

**Talking about Money in the Presence of Jesus:
Biblical Hermeneutics and the Call for Topical Preaching**

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Abstract

The assumption has been that to preach on a given topic from the Synoptic Gospels, the preacher should locate a passage in which Jesus teaches prescriptively on the subject, or something like it. Preaching then becomes a restatement of that teaching augmented with ethical admonition. This essay argues that such an approach does hermeneutical violence to the agenda of these realistic narratives, and proposes that the preacher better honors the gospel genre and the kind of world it projects by asking not, “What did Jesus say about topic x?” but rather, “What would it mean to think and talk about topic x in the presence of this Jesus?” In other words, these realistic narratives function in their own history-like poetic idiom to render this particular identity present to the cooperative reader; and therefore, sermons properly conformed to this textual function will strive to facilitate a communal pondering of topic X in the presence of this unique identity. The essay concludes with a brief example of practice that illustrates the approach.

The argument of this essay grows out of wrestling with a request by my own denomination’s Center for Faith and Giving to lecture on the subject “Preaching on Stewardship throughout the Christian Year.”¹ Specifically, the question addressed here is, “How might the preacher think with integrity about the call to prioritize a topic such as ‘stewardship,’ if 1) the preacher

is committed on theological grounds to preaching that privileges the itinerary of meaning that emerges from the biblical text; and 2) the Synoptic Gospels, for example, are not, in the first place, about ‘stewardship’?” Although the specific case I address here relates to preaching on the topic of stewardship from the Synoptic Gospels, the hope is that the hermeneutical approach developed may also prove helpful generally in relation to the tension between the preacher’s desire to prioritize the agenda of the biblical text and calls for a more topical approach.

Preaching under the “Vow of Obedience”

In order to lay the groundwork for an argument about the special case of preaching on the theme of stewardship from the Synoptic Gospels, it will be helpful very briefly to sketch a framework for thinking about a “typical” text-to-sermon process, i.e., one that is not concerned with prioritizing a pre-decided topic. The goal in this section is not to argue a case, but to supply a summary that can serve as a baseline for one understanding of the text to sermon process. Then it will be possible to extend this thinking toward preaching on a “topic” without betraying one’s commitment to privilege the biblical text.

On any given Sunday the preacher stands up from the midst of the congregation, takes the witness stand, and offers her testimony concerning an eventful encounter in the world projected in front of the biblical text. In other words, although the sermon itself is a world-projecting “text,”³ it is not a discourse generated in perfect creative freedom. Rather, the preacher constructs the sermon under a self-conscious debt to something that precedes the preaching moment: an encounter “in front of” a canonical text.⁴ Ideally, this encounter emerges out of a close reading that 1) is critically informed, 2) is in continuity with—not to say conformity to—the tradition, and 3) strives to experience vicariously the issue of the text on behalf of a particular congregation. On this view, the task of the preacher is to become an exceptionally competent surrogate reader adventuring in the world in front of the biblical text on behalf of the community of faith; then, in turn, the task is to shape the language of the sermon in such a way that it recapitulates that eventful encounter.

Much more could be said to flesh out this understanding of the text-to-sermon process, but this is enough to bring into clearer view the problem with superimposing a topical agenda like “stewardship” on this process. Meaning is negotiated between the congregation’s situational concerns (achieved by proxy through the preacher’s “surrogacy”) and the text’s own agenda, but when read under the “vow of obedience”⁵ the text pushes back against any categorical attempt to pre-decide the question of theme. By gift, training, and commission, preachers are exceptionally competent readers, and the power of the text to make its own proposal is intensified in direct proportion to such competence. As a strong reader on behalf of the many, it is the preacher’s work to display, explore, and interact with the world proposed by the biblical text. A seriously imaginable new way of being that is commensurate with that strange new world is always the “topic.”

Honoring the World in Front of the Synoptics

By limiting the case to the Synoptic Gospels it will be possible to frame this hermeneutical problem with greater conceptual precision. The preacher's first task is to display, explore, and interact with the world in front of the biblical text, and the nature of that world is, in the first place, a function of genre.⁶ Paul Ricoeur's phenomenology of reading and the notion of a textual world is not a case of special pleading on behalf of canonical texts. There is nothing mystical about the capacity of the Gospels to display a world. Chili recipes, lawnmower manuals, and letters to the editor all project worlds of various sorts. The important question is, What is the genre of—and therefore, what is the distinctive nature of the world projected in front of—a text like Mark, or Luke, or Matthew?

Although the matter is contested, Hans Frei has proposed one particularly compelling answer. Building on the work of Erich Auerbach, Frei used the genre descriptor "realistic narrative," and argued that the Synoptics are a bit like a modern novel.⁷ They are stories that function primarily to render the identity of their protagonist by depicting what he says, does, and suffers in "fit" or "realistic" relation to his circumstances. In the process of telling what he does, says, and suffers, the story makes this character available to the cooperative reader. In other words, Frei is making the rather astonishing proposal that the Synoptic Gospels are about Jesus—not in the sense of offering accurate historical reports, but rather in the sense of bearing adequate poetic testimony to his unique and unsubstitutable identity.

Or, to put the matter in terms of the theoretical framework sketched earlier, What does the preacher adventuring in the world in front of, say, Mark encounter? The answer is that there is a *person* in there—not a high-minded ethical concept, but a person: Jesus. Furthermore, this general literary claim about the function of realistic narrative takes on special resonance when applied to the specific situation of a community that reads these texts under the conviction that the identity rendered in the narrative is not merely a fictional character, or a historical curiosity, but a living presence somehow present in the midst of the gathered community in the power of the Spirit. For the Christian preacher, the encounter in the world in front of these texts is an encounter with a living presence.⁸

One important ramification of this claim is that the Gospels are not about "stewardship," or "faith and giving," or even something as theological sounding as "generosity." For that matter, they are not about any abstract principal, such as "limit experience", or abstract virtue—not even one that sounds distinctively Christian, such as "sacrificial love." The Gospels are not about any of these universal concepts that well-meaning people have tried to claim they are about while attempting to domesticate the scandal of the Christian gospel by wrangling it over to the more respectable side of Lessing's ditch.

The Gospels are not about stewardship or generosity—unless at its secret heart true “generosity” is not a concept, but a person. The Gospels are not about a person who embodies pre-understood concepts, but rather are about a unique identity that is itself constitutive of the Christian understanding of virtue. This is not a trivial distinction.

The scandal of Christian claims about Jesus is *not* that Jesus was an especially moral and religious person. For example, the claim is not that Jesus was an especially loving person—as if we already know precisely what love is, and now we are simply asserting that Jesus meets the standard and so can be made serviceable as a good role model. The logic of Christian claims about Jesus is precisely the reverse. The claim is that we know what true love is only when we encounter this unique and unsubstitutable identity, Jesus Christ. In knowing him and experiencing his unique way of being in the world, God’s own loving being is disclosed, and all pretenders to the throne are exposed. Or again, Jesus is not the exemplar of some previously established virtue called “generosity,” but rather we come to know what true generosity means just when we encounter this Jesus in whom God’s own generous being is disclosed, and all counterfeits exposed.

Preaching about Jesus and Money

In light of this analysis, one way to think about topical preaching on texts from the Synoptics is to ask not, “What did Jesus say about X?” but rather “What would it mean to ponder x in the presence of Jesus?” If the function of the text is to render the identity of Jesus, and if preaching properly conformed to the text recapitulates that textual world, then the sermon should not merely be *about* what Jesus says about a given topic, but should invite the church to think about the matter in the company of this Jesus. In other words, it would be a kind of hermeneutical violence to treat the Gospels as a collection of authoritative sayings about various topics that can be helpfully mined by the topical preacher for nuggets of wisdom. One can, without too much difficulty, imagine a literature well-suited to efficiently documenting large numbers of esoteric wise sayings from Jesus, but the canonical gospels are realistic narratives and their genre exercises constraints on the obedient reader. Sermons that take these texts seriously *as* stories will proffer an imaginative space into which the cooperative listener is invited to enter. In that space, new possibilities for understanding oneself in relation to some “topic” will emerge because the topic will appear in a new light in relation to the identity of Jesus Christ.

The following brief homiletical sketch—originally offered as a short “stewardship meditation”—may serve to demonstrate this approach to topical preaching from the Synoptics.

No Financial Wizard Matthew 20:1-14

Little known fact about Jesus: not very good with money. Just not his thing.

I'll give you an example. Take that story he liked to tell about the guy who kept going out to hire day-workers. The first group he hired early in the day with the promise to pay a fair wage for the day. No big deal, right? But the guy just can't leave well enough alone. Every few hours he's back in his pickup truck, driving around town. He's hitting the usual spots looking for day-labor. Mid-morning he's at the gas station picking up workers. He takes on a couple more down by the Whataburger at lunchtime. Later he's out running errands and comes in with a couple of guys who had quit looking for work altogether that day. He had to go and ask *them* if they wanted a job. The problem, as I expect you know, is that at the end of the day he paid them all a full day's wages—even those two guys who started working an hour before quitting time. Jesus loved that story, but it makes no fiscal sense. He would tell that one and then slap his knee and laugh. "It's just like that when my daddy's in charge!" Jesus would say.

He never seemed to understand that you'd go broke that way. Every now and then an MBA would be in the crowd and hear him tell that story and say something like, "Yeah, but pretty soon he's not going to be able to hire anyone in the morning. People will just come around after the heat of the day and sign on at the end for a little light work. It's not practical. He'll go out of business!" But Jesus never got it. Just a blank stare. And then after a minute, there'd be another story: "Did I ever tell you the one about the kid who wasted all his dad's money?" And off he would go.

Or consider the financial counseling Jesus gave to the man who asked him what life is all about: "If you wish to be perfect," Jesus said, "go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." It's no wonder that those who followed Jesus around soon found themselves homeless like him. They would point this out and he'd just throw up his hands, "Alright fine!" he'd say, "Let Judas handle the finances." Jesus was hopeless with money.

But to his credit Jesus did understand that this was a problem for others. When someone new would offer to come along with his gang he would tell them right up front that he was no financial wizard. I remember one guy said, "I will follow you wherever you go." Jesus wanted him to be clear about what he was getting into. He had this little saying: "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head."

You get the idea that a guy like Jesus could start off with everything, and wind up with nothing. It's just that way with some people: give them every advantage and they can find a way to blow it. Jesus started out in a part of town where the streets were so clean they shone like gold, and died without a shirt on his shredded back on a hill outside Jerusalem.

Some time later, the apostle invited the Corinthians to ponder this little known fact about Jesus as they passed the offering basket. Paul writes: “For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.”

Jesus is not very good with money. What are we who are pretty good with money supposed to make of all this?

Preaching that is properly conformed to the world in front of a narrative text will not be heavily didactic. In the case of the Synoptics, this is because realistic narrative is about encountering a person, not assenting to propositions about what one ought to do. In a real sense, both the text and the sermon are not about money at all, but about this Jesus and his unique way of being in the world. In this example, the sermon ends with a serious kind of wondering about this peculiar identity Jesus, and how it might transform us to confess this Jesus as Lord. The hope and trust is that by getting in touch with that winsome identity, our thinking about everything—including money—may be transformed.

Notes

1 The assumptions behind the assigned title were as follows: 1) the Christian’s proper disposition toward money is a topic that ought not be addressed only during a fall “campaign” during which the church tries to “make its budget” (on the model of secular fund raising drives); indeed, 2) stewardship should be integrated into the church’s ongoing project of theological reflection and ethical formation; and finally, 3) opportunities to address it will naturally arise in the course of preaching the Revised Common Lectionary if the preacher is sensitive to this need (and is not actively avoiding the subject).

2 The understanding of preaching sketched in this section is indebted to the work of Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 2nd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005). For a discussion of the Ricoeurian theoretical underpinnings of this approach, see Lance B. Pape, *The Scandal of Having Something to Say: Ricoeur and the Possibility of Postliberal Preaching* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2013).

3 Note that the designation “text” does not depend upon the use of a sermon manuscript, nor is it logically reducible to the semantic augmentations that emerge from the capacity of written discourse to perdure and signify independent of its author’s intentions, and the circumstances of its production. The sermon functions as a world-projecting poetic “text” in the Ricoeurian sense not because it is inscribed, but rather because it is *wrought*, i.e., constructed out of carefully chosen language arranged under and empowered by the constraints of genre. *Ibid.*, 118.

4 “To speak of a textual world is to name how immersive, immediate, and pervasive for the reader are the new options for being that open through an encounter with the language of the text.” For an account of the phenomenology of reading implicit in the notion of “entering the world projected in front of the text,” see *ibid.*, 79-80.

5 “Hermeneutics seems to me to be animated by this double motivation: willingness to suspect, willingness to listen; vow of rigor, vow of obedience.” Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: an Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Dennis Savage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970): 27.

6 “[T]he notion of a text absolutely free, absolutely open to us, in which we can ‘produce’ meaning, is—as most of its proponents allow—a utopian fiction. There are constraints that shadow interpretation; and the first is genre.” Frank Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979): 18.

7 Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974). For a thorough and illuminating appropriation of Frei’s hermeneutical project for homiletics, see Charles L. Campbell, *Preaching Jesus: New Directions for Homiletics in Hans Frei’s Postliberal Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).

8 As an aside, this insight opens onto the question of the poetics of preaching. When the preacher “takes the witness stand,” the testimony offered is not reducible to “just the facts about the events of the night of the seventeenth.” Rather, the testimony given concerns an encounter with a living presence and the preacher is in the situation of mustering all the linguistic resources at her disposal in a bid to keep faith with the one concerning whom she must bear witness.