

**Where Two Stories Collide:
Applying Lessons from Stand-Up Comedy in Preaching**

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By David Swinton
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ABSTRACT

Where Two Stories Collide:

Applying Lessons from Stand-Up Comedy in the Pulpit

By David Swinton

What can a serious preacher learn from stand-up comedy? Drawing on the homiletical theories of *narrative* preaching, from comedy research, from interviews with comedians, and from a series of sermons from my own pulpit, I identify multiple ways that the rhetorical strategies of jokes and the methods of stand-up comedians can be effectively utilized in preaching. By employing insights gleaned from studying comedy, preachers can expose listeners' false assumptions and prompt them to reinterpret information they thought they already knew. I find that the strategies and techniques from stand-up comedy amplify the authenticity, immediacy, effect, and power preachers communicate when presenting the Gospel message.

*Do not deceive yourselves. If you think that you are wise in this age, you should become fools so that you may become wise.
—1 Corinthians 3:18*

Sometimes when you ask a silly question, you get a serious answer.

Introduction

This project did not begin with a theory. It started with a question: What can preachers learn from stand-up comedy? Not many professions provide a person the opportunity to stand with simply a microphone in front of a group of people and just talk. Politicians, motivation speakers, preachers and comedians make up, roughly, the complete list. Although previous studies have considered how humor can be used in sermons, they have largely ignored stand-up comedians who, like preachers, have an essentially oral quality to their performance.¹ Through research and practice, I find that comedians have a number of strategies that can help preachers to be heard more clearly, to preach memorably, to present the Gospel more creatively, and to elicit a response from their listeners. Moreover, within the structure of humor itself is a powerful avenue for transformation.

Let me be clear. I am not suggesting dressing up the sermon with jokes: jokes to introduce the topic, quips to hold the attention, japes to skewer the opposition. Rather, I argue that humor holds substantive power that, when properly understood, leads to a clearer understanding of how to operate the mechanism of insight. Telling a joke requires careful attention to the listeners' assumptions. It involves a sudden shift in meaning, and it necessitates a reinterpretation of what was previously thought to be understood. The jokester actively engages the mind of the listener in this process. Preaching, at its best, does these same things. In fact,

Jesus, like these expert joke tellers, used similar rhetorical strategies to engage his listeners, deftly guiding their experience to lead them toward joyful and transformative experiences.

There are many clear differences between preachers and comedians. In fact, the list of differences is likely as long as the list of similarities. Preachers are not going for a laugh; they are aiming for an “ah-ha” or perhaps an “uh-oh.” Preachers are not to be cynical or sardonic; they are to be sincere. And when preachers “work blue,” it is not because they are using profanity; it is because they are sad. Many caveats can be made regarding the inappropriateness of a comedian in the pulpit and the offensiveness of many comics in comedy clubs. However, drawing each and every—often obvious— distinction would be unduly burdensome. Therefore, I use only what is helpful and generously ignore the rest. In the end, I do not simply want to note the similarities between the two professions or to highlight jokes as a clever metaphor: I am looking to apply the unique contributions that professional tellers of jokes can teach to the professional tellers of God’s wonder.

This paper examines the connections between comedians and preachers by exploring the answers to three questions: How are sermons like jokes? How can I learn to tell jokes like the experts? and What have I learned from the experts?

*For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe.
—1 Corinthians 1:21*

Part I. How Are Sermons Like Jokes?

In this section I consider the contributions from joke theory, homiletical theory, and biblical scholarship.

Joke Theory

What makes a joke funny? It's hard to say. British comedian Mark Lamarr concludes, "Explaining why something is funny is like trying to explain smell"²—which, in itself, is funny, as is Saul Steinburg's observation that "trying to define humor is one of the definitions of humor."³ When Ted Cohen griped, "Every general theory of jokes known to me is wrong,"⁴ he meant that a theory that seems to describe what makes one type of joke amusing becomes inadequate when applied to other types. Nevertheless, by learning the unique argot of humor, we develop a deeper understanding how the clever, the insightful, surprising, shocking, odd, or unusually apt can move people to a response.

Aristotle originated the superiority theory—a contention that all humor represents a way to make the practitioner look good while humiliating the object of the joke. Although this theory omits many other types such as self-deprecating and observational humor—it simply does not apply to the innocent knock-knock joke or the clever pun—it does have a biblical foundation. A survey of the biblical use of the word laughter shows that most uses refer to the mocking of a fool or, on occasion, the unfair humiliation of the righteous. Speaking from a sense of

superiority is not an unknown use of humor in Christian preaching tradition. Joseph Webb cites research by Douglas Adams showing several nineteenth century preachers employing sharp humor to quiet or denounce critics and other sinners.⁵ Webb also notes that aggressive humor serves a distinctly different function when the Christian community is oppressed than it does when adherents possess the advantages of power. Scrappy satire by marginalized believers is different than menacing mockery by those who have the power to exclude and persecute others.⁶

Sigmund Freud was fascinated by jokes. In his book about humor, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, he proposed what has become known as the relief theory of humor.⁷ This theory holds that humor is a way to subvert the inner censor, that jokes “express forbidden impulses of aggressive or sexual nature.”⁸ Even playful, innocent jokes are an attempt of the child within us to slip past the suppression of the adult ego. Freud intended for his theory to encompass and supplant other theories of humor. Other scholars have argued that, relief is an aspect or effect of many jests, it does not explain the mechanism of humor in all jokes. For example, relief theory is not consistent with simple, nonsensical quips or biting sarcasm. Nonetheless, relief does play a role in certain comic situations. Comic improvisational artist Jeff Houghton confides that one of the secrets of his work is to get past the “inner-judge” or the thoughts within him saying “I am an adult” and adults do not do this. In this state, he says, he is his more “natural self . . . [the place] where God is.”⁹

Immanuel Kant and Arthur Schopenhauer, among others in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, championed the idea that all jokes create or recognize incongruities. Schopenhauer claimed that syllogism is at the heart of every joke. Kant proposed that the comic bewilders us for a moment and then provides illumination out of the bewilderment.¹⁰ Journalist Jim Holt suggests that the creation or recognition of the incongruity is not the goal but a pathway of most

jokes . He writes: “British researcher John McCrone argue(s) that laughter occurs not when we spot an error or an incongruity, but *when we see it resolved in some clever way*. As the sought-for resolution snaps into place, we undergo an emotional shudder of pleased recognitions that issues in laughter”¹¹ [emphasis added]. That is, it is not the incongruity itself but the unique manner in which it is recognized, reframed, or resolved that brings risible feelings of satisfaction.

This point is crucial. Many incongruities are not funny—they are tragic. Poverty in the midst of plenty. The death of a vital young mother. People do not act as they should. We do not receive the rewards we earn. Good people often experience great misfortune. It could well be that humor is simply one of the ways that human beings cope with paradoxes and the genuine incongruities of life. These situations can be met with sorrow, with anger, with alcohol, with poetry, with religion, and with humor.

Why something is funny is one question. How something is funny is a different, but essential, question for the comic and, as well, the preacher.

Comedy writer Greg Dean, in summarizing the ground breaking theory of linguist Victor Raskin, explains: “A joke requires two story lines. The set-up creates the first story in our minds that leads us to expect something, then the punch surprises us with a second story. That’s compatible with, yet somehow different from, what we’re expecting.”¹² The set-up may have just a few words; but those words are enough to create an image in our minds and a story with a set of assumptions to go with it. When we hear the punch line—and understand it—at least one of those assumptions is proved to be false. A different story is created or revealed that casts a new meaning on the words, images, nouns, and characters of the first story.

According to Dean’s practical interpretation of the semantic theory of humor, the three essential parts of a joke are: a *target assumption* in the set-up, a *connector* in the punch line, and

a *reinterpretation of meaning* in the mind of the hearer.¹³ To illustrate, consider the quick joke, “My dad collected things for me: Stepmothers,” from Christopher Titus’ one man show *Norman Rockwell Is Bleeding*.¹⁴ The first part evokes a story of a self-giving father assiduously tending to his son’s interests. The one-word punch line alters that story. “Things” became “Stepmothers.” This is the connector between the first and second story. The image of “My dad” as a selfless giver is the target assumption. Then, once the hearer recognizes that “things” are really “stepmothers”, each word of the first sentence is reinterpreted to create a second story. The image of “My dad” as a generous and attentive father is transformed to one of a self-centered and needy multiple divorcee. “Collected” means married; and “for me” is a facetious way of communicating the opposite—that Titus was forgotten and neglected.

Had Titus simply come out and told the second story, he may have informed his audience, but he would not be telling a joke. It would have lost the interest, the surprise, and the multilayered meaning of the joke. This joke conveys Titus’ emotional distance from his stepmothers and his understanding that his father pretended to be acting in the best interests of the kids when he was really doing what he wanted to do. But with only one word—“stepmothers”—Titus allows the audience to draw these conclusions on their own, and in the process of “getting the joke,” the audience shares an experience, a cohesive moment of discovery.

A joke, therefore, packs the descriptive power of a metaphor and releases it in a manner that engages the minds of, and creates a shared experience among, the listeners. How marvelous this is when it happens in a sermon! The first part of the sermon may be powered by the assumptions the listeners make—such as “nothing ever really changes”—the final part of the sermon is detonated by a flash of Gospel—“Jesus lives!” Then, by the power of Grace, new light

shines on the old story. Rather than telling people how to interpret a text or an event, the preacher can structure the sermon so that the congregation must reinterpret and make new meaning themselves.

The type of a joke the comic tells is not always in the form of a “set-up and punch line.” Comedian, comedy teacher, and author Judy Carter declares that the old set-up and punch line is dead. In her book, *The Comedy Bible*, Carter instructs her students to introduce the audience to a topic or comic premise, such as “It’s hard getting old.” She then encourages them to mix part of one situation with another: “It’s hard getting old. I used to take acid. Now I take antacid.”¹⁵ The comic then can engage in an extended analogy, contrasting youth to old age. Carter lists other examples that the comic can act out: a negative mom as a therapist, a grandma who is a pot head, a 911 operator obsessed with her own problems.

British scholar and former comedian, Oliver Double, describes this common strategy: “Classical stand-up structure [involves] setting up the basic premise, then applying the same logic to an imaginary situation.”¹⁶ “A good mix,” writes Carter “is where a comic connects two elements that people don’t associate with each other. The laugh comes from the way the comic connects them. . . . Mixes generally start with ‘Can you imagine if’ or ‘What if?’”¹⁷ Mixes are surprises. She says, “Stir in imagination, surprise an audience or a reader, create interesting characters and push an idea to its extreme.”¹⁸ The advantage of a mix is that it also allows the comic to “act out” the ridiculous juxtaposition that has just been proposed.

Preachers do “mixes” all the time in the pulpit. We mix ancient scriptures with modern life; we mix ordinary people with an extraordinary God; we mix heaven and earth. What would we do if we saw Jesus walking on water? What would Jesus say about the spectacle of the Super Bowl? What would he say about our wealth? These sound like standard sermon questions. But

with imagination, anachronistic touches, surprising twists, truthful flashes of pain, and painful moments of truth, the preacher—with the help of the Holy Spirit—guides the listener toward a “fresh encounter” with an old bible story. *A plank? A little old plank in the eye? I wish I had a plank in my eye! I walk around with a whole lumber yard in my eye. Sheets of fiberboard hang off my cornea. My retina is full of roofing nails. Rods and cones? I have rerod and concrete! The only thing more painful would be to remove all that and to really truly see for the first time.*

A mix is another example of “two stories” intersecting. It is a method that can create a new way of seeing life or can expose the faulty logic of one story. It is a scheme to marry two ideas that create a new vision—either ridiculous or inspiring. It can also be a mechanism to test the limits and implications of an idea through a metaphor—of reinterpreting the idea within the metaphor, exaggerating, distorting, and stretching it until it breaks...into laughter, perhaps.

Homiletical Theories

In his book *The Homiletical Plot: The Sermon as Narrative Art Form*, Lowry explains how the careful plotting of a sermon can order the experience of the listeners. Here and in subsequent updates, Lowry details a sermon structure that guides hearers through *conflict*, *complication*, a *sudden shift*, and an *unfolding*.¹⁹ This is called narrative preaching, because it creates a flow in the sermon that is similar to the flow of a story. Lowry advocates a sermon strategy that sufficiently explores the conflict, which builds tension and anticipation among the hearers, and then, with a sudden shift, resolves that conflict or discloses the key to its resolution. The final section, unfolding, explores the implications of the Biblical truth experienced in the sermon. Note the similarities to the sudden shift in meaning that Holt names as the key moment in a joke.²⁰ It is also reminiscent of the process of bewilderment and illumination championed by

the supporters of the incongruity theory. The final section of the narrative (unfolding) provides an opportunity to sketch out the possibilities of a world newly lit with Gospel insight.

Lowry does not miss this similarity of the structure of sermons to the structure of jokes. In *Plot*, he tells an excellent—albeit lengthy—joke to illustrate reversal or sudden shift.²¹ He also repeats the plots of a novel and of a movie. He mentions how reversal of assumptions is used “at our expense!” by puzzle makers and riddlers.²² Surveying the contributions of H. Grady Davis, Fred Craddock, and others who have followed, Lowry comments approvingly that many newer types of preaching “all refuse to announce a conclusion in advance, all ‘keep the cat in the bag,’ all are mobile, moving sequenced forms, which involve a strategic delay of the preacher’s meaning.”²³

My interest in joke structure followed my interest in narrative preaching. In the second year of this program I was having trouble finding the moment for effective reversals in my sermons. Studying comedy has helped me develop better practical understanding of how to educate and subvert the assumptions of the listeners and a better insight into how to flip these assumptions into a new story.

Another helpful homiletical approach is what David Buttrick calls the “moment of reflection.” “In the reflective mode of consciousness,” he writes, “we stand back and consider a structured field of meaning, thinking *through* the field to areas of lived experience.”²⁴ The preacher extends the field of meaning into the lives of the hearers. This is astonishingly similar to the “mix” in a comedy routine. Instead of a fantastical analogy applying the logic of one situation to another (as in a joke), the sermon brings the structure of meaning from a biblical story and considers how it would affect the life of the believer.

Buttrick helps to put this process into a biblical and theological perspective. What joke theory calls a story or a script, Buttrick calls a “field of meaning” or “field of understanding.” He contends that the field of meaning points the way into a new future. The preacher does not need to tell people what to do but, instead, paints a picture to indicate that the path to take is ahead, not back, left, or right. Just as some questions indicate their own answers, the scene created by a sermon limits the range of possible responses and illuminates the possibilities for Christian action.

Buttrick’s understanding of consciousness has been heavily influenced by studies of the brain and how people think, function, and make decisions in their lives. Within the fields of linguistics, sociology, and psychology, the term *frames* has a similar meaning. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson collaborated on several books that theorize that the brain categorizes experiences in terms of metaphors. They argue, “Our conceptual system is largely metaphorical. . . . The way we think, what we experience, and what we do every day is very much a matter of metaphor.”²⁵

However, the metaphors we choose, consciously or otherwise, also shape our understanding, perceptions, and responses. The first example Lakoff and Johnson use is the common framing of argument as war, an understanding that affects our vocabulary, our approach to solving problems, and our blood pressure:

Your claims are *indefensible*.
He *attacked* every weak point in my argument.
His criticisms were *right on target*.
I *demolished* his argument.
I’ve never *won* an argument with him.
You disagree? Okay, *shoot!*
If you use that *strategy*, he’ll *wipe you out*.
He *shot down* all of my arguments.²⁶

Lakoff has recently been teaching politicians and public policy professionals about framing, that is, placing ideas and discussions in different frames which would imply a different set of relationships, different heroes and villains, and a different range of acceptable responses. When one's frame no longer fits for a circumstance, he or she must change the frame (i.e., one's understanding of the network of meaning and relationships) for the situation. Framing is important to our discussion because the second story we introduce in preaching or in a joke reframes the first story. A particular word or image at the right moment can conjure this new story—or recall an old one. We are not just playing with two meanings for one word; we are presenting an entirely new frame, a new web of relationships, and a new way of being in the world.

The Biblical Foundations

Many worthwhile books and papers have been published about the Bible's use of humor. Elton Trueblood's 1964 book, *The Humor of Christ*, broke new ground in the contemporary approach to scripture. Trueblood points to a number of passages in which Jesus used irony, paradox, preposterous statements, exaggeration, and surprise. Jesus' sayings and parables are reinterpreted: The camel through the eye of the needle is a comic scene, and Jesus' canine conversation with the Syro-phenician woman is witty banter.²⁷

Conrad Hyers (*And God Created Laughter: The Bible as Divine Comedy*) and Douglas Adams (*The Prostitute in the Family Tree: Discovering Humor and Irony in the Bible*) are among many who have reconsidered the role of humor in scripture and theology. "In the world of the Bible, like the world of comedy," Hyers insists, "everything seems turned upside down. The whole hierarchy of human values, and the ladders of human greatness and self importance,

are inverted and collapsed.”²⁸ Adams, commenting on the strange stories Jesus tells and the astonishing stories we hear about his actions, notes that they are not simply about another world or a distant heaven but, instead, they are related to our everyday life. Reports of families and the dinner parties that go awry sound uncomfortably and then somehow pleasingly familiar. “In the humor of his parables,” Adams writes, “we are able to find hope in our own imperfect families and invite others over to eat with us.”²⁹

Was Jesus funny? If so, did his contemporaries “get” his humor? No one can say for sure. However, it is clear by his popularity with sinners and outcasts and his distinct unpopularity with religious leaders that they “got” his point. Whether a preacher utilizes humor he or she can still apply the strategies of irony, paradox, preposterous statements, exaggeration, and surprise that Jesus used—tactics that happen to be used effectively by comedians as well.

Parables and Jokes

Parables and jokes operate in a similar manner. Each has a way of suddenly flipping our assumptions and expectations. Unlike arguments that ram up against the fortresses of our world view, parables and jokes bypass our defenses. Instead of simply adding new information to our network of meanings and associations—information that can be as easily discarded—they require a new framework of meaning if they are to be understood.

C.H. Dodd’s defined the parable in a manner that can nearly be applied to jokes as well: “At its simplest, the parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to *tease* it into active thought³⁰ [emphasis added]. Both jokes and parables are brief, not simply for the sake of brevity but because they both work by withholding

information, by allowing the listener to come to false assumptions before applying just the right amount of correction. As Freud said about jokes, both say what they “have to say not just in a few words but in too few words.”³¹

Bernard Scott also noted that parables were meant for oral performance and, as such, share numerous similarities with jokes. For example, both are vivid and outlandish, they rely on repetition and formulas such as the “law of threes”, they are “intensive and tensive”, they employ stock characters and a sense of everydayness, and, in both, the “narrator refuses to provide the missing links . . . A hearer must work out the connections.”³²

The process of both typically functions in the following stages:

1. *A familiar world of connections is elicited.* This image can be evoked with a simple word or phrase: “A landowner went out early in the morning to hire laborers. . . .” It begins as an invitation into a familiar network of connections, stereotypes, behaviors, and assumptions: *Sven and Ollie went out into the field. . . .*

2. *A paradox or juxtaposition is introduced.* A metaphor is created or a contrast is highlighted. The Kingdom is like a woman slipping leaven into the flour. Really?

Bernard Scott writes that “Jesus’ discourse changes or challenges the implied structural network of associations . . . driving a hearer into symbolic disjunction. It is at this point that parabolic discourse can be described as paradoxical.”³³ The mere fact that the kingdom could be described as a woman hiding leaven subverts the familiar understanding of “male power and moral goodness.”³⁴ *What’s the difference between a hockey mom and a pit bull?*

3. *There is a surprise, a turn, or a reversal.* The introduction of the paradox, or the resolution of the absurdity, “provide[s] a profound shock to the audience’s

expectations.”³⁵ To be effective, this moment must be a surprise. This element is crucial to both parables and jokes: They subvert, confound, and betray the hearer’s assumptions.

“A minister, a priest and a rabbi walk into a bar . . . and the bartender says, ‘What is this, a joke?’” This punch line provides or requires a “sudden switch in meaning”³⁶ or in perspective. To bridge the paradox or follow the resolution, the listener must backtrack and reassign new definitions, to alter the scene, and to adopt a new set of assumptions.

4. *Both parables and jokes demand a response.* If a joke is successful, members of the audience smile or laugh. Jim Holt writes, “Amusement at the contrived absurdities of jokes is an intellectual pleasure, the pleasure of finding connections where none were expected.”³⁷ The acceptance of a joke’s incongruity and the attendant joy of the audience comes “because it feels like a conclusion they deduced for themselves.”³⁸ Oliver Double compares the delight of laughter to the pleasure of having solved a puzzle.³⁹ Biblical scholar John Donahue says something similar about parables: “The parable is a question waiting for an answer, an invitation waiting for a response. It does not really ‘exist’ or function until it is freely appropriated.”⁴⁰ The power of the parable, according to Donahue, is that Jesus allowed the hearer the *freedom* to interpret and the respond.⁴¹ In parables the meaning is open. They are not rules to be followed or stories with a tidy moral for each. Jokes may only provide a laugh and occasionally a new perspective; parables, however, are always meant to shock us into a kingdom way of thinking, seeing, and living.

Part II: How Can I Learn to Tell “Jokes” Like the Experts?

If a sermon can be like a joke— structurally, theologically, and in its use of imagery—how would I assess the usefulness of an approach that uses elements of stand-up comedy? For the sake of this project, the experts are comedians and the people of my congregation. In this section I describe my preaching project: the place where I preach, the sermons I developed, and the response they received. Part II explores *how* I learned. In Part III, I discuss in more detail *what* I learned.

The Preaching Context

My context is a larger medium size (620 member) church in the mostly White small town of Harlan, Iowa. The majority of residents in the community are the descendents of German or Danish immigrants who arrived in the late nineteenth century. Most of the German immigrants were Roman Catholic. The Danish immigrants were split between Lutheran and Baptist. The United Methodist church I serve includes many of these descendants as well as many Anglos and more recent arrivals from other parts of the country. My congregation includes a few mixed-race children who have returned to the community with their mothers. There are a handful of Hispanic and Asian residents in town, but they do not attend our church.

This community has a great deal of pride. In an area of Iowa that is mostly on the decline in population and economic vitality, Harlan has strong schools, an effective city government, and many successful farms and businesses. Harlan has sent string of state legislators and a governor to the State House. The high school jazz band won the state championship last spring. Even the local business education and Future Farmers of America chapters have won national awards. Most important to members of the community, they have 11 football state championships in the

past 25 years and 2 basketball championships in the last 4 years. Few rural communities recognize and embrace excellence the way this small town does. It has been a can-do community.

In general, church members are politically conservative and theologically moderate. They expect biblically based sermons but are not biblical literalists. The church has an active youth program and a dormant adult education program. Although it is an aging congregation in a small town, it has a large number of young families who attend and take leadership in the church. Nonetheless, the church remembers its glory days in the 1970s and early 1980s when its membership was over 800 and the sanctuary was full every Sunday.

If my church is unique, it would be because of its good naturedness, its lack of a history of fights and schisms, and its financial stability. The relevance of my congregation to my thesis, however, is not in its uniqueness but in how typical it is. My church members and the church itself are deeply invested in maintaining the appearance of health, happiness, and conformity.

At times and to various degrees, it may seem that people such as my congregants live two stories: one within their family and private lives and another they present to the world. One story may include problems with debt, parenting, decaying health, addiction, sexual identity, depression, marital issues, or other serious concerns and the other story may be of a cheerful, helpful, somewhat private neighbor and churchgoer. My church members and I live a conventional, Midwestern, small-town lifestyle that reinforces a familiar set of assumptions about ourselves, others, the world, and God. Consequently, my congregation and I are rather comfortable, a little defensive, and far too polite to publically recognize or identify whatever spiritual and familial conflicts upset our homes or community. My preaching project is intended

to subvert these defenses, counter false assumptions, and bring news of the astonishing grace of God to people who are hurting or healthy—or their own private combination of the two.

The Preaching Project: Five Sermons to Get Me Fired (and Other Provocations)

My preaching project was designed to incorporate lessons from stand-up comedy into my weekly sermons. The project had five parts:

- I studied joke theory and stand-up comedy for about 18 months. I read several books by stand-up comedians, interviews of comedians, and instructional books for aspiring comedians. I also interviewed three professional comedians: former comedian and comic actor, Rob Elk of Los Angeles; Jeff Houghton, a former Letterman intern, an improvisational performer, and the current host of Springfield, Missouri's favorite talk show, "The Mystery Hour"; and Kristi McHugh, of Los Angeles, a comedian who earns her living performing at comedy clubs around the country. (Mary Catlett, a comedian and graduate of "Second City" in Chicago assisted me with editing and advice late in the project.) The results of my research and comments from the comedians are scattered throughout the paper; I do not consider them separately in this section.
- I held a focus group meeting with 10 regular churchgoers. I asked this group about the sermons they have remembered throughout the years—and what qualities of the sermons made them memorable or powerful in their lives.
- I preached a sermon series called "Five Sermons to Get Me Fired" that drew on the elements of stand-up comedy. I preached the sermons on September 14, 21, 28, and October 5 and 12, 2008.

- In each bulletin over those five weeks, I included a “Pink Slip” with two questions about the day’s sermon. The first question was: “What insight, image, or feeling do you think you will remember from this sermon?” The second varied, but was always similar to this question from the second week: “Was there anything in the sermon that motivates you to think differently about your faith, your life, or other people? What and how so?” There was a final one question asking, “Should we FIRE Dave” with two boxes to check either “yes” or “no”. These forms provided feedback about what listeners regarded as memorable and meaningful in each sermon.
- For the purposes of this thesis, I also consider sermons I have preached for the two and one-half years of the preaching program to be part of this project as well. The most helpful are those sermons that have been evaluated by my advisor, another reader (typically a faculty member) and my local Parish Project Group (PPG). The PPG is part of the Association of Chicago Theological Schools preaching program. My PPG was a group of six church members who helped me study the scripture and generate ideas for the coming sermon. We also met following the designated sermon to review my preaching goals and evaluate the preaching/listening experience. Eight sermons over three years are subjected to this preparation/evaluation process. One of those eight sermons was the second sermon in my “Five Sermons to Get Me Fired” series.

Focus Group Meeting

I convened a focus group in September 2008 of 10 people who have been regular attendees for many years. I wanted people who have heard a lot of sermons. I asked them one key question: “Over all these years, what sermons do you remember?” I was not looking for

feedback on my own sermons; I wanted to know what sermons had an impact on them and have been meaningful for them over the years.

The responses identified several different aspects of sermons that make a lasting impact. According to the group, the most meaningful sermons were those that addressed an issue in their lives that they were encountering at the time they heard it. For one woman, this topic was in a sermon from nearly 40 years ago titled “Through the Red Sea,” which addressed the seemingly overwhelming challenges in our lives—challenges she recognized as a young mother. For another respondent, it was a sermon about drugs and alcohol addiction at a church she was visiting while her son was in drug rehab.

The second aspect that made a sermon memorable was novelty or surprise. Several of the members recounted sermons I have heard mentioned many times in this parish. One of my recent predecessors would occasionally preach as a character from the Bible—Moses, John the Baptist, or Jonah—a presentation that necessitated his dressing the part. Everyone remembers seeing their preacher enter in a tunic or loin cloth in these “costume affairs.” They remember him running around the sanctuary or doing a summersault. A couple of participants also mentioned a sermon of mine from 2006 which I ended by jumping into a wading pool of water I had placed at the foot of the chancel stairs.

One member of the group remarked that stories are always easier for him to remember. He emphasized, “You can visualize a story. You can’t visualize a fact.” Later he added, “If our feelings are involved, it’s more meaningful.” Others expanded on this comment adding that a song or a hymn also make emotional impacts that go beyond words.

Near the end of the session, group members discussed what they did not appreciate in preaching: sermons that are too long, lack of variety, shallow thoughts, and a lack of warmth or connection between the congregation and the preacher.

The Project Sermons

The provocative title of the “Five Sermons to Get Me Fired” series represented an effort to disarm the response to what I thought might be a negative reaction to my preaching project. My original intent was to preach on five controversial issues using humor and a distinct reversal that would reframe the hearers’ understanding of the topic. But I ran into some resistance. From myself.

I still preached on difficult issues, and experimented with the structure and strategy of the sermons. The list of topics that originally included abortion, homosexuality, and capital punishment shifted to forgiveness, envy, conversion, world religions, and ambivalence about rules. Initially, I attributed these changes to my own poverty of ideas and naked cowardice. However, I have come to think that pastoral concern was the primary reason my plans changed. I was disinclined to enter into contentious topics in the middle of an emotional political season. Even bringing up the topics would be fine if we truly were going to delve into them, tell some personal stories, and listen to each other. I did not, however, want to scurry from subject to subject each week, whisking up frothy controversies, for reasons that had more to do with my need to experiment than my obligation to shepherd my congregation.

I developed the project sermons after studying the elements of stand-up comedy the past two years. Short summaries of the sermons are included in the following discussion. See the Appendix for a longer summary of Sermon 1.

Sermon 1 “The Power of Unforgiveness

Scripture: Matthew 14: 21–35 “The Parable of the Unforgiving Slave”

Topic and Message: There is power in unforgiveness. If there was not any power or advantage to it, then why is it so popular?

Notable “Comedic” Element(s): I portrayed “Unforgiveness Man” and “Forgiveness Man” as fictional characters with superpowers. There was a startling moment when I ripped off my shirt, exposing an “F” taped onto my t-shirt.

Sudden Shift(s) in Meaning: In the parable, the unforgiving servant is thrown into prison *until the debt is paid*. Our debt has already been paid by Jesus Christ. We have been transformed by God’s extravagant forgiveness.

Notable Feedback: “The image of Unforgiveness Man. Someone I wouldn’t want to become.” “Being unforgiving is not powerful—it takes more courage to be forgiving.” “Sometimes it’s so hard to let go and forgive even if it puts me ‘in prison.’” “Thanks for a new way to see how foolish stubborn unforgiveness hurts me, too!” “Feel freedom when you forgive.”

Sermon 2 “What Are You Looking At?”

Scripture: The Parable of the Laborers in the Field in the 20 chapter of Matthew

Topic and Message: The “evil eye” mentioned in the parable is the eye of envy that makes us despise what we possess and the One who gave it to us. It ruins our relationships with God, others, and ourselves when we determine that others do not deserve what they have.

Notable “Comedic” Element(s): I voice my inner thoughts of envy about drivers of fancy cars. An extended “Act Out” or skit at the end contrasting the responses of the eleventh hour worker to the first worker hired.

Sudden Shift(s) in Meaning: We are not the workers who came first but the ones who came late. We have not earned the love and forgiveness of God—we have no right to it.

Notable Feedback: Notably, many people missed my point and made nice comments about the importance of forgiveness and of not judging others. But there were also these comments: “Money can mess up perspective. Relationships are most important.” “That pastors are human too.” “To appreciate what we have, not be envious of what others have.” “Your evil eye can make you poor. God has granted everyone his grace regardless.” “To remember to look at things from different perspectives to truly appreciate what you have.” “Your final acting out of the scripture—powerful!”

Sermon #3 “Signs of Life”

Scripture: Philippians 2:1–13 “Work out your own salvation...”

Topic and Message: A salvation story personified through a character named Danny.

Notable “Comedic” Element(s): This sermon was a slide show of common street signs with a narration about the life of a character, “Danny.” This sermon provided an exercise for brevity. Each slide had a one sentence narration. Each sentence and each slide presented a puzzle. Sign: “School Entrance.” Narration: “When Danny was old enough, he embarked on his formal quest for knowledge.” Sign: “Slow Children at Play.” Narration: “He may not have been the best student. Or the brightest. But he had fun.” Sign: “U Turn Allowed.” Narration: “But his life did NOT have to continue in the same direction.”

Sudden Shift(s) in Meaning: The challenge for people was to understand how to reinterpret the signs in the frame of the story being told.

Notable Feedback: “The road signs, especially connecting the ‘Rough Road’ sign to the fact that some may be having a rough time in their lives.” “Use of the familiar signs was excellent! I’ll think of this whenever I see the many signs in my daily life.” “Seeing signs during the sermon helps get the message across.”

But what was most notable about the responses is how many of them responded with short, clever proverbial phrases, similar to the style of the sermon and relating more to the metaphor than to the message: “There is a brighter day ahead.” “Stay on the Road!” “Be patient and wait for signs.” “Jesus is currently waiting to be our guide.” “Life is a journey.” “Life is a journey but not always a straight path.” “There is hope for those who will pray.” “All roads will lead to Heaven despite the bumps detours, etc.”

Sermon #4 “What’s so Special about Christianity?”

Scripture: Genesis 11:1–9, The Tower of Babel; John 3:16

Topic and Message: How do we understand the different religions of the world? I climbed a ladder to represent peoples’ aspirations to reach God through religion. I took a step up each time I presented the basics of each World Faith. But when I summarized Christianity I went down the ladder, because we believe that God came down to us.

Notable “Comedic” Element(s): I reversed people’s expectation that I would put Christianity at the top. Also, the image of the ladder was distinctly memorable.

Sudden Shift(s) in Meaning: Changing the ladder from something we go up into a representation that God came down.

Notable Feedback: Comments were almost universal in saying “God came down to us.” Feedback also included: “Appreciated your description of the beliefs of the Hindus, Muslims, etc.—loss of ‘poetry’ if all peoples were forced into commonality.” “The belief to work toward God’s Kingdom and not to try to build our own Kingdom.” “The contrast between going up the ladder to seek God and accepting that God comes down the ladder to us was visually very effective!”

Sermon #5 “House Rules”

Scripture: Exodus 20:1–17 The Ten Commandments

Topic and Message: I touched on my parental ambivalence about spanking; how having limits does not just keep us out of danger, it makes us more creative and appreciative for all that is allowed us.

Notable “Comedic” Element(s): Narrated my own contradictory thoughts about enforcing rules and having to follow them. Also, established a visual scene in chancel area, imagining a fence and fighting the desire to scale it.

Sudden Shift(s) in Meaning: Reversals were not as much a part of this sermon; rather I followed a strategy of saying, “On one hand. . . but on the other hand. . .”

Notable Feedback: “The do’s are bigger than the don’ts.” “Reminders of why rules are important. Good analogy of a child in a household and we as adults, are little different.” “Affirmation of ‘no spank’ belief.” “God gives us a framework for how to live that allows us to be free from the damage that misdeeds can cause.” “Don’t have to always learn rules the hard way.” “Don’t fixate on [the] fence, turn and enjoy what you have.”

“O God, you know my folly; the wrongs I have done are not hidden from you.”—Psalm 69:5

Part III. What Have I Learned from the Experts?

The essential principle of this section is that both stories—the story of our lives and the marvelous story of the Kingdom—must be presented as sincerely, as creatively, and as convincingly as possible.

Comedians often say, “The set-up is as important as the punch line.” The listeners must first identify with or believe the assumptions of the set-up or the first story so that they will be surprised by the reinterpretation. This set-up is also essential for preaching because the preacher must first demonstrate that he or she understands, appreciates, or even shares the situation of the listeners before exposing the false assumptions or presenting the Gospel story as an alternative. The presentation of this Gospel alternative must be even more appealing and convincing than the best punch line ever delivered.

This section includes the lessons I have learned from studying stand-up comedy, from applying these lessons in my preaching, and from reflecting on their effect. I have divided these lessons: purpose, preparation, and performance. First, purpose is about the sermon plot or structure. Drawing on both narrative theology and joke theory, this subsection describes what happens when we creatively bring two stories together, allowing the second story to reinterpret and transform the first. Second, preparation concentrates on various elements involved in creating the sermon. Finally, performance focuses on lessons learned about delivering the sermon.

Purpose

Tell the Truth (Sharing the First Story)

In *Telling the Truth: The Gospel and Tragedy, Comedy and Fairy Tale*, Frederick Buechner

says:

One wonders if there is anything more crucial for the preacher to do than to obey the sadness of our times by taking it into account without equivocation or subterfuge, by speaking out of our times and into our times not just what we ought to say about the Gospel, not just what it would appear to be in the interests of the Gospel for us to say, but what we have ourselves felt about it, experienced of it. It is possible to think of the Gospel and our preaching of it as, above all else and no

matter what risk, a speaking of the truth about the way things are. . . . The Gospel is bad news before it is good news.⁴²

Comedians may lapse into fantasy and distort our perceptions with exaggerations and euphemisms. They do not, however, do any more to obfuscate the truth than preachers do with their saccharine stories, obligatory injunctions, and insipid surveys of biblical trivia. Preachers often reinforce denial with sentimental tales that make life and faith seem easier than they are. They perpetuate the cover story when they keep changing the subject to theological topics and Biblical questions that fail to probe the experience of the listeners—or the speaker. They build an artificial distance between themselves and the listeners when they skim the surface of life with stories that tell them how things really ought to be.

Universal experience is commonly found in intimate details. Carl Roger notes, “What is most personal is most general.”⁴³ According to Thomas, we can affect people’s core beliefs (i.e., assumptions) by creating a shared emotional field with people.⁴⁴ In other words, by sharing our observations and truest feelings about ourselves, our world, our faith, and other aspects of life we enter in to the place in which they live. Yet, to find this common ground requires that they permit our entering—and they will not let us in unless we first disarm ourselves and disarm them as well.

Such truthfulness can sound easy but can be terrifying to attempt. However, if we avoid it, dodge the very real questions with which people live, we have forfeited the opportunity to offer or be a part of the answer. The second story, a story of Grace or another Kingdom, will have no impact if we are not successful at setting up the contrast with the first story. Getting it right in the ‘set up’ takes courage to speak the truth and art to speak it in a way that calls forward the real story in the listeners’ minds.

Last spring I preached to a group of ministers. I shared some funny stories about my own failings as a minister, and I noted that many more stories remained untold of my failings and mistakes that are not funny at all. Although I did not tell these stories, I described them in some generalities. Then I said slowly, “I feel sometimes like I am the worst minister in the world.” I asked, “Do you ever feel that way?” Of course they have.

Comedians know about the power of honesty and the prevalence of pain. Jay Leno remarks “Comedy doesn’t come from inflicting pain, it comes from getting pain.”⁴⁵ The comedians I interviewed stressed how important it is to begin with the truth. Jeff Houghton says, “Comedy comes more from real things than fantastical. If it starts real, you can take it anywhere.”⁴⁶ Kristi McHugh recently began working out a comedy routine about her brother’s suicide, which happened 10 years ago. It did not go well the first time, but she continues to refine it because she believes there is real power in talking about the issues and experiences that affect her the most. “If it’s close to you,” McHugh says, “it’s your meat and potatoes.”⁴⁷

People want to lean in and listen because they are saying to themselves and the people next to them, “That is so true!” or “I’ve never thought of it like that before!” The minister or the comic may be describing pain or tragedy but does it in a manner that defangs the pain, robs it of its power by shining light on it, and takes away its sting by stripping away the self-denial and fear of the unknown. “Do you know who thinks cancer is funny?” asks comedian Kathy Griffin. “People with cancer.”⁴⁸ Listeners recognize that this problem, feeling, or illness does not define who they are and that they are not alone. Even death might lose its sting.

When pioneering comedian Richard Pryor died in 2005, Eugene Robinson eulogized him in the *Washington Post* saying:

It makes perfect sense that the most influential comedian of his time would identify with preachers who knew how to put on a proper show, who gave a committed performance,

who refused to hold anything back—and who told the truth. If the preacher was delivering a eulogy and the dearly departed had been a no-good dirty dog, well, that's what the preacher said. And the church said amen.

He was a lot like those preachers he portrayed—foolish, human, perceptive, painfully honest. And even when it hurt unbearably, he always gave people a show.

I say amen.⁴⁹

The Sudden Shift (Applying the Second Story)

Frank Thomas states emphatically, “*I have a sense of wonder about reversals, because I suspect that the preacher’s ability to offer an assurance of grace is grounded in the ability of the preacher to deal with reversals and paradox*”⁵⁰ [emphasis in original]. I have come to believe, too, that this moment is as crucial to a sermon as it is to a joke. But it isn’t easy to do.

Kristi McHugh describes the task of joke writing simply: “You start with the truth, embellish and then make a left turn.”⁵¹ A humorous story may do its work slowly, but a joke acts suddenly. The punch line is where the first story and the second story collide. It is the sudden switch in meaning, the turn, the twist, the reversal. It is essential for the joke. In fact, some comedians benefit from little more than the surprise of breaking light bulbs and smashing large garden produce. Others get laughs by shocking the audience with foul language and coital references. However, comedians who have nothing to offer except shock tend to have short-lived careers. The reason is because pure shock outside the narrative (i.e., without the first and second story) is nonsensical and quickly loses value.

So why would a minister be interested in surprising the congregation? Because the surprise bypasses the defenses. It requires a reinterpretation of what has preceded it, it heightens the listeners’ interest, and it can make the experience more memorable.

The most effective sudden shift among my project sermons was in the sermon “What’s So Special about Christianity?” By taking one step up the ladder (toward God) each time I described another religion, I built the expectation that Christianity would be at the top or, perhaps, that all religions were a path to the same place. By descending the ladder to show that God came to us, I reversed the expectation that our salvation is dependent on the climbing ability of our righteous actions or perfect statements of faith. The “Forgiveness Man” sermon offered its own shock. When describing the character to the congregation, I ripped off my shirt to reveal a large “F” taped to my black t-shirt. People remember that. Those are the surprises that lower people’s defenses, allowing them to now hear a new story.

Penn Gillette asserts, “Comedy is this very intellectual form that is supposed to get an involuntary reaction. So you have the two farthest apart things you can do with the visceral and the intellectual and you’ve got to put them together.”⁵² In fact, all that one can do is prepare each story as thoroughly, as truthfully, and as evocatively as possible, say a good prayer . . . and then crash them together.

Subversion (The Change in Meaning)

While listening to a recording of a sermon by Fred Craddock last summer, I wrote in my notes “He gets you agreeing with him, then he questions his own assumptions.” The sudden shift is not simply a tool to capture attention; it is used as a way to frustrate listeners’ expectations in a manner that requires them to find a new field of meaning to explain what they have heard. Instead of building an argument—which typically leads hearers to reinforce their established assumptions or to make new assumptions about the preacher—the sudden shift is akin to a happy

form of judo that uses the force of the congregation's assumptions to reveal how those same assumptions lead to ridiculous, unhappy, conflicted, or un-Christian results.

Oliver Double recounts a routine preformed by Dick Gregory, an African-American comic, who was popular in the early 1960s:

Gregory has recently moved into an all-white neighbourhood in Chicago. A new neighbour meets him for the first time when he's shoveling snow on his front path. Mistaking him for a servant, the neighbour asks him, "Whaddya get for doin' that?" Gregory replies, "Oh, I get to sleep with that woman inside." There's a huge, outraged laugh and some applause. Then Gregory asks the neighbour's husband, "Hey. . . you want me to do yours next?" The husband declines with a frightened "No." There's another big laugh.

The routine shows a black man outwitting two whites by using their own prejudiced expectations against them, and also hints at interracial sex. For it to get such a positive reaction from a white audience in 1962 shows how skillful Gregory was. It suggests that he was able to shift the consensus of the audience.⁵³

That process is exactly what I think preaching can accomplish, but it is extraordinarily difficult.

In the "What's So Special about Christianity" sermon, the subversion was sudden. However, subversion does not have to be linked with a sudden shift. Last summer I preached a sermon in the episodal style that used a "mix" to apply repeatedly the lesson of the scripture. The sermon focused on the midwives who saved the lives of the Hebrew babies and lied about it to Pharaoh. I challenged the assumption that there is nothing anyone can do that can change anything when powerful people oppose them. I repeated biblical stories of people who subverted power with trickery and noncompliance. I recalled stories from history of people who committed similar acts, including a local woman who participated in the Danish resistance to the Nazis. After each example, I repeated the name of one of the midwives, Puah. I gave more examples of how Christians are, by definition, noncompliant with the dominant culture. I spoke of a powerless Jew who turned the world on its ear. Then I proposed examples of when each of us may face times when we must choose to go along with the inevitable or to say, "Puah!" The

surprise was present because of how I used a different inflection each time: “Pu Ahhhhhh,” or “Pu ah ah ah ah (like a monkey), or “Pu pu pu ah ah ah, that’s all I want to say to you” (like the Police song), and “POO ah!!” (like the Marine cry “Hooah”). Subversion was the explicit point of the sermon. The playfulness supplied by the litany of “Puahs” reinforced the subversion and made it less threatening at the same time.

In a sermon I preached for evaluation in the first year of the program, I told a story that revealed the sudden shift that brought home the main point. In a previous parish, we were discussing what our outreach would be to the large number of Southeast Asian and Central American immigrants who were new to our community. At one point a member of the mission committee said, “Well, you know, a lot of these people aren’t even Christian.” A different member responded, “We aren’t doing this because *they’re* Christian. We’re doing it because *we’re* Christian.”

After telling this story in my sermon, I began a litany illustrating the actions and attributes of people who act as Christians: “Because *we’re* Christian, we welcome the stranger...”; “Because *we’re* Christian, we believe that God will provide what we need for the challenge ahead...”; and so on.

One more word about subversion and surprise: Me: *Knock, Knock*. You: *Who’s there?* Me: *Interrupting cow*. You: *Interrupti . . .* Me: *Moo!* I heard that from a kid. Sometimes it is good to mess with the old formulas.

Members of my focus group emphasized that they do not want to hear sermons with the same message every Sunday or sermons that simply follow the same style. Sometimes the preacher should subvert his or her own style. Anne Lamott complains that she is tired of sermons

that just go worse, worse, worse, worse, then Jesus!⁵⁴ The sermon reversal can become as predictable and stale as a poorly told joke.

Celebration (Experiencing a New Story)

According to Buechner, the plot is like this: We are all fakes—that is tragedy; but we are yet loved and forgiven—that is comedy; God uses us ordinary people and we are transformed—that is a fairy tale. In fairy tales, regular people encounter extraordinary circumstances and are transformed. All the characters are finally exposed for what they really are. Evil antagonists are revealed and punished. Humble children and common folk overcome hardship and are recognized as heroes and heroines in victory. They live happily ever after. Eventually.

This is a similar plot point that Thomas puts forward as the definition of the celebration in preaching:

Celebration is the culmination of the sermonic design, where a moment is created in which the remembrance of a redemptive past and/or the conviction of a liberated future transforms the events immediately experienced. The sermonic design is an emotional process that culminates in a moment of celebration when the good news (the assurance of grace) intensifies...until one has received an inner assurance, affirmation, courage, and a feeling of empowerment. One experiences oneself as victorious (i.e., saved, set free, healed, encouraged, etc.) regardless of the external tragic circumstances of life.⁵⁵[emphasis original]

As in the fairy tale, the listeners share a sense of victory. Their true nature has been revealed and, while humbled, they receive courage, power, and assurance. The celebratory sermon transforms the hearer and the current world by reveling in God's past deeds and future promises. As in comedy, one story is altered by another. The surprise brings an emotional result and a physical manifestation. The closing of a sermon rollicks in delight of this transformation as if one joy is added to another and another.

In October 2006 I concluded a sermon titled, “Jump In!” by jumping in a wading pool of water. In a September 2007 sermon, I imagined a Pharisee recognizing that he had been found (like the lost sheep) sitting at the table with Christ and getting up to dance. I listed all of the dances that the revelers would do. The list went on and on. Music started in the background. Excitement was building. When I concluded that the Hokey Pokey would be the closing dance I asked, “And do you know why? Because somebody turned their life around. And *that’s* what it’s all about.” People smiled, laughed, and applauded. I did not simply want to give people something to think about; I wanted to have them feel a certain way. I did not want them to just know about the Good News; I wanted them to experience the Good News.

Just as laughter is meant to follow a joke, is it not appropriate for a sense of wonder, bemusement, consternation, joy, or even anger to conclude a sermon? We preach asking people to transform their lives. How about giving them a sense of how that transformation feels?

Preparation

Observation

British scholar Oliver Double describes observational comedy as a kind of shared experience with the audience “in which the comedian talks about everyday phenomena that are rarely noticed or discussed.”⁵⁶ Double suggests that “there is a therapeutic element of observation comedy. The situation it describes may involve worry, paranoia or embarrassment, and the act of sharing them allows a release of these tensions.”⁵⁷ (Note a touch of Freud’s relief theory.) Observational comedy thus draws on the notions of “we’re all in this together” and “I understand you” as well as provides opportunities to point out situations and feelings that people experience but never give their conscious attention.

Double remarks that “observation comedy is a form of uncovering. As well as being about shared experience, it derives its power from the fact that the comedian has noticed something which the audience previously haven’t” [sic].⁵⁸ None other than Theodore Geisler (Dr. Seuss) observed, “Humor has a tremendous place in a sordid world. It’s more than just a laughing matter. If you can see things out of whack then you can see how things can be in whack.”⁵⁹

Jesus did something similar in his teaching but not for the sake of a laugh or simply to point out something new. In describing how parables work, biblical scholar John Donahue cites Robert Tannehill who wrote, “The sayings do not invite contemplation of themselves as objects of value but require us to contemplate our lives.”⁶⁰ For preachers this call to contemplation means to notice—really notice—what is going on around us. As Jesus said, “Consider the lilies,” we are to study and reflect on the nature of the life around us. We are also called to discover the meaning in what we see. What does it say about us, our intentions, our desires? What frame or story is behind our tiniest actions?

I began my sermon on envy with a story in which I revealed my inner dialogue when I pass a fancy car on the highway. I narrated for the congregation the two thoughts I have most often. The first is “Oh, look at you with your leather seats and your sun roof. You just think you have the world at your feet.” Or, second, if the person seems out of place in the expensive car, I think, “Dude! You can’t pull that off. No car can make *you* look cool.” I went on to talk about how the “evil eye” mentioned in the parable is the eye of envy that makes us despise what we possess and the One who gave it to us. It ruins our relationships with God, others, and ourselves when we determine that others do not deserve what they have.

The responses to this sermon included a surprising number of comments saying they learned that “ministers are human too.” An observational approach can be enormously helpful for setting up the “first story” in a sermon. You can communicate that you understand their lives and you can bring the assumptions to the surface—the target assumptions that may well be flipped in the second story.

Emotion—With Head and Heart

Comedian Louie Anderson spoke of the importance of connecting the head and the heart. “I think all great comics have been able to do one thing that other comics haven’t,” he said. “They’ve been able to connect their heart to their head. If you can connect your heart to your head, then you can really get the most out of the whole situation.”⁶¹ Frank Thomas reminds us that we re-experience the emotions of a sermon as we give it—especially if the emotions were true as we prepared the sermon. We cannot simply add in emotions or gestures that simulate them once we get to the pulpit.

The happiest improvement in my sermon preparation process in the second year was the participation of the Parish Project Group (PPG). For the first two project sermons, we utilized a process called the simulation bible study. I assigned everyone a role from the story. Then, after reading the scripture a second time, I asked each of them how they—as the character—felt as the story proceeded. They were required to answer in first person. I was delighted that people who seemed to be guarded the year before poured forth with creativity and insight. Even more astonishing was that they were uncovering both intellectual and emotional insights. The woman who lost a coin felt “despair” because the coin represented her dowry, her place in and connection to the community. The Pharisee was nearly “shaking with anger” because Jesus was

not eating at his house. Zacchaeus' coworkers at the tax office seethed with "envy and disgust" after remembering how Zacchaeus always wanted the attention, always wanted to be the chief.

I had provided the participants a little information about the scripture passage and its context, and they responded with insight that did not separate cognitive information from the emotions that accompanied it. Emotions are often assumed to impede intellectual insight. Sometimes that is true. But, in much of life, especially as it is lived, the heart and the head assist each other just as the eyes and ears work in concert.

By using a creative process that drew out and named the emotions and the ideas of the characters, I was able to more easily and authentically develop sermons that spoke to the head and the heart. The sermons perhaps rang true to the way people experience insight each day.

The Oral Quality of Preaching and Comedy

Preaching is a performative and decidedly oral event. So was most of the scripture we read. The Gospels were most probably recited from memory before they were committed to print, and Paul's letters were read aloud in the churches to which they were addressed. Although sermons are generally read aloud or even recited from memory, they often lack the distinctive oral quality of Old Testament stories, parables, psalms, and proverbs—or of comedy.

When a sermon is written so that it can be memorized or delivered with few notes, it must be constructed differently. Earlier, I mentioned the work of biblical scholar Bernard Scott, who details the attributes of brief stories meant for oral performance. Parables, he writes, are "vivid and outlandish."⁶² They make use of repetition, formulas, and the law of threes as strategies to help both the speaker and the listener remember. I find that when I write with the intention of delivering the sermon with few or no notes, I must simplify the structure, avoid long or multiple

quotations, and use a metaphor or a contrast that carries the sermon along in an intuitive way. It is difficult. However, as a pastor friend of mine says, “If I can’t remember my sermon, how can I expect my congregation to remember it.”⁶³

Many comics refuse to write down their jokes word-for-word. Carter suggests that the comedian write enough notes to remember, cautioning that completely writing out a joke can make it “literary and rigid,” different than how one really talks.⁶⁴ She strongly warns against writing down an “act out,” saying that they need to be developed out of the “funny zone” when the comic is up and moving, ranting and being physical.⁶⁵

In this instance, comedians have confirmed what I already knew. I typically develop the wording of my sermons while up and pacing the long hallway outside my office speaking out the words quietly to myself. As I work out a section or have a new idea, I run to my desk and write it down. Not only does it allow me to bring the emotion into the sermon from the very beginning, it also means that the verbal pacing, the gestures, and the physicality of the sermon are connected to the words and ideas. I do not have to add them later as afterthoughts.

There are two more implications. First, by the time I finish a sermon, it is nearly memorized. It is inside me and not something that I have to lift off of the paper. Second, it means that it is difficult for me to write well when other people are around. Although I research and outline thoroughly throughout the week, I leave most of the wording until Saturday. This routine is not always a happy predicament for family or when there are last minute interruptions, but it does lead to sermons that are affecting me and active, like something I just thought of and have to share. Perhaps this is another connection between comedians and some preachers: We do our best work on Saturday night.

Timing

The concept of timing is complex and difficult to define, even by comedians themselves. I include timing with other “preparation” elements, rather than with “performance”, to emphasize the importance of wording and structure. Timing contains two key elements: the structure of the joke, so that the right word comes at just the right time, and the pause the comedian gives so that the audience can race ahead to the wrong conclusion or reflect long enough to gather in the right one. When a sermon uses images or stories and throws them together in an unique way, the preacher must give the listeners time to reinterpret the new meaning. In describing a typically slow and deadpan routine by Bob Newhart, Double says, “The joke is in the gap.”⁶⁶ It is in that time in which the audience is figuring out what is not said and is drawing the intended ludicrous picture in their heads.

The “Idiot Light” sermon contained a moment when I was especially aware of the timing. During a story in which I had just explained to my mother that the “CHECK OIL” light did not work, I took a pause, drew a deep breath, and said, “The smoke was blue.” The pause before, and another after, allowed people to put together in their minds what this statement meant. It allowed them to draw a mental picture.

Louie Anderson offered some excellent advice: “The secret behind timing is to hold whatever you’re going to say until you absolutely have to say it.”⁶⁷ Part of the reason this is important is because people need time to absorb what is being said. My brain is constantly telling me “*Keep going! You’re losing them! Don’t stumble.*” It tells me that the pauses are a sign of something negative. But that is not how it works for the audience. If I am trying to construct an image or bring an assumption to the light of day, it takes a moment or two for the gears of the

listener's brains to engage, to accomplish what I want to have happen. *Then* I can take the next step to use that image or deliver the punch line that turns that very assumption on its ear.

Performance

Authenticity

Closely related to the issue of Truth is the authentic presentation of the preacher—not simply the preacher's words or his or her assessment of the truth about the world but the person, the emotions, the experiences, the vulnerabilities, and contradictions within the preacher.

Buechner describes how preachers who set themselves up as the ones with all the answers obstruct the work of God and the experience of the true story of our lives. He tells how Job's friends distort the experience of God by denying the ache of God's absence:

God is absent from all Job's words about God, and from the words of his comforters, because they are words without knowledge that obscure the issue of God by trying to define him as present in ways and places where he is not present, to define him as moral order, as the best *answer* man can give to the problem of his life. God is not an answer man can give, God says, God himself does not give answers. He *gives himself*, and into the midst of the whirlwind of his absence gives himself.⁶⁸ [emphasis added]

Like Job and his friends, we often find ourselves with little to say with authority about God.

When we attempt to fill this void by creating a persona of ourselves as we wish to be or ought to be—that is, when we attempt to speak from outside our own faith relationship—the pulpit can become a place of inauthenticity. Yet, we need nothing more than to present ourselves as people who have experienced God (or God's absence) to find a pathway to God's truth. As Buechner insists, the preacher “is not called to be an actor, a magician, in the pulpit. He is called to be himself.”⁶⁹

Comedians have discovered this same issue as it relates to engaging their audiences. Listeners do not need to hear one more perfect person whose observations and claims to truth are as ersatz as their claims to perfection. “Most people hide their defects; we comics show them to the world,” confesses Judy Carter.⁷⁰

It is crucial to be authentic about our faults, doubts, and mistakes—not simply in the sense of full disclosure or as a caveat but as a pathway to credibility and power. We all remember that we are sinners in need of a savior. We live in a “first story” infiltrated by a saving “second story”. The clearer and more real this first story is, the more astonishing and powerful the second story becomes. As comedian Richard Lewis says, “I couldn’t go out on stage and express someone else’s feelings.”⁷¹ He later adds:

It’s impossible to be as good as you can be if you hold back. If you start editing yourself, you might as well just stop, you won’t be as pure as you can be and why not go for the gold? You are only as authentic as you allow yourself to be. And if you start putting roadblocks up voluntarily, you are just headed toward mediocrity.⁷²

A sermon in the first year of the program, “Spiritual Disciplines for the Undisciplined,” explored the area of spirituality. It was about my life-long quest—and failure—to become disciplined in my spiritual life. The response to that sermon was far more enthusiastic than the reaction to the entire series I preached on Richard Foster’s *Celebration of Discipline*. In the *Celebration* series, I reported on someone else’s experience, and, when speaking of my own experiences, I only recounted my successes. I had a great deal of information about spirituality but very little witness from my life or from the lives of people close to me.

What happens when the preacher becomes accustomed to sharing the dilemmas and idiosyncrasies of daily Christian life? Perhaps like the comedian who after years of imitating

what he thought a comedian should be, a preacher can learn a similar lesson: “You will emerge,” Jerry Seinfeld assures us, “That’s the goal—to become yourself.”

Louie Anderson relates how Richard Pryor was able to accomplish this task:

Richard was the best at surgically opening himself up on stage . . . like his whole guts and everything, and laying it out on display. I think he was best at displaying his insides and that’s why you loved him so much because he’d go up there and you’d go, “This guy is hiding absolutely nothing from me, and he’s being completely honest, but yet he’s funny and he’s right and he’s making me think but he’s not making me feel guilty about what I am.”⁷³

Authority

A preacher draws on authority from many areas, including the scripture, from other books and resources, from his or her official position in the church, and from his or her personal integrity and life story. This section is not about those areas. I focus here on the authority that is evident in the presence and confidence of the speaker. Although it not the most important source of a preacher’s authority, it is the aspect of authority most often neglected. When the preacher ignores the importance of presence, confidence, and personality in the presentation of a sermon, he or she undercuts the other elements of authority.

Kristi McHugh contends that performing the comedy act is “like driving a bus. Nobody there wants an out of control ride.”⁷⁴ Indeed. “It’s all about your attitude,” she insists. People are judging you from the moment you walk on stage. “They are judging your hair, your body, your clothes, how attractive you are . . . [so] I try to stun them.”⁷⁵ Then they stop their judging so that she can take them along for a little ride on the hilarity bus.

Although not every preacher has the natural presence or personality of a stand-up comic, claiming authority is less about shock and awe and, as Franklyn Ajaye suggests, more about claiming or commanding space:

[You don't have to come] at the audience with rapid speech and an aggressive attitude If you're soft-spoken or laid back, a good delivery, good timing a strong point of view, and the words "commitment and conviction" tattooed in your brain will help you create a strong stage presence. . . . Psychologically, you must be willing to stand your ground in the midst of silence detonating all around you. This can only come from you truly understanding your point of view and being committed to putting it out there for the audience to consider.⁷⁶

In the ACTS class "Core II: Preaching as Performance," we studied how to prepare our material, our voices, and our bodies to deliver a sermon with authenticity and authority. The kind of confidence I am describing is not about swagger or coxsureness. It is clarity of thought and personality more than it is deftness of speech. It is a nonanxious voice and relaxed body more than it is a booming voice and a chesty stance. The preacher does not need to browbeat the congregation into submission. Neither is there a sense of neediness from the pastor who does not fear the listeners' judgments nor is greedy for their approval.

During the first year of this program, the PPG and other evaluators of my sermons identified several habits of mine that distracted from or undercut my message. I was bending over at the waist, putting my hands in my pockets, speaking in a high, excited voice, dropping the ends of my sentences and punctuating my thoughts with "uh" and "um." I took care of a couple of these problems with attention to my voice production and my posture. I lost weight so that I would not be sucking my stomach in any more, which helped my breath support. I reduced the "um's" and the dropping of my endings by being more clear about my wording and the ideas I was trying to convey to the congregation. That is, when I am committed to the material I am sharing, my voice and my body show it.

George Carlin says it well:

[An authoritative presence] comes from the conviction that your thoughts are worth telling somebody. If it's important enough for you to think of, and important enough for

you to drive some place, stand up, and tell people to be quiet so you can tell them about it, that's gotta be in your voice and your delivery.⁷⁷

Voicing Thoughts

A common technique among comedians is to give voice to their doubts and dilemmas. This method is a narration of their nonlinear or contradictory train of thought. Or it might be a running commentary on their act, including an occasional acknowledgement that a joke or idea was odd, offensive, or the funniest thing ever. Or, the comedian might voice the thoughts of the audience to show that he or she “understands how the audience might be reacting.”⁷⁸ Double suggests that such a strategy allows the comic to keep control of the situation; it strengthens the relationship with the listeners and can “neutralize any potential bad reactions.”⁷⁹ For example, Double describes a routine that was interrupted by a heckler at a crucial moment in the set up. The joke relied on rhythm and timing and was simply ruined. So the comic shared that fact with the audience. He went back and told it again to a thunderous applause.⁸⁰

In his show, “The 5th Annual End of the World Tour,” Christopher Titus takes an unpredictable journey. At one point, he laments the problems of the world and criticizes the war in Iraq. Then he reveals his admiration for the troops and tells about performing for them. He becomes quite serious and expresses hope for the world. He professes a desire to take his young daughter to church—but then there is that problem of pedophile priests. Titus seems to be implying a dialog through his routine that says: “on one hand. . . but on the other hand. . .” He expresses strong feelings that appear contradictory but which achieve cohesion because of his honesty and pathos. He does not deny a dilemma.

In the intuitive sermon, about which Fred Craddock wrote in “As One Without Authority,” the preacher is free to recount the process of discovery. The sermon might follow the

path of a person exploring the implications of the scripture and the contradictions of his or her life and eventually come to a profound insight or a disturbing question. My sermon “House Rules” began as an idea for a comedy routine on spanking. On one hand, sometimes I just want to “whack” my kids, because they certainly deserve it. On the other hand, I understand the arguments against spanking. I wanted to draw a connection between spanking and capital punishment, primarily the point that they may deserve it, but that does not mean it is a good idea for us to do it. In the sermon, I told a story about my older brother who, in the early 1960s, was spanked every day in kindergarten. I have always thought that if that teacher was prevented from spanking, she would have had to use her creativity to find other ways to keep discipline. She needed—but never received—rules to lead her to better things. Although the sermon ends up being more broadly about rules, including the Ten Commandments and the blessing they can be, I fully acknowledged the ambivalent relationship many of us have with limits.

Perhaps we preachers are too much in the habit of making pronouncements. If we recognize our own inconsistencies, we might be able to paint a truer picture for ourselves and to tell a more fascinating story of faith. Because of this project, I have become more willing to admit a dislike of a certain scriptural passage or a continuing problem I may have following through with an element of discipleship.

Present Tense

An element of stand-up comedy that I had never noticed before this project is its commitment to the present tense. Several stand-up comedians have written about the importance of telling jokes and stories in present tense. Double explains: “The present tense is built into the language of stand-up. When a comedian tells the story of something that’s happened in the past,

it's still related in the present.”⁸¹ Double relates the words of comedian Dave Gorman, who in an interview, said, “Even though I’m telling you something which has happened and everyone knows . . . this is six months ago . . . the grammar I use is kind of, ‘So, I’m on the train, and’—and I try to make it feel present tense. I try not to tell it with hindsight, so that it feels immediate.”⁸² Why? Double says that comedy is “about immediacy, and has a strong connection to the here and now.”⁸³ People want to have that feeling that the event is happening in the moment. Jana Childers writes, “What is true for a good joke is true for preaching as well: for many good sermons ‘you had to be there.’”⁸⁴

I began the sermon “Idiot Light” with a story told in the present tense. The members of the PPG said that they did not notice. However, a couple of them also said that the story took them immediately to similar situations in their own lives. For me, whether the present tense is a helpful strategy for sermons is yet unclear. I do notice this: The opening story accomplished exactly what I wanted it to. It conjured up the feelings people have of being low on oil, of having blown their engine, and their chance to make it right. I can imagine that it could be very helpful to retell bible stories in the present tense (*and then the bridesmaids knock on the door and they ask to come in...*). This retelling would provide the opportunity to bring the action into the present and, in the retelling, provide pauses for the listeners to imagine the thought process of the characters, to re-experience the insight and the emotion of the moment. Joseph Webb, in *Preaching and Comedy*, is also helpful on this point. He invites the preacher to emulate the comedian’s sense of spontaneity: “The preacher must be a skilled enough actor or actress to be able to deliver the sermon from memory as though it is being thought and spoken for the very first time, with utter spontaneity, despite every word being known in advance.”⁸⁵

Another aspect to the present tense is the sense that the preacher is in the moment and responding to the environment around him or her. The preacher cannot be oblivious to the fact that the lights blinked off and on, that a stunning crack of thunder denoted nearby, or even that he or she stumbled on a few words. “You learn early on don’t you,” says British comedian Milton Jones, “that if you don’t react to something that happens in the crowd, the audience lose faith in you [sic].”⁸⁶ It is not a matter of authority; it is truly an issue of authenticity. The preacher is in the room, too, right? As many preaching students learn in their first semester, the sermon is not what is written on the page. It is the event, and the event is always present tense.

Last summer I was preaching at my home church. I used a rewrite of a sermon I developed for the “Preaching the Parables” class. Near the end of the sermon I evoked a scene in which my friend Larry and his wife Rexene would sing “The Wheels on the Bus” with their new, long-awaited, baby. I said, “And I can imagine Larry and Rexene getting out the baby. . . .” I stumbled for a moment trying to get out of the odd construction of the sentence. The congregation stirred slightly. Then I smiled and said, “Oh, yeah ‘get out the baby.’ ‘Gee, honey we haven’t had the baby out for a while. Let’s get her out and play her.’” Big laugh. The small tension was relieved once I acknowledged the foible. Then I went back to where I had left off.

My point, however, is about more than clever saves for awkward situations: It is the recognition that a preacher is not reporting on a spiritual experience he or she had early that week in the office but that the preacher is re-experiencing the scripture and the moment and the insight right along with the congregation. Frank Thomas teaches that “people rarely experience the sermon if the preacher does not experience it first.”⁸⁷ This sense of re-experiencing has a pronounced effect on the timing and pace of the sermon.

All of these aspects are meant to create a moment for the Holy Spirit to truly touch the hearers of a sermon, to co-create an adventure in which, while the outcome may not be in doubt, the nature of the journey certainly is. Frederick Buechner speaks profoundly about this obligation. People are waiting for a miracle, he insists, “and the miracle they are waiting for is that he will not just *say* that God is present, because they have heard it said before and it has made no great and lasting difference to them. . . .but that he will somehow make it real to them [emphasis original].”⁸⁸

Visualization

In a reflection paper following a sermon in the second year, I referred to an idea in Dr. Thomas’ book, *They Like to Never Quit Praisin’ God*. I said that I wanted people to feel the sermon rather than intellectualize it. In his response to my sermon and paper, Thomas corrected me saying, “I have been telling students in class, ‘Don’t dumb down; image up.’” Images do not replace ideas and the deepest of thoughts, they allow other stories and experience to force their way into our consciousness in ways that reinforce rather than distract. Gene Perret, who was a staff-writer for Bob Hope and Carol Burnett, says that the joke is not in the words, “it’s the scene that appears in the listener’s mind as a result of those words. Skillful use of words will create a stronger image, but it is usually the image that produces the humor.”⁸⁹

Even a preacher who does not project pictures on a screen to illustrate the ideas of a sermon still uses words to paint a picture for the congregation. In fact, the words may make a stronger image for the hearers because the listeners must participate in forming the mental picture. In fact, if a picture accompanies each ‘story’ of the sermon, then the mental image is considerably more flexible for the sake of a reversal or to enhance a powerful juxtaposition.

The preacher has more than words at his or her disposal. Vocal inflection, facial expression, characterization, gesture, and body movement are all effective tools to create the images that the sermon needs. The preacher must be able to re-experience the scripture and to revisualize the scene that he or she is creating for the hearers. I have become convinced that most preachers can benefit greatly by reconsidering how they use gestures. Most of us gesture as a method for adding emphasis, punctuating each sentence as we poke and chop at the air. Ineffective at best—and, in some case, downright distracting—gestures should be considered carefully, as an integral part of the sermon message. How much better it is to use our arms, hands, and the position of our bodies to arrange the scene before the people. As we tell a story, place the characters to each side and direct your gaze to them. Rather than holding your finger up to make a point—lift the point up with both hands and hold it there for a while. Grimace with bad news. Give a broad grin and pause before sharing good news.

In a sermon on Zacchaeus, I stood up tall on a short stool to illustrate his position in a tree—and his desired position in society. In a sermon about Peter’s attempt to walk on water, I strapped on fishing boots and mimed a scene in which the boots controlled my feet. While retelling the parable of the “Laborers in the Vineyard,” I became the worker hired first and then the worker hired last. I jabbed my finger at the owner and threw away his denarius—after blowing my nose on it. At the end of the sermon on the “Ten Bridesmaids,” I held out my hand to conjure up the image of the lamp burning brightly through the midst of turmoil.

In each of those situations I was, as comedian Bob Monkhouse says, “using gesture to create a mental picture.”⁹⁰ Gesture and other expression are far more powerfully when we get our heads out of our manuscripts and make the image of scripture and life real for our listeners—no, not just listeners, but our fellow participants.

Acting Out

The most obvious method to use to create a scene is to act it out. Judy Carter calls this the “act out” part of a joke.⁹¹ Oliver Double uses the term “instant character.” Other terms include “mimicking” or “snap shot characterization.”⁹² Double defines the instant character as “an instant transition from narrator to character, achieved through tone of voice, posture, or facial expression.”⁹³ The act out is not as long as a theatrical scene or a short skit. Double explains:

[Instant character] works not by literally representing people, animals or objects, but by doing just enough with the face, voice and body to paint a picture in the mind of the audience. This makes the stage extraordinarily pliable, capable of being filled with a whole universe of characters, events and sound effects which can be conjured up at the comic’s command.⁹⁴

In Richard Pryor’s comedy routine about his heart attack, he personified and acted out a conversation with his heart. He balls up his fist in the center of his chest and moves his bent fingers as he speaks in a low, menacing voice, “Thinkin’ about dying ain’tcha?”⁹⁵ They converse for minute with Pryor speaking in a high, terrified version of his own voice. “Yeah, I’m thinkin’ about dyin’. I’m thinkin’ about dyin’.” The audience explodes in laughter—*laughter!*—as Pryor grimaces and wretches all the way to the floor. Pryor displays an amazing emotional range as he transforms tragedy into comedy.

It does not take long for an entire scene to be created before the congregation, and it can be powerful. In the sermon “Idiot Light,” I identified my discomfort with the bridegroom’s failure to recognize the five foolish bridesmaids and his refusal to let them into the party. Why would he slam the door on them? I then referred to the parable at the end of the chapter, “The Separating of the Sheep and the Goats.” After recounting the words of the Son of Man to the goats—“I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing,

sick and in prison and you did not visit me”—I answered as the goats: [raising shoulders and eyebrows in an apologetic shrug and making a “oops” expression] “Well...If we would have known it was *you*.” Jesus response is firm and slow, “You don’t know *me*...I don’t know *you*.” And the door shuts.

The Mix

The mix is so important and helpful that I described it in Part I as an alternative method for introducing the “second story”. The mix is taking an image or the logic of one situation and applying it to another to reveal more about the object or situation. It is metaphorical language—often taken to extreme. It can be used to show the ridiculousness of an assumption or as a marvelous way to end the sermon in Celebration. Many African-American preachers are experts at using a mix or a litany of mixes to close a sermon.

I developed a sermon while taking “Jazz and Preaching” my first year in the program. The sermon was on the parable of the man who tore down his barns to build bigger ones. In another class, Dow Edgerton pointed out that God said to the man [paraphrasing the original Greek] “You Fool, this very night they (these things you have prepared) demand your life!” Edgerton said, “That’s like a Stephen King novel—the house chasing him down the street.”

That’s all I needed. In developing the “first story”, the complication, of the sermon I followed through on that metaphor. I acted out the following scene with actions and sound effects:

- His house comes alive and chases him down the street.
- All the junk tumbles out of the closet, an ice tea maker and a foot massager fly by him. He thinks, “I forgot I had those.”
- His couch and chairs from the Ethan Allen British Colonial Collection move their arms and legs and pour out of the house to join the chase.
- His laptop is chomping after him like a pack-man.

- The mattress leaps off the bed frame and joins the chase (omp pa omp pa), the springs too (eh ah eh ah).
- His combine rolls out of the barn and tries to chew him up.
- All the fancy jewelry he bought his wife is flying at him: necklaces, rings, bracelets, but it is the brooch that catches him in the chest. (ugh)
- Then the Panasonic Home Theatre System starts in: “More money, more stuff. Go to the banker, get a loan, get more credit cards.”
- They all start chanting together, “More, bigger, better! More, bigger, better!...”
- [He cowers on the bottom stair and says in a weak voice:] “Help me.”

I say: “Does this sound ridiculous? Not at all. How many people have worked themselves to death? How many people have traded their marriage for riches? Or their relationships with their kids? Or their brothers and sisters?”

That is a mix, an act out, and present tense all in one example.

*Then shall the young women rejoice in the dance, and the young men and the old shall be merry.
I will turn their mourning into joy, I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow.
—(Jeremiah 31:13)*

Conclusion

“Is this thing on?” the comedian asks while tapping the microphone. Nobody laughed so it must be a problem with the sound system, right? Or could it be that the joke did not work because the comic did not set up the punch line properly or because people had already heard that old joke.

Preaching is like trying to explain a joke. Either people do not get it or they have heard it before. If the listeners do not get it, it is because they do not have enough biblical, theological, or shared background to understand the story. Or, if people have heard it before, they anticipate the main point and begin thinking of excuses, alibis, or attacks. Many times, the preacher may as well close the sermon with an apology: “I guess you had to be there.”

How can a preacher get heard? By using insights gleaned from studying jokes, preachers can expose listeners' false assumptions and prompt them to reinterpret information they thought they already knew. Strategies and techniques from stand-up comedy amplify the authenticity, immediacy, effect, and power of the sermon's message. Then congregations will be able to hear more sermons that engage their hearts and minds as they experience the Gospel story.

These sermons may or may not include humor. However, when alibis are undone, poseurs are unmasked, rightful heirs are restored, obscured pathways are made clear, when the proud are scattered in the imagination of their hearts, and the hungry are filled with good things, there is always a possibility that hilarity may ensue.

END NOTES

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² Mark Lamarr writing in the forward to Oliver Double's book, *Getting the Joke: The Inner Workings of Stand-up Comedy* (London: Methuen, 2005), 174.

³ Jim Holt, *Stop Me If You've Heard This: A History and Philosophy of Jokes*, (. New York: W.W. Norton, 2008), 68.

⁴ Ted Cohen, *Jokes: Philosophical Thoughts on Joking Matters* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999) quoted in Holt, 73–74.

⁵ Joseph Webb, *Preaching and Comedy* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1998), 14–15.

⁶ *Ibid*, 19.

⁷ Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, 1905 text, ed. and trans. by James Strachey. (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1960; reprinted 1989)

⁸ Holt, 87.

⁹ Jeff Houghton, Telephone interview by author, 11 December 2008.

¹⁰ As summarized by Freud in *Jokes*, 9.

¹¹ Holt, 117.

¹² Greg Dean, *Step by Step to Stand-up Comedy* (Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Heinemann, 2000), 3. Dean is drawing on the Victor Raskin article "Jokes; A Linguist Explains His New Semantic Theory of Humor" *Psychology Today*, October 1985. Raskin uses "script" instead of "story".

¹³ *Ibid*, 6-9.

¹⁴ Christopher Titus, *Norman Rockwell is Bleeding* [electronic file recording] (Comedy Central, 2008).

¹⁵ Judy Carter, *The Comedy Bible* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001), 120.

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¹⁷ Carter, 94–95.

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- ¹⁹ I am using Eugene Lowry's terms from a later work, *The Sermon: Dancing on the Edge of Mystery*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 62–89.
- ²⁰ Holt, 6.
- ²¹ Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot: The Sermon as Narrative Art Form*, revised and expanded edition, orig 1980 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 55–56.
- ²² Ibid., 59.
- ²³ Lowry, *The Sermon: Dancing on the Edge of Mystery*, 28.
- ²⁴ Ibid., 324.
- ²⁵ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980; reprint 2003), 3.
- ²⁶ Ibid., 4.
- ²⁷ Elton Trueblood, *The Humor of Christ* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1964)
- ²⁸ Conrad Hyers, *And God Created Laughter: The Bible as Divine Comedy* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1987), 150. Quoted in Sam Joeckle, "Funny as Hell: Christianity and Humor Reconsidered," *International Journal of Humor Research*, Vol. 21 No. 4 (2008) : 415–435.
- ²⁹ Douglas Adams, *The Prostitute in the Family Tree: Discovering Humor and Irony in the Bible* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 12, quoted in Stephen Ellis, "The Bejeweled Pig Snout: Appropriate use of Humor in Preaching" (thesis for degree of Doctor of Ministry at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, South Hamilton, Massachusetts, 2006), 26.
- ³⁰ C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1961), 5
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- ³² Bernard Scott, *Hear Then the Parable: A Commentary on the Parables of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 35
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- ³⁴ Ibid.
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- ⁴² Buechner, 7.
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- ⁴⁴ Thomas, 14.
- ⁴⁵ Ajaye, 124.
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- ⁴⁹ Eugene Robinson (December 13, 2005) "Richard Pryor: Preacher of Truth", *Washington Post* [Online] Available at http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpdyn/content/article/2005/12/12/AR_2005121201252.html (accessed March 20, 2007).
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- ⁵⁷ Ibid., 119.

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⁷⁹ Ibid.
⁸⁰ Ibid., 176.
⁸¹ Double, 174
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⁹⁴ Ibid, 221.
⁹⁵ Ibid, 227.

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APPENDIX

“The Power of Unforgiveness”

Sermon Summary

I titled the first sermon, “The Power of Unforgiveness”. This sermon was based on Matthew 14: 21-35 a passage beginning with Jesus’ admonition to Peter to forgive “seventy-seven times” and including the parable of the unforgiving slave. In an effort to construe why someone who has experienced forgiveness would turn around and imprison someone else for a small debt, I introduced the congregation to “Unforgiveness Man”(UM). (I explained that Unforgiveness Woman is on another network.) Unforgiveness Man has special powers: a “Shield of Anger” to ward off potential doers of harm; a “Belt of Righteousness” to broadcast the message that he is in the right and pure and beyond all criticism; and a special “Web of Restraint” that kept a particular wrong-doer under UM’s judgment and connected to the bad deed. I mimed each of the powers as I described them. If UM forgives he gives up his powers. There is power in unforgiveness. If there was not any power or advantage to it then why is it so popular?

Then I explained the dark side to each of the super-powers. The shield of anger also wards off relationships and love. The belt of righteousness blinds us to our own faults and responsibilities. And the web works both ways giving the other person more power over us than we have over them—the power to make us happy or sad depending on their apology or punishment and the power to bind us to them or to our victim identity.

I proposed that we really torture ourselves in a prison of our own construction when we refuse to forgive. Then I briefly told the story of *Les Misérables*, how Lieutenant Javert was

tormented to death by his unforgiveness and how Jean Valjean was transformed by extravagant forgiveness from the Bishop of Digne.

Here is the reversal in the sermon. In the parable, the unforgiving servant is thrown into prison *until the debt is paid*. **Our debt** has already been paid by Jesus Christ. We have been transformed by God's extravagant forgiveness.

We are transformed from Unforgiveness Man into Forgiveness Man! Transformed from Unforgiveness Woman into Forgiveness Woman. Then I ripped off my dress shirt popping all the buttons revealing a large "F" taped onto my black t-shirt. Forgiveness Man is powerful enough to practice extravagant forgiveness—going beyond mere forgiveness to showing compassion—because God has shown us extravagant forgiveness. I listed Forgiveness Man's super powers and special accessories. More powerful than past failures and betrayals. Able to leap over bitterness with a leather-bound edition of the Bible. Belt of Truth. Breastplate of Righteousness (God's Righteousness so it's not so heavy). Shoes of the Gospel of peace. Shield of Faith. Helmet of Salvation. Sword of the word of God.

"Go my Superfriends and transform THE WORLD!"

Here are some of the written responses to this sermon:

1) What INSIGHT, IMAGE, or FEELING do you think you will remember from this sermon?

"Everyone has a Superhero in them." "The image of Unforgiveness Man. Someone I wouldn't want to become." "Being unforgiving is not powerful—it takes more courage to be forgiving." "Unforgiveness man is in a web, he is not truly free of his hurt." "The 'shield' of Unforgiveness man! (How we put this up to try to punish someone that has hurt us.)

Transformation to Forgiveness Man!" "Whoa!! Was this written just for me or what?!"

Sometimes it's so hard to let go and forgive even if it puts me 'In Prison'. Thanks for a new way to see how foolish stubborn unforgiveness hurts me too!" "Feel freedom when you forgive. 'Unforgiveness Man' will have heavy stress, will hurt until he forgives. Would help for the person to ask for forgiveness." "It's better to forgive and be happy. It's way harder to be angry than happy." "Unforgiveness is a defense mechanism against hurt." "You are so right about giving power to the other person. It also takes too much energy to be angry."

2) Was there anything in the sermon that motivates you to think *differently* about FORGIVENESS?? What and How So?

"I don't like the sermon! Hits home. I don't like sermons that talk about me!" "If you don't forgive, you put yourself in a 'prison' feeling angry. Jesus has forgiven us and set us free from sin! We need to follow his example." "To remember the forgiveness we have already received." "If you don't forgive, you are actually giving the person that has wronged us—way more power over us than we realize." "It really is hard work to not forgive. I need to remember Christ's blessings for me and try to remember how much better I'd feel to just forgive and remove this anger from my life. Love the 'F' T-Shirt. You also entertained us!" "Good reminder to truly forgive. No score keeping!!" "Life is too short not to forgive yourself and the person who hurt you." "How forgiveness allows us to open up the future for us and others to move forward in God's Righteousness."



Forgiveness Man—Sermon Feedback in Art
By Jake McLaughlin age 7
9/14/08