Preaching 101

A sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery on February 15, 2015 at Duke Chapel

Death keeps making the news. Coach Dean Smith. American aid worker Kayla Mueller. UNC/NC State students Deah Barakat, Yusor Abu-Salha and Razan Abu-Salha. We can’t seem to shake death or at least, I can’t. These deaths, especially of the students, haunt my preaching imagination and should remind all Christians, and people of faith, that we minister, we live, in the valley of the shadow of death. These student deaths remind me of the death of Archbishop Oscar Romero in El Salvador in 1980; he was assassinated while presiding at the Eucharist. He had resisted the civic, religious, and military powers that oppressed and tortured the poor and eventually paid for that resistance with his life during worship. In a movie based on his life called Romero, there is a scene where he has come to the end of his strength and wisdom and is in great despair. He’s exhausted and falls to the ground on his knees in an open field as if a ton of bricks have been laid on his shoulders. Out of the silence, he then prays: “I can’t. You must. I’m yours. Show me the way.” A four-fold prayer that we all need to pray in the face of a torrent of death and violence. “I can’t. You must. I’m yours. Show me the way.” How else can we discern constructive holy ways to move forward, if we don’t pray like that, if that isn’t the root of our righteous living?

In this self-help, individualistic complex world, no one really wants to say, “I can’t.” Our culture is not an “I can’t” one. Duke and other major research universities are not educating graduates whose mantra is “I can’t.” That would be viewed as an educational catastrophe and failure and destroy your job prospects. Human ambition and self-assurance are nurtured in places like this. We are taught that we are the best and the brightest, that we can change the world and like Nike, “just do it.” We are taught to tout our intellectual and civic engagement horns. We exist in a “yes we can” society. We can pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps but that implies you have boots already. We can be self-sufficient, self-reliant, selfies in the morning, noon and night. “Yes we can” because of human power, privilege, prestige, our portfolios and pedigrees. Just a survey of self help books suggest the prevalence of this philosophy—Mastering Life Before It’s Too Late or Better than Before: Mastering the Habits of Our Everyday Lives. These suggest like the poem—“I am the master of my fate. I am the captain of my soul” (William Ernest Henley). No one wants to pray, “I can’t. You must. I’m yours. Show me the way.” But that doesn’t mean we aren’t called to embrace that prayer as the foundation of the Christian life or Christian proclamation.

This may be one of the hardest lessons when you are learning to preach—that we do not proclaim ourselves. It’s not really about us. There’s human action and agency in proclamation; God blessed bodies through the Incarnation so we do have a part to play; but we are not the Author of the story. When it comes to preaching, one can easily think it is only about what we do—our theology and conception of preaching, our interpretation of context and biblical texts, our decisions on what to preach, our use of language, our choice of sermon form, how we put it all together, our voice and body gestures. We may come to think it is all about us and if we do, what we proclaim may only be a “self-help megaphone for anthroplogy”(Trygve Johnson) in the guise of homiletical theology. This is not surprising in a selfie society where every personal human step and activity can be broadcast to the world online.

After a groom pronounced his vows to love and obey, one may have thought it was time to kiss the bride. But at this particular wedding, before kissing the bride, the groom, who was a software developer, took out his cellphone and updated his relationship status on Facebook right at the altar. He handed another phone over to his new wife so she could do the same. Let’s hope that he didn’t continue to give a play-by-play status update during every aspect of their honeymoon.

If our only news is human news, if our only hope is humanity, we are living in hell right now. If we only proclaim about ourselves, we implicitly say that we are Lord and in control and thus we can take other people’s lives into our own hands to rule or manipulate in subtle or not so subtle ways. When we proclaim ourselves we can make sure pronouncements or arguments that have no room for critique or
nuance. When we are Lord, everyone else is a servant, especially those who are different. When we are Lord, we can claim the world as ours when in fact we are not the maker of heaven and earth. When we are Lord, we may never see our own wrong and personal missteps—everyone else is wrong and we are always right. When we are Lord, our ways appear to be the only way and if you don’t agree you can take the highway. When we proclaim ourselves what we have been proclaiming is not the gospel but our own way.

In the worst expressions of human lordship, there is only domination and oppression and the propagation of fear with an incapacity to love. There may only be the hubris of hate and that has nothing to do with the Lordship of Christ. Human lordship is lust for power and when we usurp the Lordship of Jesus Christ, we take other people’s lives into our own hands to become gods and exploit the freedom to steal the life of three young people in Chapel Hill. I know the killer was a self-proclaimed atheist but if we read history honestly we will also realize that heinous things have been done in the name of Jesus as well when Jesus had nothing to do with it. Faith without works is dead but faith without love is deadly. My heart is sick over human lordship anywhere, near or far.

In a recent article in *The Atlantic*, Megan Garber tells the story of what is known as the Parsley Massacre. She writes, “In October 1937, the president of the Dominican Republic, Rafael Trujillo, devised a simple way to identify the Haitian immigrants living along the border of his country. Dominican soldiers would hold up a sprig of parsley— *perejil* in Spanish—and ask people to identify it. Those who spoke Spanish would pronounce the word’s central "r" with that language’s characteristic trill; the Haitians, on the other hand, would bury the "r" sound in the throaty way of the French. To be on the receiving end of the parsley test would be to seal, either way, one’s fate: The Spanish-speaking Dominicans were left to live, and the Haitians were slaughtered.”

When humans are lord, we can create rules that benefit only the powerful and punish the powerless, taking other human lives in our hands over mispronunciation. This is far less serious than mispronunciation. Yet we are not punished when we get it wrong and proclaim ourselves, our way as the way.

In our day, mis-proclamation may actually sell well because a self-help gospel fills many churches—a Christ on a cross is not cool anymore. The selfie savior syndrome will make one declare as in the Corinthian church—“I belong to Apollos” “I belong to Paul” “I belong to Cephas” (1 Cor 1) “I belong to Coach K.” And just like them, when we proclaim human beings, it leads to divisions and the breakdown of community because everyone is battling for the title of lord when in reality there is only one Lord. When this happens it is a symptom of christological amnesia in which one forgets the crucified one who died for all for the life of the world.

The Church is in dozens of splinters because we have gotten it all wrong—it’s not just the way we idolize people and form cults around their personalities but the ways we think our theology of Jesus, what we call ‘Christology,’ is the same thing as Jesus himself. Sometimes, we think our moral values and perspectives on the latest hot button social issue is the gospel but that is not the same thing as Jesus. We shouldn’t get it so terribly twisted to think that our traditions, upbringing, beliefs, experiences, denominations, musical preferences, liturgical proclivities, race, ethnicity, gender, class, neighborhoods, social clubs, networks, businesses, are the same thing as Jesus. And even though I know Cameron Stadium is the other main religious building on campus, sports teams are not the same thing as Jesus. Who or what is Lord of your life? Who or what do you proclaim? Our views on Jesus are not the same thing as Jesus himself, but there entails the problem—we proclaim ourselves, our traditions, our perspectives, our theologies, our Christianity and think they are the same thing as Jesus Christ as Lord but they’re not. To proclaim Christianity is not the same thing as proclaiming Jesus. We should always be reminded that Jesus may not always bless what we bless, do what we do, or say what we say.

When we proclaim ourselves, we say, “Mine!” But when we proclaim Jesus as Lord, we say, “Thine!” “I’m yours. Show me the way.” “We do not proclaim ourselves,” Paul says, “we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord.”
If 'Christian' preaching or proclamation is to be truly Christian its center and foundation should be Jesus Christ—his life, death, resurrection, and ascension. This has been called the “Christic center” (Harold Wells) and it is central to the ministry of proclamation. It is numero uno. As St. Augustine said, “Jesus Christ is not valued at all until He is valued above all.” When we proclaim that Jesus Christ is Lord we affirm what one Dutch theologian declares, “There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry: 'Mine!'” (Abraham Kuyper). “I’m yours.” We are his. Jesus claims us. Every inch of our lives is Christ’s. No late night negotiations about this. No worries about his Lordship either. His Lordship is love because he is the incarnate image or as it literally states in this passage, the ‘icon’ of God, and God is love.

As icon, in Jesus, we see and experience the incarnate love of God. He is the portal to paradise and he, himself, is our eternal home. As Pastor Shadrach Meshach Lockridge proclaims about Jesus, the “heavens cannot contain Him, let alone someone explain Him...You can't outlive Him and you can't live without Him...He always has been and He always will be...He had no predecessor and He’ll have no successor. There’s nobody before Him and there’ll be nobody after Him. You can't impeach Him and He’s not going to resign. That’s my King!”

Jesus rules like no other. We know or at least we can see the outward sign of his reign. The communion table reveals that he does not lord over us, but lords for us. Emptying himself, giving himself to us, his body given for you and me that we may realize the tremendous cost of his reign for the healing and wholeness of the world. His Lordship is cruciform, not that we are killed but that he is for our sake. A crucified Lord of love. Ruling not by imperial domination but through self-sacrifice as the redeeming Lamb of God. Not robbing young people of life, but giving life to all through humble service.

The apostle Paul reminds us later in his letter to the Corinthians that “[Jesus] died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them” (2 Cor 5:15). Who could do what Jesus did for us? No one. This is why when it comes to the witness of proclamation, we have to say along with Paul, “not that we are competent of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us: our competence is from God, who has made us competent to be ministers”(2 Cor 3). “I can’t. You must.” We may plant and water, but God gives the growth for our flourishing (1 Cor 3). “The Beginning of Wisdom” is to say to God like poet Denise Levertov, “You have brought me so far.” “Nothing from me, all things from God, no independent achievement, only dependence on God’s grace and will,” according to preeminent Swiss theologian Karl Barth. In other words, “I can’t. You must. I’m yours.”

The proclamation of Jesus as Lord, affirming the early creedal confession of “Jesus is Lord” (Rom 10:9, 1 Cor 12:3, Phil 2:10-11) is not an erasure of the self. At first glance it may appear that we don’t have to do anything and we don’t matter. But we do have a role to play. It is not the proclamation of the self but it is a proclamation by the self. “We proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus’ sake.” We are not Lord. “We are God’s servants”(1 Cor 3). What we say about ourselves is critical but it is only in the transfiguring light of the glory of God in Jesus Christ that the veil from our eyes is removed so that we recognize and see what we are to become through the transformation of the Holy Spirit. When we recognize who is Lord and proclaim Jesus as Lord, it is then that we discover our vocation through this proclamation. A vocation of service. We are servants of others for Jesus’ sake. “Servants of the Word” (Charles Bartow).

As servants, we don’t lose our self in this selfie society, we find ourselves through service for Christ’s sake. We learn who we are to become when we see the face of God in Jesus Christ and when we relate to others whose reflection is different from our own. Our role in proclamation links us to others and to Jesus because we are more than ourselves; we are interconnected and who we are links us to serving others for Jesus’ sake. The calling of God propels us toward a wider sense of self that is not closed in but that is open and in relationship with others and Jesus Christ, a wide ocean of self rather than a dried up stream of narcissism. We don’t proclaim about ourselves but proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord. This is not limiting but
life-giving and liberating, which is the essence of the ministry of Jesus.

One more thing you should know about preaching is that it is more than words and includes deeds. Showing up on a front porch with a potato chip tuna casserole one evening as a delicious surprise for a friend who is at home sick. Sending a card to someone who has been down in the dumps and just writing the words, “thinking of you.” Taking a long walk down a dusty road with the wooden weight of the world on your back and eventually being hung on that cruciform wood known as a cross. Preaching is more than words. Poet Edgar Guest put it like this: “I’d rather see a sermon than hear one any day.” Martin Luther King, Jr., said, “You can affirm the existence of God with your lips but deny God’s existence with your life.” How you live is a sermon, is proclamation, and it is the hardest sermon you’ll ever preach. I’ve heard it said before—“You are a word about the Word before you ever speak a word” (Alan Jones). “You are a letter of Christ,” Paul says, “written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God” (2 Cor 3). So when people read your life, who will they learn is truly Lord? I hope it is Jesus.