exercise reminds even the most inexperienced of preachers that they actually know far more about preaching than they might have initially thought. None of us approaches the task of learning to preach as a blank slate. Rather, we come to this endeavor with some very helpful knowledge that we have gleaned from our own experiences of preaching—knowledge that can be invaluable to us as we undertake this important task.

EXERCISE: HALLMARKS OF PREACHING

1. Think of one of the most positive experiences of preaching that you have had. It might be a sermon that you have heard, or a preacher whose sermons you have experienced. In a sentence or two, reflect on why that experience of preaching, either the sermon or the preacher, was so positive for you. What was it that made it so? Try to be as specific as possible in naming the particular attributes or principles at work that made it so.

2. Think of one of the most negative experiences of preaching that you have had. It might be a sermon that you have heard, or a preacher whose sermons you have experienced. In a sentence or two, reflect on why that experience of preaching, either the sermon or the preacher, was so negative for you. Specifically, what was it that made it so?

3. Complete the following sentences:

I believe preaching is most effective when . . .

I believe preaching is least effective when . . .

Individual and Small Group Reflection and Discussion

After working individually on these questions, we recommend that participants, if in a group or class setting, break into small groups of three or four and share their answers to the exercise questions with one another. Individuals, groups, or the class as a whole might then reflect on the following questions:

1. What key principles about preaching have emerged from your engagement in this exercise? Try to state the principle as succinctly and clearly as possible, and relate it to the experience you have named.

2. Based on your engagement in this exercise, what are some of the most significant criteria you would posit for use in critiquing your sermons and the sermons of others?

Follow Up (for use in a class or group setting)

Our practice is to have all students hand in this exercise at the end of the class period in which they undertake it. Before the next class session, we read through all the exercises and compile a list of the most frequently cited positive and negative attributes of preaching that emerge from the exercise, grouping them into appropriate categories. We then give students a copy of the listing and encourage them to bring the list with them to preaching sections (where students actually preach their sermons) so that they can use them as criteria for the sermon critique process.

Below is a sample listing, compiled from one of our introductory classes at Yale Divinity School. Please note that we have also indicated places where students can turn in John S. McClure's book *Preaching Words: 144 Key Terms in Homiletics*,¹ one of our course texts, to read further about the concepts and hallmarks identified through this exercise.

STUDENT RESPONSES TO HALLMARKS OF PREACHING EXERCISE

1. Multiple Purposes of Preaching

Moves the listener to a response—change in thoughts, behavior, lifestyle

Encouraging (literally, bestowing courage) by challenging us to need and know Jesus in an immediate, powerful way

Seeks to reframe ideas/stories/beliefs and re-invites its hearers to interact in the world

Presents the ugliness of the cross and the beauty of the empty tomb

Illuminates the Word

Draws you into the Scripture, challenges your assumptions, gives you new eyes, convicts, delivers grace

Preaches “the Truth” (even if I disagree with it)

Appeals to both intellect and emotion

Personal experience and God's Word meet

Focus is on the gospel and the community

Ties together all the threads of the day's liturgy

Engages head, heart, and spirit

Balances head and heart, displaying an intelligence on multiple levels of spiritual leadership

Is challenging, should make you think, transforming

Relevant, courageous, and unusual

Surprising

Confounding

If you want to pursue the purposes of preaching, you can turn to McClure, pp. 118–19, and read: “The New Testament provides several words for preaching, each of which expresses a different purpose . . .”

2. Form or Design of Sermons

Is concise and clear

Presents one idea

Intellectually stimulating, integrative, exciting, positive, hopeful

Use of concrete imagery—creative imagination, vivid examples from real life

Step-by-step unfolding of the image

A clearly articulated focus to the sermon

Accessibility in thought and delivery

Not too long or too short

Some kind of story, narrative, anecdote is told

Uses metaphors and challenges one’s idea of God and life

Involves both the head and the heart

If you want to pursue this, McClure gives you a good start with his entries on “form” on pp. 38–39 and “structure” on p. 129.

3. The Person of the Preacher and the Preacher’s Delivery

The preacher believes in what she’s preaching.

The preacher’s own experience and God’s Word meet.

The preacher speaks from his/her own experiences and causes you to reflect on your life in a new and challenging way.

Passionate and educated about his or her message

Authenticity/transparency in expressing their desires, doubts, and conviction.

Comfortable and conversational in the pulpit

Open to God, vulnerable with their congregations

Preach like their lives depend on it

Calm and clear, but full of energy

Makes eye contact

Integrity of the preacher is of utmost importance

Exudes calm grace

Makes himself/herself an offering to God

Delivered with active engagement

Studying McClure's list of terms in the Contents, you will discover several terms that expand upon your insights: "authenticity" (pp. 5–6), "delivery" (p. 20), "self-disclosure" (p. 122), and "voice" (pp. 144–45).

4. Role of the Congregation

Reveals knowledge of and relationship with the congregation

Makes a personal connection with the listener

Proclaims the Word while addressing needs particular to the community that is hearing it

Addresses the congregation's corporate situation

Those who listen are in turn prepared to preach.

Those who listen are provoked to thought and action.

A preaching event occurs as a collaboration between speaker and congregation.

Listeners are invited to wrestle with concepts, but are given an invitation to act.

Listeners are allowed to interpret.

Sermons create a unified emotional experience for the community.

Intimate

Meets the congregation's need

If you want to pursue these issues, you can look up “congregational study” on pp. 16–17 of McClure, and when you get to the end of that term, you will find another, related term, “contextual preaching.”

5. The Place and Use of the Bible and Theology in Preaching

Employs Scripture and experience to lovingly bring people out of their comfort zones and address real issues of justice to effect change

Balance between tradition, texts, and present reality

It couples the love of Christ with the truth of our brokenness and illustrates how God ultimately goes after us.

Preaching must be grounded in both the biblical text and contemporary life.

A close reading of the Bible passage that invites discussion about how it relates to our lives

Scripture guides the sermon.

McClure helps us find resources for these concerns through his entries on “biblical preaching” (p. 10) and “hermeneutics” (p. 47).

6. The Holy Spirit and Preaching

The preacher is prepared, but also leaves room for the Holy Spirit to move.

One prays, prepares oneself, and presents self as an offering to God (decreasing self so that God can increase).

The Holy Spirit is dwelling in the preaching, bringing everyone into community.

Notes

1. John S. McClure, *Preaching Words: 144 Key Terms in Homiletics* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007).