Fall 2015: HOM 500 Course Outline

Vancouver School of Theology
Instructor: Jason Byassee. Contact at jbyassee@vst.edu or 604-828-3745
Meetings: Wednesdays 9 AM-12 noon

The Goal of the Course

Every week and often more the preacher stands to address the congregation. What does the preacher say? How? On what sources do we draw—whether ancient or contemporary, sacred or secular, communal or personal? What’s the goal here? How do we tell if the preacher has done well and how we might improve?

Once in parish or other leadership positions, these questions are difficult to answer. The Sabbath seems to come back around every three days. There is little time or space for critical reflection. This course and seminary in general are gifts. They provide the critical space and time necessary to reflect on the task and practice and internal goods of preaching. Some academic courses are narrow: you dive deeply into a very specific set of tasks and materials. Homiletics is broader than that. Here you draw on all you have learned in your seminary education and set a trajectory for yourself—a learning agenda—for years to come. The goal is not just one’s own erudition. It is the church’s edification.

A key touchstone for this course is Origen’s image of the preacher as a physician. In our terms he means an herbal healer. The physician in third-century Rome has an herb garden. She has to know every inch of the garden and what every herb can do. And she has to know what every herb does in concoction with every other herb. And she has to be able to read the patient and that one’s particular malady. This bruise or burn or ailment requires this particular sort of remedy. Then she grinds up the herbs and applies them. The goal is obvious and verifiable (or falsifiable!): the healing of the patient. For Origen the parallel to preaching is clear: the healer is the preacher. She has to know every inch of the scriptures. She also has to know what every portion of the scriptures does in combination with every other portion. Mix Exodus and Revelation and it might explode. Mix Exodus and Ruth and Mark and it will make for healing for this sort of patient. And she has to be able to read the patient, that is, the church (one flaw in Origen’s image is it may sound too individualistic in our ears). The preacher has to be able to read what makes for flourishing in the congregation’s life, what’s inhibiting that flourishing, and what biblical resources can be brought to bear on that malady. The better the physician (the preacher) knows the garden (the scriptures) the better she can read the patient (the church), and vice-versa. Closer attention to the text yields closer attention to the church, and more attentive care for the church makes for greater capacity for surprise and joy in attention to the Word.

Course Objectives

1-To seed a lifelong love of preaching. The value of this course can only rightly be assessed as you look back on decades of preaching at the end of your life.
2-For you to find your voice as an interpreter of the bible for the sake of preaching. The scriptures live in the life and practice of the worshiping community. There is great joy in steeping in the
scriptures’ depths and chewing on their sweetness for the sake of a community that you love and lead. I assume that God has gifted you in unique ways for the church’s edification and the world’s blessing. This course will help you find that unique gifting in the years ahead.

3-To learn how the church through time and space and how your own tradition has interpreted the preaching of the Word. The goal is not only to articulate your own theology of preaching. It is to participate in God’s address to and summoning of and calling forth of the church. Ministry is really difficult. The hope of the preached Word is that God continually summons the church into being. You get to be part of that. A proper attention to the church’s tradition of preaching will not only help you avoid burnout (that’s too negative a way to put it). It will continually refresh you as you take part in the Holy Spirit’s continual refreshment of the church and endless replication of the image of Jesus in us.

4-To learn the techniques and practices appropriate to your entering into objectives 1-3. Technique is not of primary importance, but it is important, and we each have to find our own rhythm as preachers.

Assignments

A homiletical autobiography: submit 800 words describing your experience with preaching. What worries you about trying to preach? Delights you? Who has exemplified preaching in a way that makes you want to do likewise? Who has shown you what you don’t want to be as a preacher? No need to cover all this—the purpose is to give me a sense of your sense of yourself and the preaching life as you see it right now. Due September 23.¹

Three sermons, preached in class, with a manuscript and textual notes turned in to the instructor. One will be preached on an Old Testament text of your choosing, another will be preached on the lectionary-assigned gospel reading for the week of your preaching, and the third will be preached on an epistle that you choose from among those listed by instructor.

A theology of preaching: submit 2000 words on the theology and practice of preaching based on your work in this class. This is not a research paper or a book report but an opportunity to articulate your central theological convictions on the task of participating in God’s address of the church. Due December 16.

Grading

Your final grade will reflect evaluation based on VST’s letter grade scale, with particular appreciation shown to students who improve at an exceptional rate over the course of the semester. Extra credit will accrue for those who participate in class in ways that are insightful, without overmuch talking, that are curious and questioning rather than pontificating, and that make others’ learning experience in the class better. I assume timely turning in of assignments and regular class participation and do not reward them so much.

¹ I am indebted to Professor Michael Pasquarello of Fuller Theological Seminary for the wording of this assignment and also for the theology of preaching assignment.
Course texts

Required Text

*The Four Pages of the Sermon* by Paul Scott Wilson (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999). This is the basic textbook of the course which we will read and engage exhaustively.

Recommended Texts


St. Augustine *On Christian Teaching*. Trans. R.H.P. Green (Oxford World Classics, 2008). This was the primary teaching text on homiletics in the western church for a millennium. Concentrate especially on his description of biblical interpretation as with a goal of love in Book I and the early portions of Book IV.