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The Use of Feedforwarding Techniques in Sermon-Crafting: A Collaborative Approach to Preaching

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The Use of Feedforwarding Techniques in Sermon-Crafting:
A Collaborative Approach to Preaching

A Dissertation Presented to the Faculty of
Harding School of Theology
Memphis, Tennessee

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Ministry

By
Stephen Rollins

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Table of Contents

Illustrations	iii
Acknowledgments	iv
Introduction	1
Chapter 1: A New Homiletical Orientation	12
Statement of the Problem	
My Purpose and Project	
Chapter 2: Theological Foundations	22
The Conversational God	
The Priesthood of All Believers	
The Interdependence of the Body	
Hospitality to Strangers	
An other-centric Orientation	
The Wisdom of a Listening Posture	
Chapter 3: The Sermon Café	45
The Who, the When, and the What	
Methodology	
Sermon Café 1 Summary	
Sermon Café 2 Summary	
Sermon Café 3 Summary	
Sermon Café 4 Summary	
Sermon Café 5 Summary	
Sermon Café 6 Summary	

The Collaborative Sermons	
Collaborative Sermon 1 and Goal Analysis	
Collaborative Sermon 2 and Goal Analysis	
Collaborative Sermon 3 and Goal Analysis	
Collaborative Sermon 4 and Goal Analysis	
Collaborative Sermon 5 and Goal Analysis	
Collaborative Sermon 6 and Goal Analysis	
Chapter 4: Assessing the Sermon Cafés	93
My Primary Purpose	
Assessing the Five Major Movements in My Project	
Secondary Lessons Learned	
Conclusion	111
Appendix 1: The Initial Invitation Letter	116
Appendix 2: The Preview Sheets	121
Bibliography	132

Illustrations

Figures

- | | | |
|----|---|-------|
| 1. | The Relational Love Triangle | 70 |
| 2. | Range of Vision Assessment: The Windshields | 95-99 |
| 3. | The Greatest Commandment Venn Diagram | 100 |

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INTRODUCTION

A Conception of the Problem

Is something wrong with preaching today? Answers could vary from “everything” to “nothing at all.” Some call contemporary preaching irrelevant and archaic. David Norrington sets out “. . . to show that the sermon delivered to Christians had only a small part to play in the life of the primitive church and that much contemporary practice not only lacks a biblical foundation but is injurious to the life of the Christian community.”¹ Scripture warrants the value and validity of preaching. “How then are they to call on Him in whom they have not believed? How are they to believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher?” (Rom. 10:14-15) and 2 Tim. 4:2 charges we “preach the word in season and out of season.”² There is nothing wrong with preaching! In fact, this is the wrong question. The better question is, “Can preaching improve in the 21st century?” Can preaching be done better? The statement Donald

¹ David C. Norrington, *To Preach or Not To Preach* (Omaha, NE: Ekklesia, 2012), loc. 91. Norrington’s arguments against modern preaching support a more contextual understanding of preaching. Just as modern preacher’s must be careful not to read our milieu onto biblical contexts, we must recognize that 21st century America is very different from circumstances of the 1st century and not be guilty of anachronistically projecting forward. See also David Allis, “The Problem With Preaching,” *A Better World*, September 2006, <https://abetter.world/the-problem-with-preaching/>; Mary A. Brown, “The Problem With Preaching,” *HuffPost Religion*, July 14, 2011, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/the-art-of-preaching-well_b_895658. I mention these because their resolution to the problem calls for a more collaborative approach that this dissertation will explore.

² A warrant for preaching exists throughout Scripture. Most importantly, it was at the heart of Jesus ministry (Matt. 4:17; 11:1, 15; Mark 1:14, 38-39; Luke 4:18, 43, 44; 7:22; 8:1; 16:16; 20:1) and which He extended to His apostles and followers (Matt. 10:7; Mark 3:14; 6:12; 16:15; Luke 9:6; Acts 5:42; 8:4, 12, 25, 35, 40; 10:36, 42; 11:20; 13:32; 14:7, 15, 21; 15:35; 16:10; 17:18; 20:25; 28:31).

Macleod attributes to Paul Althaus has often been true, “People today are not tired of preaching, but of our kind of preaching.”³

This is a contextual question (not an ontological one). It is a question of praxis. How can preachers best communicate the Word of God in the time and place in which they live? It is a historical question. Preaching has a history of development, and its styles are not static but have changed and adapted throughout Christian history. I preach in a time of epistemological change, an adaptive shift in the way people hear, learn, and know things; an age commonly called postmodernism.⁴ It is not the scope of my project or dissertation to identify and define postmodernism, but those attentive to the times easily recognize that 21st century Western culture is not the same as its 20th century version. Younger generations do not hear preaching the same way their forefathers did. This shift forces us to ask the question, “Is there a better approach to preaching the Gospel to generations steeped in postmodernism?” A growing number of homileticians are saying that collaboration provides this vehicle.

A Review of the Literature on the Use of Collaboration in Homiletics

In the last century the history of preaching shifted from a deductive scholastic style (a form consisting of a premise, three points well supported and illustrated, and a conclusion) to an inductive narrative style of preaching (a form called The New Homiletic). Collaborative preaching is a natural development along this continuum of

³ Donald Macleod, *The Problem of Preaching* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 11.

⁴ Many books defining and describing postmodernism exist. Stanley Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996); Paul Lakeland, *Postmodernity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997); James K. A. Smith, *Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism?* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006).

contextual change and historical development. While there are strong theological foundations for collaborative forms of preaching, integrity demands recognizing the effect of the prevailing winds of postmodernism in the emergence of this newest approach to homiletics. Collaborative preaching is an adaptive homiletical evolution in response to postmodernism. It is not getting better at crafting old forms, but a shift into new way of listening and learning.⁵ David Lose senses this change when he wonders, “But what if preaching does not need to be revised or re-imagined but rather redefined?”⁶

John S. McClure has been the leading voice for this style of sermon-crafting.⁷ In his book, *The Roundtable Pulpit*, McClure gives a simple “how-to” approach that is user-friendly for all who would like to give it a try.⁸ In a more recent work, McClure has gone deeper into the concepts of Jürgen Habermas (a praxis-epistemology of active communication and discourse in the public sphere; the lifeworld) and Emmanuel Levinas’ use of proximity (face-to-face interaction) which lie at McClure’s “others-

⁵ Gil Rendle, *Quietly Courageous* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc., 2019), 25-29.

⁶ David J. Lose, “Preaching as Conversation,” in *Under the Oak Tree: The Church as Community of Conversation in a Conflicted and Pluralistic World*, eds. Ronald J. Allen, John S. McClure, and O. Wesley Allen Jr. (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2013), 85. He quotes Doug Pagitt’s introspective conclusion, “There was a time when I felt my ability to deliver sermons was ahigh calling that I sought to refine but didn’t’ need to redefine. Those days are gone. Now I find myself regularly redefining my role and the role of preaching.” Doug Pagitt, *Preaching in the Inventive Age* (Minneapolis: Sparkhouse, 2011), 9.

⁷ In this paper I will use the term “sermon-crafting” to refer to the two-step process of preparing and delivering the sermon. Preparing involves study, reflection, and writing. Delivery includes all that is involved with the preaching the sermon. Collaboration affects both aspects of preaching.

⁸ John S. McClure, *The Roundtable Pulpit: Where Leadership & Preaching Meet* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995); John S. McClure, “Collaborative Preaching from the Margins,” *Journal for Preachers* 19, no. 4 (Pentecost 1996); John S. McClure, “Preaching Theology,” *Quarterly Review* 24, no. 3 (Fall 2004): 258.

centric” approach to the crafting sermons.⁹ His emphasis on hearing and integrating the voices of “others” out of a face-to-face encounter is crucial to the success of collaborative models. McClure envisions a situation where . . .

Instead of sitting alone in the pastor study, laboring in relative isolation amid a stack of commentaries, lectionary helps, and Internet resources, preachers will walk out of the pastors study, taking the process of biblical interpretation of theological brainstorming for preaching into the public realm . . . Another option is for the preacher to create a weekly sermon-related discussion group (roundtable) in which diverse folk from within and beyond one’s congregation engage with the preacher in biblical-theological reflection on both text and life.¹⁰

McClure’s voice is not the first. Browne Barr, at the 1963 Lyman Beecher Lectures, said he was “experimenting with what he called a ‘sermon seminar’” designed to make preaching a function of the entire church and not “simply the words of one man.”¹¹ Dietrich Ritschl also calls for the preacher to come out of the isolation of his study.

If the whole Church participates in the ministry of Christ, and if it is therefore the whole Church that has the office of proclamation, then it must very definitely be said that the preacher cannot be left alone with his sermon preparation. He can only preach after having heard the Word, but

⁹ John S. McClure, *Other-wise Preaching: a postmodern ethic for homiletics* (St. Louis: Chalice Press (2001). For a summation of Habermas’ influence, 99-109. For a summation of Levinas’ contribution, 61-63, 119-124. McClure defines his ethical approach this way, “Other-wise homiletics is a homiletics that is, in every aspect, other-inspired and other-directed. It is homiletics that strives to become wise about other human beings—to gain wisdom about and from others for preaching. At the same time, it is homiletics that, because of its orientation toward the stranger, becomes patently other- wise than homiletics itself, that is, it seeks to place the totality of homiletics under deconstructive erasure so that preaching might be transformed by a profound awareness of the proximity of preaching’s others.” (xi) This is not a reading for the faint of heart, but is a must read if you want to understand the conceptual philosophy of McClure’s collaborative method.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 146.

¹¹ Browne Barr, *Parish Back Talk* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1964), 74-88.

he cannot hear the Word when he is alone and isolated from his people in the study.¹²

Collaboration breaks the preacher out of the isolation Bernard Swain calls “sovereign” preaching and into the fellowship of an interdependent community.¹³

Most ministers bring a minimal sense of collaboration to their monological sermon-crafting, subconsciously aware of the congregation and, to a lesser degree, the cultural context along with the biblical text. As Thomas Long observes, “When preachers go to the scripture, then, they must take the people with them, since what will be heard there is a word for them.”¹⁴ He continues, “We must self-consciously embody the needs and situations of others, especially those who are different from ourselves . . . When preachers turn to the scripture, all these people go with them.”¹⁵ Reuel Howe called this separation of the world of the preacher and the world of the congregation as a crisis in preaching which can only be bridged through collaborative communication.¹⁶ My

¹² Dietrich Ritschl, *A Theology of Proclamation* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1963), 124. Ronald J. Allen, “The Turn to the Listener: A Select Review of A Recent Trend In Preaching.” *Encounter* 64, no. 2, (2003): 170. “While Ritschl stops short of describing a group within the congregation who meet with the congregation to prepare the sermon on a weekly basis, Ritschl does emphasize that the congregation should help the preacher select the biblical text for the sermon and implies that members of the congregation should ‘study the sermon text with their minister.’”

¹³ Bernard Swain, *Liberating Leadership: Practical Styles for Pastoral Ministry* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986), 40.

¹⁴ Thomas Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 2nd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005) , 64. See also Lose, 74.

¹⁵ Long, 64.

¹⁶ Reuel L. Howe, *Partners in Preaching: Clergy and Laity in Dialogue* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1967), 5. He believes “The weakness of preaching stems from its wordiness and monological character.” While collaborative models do not solve the first issue, it seeks to remedy the second. Howe calls for a . . . cooperation between the pulpit and the pew,” (19). He

purpose in referencing these older sources is not to be archaic, but to demonstrate that the call for collaboration is not a 21st century fad, but one with deep historical roots dating back more than half a century.

Lucy Atkinson Rose uses roundtable imagery to advocate a conversational understanding of the preaching event.¹⁷ Ronald Allen and O. Wesley Allen use collaborative communicative theory to generate an approach to preaching better fitting a postmodern world they call “postapologetic preaching.”¹⁸ Leah Schade, using McClure’s foundational work and concepts, carves out a communal and dialogical liminal space for preaching to navigate the turbulent waters of political and social issues she calls “The Purple Zone.”

In my proposal, preaching’s goal is to gather the community of faith around the Word where the central conversations of the church are refocused and fostered. In conversational preaching, the preacher and the congregation are colleagues, exploring together the mystery of the Word for their own lives, as well as the life of the congregation, the larger church, and the world. The preacher and the congregation gather symbolically at a round-table without head or foot, where labels like

advocates that they “participate as partners” (47). He offers a bare-bones approach to dialogical preaching in chapter 10. McClure’s model is better laid out and more user-friendly.

¹⁷ Lucy Atkinson Rose, *Sharing the Word: Preaching the Roundtable Church* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 4.

¹⁸ Ronald J. Allen, O. Wesley Allen, Jr., *The Sermon Without End: A Conversational Approach to Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2015). The Allen’s are upfront and honest in defining their collaborative approach in the spirit of reaching a postmodern world, “Postapologetics is a theological/homiletical approach that brings Christian faith and postmodern pluralism into *reciprocal conversation* in order that both might be commended to the other and each might critique the other by mutually engaging their categories of and sources for making meaning, practices and experience, and ethical values.” (80, *emphasis mine*); Ronald Allen, “The Church as Community of Conversation” in *Under the Oak Tree*, eds. Ronald J. Allen, John S. McClure, and O. Wesley Allen Jr. (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2013), 3-24. Allen refers to this as “*mutual critical correlation*.”; for more on conversational preaching see O. Wesley Allen Jr., *The Homiletic of All Believers: A Conversational Approach* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005).

clergy and laity disappear and where believing or wanting to believe is all that matters.¹⁹

Emerging from the New Homiletic, dialogical styles of preaching are the current step in the development of the homiletical tradition.²⁰ Collaborative styles of preaching (regardless of what they are called) are hybrid approaches to sermon-crafting combining postmodern collaborative communication theory with the ancient ministry of preaching.

While there is much to learn in this approach to sermon-crafting there are also dangers, in particular the loss of both the voice of the preacher and of the objective, universal, and absolute truth of Scripture. Long recognizes the helpfulness of McClure's, Swain's and Rose's concern that preaching has become too authoritarian and hierarchical, but he is concerned that such conversational, collaborative, and communal models will result in the church hearing its own voice rather than Christ's.²¹ His concern is legitimate, but the two styles, sovereign and collaborative, are not mutually exclusive. A preacher can approach sermon-crafting from the solitude of his own soul and study, retain a spirit of humility and not be consumed by power and prestige. I have preached this way for nearly forty years and grown in my humility toward both the Word of God and the church. Yet, the few glaring mistakes I have made in the pulpit could have been avoided had I been in conversation with others. Likewise, collaborative sermon-crafters can

¹⁹ Leah D. Schade, *The Purple Zone* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 119-121, 124-127. Summarizing McClure's book *The Roundtable Pulpit* she says, "A central question in the book is how principles and practices of truly perceptive dialogue can be incorporated into preaching, given that sermons are essentially monological. His answer is to use a collaborative method as an alternative to 'sovereign' clergy-centered style or the inductive approach." (121).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 53-54. Schade gives an excellent brief synopsis of this historical development.

²¹ Long, 34-5.

interact with the voices of others and still think more highly of themselves than they ought or lose themselves altogether. Collaboration is a tool; it is the person using it that matters. A proud and controlling person will preach out of hierarchical authoritarianism regardless of the style. As I will show later, taking the role of a host in the collaborative process does not mean the loss of the preacher's gifts or his stewardship and accountability before God (2 Tim. 4:1). A preacher must not abdicate or erase his responsibility and accountability to God. The tension Long raises must be given serious consideration, but it must not discredit the communal and mutual value collaboration offers.

Theology

Collaboration is more than a trendy conceptual accommodation to postmodernism. It has solid theological roots emerging first and foremost out of the conversational nature of God, Himself. It also is a helpful, practical use of the priesthood of all believers and the communal interdependence emerging from the unique giftedness of each child of God. It is a powerful, if not surprising use, of the gracious ethos of hospitality to strangers. This quality of God's leaders, so often overlooked in modern times, is at the core of collaborative sermon-crafting.

Collaboration also aligns with the "one another" theology of the New Testament; love one another (John 13:34), serve one another (Gal. 5:13), accept (welcome, embrace) one another (Rom. 15:7), give preference to one another (Rom. 12:10), even don't bite and devour one another (Gal. 5:13). Along with the theological principle of the interdependence of the Body of Christ, collaboration makes space for the faithful witness of others in conjunction with the preacher's own testimony (the preacher's voice is not

lost in collaboration but enhanced and enriched by the testimony of others). Collaboration is a biblical posture of listening to the other, a pillar of wise posture (Jam. 1:19).

Methodology

There are various models of collaborative styles available for use by homileticians, some simple and others more complex. They can range from private conversations about upcoming sermons to large group conventions. One collaborative skill is feedforwarding. It is precisely the opposite of feedback. Rather than getting information after the sermon has been preached critiquing how it went with a view to doing it better next time, feedforwarding gathers the insights of others before the sermon is preached to include the voices and experiences of others. I chose to use this feedforwarding technique in conjunction with the hospitable milieu of The World Café platform, which promotes mutual and meaningful conversations. My goal is to see if feedforwarding enlarges the range of view in my sermon-crafting.²²

The preacher is the host in these gatherings instead of the expert. McClure sets collaborative and conversational approaches as fellowship within a host-guest rhythm.²³

Feedforwarding practices hospitality in two ways. First, by inviting church members into

²² Juanita Brown, *The World Café* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2005). The conversational platform The World Café is built on is the embodiment of the spirit of collaboration; appreciative inquiry, collective intelligence, actionable knowledge, mutuality and community (1-11).

²³ McClure (2013), 34. “For the Christian minister, conversation becomes a form of hospitality. Hospitality to strangers or those who are different from us is rooted in a biblical tradition that instructs members of the community of faith regarding the redemptive rhythm that can exist between welcoming hosts and responsive guests.”; *see also* McClure (1995), 25-29. Parker Palmer, *The Company of Strangers* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1990), 65 says, “When we live on the edge, or take the view of those who do, we can more clearly see our own world and what the Lord requires.”

the work of sermon-crafting, a ministry that in praxis they have been excluded from (preaching is a highly exclusive ministry) and, thus, are strangers toward. Second, in reaching out to the edges or the margins of the congregation, to diverse voices not usually heard, collaboration listens attentively to views different from my own.

Limitations and Delimitations

Choosing to use my congregation as the pool for my guests at the table limits the diversity and width of my margins. I preach for a very small congregation with a high degree of homogeneity. Still, there are differences between us. This limitation does not, and did not, invalidate my project. It simply sets parameters on the band width of increasing my worldview.

Collaboration dives deeply into postmodern deconstruction and erasure. McClure embraces the validity of erasure and deconstructionism but warns about the danger of nihilism.²⁴ Rose, though, straightforwardly calls for “a moratorium on the word *truth*.”²⁵ I do not support a postmodern ideology that deconstructs to the point that there is no absolute truth. This takes deconstruction, erasure, and pluralism a step too far.²⁶ McClure

²⁴ McClure (2001), 5-7. “I will argue, however, that because preaching is so deeply a part of the Judeo-Christian tradition, its deconstruction cannot ultimately be inspired by nihilism, spiritualism or the expressive disaster of religious speech. Instead, the deconstruction of preaching in these pages will be motivated and sustained by an *ethical* concern to reorient preaching toward the ‘other,’ to situate preaching as a radical act of compassionate responsibility.” He adds to this later saying, “We might say that homiletic counter-memory is a prolonged moment of erasure, when preachers allow their own well-formed memory, and the memories of their hearers, to dissolve into *proximity* to others, present and past, whose bodies begin to signify things unremembered.” (43).

²⁵ Rose, 104.

²⁶ Allen (2015), 84-88. They argue that the collaborative method they propose, postapologetic preaching, avoids these pitfalls of deconstruction and erasure by emphasizing a mode of communication that commends and critiques the other.

advocates for a “plurivocal” response to the univocal, sovereign, monologue posture most preachers assume.²⁷ Allen offers a useful caution, “. . . others do not always open windows on God’s presence and purposes. Others are also limited.”²⁸ The preacher must be careful the sermon does not simply become the voice of pluralism (postmodern “ear-tickling; 1 Tim. 4:3-4). If most of the voices on the margins are progressive and liberal voices then reaching out to the fringe could lead to a loss of conservative, traditional, and orthodox voices. This is unhealthy for the church. Collaborative sermon-crafting methods must hold in place the tension between open and critical listening without collapsing to the polarity of fringes and margins (liberal or conservative, objective or subjective, absolute or diverse).

In the Western world the way of knowing has changed and no number of technical solutions, no matter how skillfully implemented, will resolve, or reverse it. Preachers need to face this head on and adapt. Railing against it or pretending it will go away will not help. Postmodernism is here. Collaboration offers a way forward to meet this challenge. This is being recognized by companies, institutions, organizations, and ministries. In the next chapter, I will highlight the problem from my own forty years of experience and introduce a collaborative way to embrace this challenge enabling preachers to continue effectively interpreting the eternal message of God in the 21st century.

²⁷ John S. McClure, “The Minister as Conversation Partner,” in *Under the Oak Tree*, eds. Ronald J. Allen, John S. McClure, and O. Wesley Allen Jr. (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2013), 35-6.

²⁸ Allen (2013), 11. Allen also warns of the dangers of making God in our image, self-serving intentions, and causing anxiety and uncertainty (21-22).

Chapter 1: A New Homiletical Orientation

Statement of the Problem

During the past forty years, my preaching orientation has been a sovereign approach to the biblical text and the congregation. A sovereign preaching style localizes every component of sermon-crafting (choice of text or topic, exegesis, form, structure, illustrating, applying, and delivery) in the sole perspective and skill of the individual preacher (the professional, the expert). Even under the best conditions every sermon crafted by a sovereign preacher is limited by a silo effect and an assumed connection with the congregation and culture.¹ Lose calls this a “performative” model of preaching in which the preacher has a monopoly on speaking, is the sole interpreter of biblical witness, the only one charged with making connections between faith and life, and the lone witness authorized to share his or her faith publicly.²

I view sermon-crafting as performance. The compliment, ‘Good sermon,’ is supposed to express this was done well, but I dislike the comment and do not find it useful. Instead, I want to hear what the sermon means in your life. How does it affect your growth in the Lord? I want comments that show people hear the biblical text in an

¹ Phil S. Ensor, “The Functional Silo Syndrome,” *Target* (1998), 16. https://www.ame.org/sites/default/files/target_articles/88q1a3.pdf. Under the heading “Indicators of the Functional Silo Syndrome, especially points, 1, 2, & 5; a top-down, authoritarian, controlling paradigm. The church is rife with abuses from the pulpit of this syndrome. My own worst gaffe in the pulpit, which should have cost me my job, stemmed from this silo orientation.

² David J. Lose, “Preaching as Conversation,” in *Under the Oak Tree: The Church as Community of Conversation in a Conflicted and Pluralistic World*, eds. Ronald J. Allen, John S. McClure, and O. Wesley Allen Jr. (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2013), 86.

interactive way, a way that speaks to their daily lives (this after all, is what the Word of God is, “living and active,” Heb. 4:12). The sermon affects me more profoundly than them. Perhaps this is because the sermon is constructed and performed “as I see it;” exclusive, without community and the benefit of others. The problem is my sight is limited.

I was trained to prepare sermons in isolation rather than community.³ Barr and Ritschl (among others) are correct when they note this is a heavy burden. I take hope that Jeremiah, even when working with inspired speech, also felt burdened by it (Jer. 20:7-18). Even Jesus had to admonish people to “have ears to hear” (Mark 4:9, 23; Luke 8:8; 14:35) and he was the living, breathing embodiment of the Word (John 1:14). Can collaboration ease that burden?

The purpose of my project was to use feedforwarding techniques to craft a series of sermons with a view to increasing my personal range of vision. Feedback is a helpful critical tool but Daniel Overdorf provocatively wonders, “If only we could talk with our listeners before the sermon . . .”⁴ Or as Lose asks, “What if the sermon not only preached the *content* of the biblical narrative as a source of identity but also promoted lively *interaction* with that story so one might gain practice in living out of that identity?”⁵

³ Ibid., 88, says “. . . performative preaching represents the monologue sermon that has dominated the imagination of preacher over the centuries.”

⁴ I first read about feedforwarding in Daniel Overdorf, *One Year To Better Preaching: 52 Exercises to Hone Your Skills* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2013), 101-105. See also Shauna K. Hannan, “Pass the Mic: Expanding Pulpit Privilege” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 47 no. 3, (July 2020); Peter Mead, “Pre-Sermon Review: S Strange Idea? *Biblical Preaching*, June 28, 2010, <https://biblicalpreaching.net/?s=Pre-sermon+Review>; Shauna Hannan, “That All Might Proclaim: Continuing Luther’s Legacy of Access,” *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 56, no, 2, (June 2017): 172-173.

⁵ Lose, 88.

Feedforwarding invites people to interact in the sermon-crafting process before a title or outline has been written. Allen describes it this way,

The pastor brings members of the congregation into the process of preparing the sermon to see how they perceive the text or topic of the upcoming sermon. The pastor then incorporates their insights, questions, fears, and hopes into the sermon.⁶

My feedforwarding technique welcomes the perspectives of others into discerning the meaning of the text and its application in our lives with the primary goal of widening my range of view. They are co-creators with me, combining my expertise with their unique perspectives to produce a fuller understanding of God's will in our lives than the one I can supply on my own. I am asking them to share the preaching burden with me. I am sharing the ministry of the word with them.

I needed a platform to promote these conversations, so I turned to Juanita Brown's description of The World Café as "shaping our futures through conversations that matter."⁷ This is done by creating hospitable settings and activities promoting face-to-face interactions. Many of McClure's roundtable principles are elaborated by Brown's community including the value of conversation, diversity of participants, invitation, creating an hospitable space, asking questions that matter, getting everyone's contribution, cross-pollinating, the art of hosting, collective intelligence, and a culture of dialogue. As Brown says, "It is the story of the discovery and evolution of the World Café, a simple yet powerful conversational process for fostering constructive dialogue,

⁶ Ronald J. Allen, "The Turn to the Listener: A Select Review of A Recent Trend In Preaching," *Encounter* 64, no. 2, (2003): 170.

⁷ Brown, front cover and title page. Brown acknowledges her authorship is with the World Café Community. She teaches the principles of the Word Café through real-life examples of completed cafés.

accessing collective intelligence, and creating innovative possibilities for action”⁸

These were the dynamics I was looking for in my project. *The World Café* gave me a practical way to host and convene feedforwarding dialogue and conversations.

It is not difficult for a preacher cloistered in his study to put together a sermon that makes sense to him. The more difficult task is bridging the gap from speakers to listeners, listeners who approach hearing from varying and differing contexts, postures, and life situations. It is only now, in my senior years of preaching, that I have grown aware that my perspective is a limited one not everyone shares. As Allen notes of people universally, “Our interpretative lenses are shaped by a multitude of interacting factors”⁹ My own factors are a Caucasian, senior-citizen, middle-class, college-educated male from the Northeastern part of the United States of America (New England), whose only religious experiences are among churches of Christ. This is a valid and genuine point of view, which must not be discarded, but it is not the only legitimate and valid one. It has strengths and weaknesses and advantages and disadvantages. It is incumbent on me to seek to widen and enrich this point of view rather than project it narrowly onto others.

Collaborative styles of communication offer potential for increased active participation in the communication process. Ernest Stringer observed classrooms where students spent most of their time “passively watching or listening.”¹⁰ Congregations are

⁸ Ibid., 3.

⁹ Ronald Allen, “The Church as Community of Conversation” in *Under the Oak Tree*, eds. Ronald J. Allen, John S. McClure, and O. Wesley Allen Jr. (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2013), 10.

¹⁰ Ernest Stringer, *Action Research* (Thousand Oaks, CA; SAGE Publications, Inc, 1999), 188. “That experience changed my perception of classroom life quite fundamentally, so that I am now much more sensitive to the passivity that is a pervasive feature of school life and to the need to engage students constantly in active learning processes.”; *Ritschl* believes a congregation is

filled with passive listeners rather than active learners. “Our hearers have traditionally been just that—*hearers* used to being more like an ‘audience’ at a musical performance than ‘participants’ in an ongoing drama.”¹¹ Stringer asserts,

Collaborative processes not only generate a sense of purpose and energy but also provide a means for accomplishments of goals and solutions of problems and produce conditions that enhance personal, social, and professional lives.¹²

Worship services differ from school classrooms, but disciples are students and there is a sleepy dose of passivity when congregants listen to sermons. A collaborative approach to sermon-making hopefully decreases passivity and enhances active congregational interest and investment, thus increasing my range of view (and theirs). The more actively they are involved the wider my range of view grows. Parker Palmer says collaboration generates a public space for the sermon to be examined and discussed where “. . . we learn the skills of collective action, skills of leadership and decision-making and creative resolution of conflict.”¹³

Are there ways to bridge this passive gap between the preacher and the congregation? In an epistemological sense, this gap is already closing. Access to the internet makes a wide range of knowledge more accessible today. With technical devices in hand, students in classes and church members in pews use apps like BibleGateway and, in moments, tell the teacher what the Hebrew or Greek word used in the passage

“actually disobedient” if it allows its minister and congregation to suffer in passivity and silence, 124.

¹¹ Lose, 91.

¹² *Ibid.*, 189.

¹³ Parker J. Palmer, *The Company of Strangers* (New York: The Crossroads Publishing Company, 1990), 45-6.

under discussion means. Websites provide encyclopedic information on people and places. Thanks to Google and other search engines, anyone can access commentaries, articles, and a gaggle of blogs. Preachers can be fact-checked at the push of a button. Secular research such as government reports, professional articles from doctors, lawyers, sociologists, psychologists, educators, and cultural surveys may challenge or contradict the preacher's point of view. This accessibility to knowledge closes the gap between the expert and the layman.

Not all this information is sound, and few people scroll past the first three of four sources that a search divulges. The internet is not gospel but rarely do people critique the sources that pops up. There is danger in acquiring knowledge this way. Still, one of the blessings of graduate school, was opening access to databases of knowledge previously inaccessible to me, whether by ignorance of their existence or lack of credentials or funds to access them. The Internet provides a breakout of knowledge unknown to previous generations. The level of your audience's knowledge has increased. The preacher no longer corners the market of religious and biblical studies.

Can intentionally engaging other voices in the sermon-crafting process narrow this gap between speaker and listener better than random Internet searches and post-event feedback evaluations? Will inviting and incorporating others into preparing the sermon broaden my margins and increase my range of view, thereby reducing the gap and making my sermon more widely intelligible? Will moving closer to my listeners make me more aware, attentive, and sensitive to alternative ways of hearing and applying the message of Jesus? Will seeing Scripture through the experiences of others give me a fuller view of potential ways the Word interacts with others? Has the cultural shift of

postmodernism opened the way for collaboration to offer a richer diversity of living resources for preachers in the sermon-crafting process? Increasing my range of vision will improve my ability speak to the contemporary needs of the others listening to me.

My Ministry Context

I have preached among churches of Christ for nearly forty years as the solo paid staff; a very solitary posture. I have preached in rural, small city, and suburban churches. At present, I am in my twenty-first year with the congregation in Leesburg, Virginia. I have worn many hats in each place, but preaching is my passion and my priority. Proclamation and pastoral gifts are my strengths. I presently serve with one other elder and four deacons in a small single cell, family style congregation. The leadership is mature and interacts collaboratively with a high degree of mutual submission. Shepherding encourages collaborative pastoral skills, but my main mode of operation for preaching is a lone wolf, lending itself to the silo syndrome described earlier.

The congregation has always been small but has presently dipped below fifty in weekly attendance. An ebb and flow of attendance has characterized the history of this congregation since its planting in the 1970's. In contrast, Loudoun County has experienced a population boom and, with it, an upsurge in economic wealth. Northern Virginia is a transitive and diverse community. Yet the Leesburg congregation is highly homogeneous: eighty-eight percent white, ninety-five percent middle-class, ninety percent college educated (mainly professional workers with incomes above the poverty line), and twelve percent retired. Fifteen percent are under forty years of age, ten percent over seventy years of age, and seventy-five percent between forty and sixty-nine years of age. The congregation's membership is forty-eight percent female and fifty-two percent

male. We do not own a facility, giving an impression of impermanence in our high-tech, high-powered community.

The congregation is in a time of disorientation. There is a need for reorientation: a renewal of hope and empowerment. I believe the pulpit can be a key element in this rejuvenation. Sermon-crafting is an invigorating experience for me, and I pray it is for those listening. Studying a text, thinking about its meaning and effect, crafting the movement and flow of the sermon, and applying and illustrating key points enriches the dynamic of God's word for me. Learning from others' experience with Scripture and living by faith will hopefully further boost this dynamic for me and open new doors for others to experience the same kind of spiritual zeal.

My Project and Purpose

My project is to invite a diverse subsection of the congregation to converse with me in a feedforwarding exercise aimed at preparing six collaborative sermons. This was an unusual request for me to make among the congregation, but the longevity of my faithfulness both to preaching and to this congregation accrued the respect and integrity necessary to implement this adaptive move. This number of sermons provides an initial experience large enough and brief enough to handle in our first attempt at collaborative sermon-crafting. The purpose of my project is to broaden my worldview through thickening my relationship within the diversity of the congregation.¹⁴ By inviting the

¹⁴ John S. McClure, Ronald J. Allen, Dale P. Andrews, L. Susan Bond, Dan P. Mosely, and G. Lee Ramsey, Jr., *Listening to Listeners: Homiletical Case Studies* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2004), 1. "Few pastors have a 'thick understanding' of how people are actually affected by preaching or the role the sermon plays in the community." The authors ". . . offer some approaches that may help you think through ways to move towards a thicker understanding of your listening community and to name and think critically about how preaching functions in your context." (2). One recommended method is that "some preachers organize 'feed-forward' groups

other (the stranger) into the sermon-crafting process, I hope to be able to see more “in the round”, acquire a more panoramic view of the text and its meaning in the lives of people.¹⁵ Through this interaction, we will work to become co-creators in the sermon-crafting process from beginning to end.

Will feedforwarding impact a sense of investment in the sermon? Will those involved have a sense of it being "our sermon?" I commonly say to the people listening to my sermon that I have lived with it much longer than the thirty minutes they have invested in listening to it. My investment in preparing it is always more than their listening to it. I know this is secondary to my focus, but I wonder if feedforwarding will convey the same sense for my co-contributors.

Bridging the gap between preacher and congregation, text and community is a difficult task. It always has been. Every age and generation present its own obstacles and challenges. Our time is no different. Homiletical styles are always adapting to these cultural settings. Preachers need to use all the style and skills available to communicate in a way that is clearly heard by their audience. Collaborative methods and styles of preaching are worth considering with respect to the effects of postmodern thinking on our current culture in the America (and the West), but this is not the only reason for using them. Better reasons arising out of the theology of Scripture require us to look deeply into

of laypeople in the congregation to help prepare sermons that intersect with the actual experience of the congregation.” (5). They call upon the need for preachers to have an “unusual depth of awareness of the congregational culture. . .” (6), which is later referred to as “a thick description of a congregation,” (150). I want to thicken my perspective in this sermon series.

¹⁵ Palmer, 58-9. “This function of the stranger in our lives is grounded in simple fact: truth is a very large matter, and requires various angles of vision to be seen in the round. It is not that our view is always wrong and the stranger’s always right, but simply that the stranger’s view is different, giving us the opportunity to look anew upon familiar things.”

the face of the other and find ways to build a stronger bridge from the office to the pew and then out in the world. Collaborative preaching may be contextual, but it is not unbiblical. In chapter two, I will trace theological principles, rooted deeply in Scripture and the will of God, that requires preachers to consider the benefit and value of collaborative approaches to sermon-crafting.

Chapter 2: Theological Foundations

Having traced the historical and conceptual need for collaborative styles in homiletics, the strength of this preaching movement resides in the theological pillars supporting it. Without this there is no substantial reason to pursue it. Collaboration has deep spiritual roots lying buried in human spiritual resources which often sit untapped in traditional churches whose preaching styles were formulated by modernity. Justification for using collaborative methods in sermon-crafting are found in the conversational nature of God, the priesthood of all believers, the interdependent multivalent giftedness of the Body of Christ and the power of communal witness and testimony found there, the virtue of hospitality, the value of others, and a wise listening posture.

The Conversational God

All good theology, by definition, begins with God, and Yahweh is a conversationalist. Brueggemann contends God is a dialogical partner.¹ Take for instance, the text from which we learn God's name. It is part of a lengthy conversation between God and Moses at the theophany of the burning bush that spans four chapters (Exod. 3:1-7:7). The preacher in Hebrews introduces us to God as the one who “. . . spoke long ago to the fathers in many portions and in many ways (Heb. 1:1).” God spoke creation into existence (Gen. 1; Heb. 11:3). The Incarnation is “The Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us. . . (John 1:14).” He is the embodiment of conversation and dialogue.

¹ Walter Brueggemann, “The Irreducibly, Inscrutably Relational God”” *2015 Fuller Forum* Fuller Seminary, July 16, 2020, video of lecture, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mrlVs58s5nk>, 1:09.

When God strolled through the Garden of Eden seeking and calling of His children there was a conversational air to it, sadly it became an unpleasant one (Genesis 3). God spoke to Abraham on many occasions, but most notably when He pondered making Abraham a conversation partner over the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah and then did so, bartering back and forth with him for its salvation (Genesis 18).

There are the face-to-face meetings (essential to Levinas' and McClure's collaborative ideology) between Moses and Yahweh on Mt. Sinai. They were so interactive and personal that Moses' face shone brilliantly with the afterglow of God's glory, so brilliantly that he wore a veil to interact with the Israelites (Exod., 19-20, 24; 32-34). Amid Exod. 32-34, Moses intercedes on behalf of the people arguing against God's wrath. Brueggemann says fidelity (which is comprised of justice, lovingkindness, faithfulness, mercy, and righteousness) "requires face-to-face addresses."² Preachers who yearn for fidelity in their sermon-crafting and delivery can enhance it as they come into contact not only with Scripture but face-to-face with the congregational members among whom they preach.

Yahweh calls out in the night by name for the young boy Samuel until finally Eli gives him the proper response, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening (1 Sam. 3:9-10)." Feedforwarding says, "Speak, friends, for you servant is listening." Jacob wrestles with God both physically and dialogically and will not relent until he is blessed (Gen. 32:24-32). God dialogues with the prophet Elijah's depression on the Mount of Horeb (1 Kings 19:9-18). In 2 Kings 6:17 Elisha prays asking for God to open the eyes of his servant to see that they are not alone. All of prayer is built upon the reality of God

² Ibid., 16:23.

communicating with us, of His listening and responding (1 John 5:14-15). Our faith is in a conversational God.

The messages of the prophets incorporate dialogical forms, “Have you not known? Have you not heard? (Isa. 40:28)”, “To whom will you liken me? (Isa. 40:18: 46:5)”, or “Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord... (Isa. 1:18)”. Most of Malachi’s prophetic message is set in the context of a dialogue, “‘I have loved you’ says the Lord. But you say, ‘How have you loved us?’” (Mal. 1:1-3:5).

Jesus is the full embodiment of Divinity (Col. 1:19). Therefore, we should expect a conversational quality in Jesus’ teaching and interaction with others and, indeed, we find it. At twelve years old, Jesus was asking and answering (dialoguing) at levels above His age (Luke 2:46-47). A look through the Gospel of Matthew shows conversation and dialogue were a mainstay of His ministry. His baptism and the Mount of Transfiguration contain divine and human dialogue (Matt. 3:13-17; 17:1-13).

While scanning through the Gospel of Matthew it is amazing to see the running theme of conversation. Many of His healings include substantial dialogue (Matt. 8:1-4, 5-13; 9:1-8, 18-31; 21:9-14; 15:21-28; 17:14-23; 20:29-34). Teaching moments emerge out of conversations and dialogues either initiated by Him or others.³ Most of Matthew 22 builds upon a series of dialogues beginning with a question about taxes, then the resurrection, then the greatest commandment, and ends with Jesus querying the religious leaders about the origin of the Son of Man (which baffled them so much that no one dared ask him another question). He was an expert conversationalist. The personal

³ For examples see Matt. 9:14-17; 11:1-6, 7-9; 12:1-8, 38-42, 46-49; 15:1-11, 12-14; 17:1-13, 24-27; 18:21-35; 19:1-9, 16-26, 27-30; 21:14-17, 20-22; 21:1-3, 23-27.

revealing of Himself as God's Son occurs during a conversation when He asked the disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" and "Who do you say that I am?" (Matt. 16:13-20). Matthew 18 begins with the question, "Who then is the greatest in the kingdom of Heaven?" His parables invite questions and dialogue (Matt. 13:10-17, 18-23, 36-43; 15:15-20). The miraculous feedings of the 5,000 and 4,000 emerge out of conversations with the disciples about who is going to feed the people. The final Passover (Matt. 26:20-35), the Garden of Gethsemane (Matt. 26:36-46), His arrest (Matt. 26:47-56), His trial before Caiaphas (Matt. 26:57-67), and His examination by Pilate (Matt. 27:11-26) all contain powerful conversations, conversations that matter (He even uses restraint of conversation in his trial before Caiaphas and Pilate to drive the narrative forward).

Bringing the other Gospel witnesses into this discussion only adds to the important role of conversation in bringing people to faith. Jesus has a lengthy conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4—a conversation which she, herself, is incredulous is happening), Dialogue plays an important role in the narrative of the healing of the blind man (John 9) and the raising of Lazarus (John 11). John 3 is built on a late-night conversation with Nicodemus (from which one of the best-known verses in Scripture emerges—John 3:16). Jesus' first sign, the miracle at Cana changing water into wine, occurs because of a conversation initiated by His mother. The calling of the disciples in John 1 comes through the inviting conversation, "Come and see" (even Luke's version is built on a conversation about fishing—Luke 5:1-10). The story of the Good Samaritan arises out of a conversation about inheriting eternal life and the critical question, "Who is my neighbor? (Luke 10:25-37)." Even at the cross Jesus converses

both with His Father (Mark 8:34; Luke 23:34, 46) and others (Luke 23:43; John 19:26-27, 28, 30). It was the power of conversation that opened the eyes of the two disciples on the Road to Emmaus that the man in their presence was the Risen Jesus (Luke 24:13-35). In regard to homiletics, Lose reminds us, “The Greek word *homily* means ‘familiar conversation’ similar to the exchange of the two apostles on the road to Emmaus, as they ‘talked with each other about all the things that had happened.’”⁴

Communication is at the heart of relationships and the central role of conversation in the ministry of Jesus emphasizes the relational quality of His ministry. All this stems from the relational nature of the Trinity. The terminology of the Trinity is relational; Father, Son, and Spirit (1 Cor. 2:11 establishes the relational aspect of the spirit, both man’s and God’s). As Mark E. Powell comments,

It should not surprise us that we are relational creatures since a relational God created us. There is one God, but an eternal community of love as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit . . . relationship and community are at the very being and heart of God. Likewise, relationship and community are at the very being and heart of what it is to be human.”⁵

Powell’s relational understanding of Trinity stretches back to the writings of Thomas Aquinas on the paternity, filiation, spiration, and procession of the Trinity.⁶ The Gospel of John emphasizes the relationship between the Father and the Son. Jesus, the Son, can only do the things He both sees and hears from His Father (John 5:19-23; 8:28-29). The

⁴ David J. Lose, “Preaching as Conversation,” in *Under the Oak Tree: The Church as Community of Conversation in a Conflicted and Pluralistic World*, eds. Ronald J. Allen, John S. McClure, and O. Wesley Allen Jr. (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2013), 76.

⁵ Mark E. Powell, *Centered in God: The Trinity and Christian Spirituality* (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 2014), 94.

⁶ St. Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica*, trans. The Fathers of the English Dominican Province, https://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/03d/1225-1274,_Thomas_Aquinas,_Summa_Theologiae_%5B1%5D,_EN.pdf, 597-599.

Spirit as Helper and Advocate shares in the all that the Son has (John 16:12-15). If being relational is good enough for God, should it not also be good enough for sermon-crafting? Preachers infuse degrees of relationality in preaching the Word by building relationships that foster substantial spiritual conversations.

Rather than a generic “Good sermon today,” most preachers love to converse about what made it good. This is meaningful and fulfilling. Imagine the impact of having those conversations before you preached. Conversations are a rich source of new ideas and illustrations for sermon-crafting. How many of Jesus’ “sermons” arose out of conversations? Along with the examples I already mentioned, the question John’s disciples ask, “Are you the coming One, or are we to look for someone else?” (Matt. 11:2) leans into a whole chapter about the kingdom of God, repentance, and being yoked to Jesus.

I remember conversations with an older couple in Vermont over homemade apple pie and coffee who had gone through withdrawal of fellowship. Those face-to-face conversations impacted my teaching on the subject in ways commentaries never could. I recall hearing a Christian family trying to decide between going skiing or to church and listening to this debate led to crafting a sermon called “Baptism: A Lifechanging Decision” exploring the idea that once we are baptized into Christ these decisions are already made. I fondly remember Saturday game nights with friends and dropping in little bits of the upcoming sermon to listen for their response. A conversation on Sunday morning or even the conversational flow of the worship service tweaked more than a sermon or two (and for the better). The longer you have your sermon planned out and laid out the more time it allows for conversations from anywhere and everywhere to interact

with it. Never underestimate the contributions of good conversation. Conversations deepen sermon-crafting.

The Priesthood of All Believers

Another theological pillar is the priesthood of all believers. From the time of Mt. Sinai, Yahweh viewed his people as a “kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” (Exod. 19:5-6). The apostle Peter seized upon this divine vision describing the Christian church as “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession” (1 Pet. 2:9). Those who come to Jesus, the Living Stone, are also “living stones, being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood” (1 Pet. 2:5).” In Rev. 1:5-6 the redemptive love of Jesus transforms sinners into a kingdom of priests (Rev. 5:9). A status once reserved for the tribe of Levi has now been conferred upon all Christ’s followers. In churches of Christ everyone saved by the blood of the Lamb is cleansed and ordained as a priest to God the Father. The whole church is a shared priesthood.

What does this mean for Christian preaching? It means there is no clergy-laity distinction in the Christian church. In some churches this line is clearly drawn and defined. In churches of Christ clergy is disavowed on many levels (religious titles, religious garments, etc.), but in the arena of preaching it still exists. Ironically, for a historical movement aimed at restoring a biblical ecclesiology dissolving the distinction between clergy and laity, the pulpits of churches of Christ and the sovereign preachers who inhabit them are one place where this restoration has fallen short. Church members are invited into many aspects of ministry: benevolence, teaching, administration, stewardship, service projects, edification, prayer, finances, and outreach and many parts of worship: prayers, song leading, communion, and Scripture reading. Yet, the one vital

part of church life they are predominantly excluded from is preaching. This is the work of the preacher and the preacher alone.

Preachers and congregations feel the discomfort that comes from one man trying to speak for the whole group. This responsibility is heavy to bear and, at times, a source of conflict. Ritschl counsels, “Part of the cruelty (which we ourselves have created) of our Church is that minister and congregation are separated in such a way that the preacher is alone and isolated with his preaching task.”⁷ He is a lone ranger. Ritschl asks, “Is it possible then for the congregation to share at least a part of the burden of the minister?”⁸ Ronald Allen, quoting Ritschl, offers this application,

While Ritschl stops short of describing a group within the congregation who meet with the congregation to prepare the sermon on a weekly basis, Ritschl does emphasize that the congregation should help the preacher select the biblical text for the sermon and implies that members of the congregation should ‘study the sermon text with their minister.’⁹

Collaborative approaches to sermon-crafting make this a reality. Rose builds her case for the use of dialogue on the same theological foundation, “In pursuing their shared priesthood, the preacher and the people together seek to interpret the Word.”¹⁰

⁷ Dietrich Ritschl, *A Theology of Proclamation* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1963), 124.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁹ Ronald J. Allen, “The Turn to the Listener: A Select Review of a Recent Trend In Preaching,” *Encounter* 64, no. 2, (2003): 170.

¹⁰ Lucy Atkinson Rose, *Sharing the Word: Preaching the Roundtable Church* (Louisville: Westminster John Know Press, 1997), 93. She continues, “Instead of preachers being alone and isolated, studying and making decisions apart from the people...Ritschl urges them to join the congregation for pre-sermon Bible study where they share the results of private biblical study with the people, where they raise questions, suggest answers, and receive from the people new questions and answers” (93).

Sometimes you hear of preachers going off to secluded spots to prepare their preaching schedule for the year. Collaboration takes a different approach. It moves preachers out of seclusion and into fellowship with others to lay out the direction of their preaching. The congregation will probably have a very different idea of what needs to be heard. It is not easy to implement such collaborative models. On a couple of occasions, I asked the congregation to send me a “Pop Sermon” text or topic (akin to Pop Music) as an attempt to give them a voice in what they wanted or needed to hear a sermon about. While these periods were short-lived, they still generated sermons I would not have considered.

Homiletical training in churches of Christ has been based in a sovereign approach toward preaching using the call of 2 Tim. 4:1-2 as the personal charge that the preacher’s responsibility and accountability is solely between him and God. Preachers are accountable to God, but they also have a responsibility to the people among whom (not to whom) they preach. “The preacher dares not ignore the response of the congregation to the lesson, any more than he dares to ignore his own.”¹¹ Genuine collaboration does not tickle ears (2 Tim. 4:3-4), instead it pricks them up (especially the preacher’s).

Within each congregation exists a resource of brothers and sisters in Christ who are listening to the Word, praying to the Father, and living out their faith in circumstances and conditions very different from my own, but equally significant and vital. They come to the Bible with different points of view. They each have a lifetime of experiences different from mine. They have lived through circumstances and situations foreign to me. They have seen and heard things I can never imagine. God has been with them as fully

¹¹ Browne Barr, *Parish Back Talk* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1964), 81.

and faithfully as He has been with me. When I read a text like “Bear one another’s burdens and, thus, fulfill the law of Christ (Gal. 6:2),” can I truly think they have nothing to share with me that would benefit my sermon and help carry my burden? Appreciating the priesthood of believers should lead me to intentionally engage them in spiritual conversations about the Word of God and Christian living so that I do not miss out on a rich God-given resource for crafting my sermons. Intention instead of assumption can open up living resources of faith to add to the ones on our bookshelves.

The Interdependence of the Body of Christ

Understanding every priest of God has a unique set of gifts and abilities (natural, experiential, and grace-given) blesses collaborative sermon-crafting. Some believers have gifts related to the preaching of the word (1 Pet. 4:11). While not everyone has Word gifts, every Christian’s giftedness brings a fresh perspective to those gifted in the study and proclaiming of the Word.¹² First Corinthians 14 describes a context where people with various gifts of the Spirit brought a word, song, or prayer into the worship assembly. Feedforwarding invites others to bring something of their own to sermon-crafting. It reaches out to the congregation’s universal giftedness so that the whole assembly can hear it. Craddock, in the New Homiletic, sought to bring people along on his journey of biblical discovery. Yet Schade insightfully observes that it was “still the preacher’s trip” and not the congregation’s journey.¹³ Collaborative approaches build on the New

¹² Ritschl, 123, “It does not mean that everyone is a pastor or a preacher, but it does mean that all the *charismata* of the members of the body serve to the end that ‘you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness and into his marvelous light.’ (1 Peter 2:9) No church member is free of the responsibility of proclamation, and no minister is free to claim that he alone bears this responsibility.”

¹³ Leah D. Schade, *The Purple Zone* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 54.

Homiletic and push beyond it into a new attitude toward preaching where listeners become “co-creators of the journey.”¹⁴ Collaborative preaching moves sermon-crafting from monologue to stereo, you might even call it surround sound.

In the body analogy of 1 Corinthians 12 the mutual need for one another and each one’s gifts is affirmed to the point that “the body is not one member, but many” (1 Cor. 12:14). Palmer says, “Here we learn that our interdependence does not simply pose problems; it is also the source of great joy, the joy we find when we receive each other’s gifts and share each other’s foibles.”¹⁵ Collaborative sermon-crafting is an opportunity to put this mutuality and interdependence into practice for the common good.

Embracing difference is not based on an enlightened commitment to egalitarianism, acceptance, and tolerance. Rather, it is based on a more fundamental theological commitment to the *ecclesial-communal nature of Christian truth.*” [emphasis, McClure].¹⁶

Ritschl likens it to a *perichoresis* of the various charismata, in order to make quite clear that these grace gifts are not functioning in isolation.”¹⁷

For example, a preacher may not have the gift of mercy (Rom. 12:8).

Collaboration listens to how someone gifted in mercy responds to a text about judgment.

¹⁴ Ibid., 54. The influence of postmodernism’s ideology of people as meaning-makers is evident here.

¹⁵ Parker J. Palmer, *The Company of Strangers* (New York: The Crossroads Publishing Company, 1990), 39.

¹⁶ John S. McClure, “The Minister as Conversation Partner,” in *Under the Oak Tree*, eds. Ronald J. Allen, John S. McClure, and O. Wesley Allen Jr. (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2013), 31.

¹⁷ Ritschl, 123. The significance of *perichoresis* is that this is Greek word used to describe the interdependence of the Trinity. See also Nonna Verna Harrison, “Perichoresis in the Greek Fathers,” *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 6, no. 1 (1991). I like Harrison’s last line and its application to collaborative preaching, “Perichoresis, which genuinely unites while preserving distinctiveness and enables mutuality and interchange of life itself among radically uneven levels of reality, thus stands at the heart of a Christian ontology of love.” (65).

What is their gut reaction? What scares them? How does the spiritual gift of mercy interact with the vengeance of God? Just think about the unlimited possibilities of the giftedness of others interacting with the preacher's gifts and skills to make the preaching experience much more full and complete.

Consider again the scenario Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 14, where each gifted servant of God (prophet and tongue-speaker, whether through a word or a song or a prayer) brought something out from his (or her) own giftedness? Imagine someone bringing a song of faith. Imagine another telling a story of healing and another proclaiming the love of the Gospel, while another speaking a word of wisdom in the face of persecution. How many of these types of stories and experiences sit untapped in pews when the preacher stands up to speak? The preacher speaks to a people he has not heard. David Belgum speaks of “. . . the treasury of spiritual resources we have to share—from scripture, and from the tradition and experience of the church as well as from the authentic encounters which we and our fellow believers have experienced.”¹⁸

¹⁸ David Belgum, “Preaching and the Stress of Life” *The Lutheran Quarterly* 20 no. 4 (Nov. 1968): 356.; Tim Stafford, *Interactive Preaching: Opening the Word then Listening* (Cambridge: Grove Books Limited, 1998), 14 writes, “Many Christian ministers are well resourced and equipped to prepare their sermons in quite a self-contained way...What a task the preacher sets him or herself. Many have to come up with the goods from their own store week after week...Sometimes the contents of the cupboard seem sparse...Sometimes the cupboard is bare...Well there is another cupboard. Most churches contain within them a great wealth of experience as to what it means to live out the gospel in its community—far more living illustrations than the preacher's study shelves are likely to hold. The ministers who find a way to tap into this will also find a great liberation from the burden of being the only interpreter of the gospel.”; Ritschl, 126. “The hearing and understanding of the Biblical Word cannot be an individualistic effort of the preacher. He cannot substitute his books or his ecclesiastical colleagues for his own congregation. The members of his congregation with the *charismata* [emphasis, his] must share the preacher's work of preparing the sermon. The office of proclamation does not belong to the preacher but to the Church, because it is Jesus Christ's office. The sermon is not a special type of proclamation, distinct from the proclamation through works and various gifts of the church members; the sermon is the source and the heart of all the

Collaboration reaches out to the congregation's giftedness. It does not replace the preacher's giftedness, but provides new voices, equally divinely gifted ones, to influence and enhance sermon-crafting.

Hospitality to Strangers

Hospitality is an underappreciated quality of godliness lying at the heart of all God does. Preachers see themselves through various images: prophet, pastor, evangelist, servant, etc. Collaborative preaching requires the preacher to see himself as a host and embraces a theology of hospitality to the stranger.

Creation is an act of hospitality as God shares His gift of life with everything He creates and calls it "good" (Gen. 1; Acts 17:24-28). Setting Israel free from slavery is an act of redemptive hospitality and is the theological framework from which a heart of hospitality toward strangers is expected to develop (Exod. 22:21; 23:9; Lev. 19:34). The Incarnation is one of the greatest acts of hospitality, the Creator becoming the creature. Heaven is described as a place where Jesus has returned to prepare a dwelling place for us in His Father's house (John 14:1-4), eternal hospitality. Love for strangers was a key ethic in ancient Israel (Deut. 10:19), in Jesus' ministry (Matt. 11:28; 25:31-46), and in the benevolence of the early church (Acts 2:43-47). Hospitality to the stranger is a mark of Christian leadership (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:8; Phil. 1; Heb. 13:1-2).

"Hospitality means inviting the stranger into our private space, whether that be the space of our own home or the space of our personal awareness and concern."¹⁹

charismatic works which are performed by the members of the body, so that this weekly activity a new sermon can be preached on Sunday."

¹⁹ Palmer, 69.

Feedforwarding invites others into my private and sacred space; sermon-crafting. Collaborative methods of sermon-crafting apply a unique and interesting application of “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing so, you have entertained angels unaware” (Heb. 13:1-2). The amazing observations, questions, illustrations, and applications of others are strangers to the lifeworld of the preacher secluded the ivory tower of his sermon-crafting. Collaboration entertains strangers. The preacher is a stranger to the fuller perspective that will arise out of a face-to-face encounter with others’ experiences with the Word and faith in God; contributions sitting intact and untapped within the congregation week after week, kept aloof as strangers from the sermon into which they could breathe fresh air.

Whiteley teaches,

...if we really expect our preaching to be formative and transformative—if we expect anything to actually happen!—then that passive model is inadequate. Our preaching needs to engage our hearers, even more than that, it needs to provide for them a space to respond.²⁰

Through the collaboration of feedforwarding I am making that liminal space a reality by inviting others to participate in a ministry from which they have largely had no access and, as such, are treated as strangers.

To facilitate this hospitality the preacher must share authority and ministry and move from the professional expert to a gracious host. It is the humble move of a servant. Creating an air of hospitality and comfortability is essential. Inviting, welcoming, and encouraging participation fuels the feedforwarding process. People will be unsure and reluctant at first. They are not used to being in this place. It is strange and unknown. They

²⁰ Raeweyne J. Whiteley. *Steeped In the Holy: Preaching as Spiritual Practice* (Chicago: Cowley Publications, 2008), 67.

are wary. They are strangers. The preacher's welcoming and sharing spirit is the lifeline of getting started, but once people warm up to it, watch out, a new era of church life might start blossoming.

Remember, hospitality is one of the qualities of a pastor of the flock (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:8) and, while most preachers are not elders, the ministry of preaching the Word is vital to the ministry of feeding and tending God's people. Preachers who can infuse hospitality into their sermon-crafting have the potential to better lead God's people to green pastures, quiet waters, paths of righteousness, and through shadowy valleys of death. Feedforwarding and other collaborative approaches allows the preacher to lead from an empowering spirit of hospitality rather than the hierarchical power of position or privilege. McClure envisions collaboration as a centripetal dynamic empowering others to move away from the margins and into the center.²¹

An "other-centric" Orientation

Collaborative sermon-crafting is others-centric (or, as McClure states it, "other-wise"). Jesus' focus was certainly others oriented. He came and lived and died and rose for others. He bore our sins not His. The New Testament, beginning with Jesus' own call to "love one another" (John 13:34) is filled with many other-centric exhortations defining Christian discipleship.²²

²¹ John S. McClure, *Other-wise Preaching: a postmodern ethic for homiletics* (St. Louis: Chalice Press (2001), 14. "Throughout this chapter, I will argue that this power is primarily 'centripetal'; it is an 'othering' or other-directed power."

²² Mark 9:50; John 13:14-15; 15:12, 17; Rom. 12:10, 16; 13:8; 14:13, 19; 15:5, 7, 14; 16:16; 1 Cor. 11:33; 12:25; Gal. 5:13; 6:1-2; Eph. 4:2, 25, 32; 5:19, 21; Phil. 2:1-4; Col. 3:13, 16; 1 Thess. 3:12; 4:9, 18; 5:11, 13, 15; 2 Thess. 1:3; Heb. 3:13; 10:24-25; James 5:16; 1 Pet. 1:22; 4:8, 10; 5:5, 14; 1 John 1:7; 3:11, 23; 4:7, 11-12; 2 John 1:5. This qualifies as a major theological plank.

Collaborative preaching methods have a particular regard for Philippians 2:1-4. They are practical ways of considering the thoughts and needs of others instead of just your own. Although certainly in a different context than Jesus, it is still a way for the preacher to come down out of his metaphorical ivory palace and empty himself (erasure) so that he can be filled up by the faithful witness of others (Philp. 2:5-7; it makes for a more incarnate message).

Collaboration is a direct way for the preacher to practice the communal command of 1 Pet. 4:9, “Be hospitable without complaint” in the context of “employing them in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold wisdom of God (1 Pet. 4:10).” One of these gifts is “speaking the utterances of God” (1 Pet. 4:11). Collaboration enables preachers to employ their gift of uttering in the service of one another. It is a way for preachers to expand the talent God has given them (Matt. 25:14-30), not by just perfecting our technical skills but through an adaptive skill of learning from others.

Collaborative methodology fits easily into the homiletical vision of witness. Long prefers to see the preacher as a witness.²³ The role of witnessing is central in the early preaching in Acts (Acts 1:8, 22; 2:32; 3:15; 5:32; 13:31; 22:15; 23:11; 26:16). A disclaimer is necessary here: no current preachers witnessed the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus. We are not eyewitnesses of these events (as was required of the apostles), but we are witnesses to the presence of God and the work of faith in Christ

²³ Thomas Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 2nd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 64. Long confesses that this is not a popular image among homileticians, “Homileticians have sniffed the odor of manipulation around these words and thus have strayed far away from them...homileticians have not been greatly attracted to the witness image because it seems out of place” (46). See also Lose, 45-51.

through the Spirit in our own lives. The primary factor for Long preferring this image is the principle of what the preacher “has seen and heard.”²⁴ This is the realm of testimony and is perhaps a better post-biblical term than witness (which does convey actual presence at the time and scene of the event).

But preachers are not the only ones in the congregation who have seen and heard. Each believer in every congregation has seen and heard and their testimony differs from that of the preacher. There is a wide range of testimony that lies unearthed in the fertile soil of the congregation’s experiences of faith, conversion, and discipleship. At first, Long looks like he is building a case for exactly this.

Does this mean that the preacher is authoritative because the preacher has more Christian experience than the people in pews? No, of course not. There may well be many in the congregation whose faith is richer, more mature, and more tested than the preacher’s. In addition, there will probably be people in the congregation who have more education or more common sense, who have a firmer grasp of human natures, or maybe even know more Bible and theology than does the preacher. To call the preacher an authority does not mean that the preacher is wiser than others.²⁵

Long locates the authority of preachers in their ordination.²⁶ This is a traditional hierarchical structure that is eschewed in postmodernism’s move away from authority, especially old forms of it. It is also short-sighted. Collaborative models, to use Long’s language, ordain members of the congregation as witnesses. The Old Testament never

²⁴ Ibid., 47.

²⁵ Ibid., 48.

²⁶ Ibid., 48. “The authority of the preacher, then, is the authority of ordination., the authority of being identified by the faithful community as the one called to preach and the one who has been prayerfully set apart for this ministry, the authority comes from being ‘sworn in’ as a witness.”

allowed the witness of one; two or three were needed to build a case (see Deut. 17:6, a verse quoted five times in the New Testament—Matt. 18:16; John 18:17; 2 Cor. 13:1; 1 Tim. 5:19; and Heb. 10:28). Collaboration enlarges the role and testimony of witnesses in the preaching process and, thereby, enriches the sermon in ways beyond the silo vision of the solo preacher.

Long notes the danger of tunnel vision that extends from sovereign sermon-crafting, “So, the preacher goes to the Scripture, but not alone. The preacher goes on behalf of the faithful community and, in a sense, on behalf of the world.”²⁷ McClure, Rose, Schade and other proponents of collaborative sermon-crafting are asking, “Why on behalf? Why not with the faithful community?” It’s a valid biblical question. Silo preaching methods end up validating the witness of the preacher more than the members. Richard Lischer cautions,

No speaker preaches a sermon, then, and no hearer receives it apart from a *medium* [emphasis, his] of encounter, and that medium is the church. Although the Word of God created the church, it does not follow that the preacher’s job is to distance the Word from the church or to prove its superiority to the church. Because of God’s act in Christ, the church now embodies the Word in a godless society. Preachers, therefore, do not need to re-invent the priority of the Word above the church. When they do so, they tend to abstract their individual hearers from the church and create a false impression that it is possible for individuals, as individuals, to participate in the Word apart from the community that embodies it.²⁸

Lischer is not prohibiting or demeaning the importance of personal Bible study. He is aiming at the establishment of a clergy who embody such expertise in the Word in a way

²⁷ Ibid., 49.

²⁸ Richard Lischer, *A Theology of Preaching: The Dynamics of the Gospel* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001), 79.

that creates a chasm between them and the laity; a gap that preachers often lament the difficulty of traversing.

Ordination, formal or informal, has its place. It recognizes that certain individuals are skilled, not in witness experiences, but in preparation and proclamation, organizing thoughts and words into a coherent message. Collaborative methods do not discard ordination but define it as a gift of grace given by the Spirit. For most, the role of the preacher is still valid and crucial, but not in isolation from the knowledge and experiences of others. Every disciple is a witness for Christ and collaboration taps into this living testimony. Every follower of Jesus has a story to tell and a testimony to share. Churches of Christ rarely make space for testimony outside of personal one-on-one friendships and conversations. Every time I have been in a situation where someone else other than me has the chance to tell their story it has strengthened my faith. Collaborative methods of sermon-crafting such as feedforwarding groups provide an outlet and an avenue for incorporating these interpersonal testimonies into the larger life of the congregation.

Collaborative methods are highly relational ways of sermon-crafting encouraging a theology of community and mutuality that should be normative and formative of the people of God. There is always a sense in which the congregation prepares the sermon. No preacher prepares a sermon without having his audience in mind. Lischer speaks to this subconscious reality saying, “In all stages of sermon preparation and delivery the preacher is probing the mind and milieu of the listener.”²⁹ Collaboration is an intentional way of involving them more directly.

²⁹ Lischer, 8.

The Wisdom of Relational Listening

“Conversation is the rhetoric of listening”³⁰ The New Testament sage advises, “Be quick to hear, slow to speak” (James 1:19). It strikes me that the sovereign preaching posture is quick to speak and slow to hear. Ritschl wisely notes, “He [the preacher] can only preach after having heard the Word, but he cannot hear the Word when he is alone and isolated from his people in his study.”³¹ Preachers realize this need to hear the Word and, therefore, seek out commentators and podcasters (which is often done in the solitude of a study). Ritschl speaks a little over the top, but his point is well taken. A whole congregation of people exists outside walls of solitude and isolation among whom the preacher can hear the text embodied in the life of those he serves. “The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man is he who listens to counsel.” (Prov. 12:15; see also Prov. 15:31-32; 19:20, 27; 23:19; 25:12 for more on the wisdom of listening). Not all solitude is folly, but how many sermons are crafted in the seductive folly of hearing only your own voice (which is every much a real fear as substituting God’s voice with the congregation’s).

Allen calls collaborative preaching a “turn to the listener.”³² He identifies five approaches to making this turn and one of them is the “laity feed forwarding into the

³⁰ John S. McClure, *The Four Codes of Preaching: Rhetorical Strategies* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 68.

³¹ Ritschl, 124.

³² Allen (2003), 170. “Some of the earliest efforts in the turn to the listener take the form of feed-forward groups. The pastor brings members into the process of preparing the sermon to hear how they perceive the text or subject of upcoming sermons. The preacher then incorporates their insights, questions, fears, and hopes into the sermon.”

sermon.”³³ “Some of the earliest efforts in the turn to the listener take the form of feedforward groups. The pastor brings members into the process of preparing the sermon to hear how they perceive the text or subject of upcoming sermons. The preacher then incorporates their insights, questions, fears, and hopes into the sermon.”³⁴ This is the approach my project takes.

A theology of listening is a theology of caring. This has become a popular cultural saying, “People don’t care how much you know unless they know how much you care.”³⁵ Wolvin and Coakley conclude their technical work on listening saying, “...but there is a further dimension to effective listening that professional listeners almost always cite—caring.”³⁶ Nichols affirms this, “To listen it to pay close attention, take an interest, care about, take to heart, validate, acknowledge, be moved...appreciate.”³⁷ Listening improves relationships and builds trust and trust enhances preaching.

³³ Ibid., 168.

³⁴ Ibid., 170.

³⁵ This quote (or one similar) is often attributed to Theodore Roosevelt (although no known source of his can validate it). “Theodore Roosevelt Quotes,” *Theodore Roosevelt Center* (accessed 1/25/23) <https://www.theodorerooseveltcenter.org/Learn-About-TR/TR-Quotes?page=112>. This reflects the commonsense origin of the phrase.

³⁶ Andrew Wolvin and Carolyn Gwynn Coakely, *Listening*, 5th ed. (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1996), 410-11.

³⁷ Michael P. Nichols, *The Lost Art of Listening: How Learning to Listen Can Improve Relationships* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2009), 14.

Listening well is a spiritual skill of the sage.³⁸ McKenzie identifies a listening heart as one of the pillars of wise preaching and teaching.³⁹ The preacher who takes the time and initiative to create opportunities to listen attentively to the congregation will infuse his preaching with wisdom. It takes intention. It takes practice. It takes the suspension of yourself for the well-being of the other.⁴⁰ Jesus calls it compassion and practicing it takes us into the depths of theology and the very heart of God. Through attentive listening the preacher finds new ways to obey the command of God and Jesus, “Go and learn what this means: I desire compassion and not sacrifice . . .” (Matt. 9:13).

Armed with these theological tools a preacher is ready to access the gifted priesthood of believers in spiritual conversations, listening and learning in a spirit of hospitality to the witness of others. Collaborative models carve out a place to add the living contributions of others to the academic resources in your sermon-crafting process?⁴¹ Collaborative efforts come in many forms. In this next chapter I will lay out the methodology for my feedforwarding project; the setting, the participants, my role as

³⁸ Alyce M. McKenzie, *Making A Scene in the Pulpit: Vivid Preaching for Visual Listeners* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 18. She calls this “a knack for noticing.” (27-32)

³⁹ Alyce M. McKenzie, *Hear and Be Wise* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004), 61-105. She declares, “Attentiveness is at the heart of the preaching life.” (75)

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 10. “The essence of good listening is empathy, which can be achieved only by suspending our preoccupation with ourselves and entering into the experience of the other person.”

⁴¹ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 140-47. Although Volf’s context is a response to violence and enmity, his principles can be useful in many contexts.

host and catalyst, and a summary of the dynamics involved in each one of our gatherings.⁴²

⁴² Schade, 102-118 gives a valuable “how-to” approach for her vision of deliberative dialogue.

Chapter 3: The Sermon Café

Since hospitality and face-to-face interaction are foundational to feedforwarding collaborative models, I decided to use McClure's roundtable and World Café's small group dynamics to generate a hospitable and comfortable learning space I called The Sermon Café.¹ I decided to stay within the congregation for participants because the close relationships provided a safer environment for my first try at this approach. This was still an adaptive change and the depth of accrued integrity I built during the past 20+ years with this congregation enabled a favorable response to this experimental endeavour. My wife and I decided to host these gatherings in our home (enhancing a hospitable setting). I used multiple small tables, purchased thematic decorations, and created posters to create a Café style environment conducive to interpersonal interaction. The point is not what decorations and accessories you use, but that the host create as hospitable a setting as possible.

The Sermon Café involved five major steps. First, I recruited a group of participants and created a sermon series. Second, I prepared weekly preview sheets for

¹ In naming it this I am unaware of any copyright infringement nor is it my intention to unethically market or infringe on anyone else's property or concept. For practical information on The World Café see Juanita Brown, *The World Café: Shaping Our Future Through Conversations That Matter* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2005). You can see the seamless connection between McClure's vision, my purpose, and the World Café when, speaking of Joy Anderson, Brown writes, "He described hospitality as a stance of openness toward new people and ideas, a lens that reflects our experience in hosting Café conversations. 'Hospitality,' he said, 'is the act of affirming gifts in others. It is entertaining ideas that enable us to see life in a new way. When we offer hospitality to the stranger or a guest, we welcome something new, unfamiliar, and unknown into our lives that has the potential to expand our world.' Our own emphasis on encouraging people to serve as Café table hosts who welcome travelers as guests or 'ambassadors of meaning' for each progressive round of conversation draws on the same spirit of welcome, inclusiveness, novelty, and mutual contribution that lies at the heart of hosting and the creation of hospitable space the world over." (67).

distribution among the participants preparing them for the feedforwarding conversations. This utilized my exegetical skills and question asking skills. Ideally, these should be given to the participants one or two weeks in advance. Third, I hosted the Sermon Café. The preacher's main role here is coming alongside and encouraging group interaction with one another in meaningful conversations. The preacher is a listener and catalyst in this process, not the expert or professional. He suspends and submits his authority to the Café's participants. Fourth, I recorded and compiled the content and mood of the group's conversations and used them to generate the form, content, and delivery of the collaborative sermon; the sermon-crafting. Fifth, I gathered feedback both on the effectiveness of each Sermon Cafés and the subsequent sermons.

The Who, the When, and the What

My first step was recruiting a group of participants. Having the meetings in my home was a risky move because the project was scheduled to start at the tail end of the Omicron variant strain of Covid 19 (one person chose not to participate because of this). I contemplated using an online platform such as Zoom meetings with breakout rooms, but the interpersonal face-to-face element is so crucial to the other-wise nature of McClure's model that I kept to my original plan. He advises, "Other-wise preachers always place their preaching within an embodied, face-to-face interaction at the deepest possible levels.² This does not prohibit online platforms for hosting, but requires different

² John S. McClure, *Other-wise Preaching: a postmodern ethic for homiletics* (St. Louis: Chalice Press (2001), 14. "According to Levinas, the falseness of totality is exposed in face-to-face encounter with other human beings. In this encounter, the glory of otherness interrupts our attempts to cling to sameness. For Levinas, this 'rupture' of sameness is an *ethical* event. Not only are my conceptual schemes interrupted by the other, but the face of the other introduces a

techniques for creating hospitality, coaching conversations, and recording data (especially the mood and tone of the conversations).

Under the influence of hospitality and hosting, my first step in recruiting participants was a face-to-face personal invitation for them to help with my project. I gave them a brief description of the event, my purpose in doing it, and how much I valued their participation. I promised, if they were interested, to send them a more detailed description in an email (see Appendix 1). I started by inviting fifteen people, three people turned me down for various reasons (time, concern about social distancing, and disinterest), leaving me with twelve potential participants. My context did not allow for the depth of diversity McClure and Rose recommend and encourage. The Leesburg church of Christ emerged out of COVID's isolation and social distancing smaller and even more homogeneous than it was before March of 2020. The fringes of our congregation are not very diverse from the core. Nonetheless, there was a good modicum of diversity within the group's homogeneity. Diversity exists in homogeneous units. Here is a breakdown of the "otherness" of my team.

- Age: one was over 80 years of age, five were in their 60's, three in their 50's, two in their 30's and one in their 20's. My initial list would have skewed a little younger including both a college and high school student.
- Ethnicity: nine of the participants were white, one was black, one Asian, and one of Hispanic descent. All were American in nationality and culture. This

profound obligation into my experience. This obligation persists as an infinite responsibility to and for the other, discovered in what Levinas calls 'proximity' or 'the-one-for-the-other'" (8).

does not represent much diversity, but it does reflect a degree of multiculturalism in our local congregation.

- Gender: seven were male and four were female.
- Christian maturity: nine of the participants were mature in the faith and in the life of the congregation, two were novices both in their conversion and the life of our congregation. As alluded to earlier, all eleven were members of the Leesburg Church of Christ (only three were raised in churches of Christ, six came from other Christian church backgrounds, and two came from little to no Christian heritage).
- Ideology/Politics: the spectrum weighed heavily to a conservative approach to life; three of the members having liberal leanings.
- Marital Status: five were married (one was a husband-and-wife couple) and six were single (four were never married, one divorced, and one widowed)
- Economic demographics: ten were employed (six making more than \$100,000.00 per year), one was retired; seven were homeowners, two were renters, and two lived in their parent's home. All eleven were lower-middle to upper-middle class. Ten had white-collar jobs, one had a blue-collared vocational job (three had recently emerged out of blue-collar jobs). There were neither wealthy nor poor people among the collaborators.

The email had two important features. One was a clear description of the commitment required. People who participate in collaborative sermon-crafting are making a serious time commitment. The second crucial feature of this correspondence was selecting a time to meet. The email provided numerous weekday and weekend

options which I asked them to rank in terms of most available and least available. The most accessible and popular time was Sunday afternoon immediately after church services. My wife and I decided to serve a brief lunch (again increasing the level of host and hospitality) and then launch into the ninety-minute Sermon Café session.³

The last prerequisite was choosing the topic or text(s) for the sermon series. Originally (and in a spirit of collaboration) I planned on the group deciding the subject matter, but at the same time as I was inviting participants, I was also doing a small project on casting congregational vision with the leadership of the church. It was a collaborative brainstorming effort (much like McClure's roundtable model). We came out of it with a clear consensus that our vision should be "The Power of Love" and the group embraced the idea of making this the sermon series for my project. This collaboration inspired six sermons devoted to the power of love, both God's love for us and our love for others. This parallel collaboration made what could have been a difficult task much easier (Schade encourages using a database called National Issues Forums Institute to making choosing topics easier).⁴ Without a collaborative method of deciding on the sermon series theme (which very little of the literature advocating collaboration discusses), the preacher still holds a high degree of sovereignty over the process.

³ One of the Cafés conflicted with our monthly fellowship meal. Keeping in mind the danger of Sermon Café members being seen by the rest of the congregation as "elite" we decided not to cancel the fellowship meal in lieu of the Café. For that week we moved the Café to the second most available slot in the invitation email, Saturday morning. My wife and I offered an optional breakfast followed by the Sermon Café.

⁴ Leah D. Schade, *The Purple Zone* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019) Schade, 98-99. NIFI is the online source Schade advocates as a resource for Purpose Zone (political and cultural content) preaching. *The Purple Zone* is a collaborative model for crafting sermons dealing with social and political issues.

I asked the participants in The Sermon Café to commit to six communal brainstorming and information gathering sessions with me, each one aimed at helping expand my vision and then use that broader range of view to create a series of six sermons that was “ours” and not just “mine.”⁵ The schedule called for us to begin meeting on January 30, 2022, through March 6, 2022. The first sermon was scheduled to be preached on February 20, 2022, and the series would run through March 27, 2022. Both the newness of this technique and the extra material I had to record and work through required a cushion between the first Sermon Café and the first collaborative sermon.

Methodology

Feedforwarding’s active inclusiveness of the thoughts and experiences of others does not ignore or hijack the preacher’s skills and experiences, nor his obligations and responsibilities. The preacher is still responsible for his own exegesis of the text or topic ahead of the contributions from the roundtable participants. Matter of fact, it is crucial. I pledged to provide each participant a one-page preview of the upcoming conversations ahead of time to help them be prepared to talk with one another intentionally and intelligently about each text or topic (see Appendix 2). These previews included the Scriptures under discussion, key words or phrases, background information, quotes from extra-biblical sources, and a group of conversational questions. I emailed these a week ahead of our scheduled meeting. Based on personal observation and turned in sheets for

⁵ Reuel L. Howe, *Partners in Preaching: Clergy and Laity in Dialogue* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1967), 73. Preachers often refer to the sermon as “my” sermon, i.e., “How did you like my sermon today?” Collaborative preaching challenges this sovereignty of ownership. When done well, the sermon arises out of communal effort and is, therefore, “our sermon.” The finished sermon will be holistic instead of silo.

record keeping, I estimate that the people spent quality time with these worksheets before coming to the Café. They helped maximize quality discussion at the cafés.

Another necessity the preacher must plan for is data collection. I used three parallel systems. First, I had recorders running live at each table to catch everything that was said and, more importantly, the tone of mood of the conversations. I then listened to each recording during the week and logged a written transcript of each one (raw data). Second, I encouraged each table to have a scribe/secretary to summarize the table's discussion (redundancy). When these were turned into me (they did not always do this), they helped corroborate the transcript I was listening to (hearing 4-6 people talk, often at one time, in a space where other groups are also dialoguing, some loudly, is makes clarity challenging at times). Third, I used butcher paper on tables to encourage doodling and the writing down of ideas as another source for the less vocal participants.

One of the participants set up a Zoom Chat Room for post-café conversation and posting new thoughts and discoveries. I thought this was a good idea and used it to give additional preview material and relevant information I came across while preparing the collaborative sermons, but it appeared as overload to most of my collaborators.

At the first Sermon Café I welcomed everyone and defined my role at these gatherings as the host (not the expert). I stressed how much this was an act of hospitality on my part by inviting them into a process they rarely, if ever, had been granted access to participate in (welcoming the stranger). I was sharing with them a sacred space in my life. I also stressed the need for their weekly commitment to attend and participate.

Everyone participating is the key to success. I called upon those who can easily dominate

discussions to limit themselves and encouraged those who leaned toward silence to prepare themselves to contribute something to each conversation.

Here is a summary of the organization, content, and dynamic of each Sermon Café. Each café had a different energy. This is expected. Not only did the content and activities change from café to café, but the participants brought a different physical, emotional, and spiritual mood to each gathering.

Sermon Café 1

The first Sermon Café was devoted to a topical sermon about The Power of Love. I set up tables covered with butcher paper for doodling and making notations during the conversations. One table discussed “What is love?” Another table described the power of love (the effect it has on us and others). At another table there was the chance to share stories of love’s power; biblical and non-biblical, fictional and non-fictional (historical or personal). Another table asked people to consider the lyrics to Huey Lewis’ song *The Power of Love*. The final table was a whole group activity where each one was encouraged to draw an illustration of the power of love.

The first gathering was a great success. The spirit of hospitality ran high (one person commented that the butcher paper covered tables reminded them of going out with their family and friends at Macaroni Grill, an Italian restaurant that covered each table with butcher paper rather than tablecloths). Everyone was excited. When the café ended the collaborators (who, at first, questioned the time commitment) were surprised at how quickly time had flown by and how much they could not wait for the next one. The discussions were productive. Everyone participated and I accumulated lots of information that would never have come to my sovereign mind by myself. The final activity of

drawing an illustration of the power of love pushed people's limits and was uncomfortable for some, but diverse information gathering requires diverse and challenging applications not only for me but for the collaborators. Most people liked the small group discussions, but some commented that they would like to have heard what the other groups said and asked if I would add some larger group dynamics to the next café.

Sermon Café 2

The second Sermon Café dialogued about a biblical text. This was a change from the first collaboration. This café dealt mainly with 1 John 4:7-21. The conversations centered on four questions I gave in the weekly preview. The first question was, "Is there a difference between God 'is love' and God 'has love' (ontological vs. functional)?" The second question was, "Can a person love without knowing and abiding in God?" The third question was, "In what two ways is the love of God seen and expressed in this passage?" Question four was, "What is the relationship between love and fear?" Discussions were energetic and healthy and, with gentle prodding from the host, everyone contributed.

Most people had never considered the difference between God is and God has love. It generated some deep thinking. Nearly everyone thought even ungodly people could love their spouse or children and friends and all agreed that knowing God would raise the capacity and quality of that natural love. The relationship between love and fear (1 John 4:18) sparked strong dialogue. I decided after week two that, despite the success of four small group discussions, I would need to mix in different learning dynamics to keep things from getting stagnant: medium groups, large groups, etc. Time flew by once

again as the participants warmed up to the process. Once again, there was eager expectation for next week's café. The initial objection to the time commitment was dissipating as the enjoyment of sharing faith with one another grew.

Sermon Café 3

This Sermon Café was another textual study. The main text was the synoptic Gospel accounts of the Greatest Commandment (Matt. 22:34-40; Mark 12:28-31; Luke 10:25-28). The main emphasis of this café was loving the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. I took a new track for our opening discussion dividing the group into lumpers and splitters. These terms describe the way people process information. Lumpers tend to see the whole forest, composite pictures, emphasizing congruity. Splitters see the individual trees, a divergent picture emphasizing incongruence and individuality.⁶ The lumpers gathered at a table covered in butcher paper and I asked them to write down how they saw the Greatest Commandment. I sent the splitters to their own table to talk through the passage from their perspective and gave them the same instructions I gave to the lumpers. The results were predictable; lumpers saw totality, splitters saw distinctiveness. Unexpectedly the splitters broke from the

⁶ These two terms originate with a letter Charles Darwin sent to J. D. Hooker; , "The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin—Day 153 of 188," *Turtle Reader*, Scott Wallick's Blog <http://turtlereader.com/authors/charles-darwin/the-life-and-letters-of-charles-darwin-day-153-of-18>. Since that time has evolved into usage in science, politics, psychology, education, software, religious studies, history, language, etc. Brian Hopkins, "Lumping (versus splitting)," *Lancaster Glossary of Child Development* May 22, 2019, https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/fas/psych/glossary/lumping_versus_splitting/#:~:text=More%20formally%2C%20and%20across%20a,convincing%20reason%20to%20unite%20them; Jeremy Berg, "Lumping and Splitting," *Science*, March 2018. This terminology is in common use regarding taxonomy and categorization.

parameters of my initial instructions (which I encouraged) and created a Venn diagram to illustrate each unique way to love God.

Then I took a risk. I asked the lumpers to move over to the splitters table and for the splitters to move over to the lumpers table and critique what they saw written down on the paper. The lumpers took one look at the Venn diagram and accused the splitters of being lumpers. The splitters were confused by what the lumpers wrote down. They had no idea what they were talking about. It opened the eyes of all of us to the fact that people see the world, even the world of Scripture, differently. There was a lot of discussion about how we love God with our heart in comparison to loving Him with our soul or our strength or our minds. Examples of each were given; loving God with your mind could refer to memorizing Scripture and loving God with your heart could refer to someone taking care of and serving others. Along the way, the lumpers kept reminding us that all four were one way to love God, united in purpose.

Each group discussed The Greatest Commandment passage from the angle of Jesus distilling the 613 torah laws down into a “2 in 1.” This was a hot debate among rabbis coming into the first century. The groups looked at some other attempts by rabbis to condense faithfulness to torah into something more manageable. We compared Jesus’ answer to the burden of torah-keeping with the rabbinical efforts.

Each group then spent some time working collaboratively to put a sermon together. I wanted to see if they would go about this differently than I would (at this point I was getting ready to preach my first collaborative sermon). This did not go over very well because I asked them to do something outside their skill set. This was a good lesson for me as host and illustrated that collaborative preaching does not erase the skills of the

preacher. It was ironic that the collaborators thought creating the sermon would have been easier if they did it individually (sovereignly). There will always be a solitary and singular aspect to sermon-crafting.

The Café ran out of time so the final group activity, centered on four questions, was truncated. The consensus was that we tried to do too much in this ninety-minute session. Overburdening the collaborators drains their energy and the level of conversation and dialogue decreases. It is better to concentrate thoroughly on fewer conversations than try to rush quickly through too many discussions. I began to get a clearer picture of what could be accomplished within our time frame. Despite this, excitement and expectation still ran high. Some wanted to go for another hour, which said to me that the preview sheets were generating interest and the collaboration was enriching. The principle of leaving them wanting more showed me I was giving them the right amount of time for conversation. The group looked forward to hearing me preach “our” first sermon that upcoming Sunday.

Sermon Café 4

This Sermon Café highlighted the second part of the Greatest Commandment, loving your neighbor as yourself. We had two small group discussions, one large group activity, and one individual introspective exercise. I tried out new learning dynamics to see if they generated different kinds of reactions and responses. The two small group discussions centered on what Jesus meant by teaching the second commandment was “like” the first and that the law and the prophets “hang” on these two commandments. Both discussions were energetic with good participation.

We then met as a large single group to discuss the second command in its setting in the Gospel of Luke, the Good Samaritan (which is radically different setting from Matthew and Mark). We talked about Jesus turning the question of “Who is my neighbor?” into the question of “Who was a neighbor?” I asked the participants in the preview worksheet to map out their neighborhood and what they knew about their neighbors. I shared a diagram of my cul-de-sac and what I knew and did not know about the people in my proximity. Others shared their diagrams. Our oldest member, who lives in an assisted-living facility consisting of condominiums, described a thriving “neighborly” network. He talked about many opportunities to take care of and assist one another. My aim through this activity was to explore how knowing our neighbors correlates to how we treat them and, after listening to the brother in the assisted-living development, Jesus’ point was impressed on each of us. This encouraged a great conversation about who were the last ten people we proved ourselves to be neighbors toward.

The final activity was profoundly different from the previous conversations. I asked them to have an introspective psychological conversation within themselves, an exercise in self-awareness. Since we are to love others the way we love ourselves, I instructed them to write one paragraph about how each one’s self-love affects the way they love others. This tested their transparency. I have often wanted to collaborate with others about this application. After initial reluctance, I encouraged them to follow through and the papers turned in were very insightful. Quite a few did not have high love for self, but saw themselves as very loving of others. This made me question my initial

response to this teaching and pursue other possible messages. Sovereign and solitary sermon-crafting has difficulty in breaking through preconceptions about texts and topics.

Sermon Café 5

This Sermon Café shifted away from textual study and into the practical aspects of love's power. The small group discussions focused on how we see God's love in the life of Jesus. The brainstorming was strong and dozens of events in Jesus' life were mentioned: the woman caught in adultery, touching lepers (all the healings), casting out demons, the foot washing, restoring Peter, eating with tax collectors, raising Lazarus, accepting children, His humility, giving the Holy Spirit, feeding the 5,000 (and the 4,000), the crucifixion (giving His life, forgiving the thief, providing for his mother's care), and the resurrection.

I led a large group brainstorming activity about the way Jesus showed love in the Upper Room on the night before His death in John 13-17. I acted as a catalyst for this dialogue with some comments on how Jesus loved His own to the very end in John 13:1 and then opened it up to the group. The ideas flew fast and furious. I did not need to coax them at all. It was hard enough for me to keep up with them while writing their contributions on large flip chart pages. Within twenty minutes we filled a dozen sheets with expressions of love from that night. At the center was the idea that Jesus would not leave them as orphans, i.e., unloved. Usually, large groupthink can minimize voices, but mutuality was strong in the sharing of ideas found in John 13-17 and space was made for everyone to contribute. It was electrifying to see the group feeding off the discoveries of one another. The face-to-face orientation provoked active and energetic sharing. The power of love at work in the Upper room that night became evident to everyone in The

Sermon Café. It was refreshing to witness the energy a spirit of collaboration evokes. It was a time of active witnessing that encouraged everyone.

Sermon Café 6

The final Sermon Café was devoted to conversation about how the power of love emanates from us into the lives of others. It was a balance of text and praxis. I was getting tired by this time and so was the group. It was good that this was our last one. Enthusiasm ran high the first five weeks, but by week six it was starting to wane.

I gathered everyone together in a large group to talk about the verses I had given them in the preview sheet. I asked which verses they found most significant. In leading the group this way, I was looking to increase my range of view by using listening skills, not talking ones. Sure enough, most people did not choose the verses I chose. The beauty of collaboration is becoming aware of how and why others see things differently than you do. It was mutually encouraging for each person to hear why others chose their verse. This mutual benefit, while not my main purpose, became clearer throughout the weekly conversations.

One interesting question arose from John 13:35, “By this all men will know you are my disciples, if you love one another.” The group asked if you can you switch out love for one with other elements of the fruit of the Spirit. For example, is it also true that men will know we are disciple of Jesus by our joy or our faithfulness or our self-control? Or is this simply a power of love?

I took time to listen to a lot of feedback about the Sermon Café and the collaborative sermons. The consensus was that the participants, though tired, knew they would miss the face-to-face dialogue and conversations about Scripture and its meaning

in our lives. Feedback from one sister in Christ celebrated the value of collaboration saying that all Bible studies should be carried out in this format.

The Collaborative Sermons

Below is the sermon series I preached on the Power of Love. Each of these emerged out of and incorporated the dialogical conversations of the collaborative gatherings. These sermons are presented in the outline style I use to prepare and deliver my sermons. There is an element of performance in the presentation that cannot be captured and only becomes visible in the moment of the preaching event. If I was proficient at seamlessly interweaving my ideas with those from the Sermon Cafés, then it would be hard for an outsider (i.e., a reader of this dissertation) to measure the collaborative effect on my primary goal. Therefore, at the end of each sermon I offer an analysis on the collaborative effect involved in crafting these sermons.

Collaborative Sermon 1: “The Power of Love”

Introduction

A. What is God up to in the world today? Is He up to anything? Is He up to something new or the same old/same old?

1. About four months ago the elders and deacons came together and pursued this question with all their hearts, souls, minds, and strength. We came up with many wonderful ideas; a blessing to the world, a call to repent, 2Seek&2Save, discipleship, being filled with the Spirit, being do-gooders. In the end we settled on one vision that rose above and even engulfs all the others, it’s not new and it’s not old, it’s always been and always will be

even when faith and hope are gone. It's "What the world needs now,"
always has needed and always will. It's the Power of Love!

1 Corinthians 13:1-3 (**say the emboldened parts with me**)

¹If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, **but do not have love**, I have become a
noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

²If I have *the gift of* prophecy and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all
faith, so as to remove mountains, **but do not have love**, I am nothing.

³And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and if I surrender my body to be
burned, **but do not have love**,
it profits me nothing.

Body

A. Love is a power (as is the abuse of it)! This is well attested in the number of songs
and poems, books and movies devoted to it. Whether it's Harry Potter's mother
protecting him from the killing curse or Arwen giving up eternity to spend a
lifetime with Aragorn in LOTR or Jonathan's soul knit to David or Michael
Hosea's redeeming tenderness for Angel...I mean Sarah...or is it Mara...maybe
Tirzah in Francine River's *Redeeming Love* or John Nash, in the movie *A
Beautiful Mind*, accepting the Nobel Peace Prize for his mathematical algorithm
and saying of his wife Alicia, "And I have made the most important discovery of
my career, the most important discovery of my life: It is only in the mysterious
equations of love that any logic or reasons can be found. I'm only here tonight
because of you." It's not the power of a sumo wrestler or a 1.21-gigawatt bolt of
lightning or the 1020 hp of a Tesla S (although it can make the heart flutter).

1. I liked the way one member of the sermon-crafting team described love's power:
 - a. If someone really loves you, you won't have to fight for their attention.
 - b. If someone really loves you, they will make you feel at home.
 - c. If someone really loves you, they won't let you go to sleep wondering if you matter.
 - d. If someone really loves you, they will notice the things no one else sees.
 - e. If someone really loves you, they will never hurt you and, if they do, you will see in their eyes that they are hurting, too.
 - f. If someone really loves you, they will appreciate your nude soul far more than your nude body.
 - g. If someone really loves you, they'll do more than click the "like" button on your posts.
 - h. If someone really loves you, they will never forget the first day you started talking.
 - i. If someone really loves you, they'll understand no matter how good your heart is, it also gets tired.
 - j. If someone really loves you, no matter what or how or why or when, they will always let you know they care.
 - k. If someone really loves you, they'll notice and care that you've been acting differently and not get mad about it.

- l. If someone really loves you, they will embrace your uniqueness.
- m. If someone really loves you, even though they see you at your worst they will always think you're still the best.
- n. If someone really loves you, you don't have to force them to stay with you.
- o. If someone really loves you, they will help make you a better person.

These are insightful and a full life of experience (both my own and those in my Sermon Cafe) tell me that the power of love is vulnerability, transparency, faithfulness, compassion, forgiveness, listening, welcoming, honoring, comforting, embracing, protecting, forbearing, and enduring (1 Corinthians 13:4-8a). Love is not bought. It is not coerced. It is not won by might or deceit or skill or beauty. It is only found in the mutual giving of yourself to another—Ephesians 5:20—then look what follows.

- B. The power of love is in its effect. It has many strong effects from hospitality, intimacy, kindness, goodness, rescuing, presence, encouragement, comfort, and generosity. The strengths in our lives are not found in degrees, careers, or portfolios, but in relationships (i.e., It's A Wonderful Life). Lives are littered with destruction among those who "looked for love in all the wrong places."

When I first mentioned The Power of Love, what did you think of it? It's okay, you can say it. When I have mentioned this vision to others the first thing that pops out of the mouths of most people is Huey Lewis and the News. The Power of Love was the hit song on the soundtrack of the blockbuster movie, *Back to the*

Future. I gave it to my Sermon Café with a little bit of hesitation. After all, what could a secular song, a rock and roll song, say in a sermon? But they gave it a look over and I think all of us were surprised at how much Huey Lewis hit the nail on the head.

1. From the line, “with a little help from above” to “it might just save your life” *The Power of Love* speaks passionately and eloquently about the true power of love; more than a feeling, an infatuation, an attraction, a lust, a hook-up, the real power of love is its capacity to transform:

- Make one man weep, make another man sing
- Change a hawk into a little white dove.
- Make a bad one good, make a wrong one right
- Will keep you home at night.
- You won’t feel nothing until you feel the power of love.

2. Transformation is the power of God’s love. When you know the love of Jesus, you’ll never be the same. It transformed Zaccheus. It transformed Saul of Tarsus. And if Philemon accepted Paul’s challenge of love, just imagine the way it changed his life and a whole congregation! The Holy Spirit testifies to this change over and over in 1 John.

- a. 1 John 2:5 (perfected)
- b. 1 John 2:10 (Light, no stumbling)
- c. 1 John 3:1, 10, 14
- d. 1 John 4:7
- e. 1 John 4:18 (a transformation hard to understand)

f. 1 John 5:2

Conclusion

- A. This congregation has felt the power of love—i.e., share the “stories”
 - 1. We need to move into the love of winning souls for Christ.

Analysis

The entire introduction resulted from four collaborative sessions I had with the leadership of this congregation prior to the Sermon Cafés. It was a project in my last Doctor of Ministry class, Congregational Leadership Systems. The Power of Love was not one of the visions I cast in those brainstorming sessions. This itself was a challenge because I was preaching on a vision which did not originate with me. Collaborative sermon-crafting requires the humble movement of valuing the interests of others and not just your own.

All the examples in the Body of the sermon were discussed in the Sermon Café. The “If someone really loves you . . .” statements are not original to me but came from one of our female participants. This was an example of someone going the extra mile in creativity and imagination spurred on by the dynamic force of collaboration. I made posterboard wall hangings of many of these and decorated the Sermon Café space with them to encourage others to stretch themselves in similar ways. This kind of innovation, ingenuity, and inventiveness stretched my range of view. One of the other female collaborators was surprised by my impression at the novelty of these observations saying women feel these things all the time. But that is the point. I am not a woman. This perspective is new and fresh to me and good for me to consider.

The observations about Huey Lewis' song, *The Power of Love*, all arose from the Sermon Café's dialogue about the lyrics. The move to transformation, (highlighted in comments about Lewis' lyrics "making a hawk into a little white dove and a bad man into a good one, a wrong one into a right one") encouraged my own musings on the biblical theme of a transformative life in Christ through the Spirit. You can see the awkwardness of my attempts to move back and forth between collaborative thought and sovereign thought. This improved with each sermon.

One way my vision was widened was the reminder that not all people think of the power of love in the same way. Not all of them were positive, either. Some had been deeply hurt by abusive love. People saw the power of love in biblical stories, movies, and literary characters that would not have come into my peripheral vision.

Collaborative Sermon 2: "God Is Love"

Introduction

A. During the first week of February I was living off a high created by our first Sermon Café and their discussion of "The Power of Love". During that week a magazine came in the mail, a secular magazine, that had the tagline to its title, "The Love Issue." I wondered how their view of the power of love would compare with our Sermon Café's perspective. The first blurb from the Editor-in-Chief told me all I needed to know. She wrote, "It continues to amaze me that despite 57 years of *this magazine* exploring and reporting on love...we're no closer to figuring out, once and for all, how to actually 'solve' the *darn* thing. Love continues to stalk around, complex and inscrutable, forcing us all to DIY a strategy on the fly [*italics mine*]."

57 years and you don't know a *darn* thing!

You could read 1 Corinthians 13 in less than 57 seconds learn every *darn* thing
you need to know!

A look at the few and then the kind of articles within the magazine and it didn't take me long to understand this comment; they are devoted to carnal love and its corruptions. This magazine thinks of love as eros, the lowest standard of love in the Greek language, often little more than sexual/sensual attraction and lust. No wonder she doesn't know a *darn* thing about love. Christians know better because God IS love.

Body

1 John 4:7-21

- A. One of the truths the Sermon Café centered around is the description that God IS Love (1 John 4:8); that is, God doesn't just love or have love, He IS love. It is who He is. It is His nature, His essence, an unchangeable virtue of his being. He is the source and the model and the giver of love. While it's not the only quality of His nature revealed in Scripture (God is light, God is Spirit, God is faithful, God is truth, God is holy, etc.), it is central to his nature and the Christian faith.
1. It was unanimous in the Café that there is a difference between being love and having love. As our resident philosopher's said, "I have milk, but I am not milk." We have the capacity to love, and often do (though not always and not always well), but God is love and He can never be anything else. Even his jealousy emerges from pure love, not selfishness, insecurity, fear, faulty assumptions, etc.

2. The message that God is love transformed the Greek language turning agape into the highest kind of love (a common misconception seeing that John uses *phileo* and *agapao* interchangeably on some occasions).
“It is a fact that in Greek literature before New Testament times the verb agapaō has nowhere near the importance or even the connotations that it has in the New Testament itself. C. H. Dodd puts it this way, “The noun is scarcely found in non-Biblical Greek . . . It is a comparatively cool and colourless word. It is this word, with its noun, that the translators of the Old Testament used by preference for the love of God to man and man’s response, and by doing so they began to fill it with the distinctive content for which paganism, even in its highest forms, had not proper expression. In the New Testament this fresh content is enlarged and intensified through meditation upon the meaning of the death of Christ. It is interesting, in addition, that when pagan religious writers do speak of a god loving, they usually use the word *eros*, which normally refers to sexual desire and love. This is precisely what the New Testament writers do not want to say about God’s love for humankind or God’s character” (*Witherington*, 528).
3. Application: God always acts out of love (i.e.—God is truth/cannot lie—Titus 1:2). Now, that’s easy to accept when He’s blessing us, answering us, saving us, comforting us, empowering us, but it is also just as true when He disciplines, punishes/judges, and hates sin. God is also jealous but it is not a jealousy born out of selfishness, insecurity, misinformation,

etc. It comes from a love for His people. Even the pouring out of wrath stems from a love of all that is good and righteous and loving us enough to show us sin is destructive and deadly—see **James 1:20**. We may not understand this. It may not look that way to us. But we are not love and, therefore, there are things we cannot know or understand.

4. Application: can unbelievers love? Can you love if you don't know God? Can you love if you are not a Christian? Our Sermon Café challenged this absolute believing that all people can love because they are created in the image of God. Matter of fact, one group said that suggesting to an unbeliever that they don't love their spouse, children, parents, siblings, friends, etc. would be cruel and insulting (how could you ever share the Gospel with them after offending them in this way?) It's good to remember that 1 John 4 is not an essay on the condition of unbelievers, but an exhortation for how believers must live. At the same time, café members unanimously voiced hope on how fuller and richer their love, the love of unbelievers, could grow to become if they, too, knew God and His love for them.

B. Loving God through loving others.

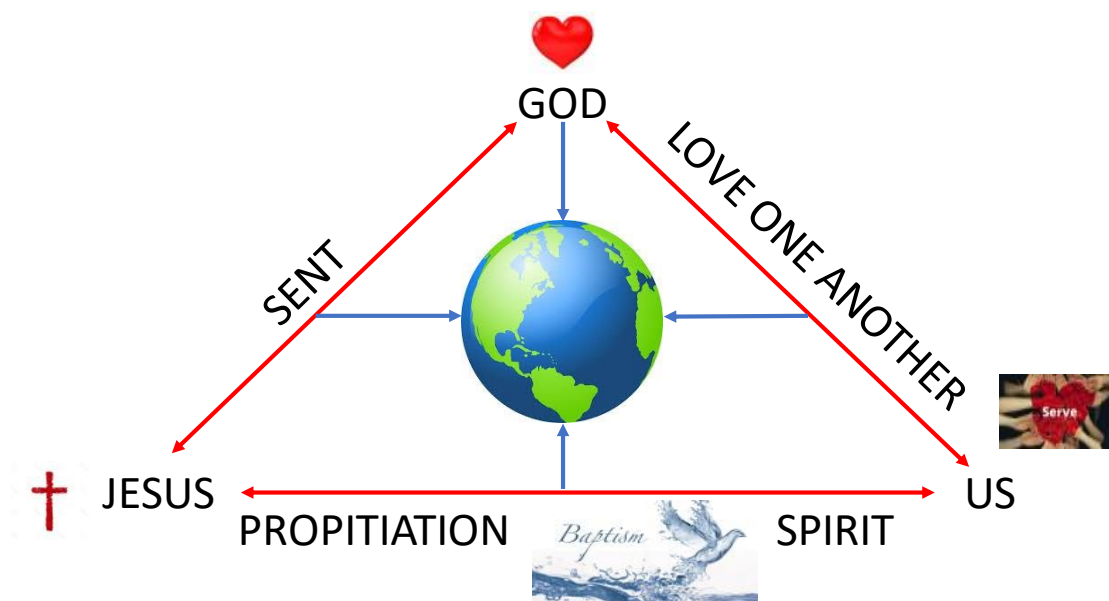


Figure 1: The Relational Love Triangle

1. It's about relationships—1 John 4:15-16 (John 17:20-25; 15:1-11).
2. We love God by loving one another (we love the One we cannot see but loving the ones we can see). This love is first revealed to us in God sending the Son into the world to be the propitiation for our sins-1 John 4:9-10 (go over the first two sides of the triangle). Now, watch what happens next. 1 John 4:11—"Beloved if GOD SO LOVED US" . . . what? We know these words so well that we know what's coming next, but pretend you're hearing them like you've never heard them before. "Beloved is GOD SO LOVED US, we should love Him back! Is that what it says? No! The verse finishes with "so we also ought to love one another . . .". This tremendously unexpected train of thought continues in 4:12—no one has seen God. How can you love someone you have not seen? How can you have a relationship with someone you cannot see? THE

ANSWER IS BY LOVING THE ONES YOU CAN SEE! 1 John 4:20b.

Loving one another is the way we experience the fullness of God's love—it is “only when a person loves his fellow Christians . . . that he fully experiences the love of God in his own heart and knows the presence of God” (Witherington, 532). This is how God's love is made “full” in us.

Conclusion

- A. Perfect Love casts out Fear. This was a tough one (one sister said she prayed all week and still can't understand it). What's hard to understand is that there are plenty of verses, plenty of good verses that teach us to fear God—Proverbs 9:10; Psalm 19:9—“fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever” (112:1; 128:1—“How blessed is the man who fears the Lord.”) Isaiah 11:2-3. Now some will say, “Yes, see that's the Old Testament. Well then what about 1 Peter 1:17; 2:17; 2 Corinthians 7:1; Ephesians 5:21; Philippians 2:12; and Revelation 19:5?
1. A “kind” of fear—fear of punishment. The key thought here is “perfect” love. Perfect means “mature, complete, full.” An analogy that I often heard was the change that happens in the way we view of our fathers. As children we fear their punishment, but in our maturity, we seek their counsel and advice (ILL—Bill K. going to NY to visit his father after a fall). God's love transforms our relationship with Him from one of fear of Hell to respect and adoration, to worship and refuge.
 2. If you have been born of God, born from above, born again of the water and the Spirit, that is, baptism (John 3:1-5), then you are IN THE LOVE OF GOD and have nothing to be afraid of when Jesus comes again nor as

you stand before God on the Day of Judgment. But if you have not been born of God, not born from above, not born from above, not born of the water and the Spirit, that is, baptized, then you are NOT IN THE LOVE OF GOD and have everything to fear when Jesus comes again, and God calls you to account. 2 Corinthians 5:10—believe in the love of God, obey the command of God, know the full perfection of His love for you. For those born of God, who know His love, let us grow to perfection by loving one another. This is the proof of your authenticity in Christ. This is the evidence of your love for Him and His love in you.

Analysis:

One of the critiques that emerged from feedback on the first Sermon Café was the lack of Scriptural texts. I explained it was collaboration for a topical sermon. The second Café was very textual and demanded more exegetical collaboration. The participants warmed up to it quickly and loved digging deeply into 1 John 4.

Honestly, I would normally have thrown the Cosmopolitan magazine (which was being delivered through some fundraiser my daughter bought into for a friend) into the trash. It was the discussion during the first Sermon Café that enlarged my radar screen and made me stop and notice it (and what a gold mine it revealed!). It added a level of provocativeness to my generally prosaic introductions. The conversations and dialogues during the Sermon Cafés heightened a hypersensitivity to the world around me. Interfacing with these conversations is far more dynamic than the isolation of silo imagining and visualizing. It encouraged me to use the language of “darn” rather than a

more expected style. The introduction had a shock value to it that dove-tailed well with the tenor of the collaborative discussions happening at the roundtables.

Diagrams are foreign to my linear way of thinking. The second Sermon Café introduced the first of two insightful diagrams (Figure 1: The Relational Love Triangle, page 73. This was used as a power point slide during the sermon.). This one opened my eyes afresh to 1 John 4. Fresh ways of seeing well-known texts are part of the discoveries a collaborative approach provides from listening to the Word of God with others. We need more sets of eyes on the Word than just our own. This origin of the triangle was very basic, but quickly grew in depth. One of the amazing truths it revealed is that the way we love God back is not by loving Him directly, but by loving one another. The diagram traces this beautifully. I never would have appreciated this as much on my own.

It was also good to listen in on dialogues about a controversial passage, 1 John 4:18, and a controversial question about fear and love. Seeing others struggle with it generated empathy toward the text. I did barge through it with my expert answer but tried to wrestle with my collaborators and the congregation. Another controversial question was “Can unbelievers love?” My solo judgment would have been narrow and harsh, an affirmation that only those who love God can truly love, but the organic assurance arising from the roundtables was that such a view would be an insult to people you were trying to reach for Christ opened my eyes to kinder possibilities of understanding John’s message. By this point, the Sermon Cafés had impressed on me just how much I miss through sovereign sermon-crafting.

Collaborative Sermon 3: "The Great Love"

Introduction

- A. Our third Sermon Café looked at Matthew 22:34-40 from two different angles: the Lumpers and the Splitters. Now, this was not a competition between those fans of the Oatmeal's Second-fiddle, Cream of Wheat, and the King of Sundaes, the Banana Split (we all know who would win that battle!).
1. Lumpers and Splitters refer to the way you look at things, a way of classifying data. Lumpers see the big picture, the forest, the whole. Splitters delight in the details, the trees, in all the individual components. It was amusing to watch these two, especially when I asked them to switch tables and admire one another's work. The lumpers accused the splitters of, well, lumping and the splitter's took one look at the lumper's comments and said, "I don't understand a single thing they did!"

Body

- A. Matthew 22:34-40 most naturally represents a lumping movement. Rabbis had identified 613 commandments coming out the Babylonian Captivity and, in Jesus' day there were discussion about how to boil these down to something a little more manageable. The scribe had an ulterior motive of trying to trip Jesus up, yet his question also spoke to a hot button topic in his day. Jesus' answer is, by nature, a movement from the trees to the forest.
1. Jesus is summing it up into two laws so closely connected to one another in theology and practice that they cannot be separated—conjoined twins,

they share a common heart, soul, mind, and strength. Pulling them apart will kill them both.

2. The language is also lumping: the first and foremost commandment comes from Deuteronomy 6:4-5, the Shema, the great prayer of the Hebrew people and it begins, “The Lord you God is ONE...” It is an integral number, a wholeness. The emphasis is on loving God with “all” one’s heart, etc.

B. Yet the biggest discovery of this Sermon Café may have come from the Splitters who quickly diverged from my line of questioning to pursue a better course—and the result was a very cool (see Figure 3: The Greatest Commandment Venn diagram, page 103—this was also used as a slide during the sermon). I’d like to share with you what I learned from this diagram.

1. First, and foremost, the core of loving God is a heart-soul-strength-mind commitment. Our core virtue is loving God with our entire being. The diagram never works from the rim to the center but from the center to the rim. It is only in the center that heart, soul, mind, strength come together in one common devotion.
2. Second, I like it, because it allows for recognizing that people are all “wired” differently and have certain inclinations toward heart-soul-mind-strength. Some are very emotive in their faith. Others are very cranial in theirs. You could almost use this like a personality test to learn about yourselves and which areas you are more naturally inclined toward.

3. Third, this Venn model allows for mixtures of our being while also leaving room for realizing that some acts of faith are more heart-related while others more strength-related (holding your ground, taking a stand).
 - a. Mind—He has a great memory for Scripture.
 - b. Strength—She is very talented composer.
 - c. Soul—“She’s on fire for the Lord!”
 - d. Heart—“He has great love for children.”
- C. I want to come back to kind of where we started because it is the BIG message of Jesus’ answer to the Greatest Commandment—it all starts with being all in on God. It all boils down to loving God first with all that you’ve got. Why?
1. Because He made your heart, mind, soul, and strength.
 2. Because this is how He loves you. We love God with all our being because He loves us with all His being.
 3. Because this is what orients your life. If God is not at the center your life is off center. It’s out of whack. It’s lost its bearings. It’s off-kilter. It will come unglued—Matthew 6:33.

Conclusion

- A. Every fabric of your being was made to love God. Only when you love God with all your heart-soul-strength-mind can you love others the way they need, the way you need, to be loved.

Is God the great love of your life?

Analysis:

The lumpers and splitters conversations exhibited the best fruit of collaboration, especially when I asked them to switch tables and react to their “others.” This generated a lot of face-to-face conversations long after the twenty-minute exercise. Lumping and splitting as ways people categorize and arrange information was not new to me, but it was to the participants, and they learned a great sense of discovery about themselves. This demonstrated the mutuality collaborative approaches to Bible study generates.

The second diagram emerged from the splitters conversation on the Greatest Commandment (see Figure 3: The Greatest Commandment Venn Diagram, page 103). I did not know what a Venn diagram was, so I had to do some research. This, in and of itself, increased my range of vision and spared me some embarrassment. About six months later when preparing to share this with another congregation a man, on first sight, blurted out surprisingly and joyfully, “A Venn diagram.” Thankfully I was well-versed on them by this time and could carry on a meaningful and thoughtful conversation (instantly giving me credibility in his eyes). Collaboration enriches your view of the world and brings you into contact with areas of learning and understanding to which the silo technique is blind. This was a great way to diagram the Greatest Commandment and dialogue about it was energetic and inspirational. Like the first diagram, the application of it grew as the conversational teams pondered its meaning and significance. Ideas abounded such as this could be a tool used in helping people find their giftedness in loving God or this could be used as a spiritual personality evaluation tool helping people see their strengths and weaknesses in their love for God.

My own personal slant on this text was the splitter point of view. The lumpers helped me see that totality is Jesus' angle and, therefore, adjusted my perception of the text. For me personally and my own purpose in doing a feedforwarding approach to sermon-crafting, this was the most influential Sermon Café.

Collaborative Sermon 4: "As Yourself"

Introduction

An expert in God's law approached Jesus with a question. "What is the greatest commandment?"

Jesus replied, "Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:11."

This learned man should have stopped right there (although I'm glad he didn't). This Master of Divinity was not a master of humanity and so he poked a little deeper, "Yes, but who is my neighbor?"

Jesus answered with one of His classic stories.

A certain man was going down the road from Jerusalem to Jericho when he fell among some bandits. They robbed him and beat him leaving him for dead.

A short time later a priest came down the road. Seeing the wounded man, he crossed over to the other side and passed him by. Later another man, a Levite, came down the road and he, too, seeing the man, crossed over and passed by on the other side. Another traveler, a Samaritan, came upon the man and felt compassion for him. Bandaging up his wounds with olive oil and wine and putting him on his donkey, he took him to an inn. There he cared for him and upon leaving gave the innkeeper money instructing him to take care of the man's needs and upon his return he would reimburse him.

Jesus then asked, “Who proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?”

The answer was obvious. “It was the man who showed mercy,” said the lawyer.

With this one story, Jesus burst all the fences barricading this second commandment.

“A neighbor is not defined by proximity but by opportunity!”

Body

A. This is just one of a handful of intriguing features of the way the Gospel writers talk about the second commandment. This quote from the Holiness Code of Leviticus 19* also encapsulates the second five of the Ten Commandments: thou shall not murder, thou shall not steal, thou shall not commit adultery, thou shall not bear false witness against your neighbor, act against your neighbor’s life (murder), thou shall not covet your neighbor’s wife. Leviticus 19:18 is the most often quoted verse in the New Testament (Matt. 5:43; 19:19; Rom. 13:9; Gal. 5:14; James 2:8—Gal. 6:2).

1. *The Holiness Code—“You shall be holy for I, the Lord Your God am holy.” (1 Peter 1:16). Honor your father and mother (v. 3), keeping sabbath (v. 3). You shall not worship idols or make molten images (v. 4). Don’t deal falsely with your neighbor (v. 11-12). Don’t rob him (v. 13).

Matthew 19:19. It's interesting to see all that loving your neighbor entails in those 18 verses.⁷

B. "Like"—What does this mean to you?

1. Similarity and that similarity is both relational and love based.
2. Equality and interdependence (they share the same "heart" or a family), and inseparable (1 John 4:20). One group said, "You can love your neighbors without loving God, but you cannot love God if you do not love your neighbor." The Greek word here is *homoios* and is used in English as a prefix in words such as homogenized. One brother (who knows a bit about dairy farming) noted that the process of homogenizing milk takes a lot of effort. Loving God is easy (worship, prayer, etc.). It's loving people that's hard and costly!
3. It places value on loving others—believing in God is not just about loving the Divine One.

C. "As Yourself" (rarely examined)

1. There is some psychology here. How you love yourself affects how you love others. Just consider the two extremes. Narcissistic and selfish people don't love others well. They often use people simply to get their way or for their profit. Likewise, people with low self-esteem or

⁷ Loving others includes peace offerings, not reaping the corners of your field nor the leftovers, oppression, not holding a hired man's daily wage, not curse a deaf man nor causing the blind to stumble, just judgments, fairness, no vengeance nor grudge-bearing nor slander. You shall reprove him honestly. From Ephesians 5:28-29 we learn that loving self is about nourishing and cherishing our own bodies. One person applied this saying, "Applying that to myself, I try to take reasonable care of my mind, body and soul just as I try to do my best to help my wife, children, and grandchildren."

worth/value also have great difficulty loving others. One person wrote of a time when they did not love themselves, actually hated themselves and in that state said it was basically impossible to love anyone.

- a. Another person said the way they love themselves is both conditional and merit-based, but they see their love for others as unconditional and gracious. Still, in the end, they wondered how much they can actually love their neighbors if they cannot truly love themselves.
- b. Another interesting perspective was someone who said they have been working on loving themselves better because at times they can give so much of themselves that they fail to take care of themselves.
- c. Selfishness was mentioned by many as an obstacle to loving others. One person confessed that it is easy to fall into a doing for others as long as it doesn't affect me negatively. Jesus transforms this way of thinking and helps this person be better than they might naturally be.
- d. One person said they don't love themselves and have always struggled with it, but never felt this prevented them from loving others. The phrase makes this person ponder how they love others. They asked, "Why is it so hard to love myself?"

2. What surprises me about this qualifier is that human beings are so terribly flawed. Where should our sense of self-worth come from? I think this is

key to understanding what Jesus means in using this phrase. I think he means to love others in the same way that we have experienced God's love (a lot of the motivation in the OT for loving others stemmed from remembering that they had been slaves in the land of Egypt). Remember, the second command does not exist on its own, but in tandem with the first and foremost, loving God. In a sense this is reciprocal, what we have received from God we extend to others. It's an application of the Golden Rule. One person in the Sermon Café said, "We have to accept the love of God in our lives." Then we have to show that self to others by how we treat them. Doing this allows us to love one another as yourself, as our redeemed and forgiven and renewed self. In that way they will see not our love for them but God's love for them. "To learn to love our neighbor as ourselves, moreover, means we must learn to love ourselves as God has loved us (1 John 4:11). To learn to love ourselves truthfully is not easy because we most often desire to love ourselves on our own terms. The challenge that Jesus presents by joining these two commandments is to learn that one is loved by God so that one is thus able to love God and others. Such a love requires a lifetime of training in which we are given the opportunity to have our self-centeredness discovered and overwhelmed." (Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew*, Brazos Theological Commentary of the Bible, 193)

Conclusion

A. Where Jesus kind of distances himself from the contemporary debate of His time is the conclusion that “All the law and the prophets *depend* on these two.” This is the *hinge*, the *fulcrum*, the *foundation*, the *source*. Everything in the Law and the Prophets is an extension of these two loves rolled into one. Robert Smith says, “A deed deficient in love toward God or love toward neighbor, no matter how pious the deed may appear, is no real doing of the will of God (1 Cor. 13)”. (265) In Mark 12 when this torah expert affirms Jesus answer, Jesus tells him, “You are not far from the Kingdom of God.” This is what the Kingdom of God is all about. Gerhardsson calls this Jesus’ *Hermeneutical Principle*, you might call it the guiding principle of following Jesus; of discipleship (John 13:34-35)

1. We also discovered that the Greek word is used in reference to “hanging” someone on a cross. I remember one Café member getting very excited about this maybe even using the word “cool.”

a. The cross is the manifestation of the Greatest Commandment. It is the ultimate union of loving God and loving others. “It is vital to note that these words are uttered in Jerusalem during Jesus’ final days as he draws near to the cross. There he will quite literally yield up heart and soul and mind in loving obedience to God . . . and there he will complete his loving service to the neighbor.”

(Robert Smith, in Richard A. Jensen’s *Preaching Matthew’s Gospel: A Narrative Approach*, 266).

B. What's your life all about? What is its purpose and meaning? Why are you here?

Jesus says, "Matthew 22:37 & 39." Are you fulfilling your destiny?

1. Have you accepted the love God has for you? Rom. 5:8-6:3

2. Are you living out your love for God by loving others?

Analysis:

This sermon interjected more of my own material than the previous ones.

Remember, this is not wrong or bad. The preacher must not get lost in all the collaboration. My exegesis unearthed some background information on this text to which my collaborators did not have access. The host of the roundtable is not a dunce. At times the host, as a catalyst, adds his knowledge and expertise to help grow and expand the conversations.⁸

The big contribution the collaborators brought to this sermon was a psychological element that they worked on individually (sovereignly). Their self-awareness of how they love themselves and the effect this has on their ability to love others made them uncomfortable and stretched them in a way some would rather have avoided. As a gracious host, I invited them to lean into the activity and do their best. I instructed them to write their assessment on a piece of paper and hand them in anonymously. The results were amazing! It divulged confessional perspectives normally not expressed in Bible studies. They were honest and transparent and wrestled with the cause and effect. A few did not like themselves, let alone love themselves, but they did not see this prohibiting them from loving others. I read and reread and contemplated these with a deep level of

⁸ Schade, 105 says "This does not mean that the facilitator should act like a soulless drone. On the contrary, a good facilitator demonstrates genuine curiosity, asks thoughtful questions, and provides insights and information when needed."

respect, even sacredness. It felt like I was reading into their souls. This could never happen with a preacher sitting alone with his books in his study.

One of the bits of information I brought to the roundtables was that the word used of how the Law and the Prophets “hang” on these two is the same word used to describe crucifixion. Therefore, Jesus hanging on the cross is the definitive statement of loving God and others. It invigorated me to see the wonder and delight this discovery brought to the conversations and it provided a great segue for me to bring my sermon to an invitation to salvation.

Collaborative Sermon 5: “God as Love”

Introduction

A. “He who has seen Me has seen the Father.”

1. This is what Jesus said in response to Philip’s request to see the Father (John 14:7-9). Jesus is the exact representation of God’s nature (Heb. 1:3)—John 1:18 (also John 5:19-20; 6:46; 12:45)

2. Therefore (using a bit of deductive logic), if God is love and you’ve seen Me, you’ve seen the Father—Jesus shows us the love of God!

Body

A. I wanted to explore this truth, so I asked the members of the Sermon Café to identify the places in the Bible where they saw Jesus showing the love of the Father? On one hand, the answer to that question is “everything that Jesus did” shows God’s love—Luke 4:22; Mark 7:37.

1. All the time the Gospels speak of the compassion of Jesus—Matthew 9:36 (Mark 6:34); 14:14; 15:32 (Mark 8:2); 20:34; Mark 1:41; Luke 7:13 (see also Luke 10:33; 15:20; Matt. 18:27).
2. There were a lot of stories you would expect: the woman caught in adultery (John 9—kept in the Gospel despite its textual evidence because it is so keeping with Jesus’ character of love); setting Legion free of his demons, healing the lepers (touching them), the woman who touched his robe, raising Lazarus (see how He loved Him—they didn’t know how much—I would add to this giving the widow of Nain back her son—these are displays of power, yes, but of Powerful Love), accepting the children, feeding the thousands, restoring Malchus’ ear, and the Foot-washing (to name a few).
3. Of course, the ultimate demonstration of God’s love in Jesus is everything that happens around the cross, from the Passover meal all the way through his death—LOVE, LOVE, LOVE—pure, unadulterated, the POWERFUL LOVE of God (John 3:16; 13:1; Rom. 5:8 & Titus 2:11 & 3:4).
 - a. “Father, forgive them for they know not what they are doing.” (Luke 23:34).
 - b. Not calling down twelve legions of angels to rescue Him from being arrested by the Romans (Matt. 26:53)
 - c. Pardoning the thief on the cross (Luke 23:43).
 - d. Providing for the care of His mother (John 19:25-27).

4. I was also interested in exploring the resurrection as an example of God's love. The members of the Sermon Café took this challenge and came up with a number of examples; the way Jesus brought peace to the fear of the women and the apostles, appearing to Thomas (John 20); the tender way He spoke Mary's name at the tomb. On a larger level the resurrection is an act of love because without we could never be saved, and Jesus fulfilled His promise (how big is that one any love scale?).
5. The one other area both groups mentioned was the giving of the Holy Spirit. We brainstormed this by noticing all the expressions of love in Jesus Final Words with His disciples in John 14-17. Whether it was the dignity Jesus afforded Judas to bow out discreetly or taking the time to teach and instruct these final hours were filled with loving affirmations and empowerment and comfort:
 - a. John 14:16-18—I will not leave you alone (16:7, 12-15)
 - b. John 13:36—you will follow me later
 - c. John 15:9, 15
 - d. John 14:1-4
 - e. Peace (14:27; 16:33) and Joy (15:11; 16:22)
 - f. Prayer—a line of connection—15:7, 16; 16:23-24
 - g. Unity/Abiding—14:17 & 25-26; 15:4-5, 7, 9-10; 17:9-11, 20-26
 - h. An overall message: nothing's going to change, I'll still be with you and even better.

Conclusion

A. John 21:1-17.

1. On that final meal, seated around a fire on the beach with the Sea of Galilee lapping itself upon the shore, Jesus shows Peter tremendous love. Peter betrayed Him three times. Jesus gave him the chance to confess that love anew three times. And with each time restored him to a place of service and ministry, to tend Jesus' sheep; a ministry of love.
2. Sin is not an act of love. It is an act of hate. It's no wonder those who die in their sins cannot be with Jesus.
 - a. If you are in your sins today, we implore you to confess your faith in Christ and be baptized in God's love for you. Your sins will be washed away, and you will be raised (filled with the Spirit) to a new life.
 - b. If you have been baptized Jesus has not only forgiven you of your sins but He has also affirmed your place in His service. You are an instrument of His love to the world—Gal. 2:20.

Analysis:

While all these examples of love were familiar to me, the ones I included in this sermon were the ones the participants in the Sermon Café highlighted. These were the stories that demonstrated the love of God in the life and ministry of Jesus. A key impact of feedforwarding was the vibrancy the group brought to grasping the outpouring of God's love in the Upper Room just hours before Jesus' death (John 14-17). I mimicked the energy and passion of this brainstorming in my preaching as I poured through the powerful words and promises of love Jesus made to His disciples.

I remember a lot of dialogue about John 21:1ff and the reaffirmation of Peter, so I chose to close with that passage. The story is a powerful demonstration of love and gives each of us the hope that our failures are not fatal when surrounded by the love of God in Christ Jesus. Still, this sermon illustrates that not all collaborative sermon-crafting generates novel ideas. Some feedforwarding will only have a subtle impact on sermon-crafting, but the influence is still there.

The group rose to my challenge to look, not only at the cross, but at the resurrection as a display of God's love. Part of the host's job is to raise opportunities to ponder and explore new concepts and ideas. After four weeks of feedforwarding techniques and skills, my collaborators had grown to a point where I thought they could help me work through an new angle. They did not disappoint, but eagerly shared their thoughts humbly and graciously with one another to the point that a clear point emerged for this sermon (see Body, A. 4).

Collaborative Sermon 6: "Share the Love"

Introduction

- A. How do we share God's love with the world in a way that leads them to salvation?
 - 1. That is the big question! Do I have a big enough answer?

Body

- A. I want to begin with the fruit of the Spirit. "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law." (Gal. 5:22-23) and connect it with John 13;34:

"By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Can you replace love with joy, peace, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control and still be a witness to the world? Today's sermon is about how you live. If you live by the Spirit all men will know and some will be saved! (1 Peter 3:1ff)

B. By doing good

1. Titus 2:14 & Ephesians 2:10
 - a. Acts 10:38—"He went about doing good" (John 21:25)
 - b. What does "zealous" for good deeds mean? Does this describe you?

C. Praying for Laborers (that's me...that's us!)

1. Matthew 9:37-38
2. Paul, the Great Evangelist—Colossians 4:3 (1 Cor. 16:9; Acts 14:27). Do you remember what the church did in Acts 4 upon the heels of threats and persecution? They prayed for boldness—Acts 4:23-24ff.

D. Speak God's Word.

1. No one can be saved without the Word of God—Luke 8:11; Romans 1:16 (2 Tim. 3:15). No one can be saved unless they hear the message of Jesus—Acts 4:12.
2. In the Parable of the Talents the treasure we are given is the Gospel (2 Cor. 4:1-7). Remember the story; a master gives his money (talents) to three servants; two use it and invest it but one digs a hole and hides it in the ground. To risk losing it. One protects it (and gave back what he was given without any loss); "he leaned toward burial instead of boldness." I

like Michael Newman’s assessment, “Clearly being faithful means more than simply preserving and protecting the master’s treasure . . . Burying isn’t an option . . . We need to put the Word of God to work. (“Fear or Faithfulness, Burial or Boldness,” *Lutheran Mission Matters*, Vol. XXVII, no. 1 (Issue 54), May 2019: 19, 21, 23). *Do you trust the Word of God’s effectiveness?*

a. I think the first two servants felt privileged by the master’s trust in them. They saw this as an opportunity (something like a bench player breaking into the starting lineup or a job promotion). In a sense, they could not fail—2 Corinthians 4:7-16a.

(1) Some of us have lost heart.

(2) Some of us haven’t got heart. We don’t care enough, or we don’t try. Too often we are like the servant who buried his treasure.

Conclusion

A. I began with a BIG QUESTION. How do I share the love of God with others? he BIG ANSWER is BOLDLY!

1. Acts 4:13—notice what they had done; they did good to a man telling him about Jesus and used it to preach salvation—and they did it BOLDLY.

These are the same people at the end of the chapter who will ask for MORE.

a. BOLDLY raise your hand or step to the front and be baptized into Jesus. “This is the way!”

- b. BOLDLY share the love of God with others; live out the fruit of the Spirit BOLDLY, be zealous for doing good BOLDLY, pray BOLDLY, and share the message of Jesus BOLDLY.

Analysis

Every point in the Body of this sermon was seen through the windshield of the Sermon Café instead of my own. I put before them the question of whether you can replace “love” in John 13:34 as a witness of discipleship with the other fruit of the Spirit. The group thought joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control were also worthy witnesses of God’s nature. I was unsure of this myself, but they were adamant you could and should, and that confidence appeared in the sermon.

In the delivery of this sermon (the last of the collaborative sermons) I concentrated on making the contributions of the Sermon Café seamless. My focus was on infusing their voice and mine into one. This was my best organic attempt to create “our sermon” instead of “my sermon.”

The cafés were dynamic, but did they accomplish my goal? Did my personal vision increase? Was I able to step out of not only my study but my own silo and listen and incorporate the viewpoint of others into crafting my sermons for this series? Was this the only benefit I or others received from the Sermon Cafés? These questions are not only about the enjoyment but the effectiveness of The Sermon Cafés. All these answers await us in the following assessments.

CHAPTER 4: Assessing the Sermon Café

My Primary Purpose

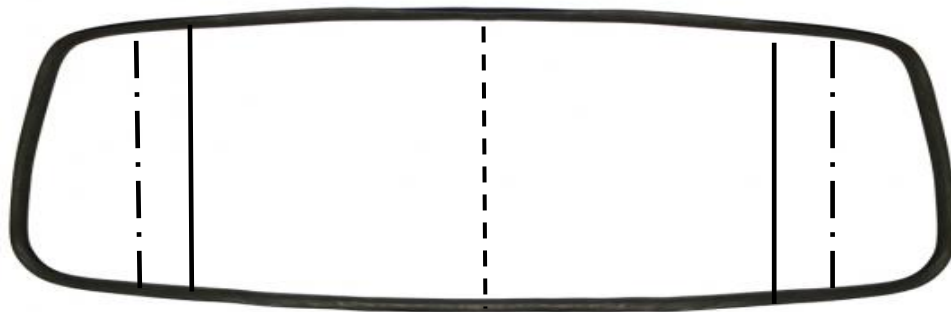
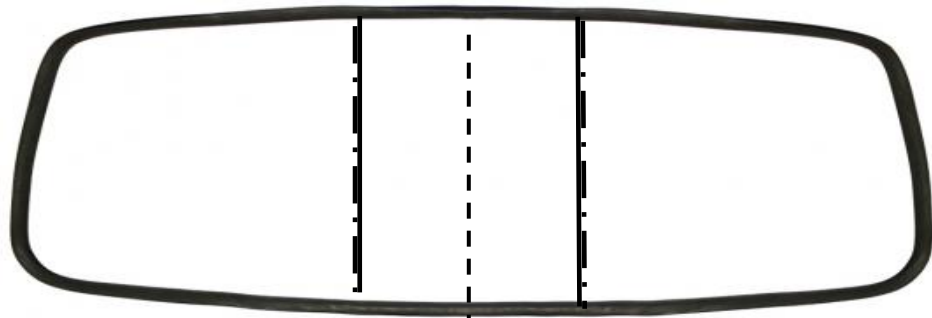
My project sought an alternative to the sovereign style of preaching limited by the preacher's own posture; the kind of preaching to which I have been accustomed. My purpose in doing the Sermon Café was to see if a collaborative feedforwarding method of sermon-crafting can broaden my range of view and increase my ability to make meaning of the text and its application to others more relevant and transforming. I invited others into what has always been a sovereign, solitary, and silo activity for me; sermon-crafting. This is a theologically and culturally valid movement, but the main question of this dissertation is: "How effective was "other-wise" sermon-crafting in accomplishing this goal?"¹

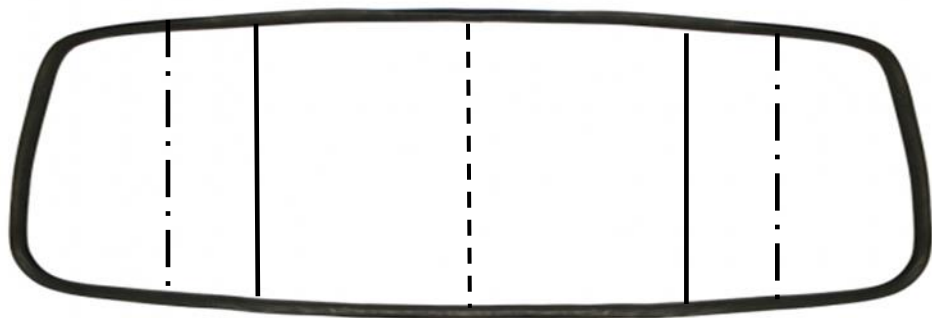
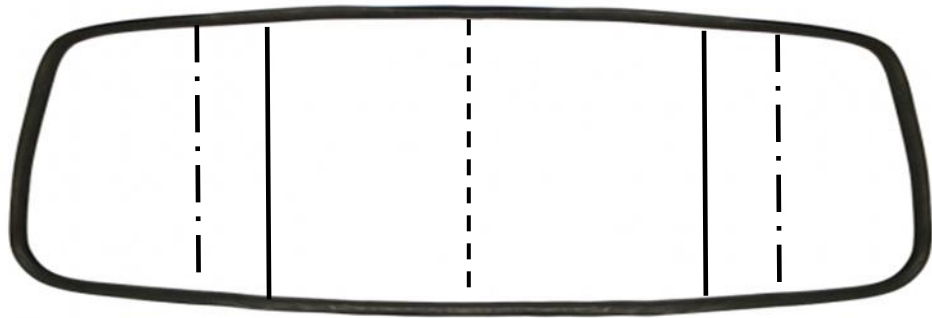
I did a subjective qualitative assessment at the first Sermon Café. I drew the figure of a windshield and asked each participant to mark their opinion of my current range of view. My length of stay in this congregation and the long-standing and deep relationships I had with everyone who participated in the Sermon Café gave me confidence they could accurately assess this range. Most of them had heard me preach hundreds of times. I gave two instructions. First, I wanted them to use the center line and then extend left and right to measure the parameters of my range of vision. I wanted them to consider my general intelligence, my biblical intelligence, my rhetorical intelligence,

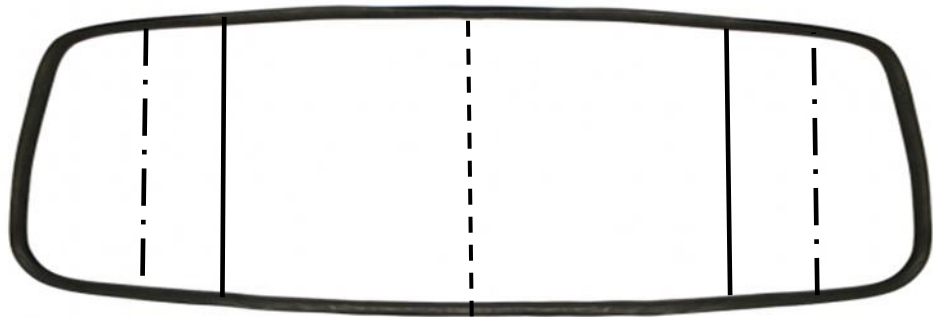
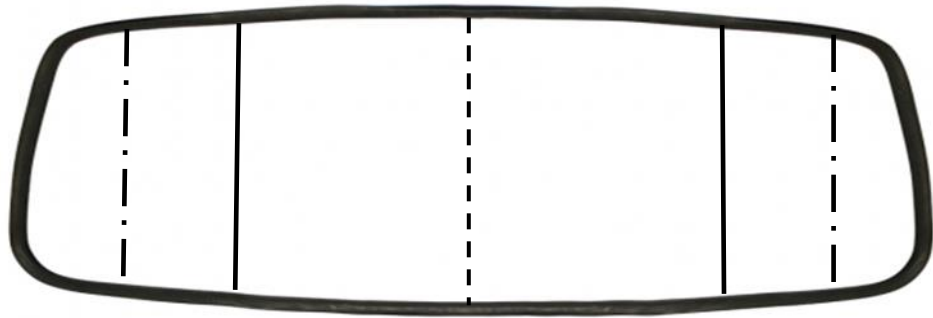
¹ I am purposefully using McClure's name for collaborative preaching. While strange sounding at first, the wisdom of drawing others near and into the sermon-crafting process is a sagacious path from which you can become "other-wise." The preacher transitions from the professional to the sage.

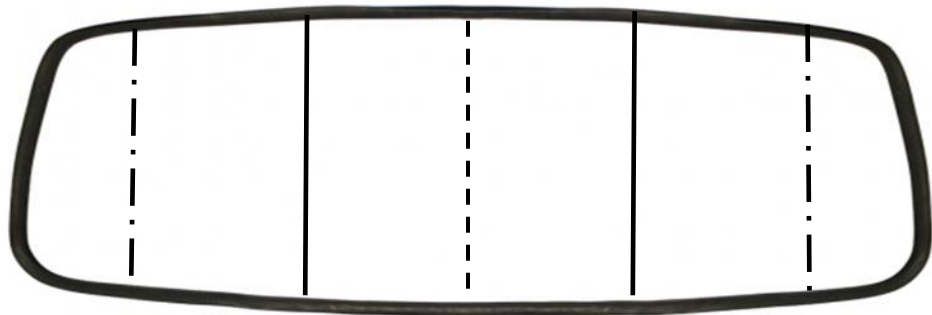
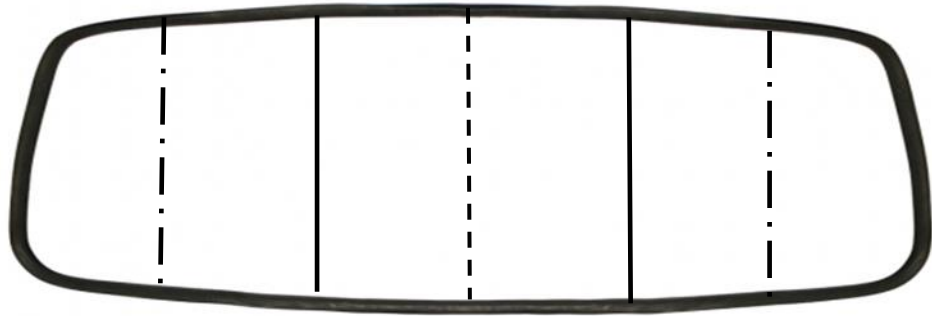
my emotional intelligence, and my cultural intelligence. Second, as a model I told them Jesus' range of vision would encompass the whole windshield because He saw the text and people and the world perfectly, to greater depths than we understand ourselves. I said this to counteract anyone delineating the whole windshield for me and put some restraint on how wide a range they were willing to give me. This was done anonymously without my supervision.

After all the Sermon Cafés had assembled and all the preaching was finished, I reassembled them, gave them back their windshields and asked them to assess whether my vision had increased or decreased in comparison to their original judgment. Due to a mix up on my part (I aimed at anonymity in the original measurement and did not ask them to place their initials on the page they turned in hoping this would increase honesty, but it made it difficult nine weeks later for each one to identify their windshield). I was only able to confirm eight of the original ten assessments (one person did not participate in this activity), but I feel this is enough to make a valid qualitative observation. No one registered a decrease in my range of view. One recorded it was the same. One indicated growth of five percent. Four indicated an increase of ten to twenty percent and two indicated a growth of one hundred percent or better. If you throw out the two highs and lows, then the median would be a ten to twenty percent increase in my range of vision. This coincides with my own personal assessment. In the figure below the dotted black lines represent the midpoint of the windshield, the solid black lines my range of view prior to the Sermon Cafés, and the variegated black lines my range of view post-Sermon Cafés. The space in between the blue lines and red lines is the liminal space where my range of vision expanded.









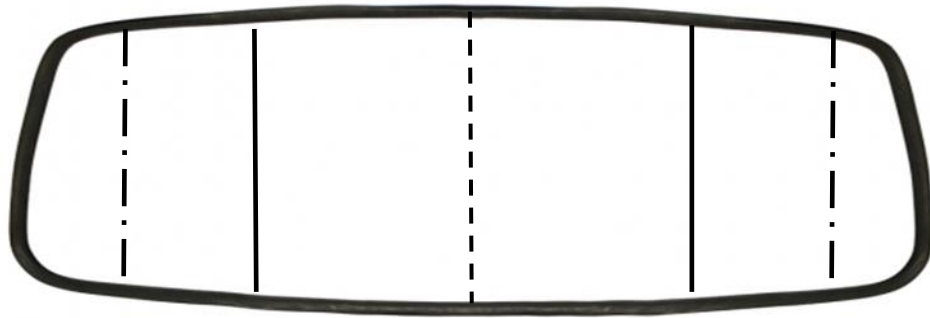


Figure 2: Range of Vision Windshields

Qualitatively and subjectively, I would agree with the middle tier assessments. I know my range of view increased drastically in the areas of illustrations and applications. For example, Figure 1.2 shows a Venn Diagram that emerged out of Sermon Café 3. That I never would have thought of this is evident by the fact that it was not in the Preview Sheet for that Sermon Café. The splitters created it as an ad hoc culmination of their discussion group. It was a great example of feedforwarding in action transforming the collaborative moment. It was a breakout activity. By that I mean collaboration broke out from the limitations of the preview sheets parameters.

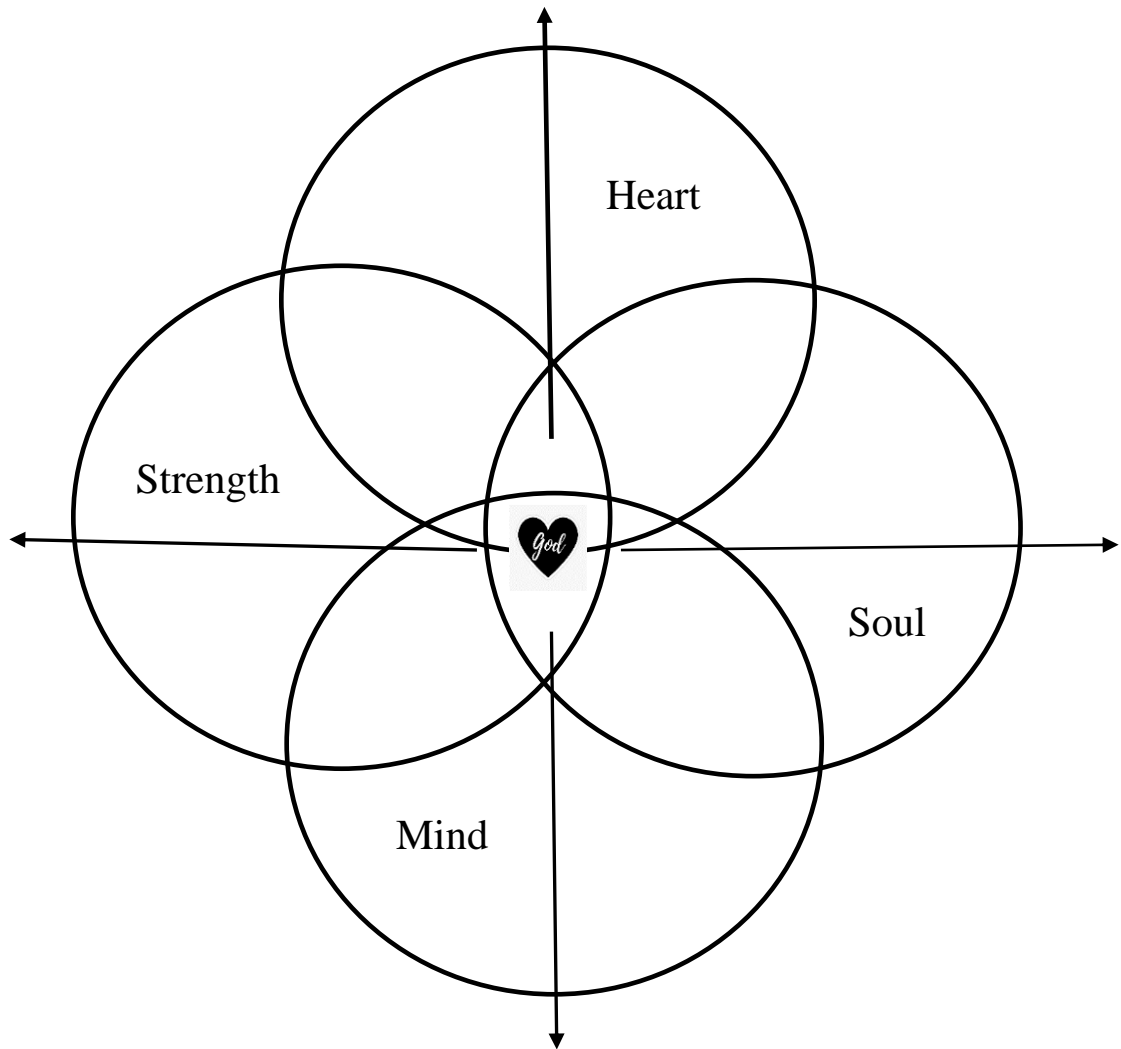


Figure 3: The Greatest Commandment Venn Diagram

This Venn diagram became the core for one of my sermons. It influenced me significantly because it was a startling example of the limitations of my own range of vision. The creation of this visual description of The Greatest Commandment affirmed that there is so much I can learn from others. The applications continued to grow as we thought more and more about it. I shared it with another congregation, and they took to it with voracity and eagerness, adding their own discussion points to it.

The core of the diagram and our lives is loving God. This is the first and foremost commandment. This is what unifies the four aspects of loving God. This is where God indwells us through the Spirit of Jesus who empowers us to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength.

Every aspect of loving God and the acts that emerge out of them emanate from a common core. Loving God with your heart emerges from the same place as loving God with all your mind, etc. Because the four components (splitters) emerge from the same core they are also touched by one another. Loving God with all your soul is effect by loving God with all your strength. This is true of all combinations the four make possible.

Another example of collaborative intelligence is this relational definition of love that came from the experiences of one of the women in the Café. I include it here again to emphasize the importance of the contribution of others. This was far outside my range of vision.

- If someone really loves you, you won't have to fight for their attention.
- If someone really loves you, they will make you feel at home.
- If someone really loves you, they won't let you go to sleep wondering if you matter.
- If someone really loves you, they will notice the things no one else sees.
- If someone really loves you, they will never hurt you and, if they do, you will see in their eyes that they are hurting, too.
- If someone really loves you, they will appreciate your nude soul far more than your nude body.

- If someone really loves you, they'll do more than click the "like" button on your posts.
- If someone really love you, they will never forget the first day you started talking.
- If someone really loves you, they'll understand no matter how good your heart is, it also gets tired.
- If someone really loves you, no matter what or how or why or when, they will always let you know they care.
- If someone really loves you, they'll notice and care that you've been acting differently and not get mad about it.
- If someone really love you, they will embrace your uniqueness.
- If someone really loves you, even though the see you at your worst they will always think you're still the best.
- If someone really loves you, you don't have to force them to stay with you.
- If someone really loves you, they will help make you a better person.

Preachers are missing out on so much innovation, creativity, and experiences if they do not take opportunities to hear the stories of others and how they understand the text and their testimony of the Word's effect in their lives. They have so much to bring to sermon-crafting.

Assessing The Five Major Movements in My Project

Earlier I said that the Sermon Café had five major movements: recruiting participants, exegeting the text or topic, hosting the collaboration, synthesizing all the input, and delivering our sermon. I want to assess the project of the basis of these five factors.

The next time I do this I would aim for a less homogeneous group. I am intrigued by McClure's notion of taking the Sermon Café out into the public realm of the unchurched and unbelievers. I would also want to try a more controversial topic.

When it comes to exegesis the process not only demonstrated the importance of possessing such skills, but also new ways for them to grow. The Sermon Café increased my attention to small group dynamics and improved forming questions that lead to conversations that matter. It was exciting to witness how the Sermon Café ignited in others new and fresh discoveries of how to see and understand Scripture and its application.

Hosting the cafés energized me at every angle. I am an extrovert and hospitality has been the most crucial characteristic of my ministry for nearly forty years. It is the strength of my ethos within this congregation. This played to my personality, ministry gifts, and influence. It let me use them in a new way and sharpened my skills.

Integrating the contents from the Sermon Cafés into usable material in crafting the sermon was a new challenge. I was pushed beyond my regular routine, but this is where growth occurs. Most participants saw subtle changes in my style and delivery, but nothing revolutionary. The effect of collaboration on form and style is an area I need to pay closer attention to next time. Still, it was a fresh way of preaching.

I did not excel at gathering feedback. I needed to create a more definitive and intentional way of gathering it. My approach tended to be more conversational on a personal level with the participants. This is an area for improvement moving forward.

Based on my personal observations and informal feedback of the participants, the project was a great success. I instructed them at the start as to the nature of my project

and asked them to consider my general intelligence, biblical intelligence, rhetorical intelligence, emotional intelligence, and cultural intelligence. The group of participants knew me well. Rather than an obstacle, the accrued ethos of my twenty-one years of influence within this congregation as a preacher and elder contributed to a deep level of authenticity, transparency, and expertise in their description of my range of vision at the beginning and the end of the project. The windshields (Figure 2, pages 100-4) show others perceived an increase in my range of view (the primary goal of the project) coinciding with my own assessment and the feedback I received throughout the process. James McCambridge questions the validity of the Hawthorne effect.² In my context there is no mitigating effect here. The windshields may be creative, rudimentary, and unconventional, but they are authentic, informed, and valid.

Everyone who participated would be glad to do it again and said they would miss it once we finished. This could be attributed, in part, to being a new experience for them, being invited to participate in an area of ministry previously inaccessible to them. They were also energized by the communal approach and hearing the voices of others speak to the text and its applications in ways they would not normally see.

Secondary Lessons Learned

This project taught the value of planning. I had to set five schedules: one for the invitation period, one for preparing and delivering the preview sheets, one for preparing an agenda for the Sermon Café meetings, one for creating and preaching the sermons, and

² Jim McCambridge, “Systematic Review of the Hawthorne Effect: New Concepts are Needed to Study Research Participation Effects,” *Journal of Clinical Epidemiology* 67, no. 3 (March 2014): 275. “Perhaps, this is not at all surprising, although it does undermine further the idea that there is a single effect, which can be called the Hawthorne effect. Rather, the effect, if it exists, is highly contingent on task and context.”

one for feedback of the cafés, the sermons, and the completed project. Administrative skills are not my strength. This pushed me and drained me. For a few weeks I was interacting with multiple sermons during the week. The early proponents of collaborative preaching write about lifting the burden off the preacher (and in some ways it did), but it also created new ones to bear.³ Preaching has a sovereign component to it. At some point the preacher is left alone to work through Scripture and input from others to produce a sermon. Collaboration increased that burden from the simple standpoint of adding more voices into the mix. Ritschl, a strong proponent of the church bearing the burden of preaching because it is a church ministry still wisely cautions,

...we must be very careful to distinguish sharply between the real burden and duty of the minister, which cannot be shared with others, and the self-imposed burdens and tasks which can very well be transferred to the congregation.⁴

I did not make good use of the time between the Sermon Cafés and the preaching of the sermon. Three weeks were scheduled between each Sermon Café and its corresponding sermon to give me time to process all the extra information, but also as an incubator time for Sermon Café members to add ideas that might spring up in the weeks between the two events; in other words, keeping the conversation going.⁵ I could have promoted and cultivated this liminal space better. I like to let a sermon simmer in my mind for at least a month before preaching it (marinading effect), to live with it awhile before putting it into words. Putting the sermon on paper then leads to new and deeper

³ Dietrich Ritschl, *A Theology of Proclamation* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1963), 16-19.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁵ McClure (1995), 50. "Collaborative preaching is designed to place before an entire congregation, each Sunday morning, an ongoing, core conversation."

content. Finding ways to keep the conversation of each Sermon Café alive and growing during the weeks leading up to the preaching could yield even deeper discoveries. I did not anticipate this feature of feedforwarding well enough to implement it, but I will the next time. This was a new approach for me, as well as my guests, and I have much to learn and room to grow.

Keeping momentum alive is crucial. You must start with a “bang.” Once you have momentum you must keep it from coming to a stop. I felt this expiring enthusiasm during the last Sermon Café, both in myself and the participants. The leader’s own enthusiasm, heaps of praise and gratitude, and interesting and varied small group activities should keep things moving forward in interesting ways.

Make good use of the preview sheets to create and maintain anticipation. Learn to form stimulating questions. For the first four weeks, a spirit of anticipation was alive. Participants looked forward to the Sermon Cafés, often expressing they could not wait for the next one. Through six weeks I was able to generate enough impetus to see the project through to the end and leave them wanting more, but it was not easy and required high levels of catalytic intentionality.

Another side effect that arose from the Sermon Café was that participants felt more invested in the sermon-crafting process. One person observed in a feedback session that I interacted with them in “adult” ways. I did not treat them as children but as equal collaborators. I made genuine space for their input which was affirmed by what they heard in the sermon content. The Sermon Cafés unlocked the priesthood of all believers and valued the contribution of each person’s giftedness. I take these comments and similar feedback to conclude I made the shift from expert to host skillfully and gave them

empowerment in the process. They each were more active listeners in the worship services in which these sermons were preached. In these six sermons preaching moved from “performative to formative preaching.”⁶ In another feedback session, one sister referred to the Sermon Cafés as the most spiritually enriching and growing experience she recalled in the life of our congregation. Many shared the sentiment of this feedback. It was revolutionary, not only for its novelty, but for the authenticity of being asked to participate.

Delivering collaborative sermons requires a different language than delivering a monologue. At first, I was mechanical and robotic making statements like, “One member of the Sermon Café observed” After the second sermon I got some feedback that I need to integrate the contributions from the Sermon Café members into my delivery more seamlessly, more organically. It was not necessary to identify the source of each contribution, matter of fact it was awkward and might cause disassociation between the members who participated and the rest of the congregation. In the second half of the sermon series I was able to make some of the transitions McClure suggests.⁷ Still, this is an area of the collaborative sermon-crafting process in which I am a novice. Lose cautions preachers to be aware . . .

⁶ David J. Lose, “Preaching as Conversation,” in *Under the Oak Tree: The Church as Community of Conversation in a Conflicted and Pluralistic World*, eds. Ronald J. Allen, John S. McClure, and O. Wesley Allen Jr. (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2013), 86. The whole quote is, “In recent years, I have become increasingly persuaded that we need to move for performative to formative preaching that more intentionally seeks to ‘equip the saints for the work of ministry.’ (Eph. 4:12)...I believe a more participatory style of preaching holds great promise.

⁷ John S. McClure, *The Roundtable Pulpit*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 73-94. McClure offers practical ways to translate the language of roundtable (Sermon Café) and into the sermon.

. . . of sermon forms and language that separate the preacher from the community” (a hierarchical model of preaching) and holds out hope that the goal of a provisional monologue that arises from a conversational homiletic seeks to bridge and eventually erase such divides.”⁸

Eventually I caught on to the collaborative spirit of the tone, but affecting form was a challenge. My sermons kept their same form and the times I struggled in writing the sermons or delivering them may be traced back to not having a conversational form.⁹

Collaborative learning is a different kind of learning. One criticism I have from the conversational models of McClure, Schade, and Rose is that they were flat. They implemented one format. People converse better in different contexts. Not everyone learns nor dialogues the same way. My first Sermon Café was built on four small groups rotating from one table to another and encountering a new discussion. It worked well but I also heard people ask for other formats. They would have tired of six weeks of small groups rotating from table to table, so I decided to mix up the discussion groups. I used three levels of group dynamics: small, medium, and large. I added drawing and music to the conversations. A host of these types of gatherings would benefit from some learning and training in both group dynamics and the different ways people learn (audial, visual, participatory). I wish I had thought of using one-on-one conversations (the kinds we most often have). There is a great potential for depth and personal sharing in these encounters.

⁸ Lose, 78.

⁹ Ibid., 78. “Much of the same can be said about sermon form, which must itself be more conversational, imitating the give and take of the conversations the preacher has had with congregation members in preparing the sermon.” This is a challenge for any form of roundtable or café format because there is a lot of conversation happening at the same time and it is impossible to listen in on, let alone listen in on accurately, to each shifting dynamic and then format your sermon to match that engagement. The tape recorders helped capturing and preserving these dynamics, but it is also hard to discern between multiple conversations happening at the same time.

I also did not use multi-media, but the applications there are endless. Sculpting and painting would provide some interesting results. Formats involving drawing, sculpting, music, poetry push people outside their comfort zones and into mediums of communication they avoid, but for others a simple face-to-face conversation in a small group is a scary and unsettling proposition. A successful Sermon Café will provide a little discomfort for everyone (which is why the host as encourager is critical).

Participating in the Sermon Cafés piqued the participants interest in the preaching of the collaborative sermons. Participants felt a sense of ownership. They were listening to hear their contributions to the process. Their contemplation of the texts and topics increased their understanding of the sermons. The previews and Sermon Cafés were deep Bible study, deeper than the ones they were used to attending. It was a growth experience for each participant and deepened their spiritual strength.

Individuals were not the only ones who grew. There was also communal growth. Working together in the Sermon Café groups increased and strengthened bonds of fellowship. The Sermon Cafés made room for the theology of mutuality and interdependence to work and grow together. They were listening to each other, learning from each other, encouraging each other. I did not expect this level of collaboration. My myopic approach failed to appreciate the dynamic of collaboration around the roundtable. It took me by surprise, but I think it was also encouraged through my example of hospitality. Requiring each one participate in at least one way and encouraging a welcoming and accepting posture toward the ideas and thoughts, gifts and experiences of others, especially those different from your own, generated a spirit of welcoming one another, accepting one another, and learning from one another.

This was a positive experience for me and my fellow collaborators. It can be a useful homiletical tool in the preacher's toolbox. There are genuine spiritual benefits and ways to grow using collaborative methods. I will now follow this optimistic assessment with some concluding thoughts.

Conclusion

Do collaborative models of sermon-crafting such as feedforwarding provide preachers a way out of the silo confinements of their study and into a wider world of vision and perspective? I believe they can.¹ Feedforwarding is much more than feedback. Feedback evaluates how well I communicated my sovereign vision onto others. My project was proactive. The Sermon Café invited others into my sacred and sovereign space to expand my range of vision and craft sermons that were community-based rather than individualistic. Inviting, initiating, and fostering meaningful and significant conversations holds promise for increasing a preacher's range of vision by listening actively and attentively to the testimony of others. The assessment shows that building strong bonds of mutuality and communal interdependency broadens a preacher's view of the text and its application to the lives of those listening.

The shift in posture is adaptive and challenging. Lose describes the ministry shift in this way,

From this point of view, the preacher plays the role neither of the expert witness on all matters religious nor of merely a conversational facilitator. Rather, the preacher plays the role of coach, conductor, teacher, and encourager, always deploying his or her expertise to help all members of the congregation know the story, share the story, and live the story better.²

¹ Daniel. Overdorf, *One Year to Better Preaching: 52 Exercises to Hone Your Skills*, (Grand Rapids: Kregel Ministry, 2013), 104 lists Harold Keck under the "I Tried It" section of the chapter on assembling a feed-forward group. Finding practitioners of collaborative methods was a lot more difficult than academic proponents, but Keck was one who had tried it. As for the main purpose of my project, Keck affirms, "The insight enabled me to address the context more fully with the audience than I might have otherwise . . .".

² David J. Lose, "Preaching as Conversation," in *Under the Oak Tree: The Church as Community of Conversation in a Conflicted and Pluralistic World*, eds. Ronald J. Allen, John S. McClure, and O. Wesley Allen Jr. (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2013), 90. Schade,

In most churches the priesthood of all believers remains a virtually untapped resource to the preaching ministry. Many preachers suffer in silent anguish and agony from the weight of speaking for others when the opportunity to invite others near to help is sitting right in front of them.

Do not be fooled by the burden-bearing language of collaborative methods as making preaching easier. Collaborative preaching is not easy. Preachers could benefit in some training in conversational brainstorming and collective intelligence such as The World Café, Appreciative Inquiry, and coaching/mentoring skills. The methods are time consuming, much more than sovereign preaching. If you are looking for a way to lighten the load of your work week, this is not it. My workload increased rather than decreased. The singularity of the sovereign preaching silo streamlines the processes of sermon-crafting, but compiling and sifting through the contributions of others is more complex and arduous. The transfer in collaborative sermon-crafting from monological speech to dialogical speech is an adaptive shift.³ It was a challenge for me. But if you are looking for a way to enrich your weekly sermon preparation, feedforwarding will deliver satisfying rewards and increase your own gifts and skills. The reward is worth the effort.

Preaching is a difficult task. The early proponents of collaborative sermon-crafting (Barr, Howe, Ritschl) focused on relieving the burden of the preaching ministry

105 uses an interesting phrase describing the role and effect of the facilitator (host) on the process as “passionate impartiality.”

³ John S. McClure, *The Roundtable Pulpit*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 40. “The most significant problem, however, was the failure to discern the precise nature of dialogical speech. How could preachers transform the actual principles of dialogue into the nuts-and-bolts of homiletical practice? Given the monological character of preaching, what would the language of dialogue sound like in a sermon? What kind of logic and rhetoric would be inclusive of the experience and thoughts of the hearer?”

from the lone shoulders of the preacher. Contemporary advocates (McClure, Schade, Rose, Ron Allen, and O. Wesley Allen, Jr.) shifted the emphasis to inclusion. One reason for this may be that collaboration increases the burden, but the other is the effect of postmodern thought. While there is a supportive fellowship that comes from collaboration with others, the process of melding the contributions with your own into a form and style you can genuinely deliver is taxing (perhaps this lessens through experience). While the notion of removing the burden of preaching is commendable, sharing the ministry is a more reasonable goal. Collaboration strengthened our shared values. The burden of preaching will always be there. Jeremiah wanted to quit (Jer. 20:7-13). Paul confesses that the burden of the churches is a daily pressure (2 Cor. 11:28). There will always be an “in season” and “out of season” for preachers (2 Tim. 4:2).

Collaborative models require and are blessed by the investment of others working together with you. My participants enjoyed and loved their experience, but none of them would want to do it every week.⁴ Most of my participants thought bi-annual, maybe quarterly cafés would work best. Regardless of the frequency, this intentionality and commitment to the work of preaching produces benefits worth the effort.

Preaching is a ministry that has been traditionally and historically limited to an ordained few. Most Christians are strangers to it. Both the preacher and the congregation suffer from this chasm that is hard to bridge, but it is a gap the church has created, and it will take the church to narrow it. Collaboration holds hope for building such bridges.

⁴ Ibid., 62. “Members of the sermon roundtable should change regularly, at least every four months. For continuity, however, membership should change on a rotating basis.”

Collaborative models can happen on many different levels. My Sermon Café was not the only way to do it. It can happen among staff members. Among churches of Christ, it can be used to provide preachers with a way of collaborating with their elders that could radically change the dynamics of the preacher-elder relationship for the better as co-workers. The face-to-face effect is transformative. It is the genius in Levinas' ideology that McClure's model creatively adapts to a homiletical context. Face-to-face encounters transform people in relational ways. The Sermon Cafés transformed all of us. Preachers can collaborate with other preachers. At the far extreme, preachers could reach out and try to collaborate with unbelievers. The applications are nearly endless and limited only by your own creativity. Collaborative models are flexible and adaptable to your preaching context. There is a natural versatility in it. Each situation allows for its own structure and implementation. Collaboration among preachers, for example, would have a primary goal different from collaboration among unbelievers, yet both applications would bring fruitful results and, regarding my own personal goal, widen the range of vision. As far as my project attests, collaborative models can help preachers take off the blinders and grow out of their own myopia.

Overall, I would do it again. I miss those gatherings in my home and dialoging face-to-face about the meaning of Scripture. It was a transformative experience. The move from monologue to dialogue, from sovereign-wise to other-wise, from silo to stereo; was healthy. Crafting sermons in the surround sound of conversation gives preachers a more panoramic view of proclaiming the God's message to the world.

I cannot predict where the next move in homiletical theory will turn. But I do know the postmodern world is open to collaborative approaches today. Quoting the

prophet Isaiah, Paul told the Corinthian Christians, “At a favorable time I listened to you (2 Cor. 6:2)”. Postmodernism is a favorable time for preachers to open their ears and engage in careful listening to the meaning others can bring to your preaching the Word of God. It is a time for others to listen, too. The sage says, “Make the most of your time (Eph. 5:15-16)”. In our time and place in Western Civilization, collaboration will help you take advantage of your time in the pulpit.

Appendix 1: The Initial Invitation Letter

This is the letter I sent after my initial face-to-face invitation. It explains in detail what the project is and how the invitee will participate.

Dear brethren,

Thank you for considering helping me in my dissertation project, *Sermon Café*, a “feedforwarding” (vs. “feedback”) approach to crafting a sermon. I am inviting you into a process I hold with the highest regard and love, preaching God’s Word. I have treasured the privilege of preaching for almost forty years. I am inviting you to participate in one of the great loves of my life. I am extending this invitation as an act of hospitality and will rejoice in your willingness to accept it as such.

What follows may seem like a lot to process, but I have tried to anticipate and cover any questions you might have. I need to know by January 12th if you would like to participate. I pray hopefully that you will! I value what God has given each of you to bring to this exciting process.

The Invitation

I am inviting you for two reasons. First, I want to grow as a preacher and one of the ways to do this is by enlarging my worldview. I, like you, see Scripture and the world only through my own limitations and context. It’s similar to a horse with blinders. Inviting you into the process of examining Scripture’s meaning and application will broaden my range of view and help me see and seek truths that would never have come to my mind. The beauty of feedforwarding is that rather than hearing this perspective afterward as feedback, I can hear it ahead of time and include it in the preaching event.

Second, I need your help to finish my degree. This is my utilitarian motive. It is an important one to me. I have spent the last eight years to get to this point. It has been an incredible journey of learning and development and now, as I near then end, I need your help down the final stretch. I thank you for your commitment to the Word, to preaching, and to me.

The Plan

I plan to preach six lessons based on the missional theme of “The Power of Love” (I arrived at the idea for this sermon series with the help of previous unrelated conversations with John C., Tim G., John W., Randy T., Bill P., and Stu S.). The six sermons are:

1. The Power of Love
2. God is Love
3. Love as the Greatest Commandment: loving God
4. Love as the Greatest Commandment: loving others
5. The Love of Jesus
6. Living the Love of Jesus Today

Feedforwarding is a collaborative communicative action. Participants will break into small groups to discuss various elements of the sermon-crafting process. I will provide you with a one-page handout prior to meeting together identifying some of the key passages and points (which I hope will be enlarged during collaboration, but it is starting point). The group will meet for six consecutive weekly 90-minute sessions in my home where I will serve as your host (not teacher). The majority of the time will involve you in interpersonal dialogues in personal small group settings, moving around four tables,

discussing different aspects of the sermon. These will be informal and transparent times of honest reflection. *Each person must add something* to the discussion for this to be effective and each person's contribution will be valued equally. I believe our familiarity with one another will allow for and encourage this transparency and help each of us grow closer to one another.

There will be multiple ways to record the results (paper tablecloths for noting ideas or drawing picture, each table will have a notetaker, community board for sharing ideas, as well as my observations of discussions and body language, etc.). These will be recorded (audio and video) so that I can recall them. After each Sermon Café I will collect all the accumulated data and use it to craft the upcoming sermon. This sermon will be a collaborative effort and will reflect the input of the group rather than my single, solo, sovereign perspective. You can expect to hear in the sermon things like, "One sister wondered..." or "One member of our group struggled with..." "One brother had the idea...".

Tentative Meeting Plan

- Welcoming Introduction (5 minutes)
- Rotate between 4 small group discussion tables (16-18 minutes per table)
- Concluding thoughts from the meeting's dynamic (10 minutes)

The delay between each Sermon Café and the delivery of the sermon allows me the time needed to put all the information together into a coherent sermon. It also allows time for sharing other ideas that might emerge following the Sermon Café.

The Time Commitment

Here is the tentative schedule.

- Sermon Café 1: January 29th Sermon Delivery: February 20th
- Sermon Café 2: February 5th Sermon Delivery: February 27th
- Sermon Café Sermon Café 3: February 12th Sermon Delivery: March 6th
- Sermon Café 4: February 19th Sermon Delivery: March 13th
- Sermon Café 5: February 26th Sermon Delivery: March 20th
- Sermon Café 6: March 5th Sermon Delivery: March 27th

This *tentative* schedule uses a Saturday date. I did this just to give you a look into the time commitment (and it is a commitment, one I am making to you and you to me). This is basically a two-month commitment on *our* part; mine and yours. I need two things from you by January 12th. First, will you accept my invitation and help me grow my gift of preaching and achieve my Doctor of Ministry? If so, please use the second email to verify your willingness to help and which time slots are best for you.

Grace and peace,

Stephen

Here is a sample of a mock Sermon Café:

Welcome (5 minutes)

Thank you for joining me in my home today. There are drinks and snacks available to you whenever you'd like. I am thankful to God for your love for His Word, for me as a preacher, and the congregation in Leesburg. What we are doing today will help me create a fuller and better sermon than the one I could produce on my own.

Today's Sermon Café will focus on the Beatitudes in Matthew 5:1-12. You have the handout that I sent to you. You will 16-18 minutes at each table. <<Prayer>> Let's break into groups and start talking. Remember: everyone needs to contribute at least one

thing at each table. Here are the small groups for today... When the timer sounds, just pick up and move to the next table and keep talking.

Collaboration (64-72 minutes)

Table 1: Which of these beatitudes makes the most sense and why? Which one do you find most difficult and why?

Table 2: Stephen noted that many scholars refer to these as the “Bill of Rights of the Kingdom of God or the “New Testament’s 10 Commandments” or “The Magna Carta of the New Covenant” or as The Meta-Virtues of the Christian Faith.” Do you think this is an accurate way to view them?

Table 3: Do you think it is right for each virtue to be rewarded?

Table 4: Share an example when you were blessed by one of these beatitudes.

Concluding Remarks (10-13 minutes)

Thank you for your participation. We will take a few moments for some large group reflection. What went well? Anything people struggled with? Anything we missed?

If you think of any concepts, applications, or illustrations, please feel free to share them with me. Today is a seeding to promote more reflection and discussion.

Appendix 2: The Preview Sheets

Initially my schedule called for sending these out two weeks ahead of time. This provides enough time for reflection and means each participant will have no more than two worksheets active at the same time. These documents must provide key information and thought-provoking questions. There must be a sense of discovery and the opportunity for an “Aha” moment. Interesting previews will build exciting anticipation.

Sermon Café 1 (1/30/2022)

This sermon will be topical and introductory to the series. The Bible is filled with themes running from Genesis to Revelation. These strands of theology unite the sixty-six books of the Bible into one narrative. One of these is love. I like the word “trajectory.” A trajectory is a curved line, an arc, used to delineate the direction of an orbit through space. In more common use it describes a path, a line of development, a progression, although usually in an overarching sense. Think about a trajectory of love in the Bible running from Genesis to Revelation, from creation to eternity. What thoughts come to mind?

In the New American Standard Bible, the word love occurs 684 times. As a comparison, faith and believe occur 649 times. When you add the related words of lovingkindness (182 times) and grace (125 times), then the idea of love is expressed over 1,000 times in the Bible. It is the major theme! When 1 Cor. 13:13 says of faith, hope, love that the greatest is love; God meant it.

Key texts: 1 John 4:7-21; 1 Corinthians 13; Romans 5:6-8 & John 3:16 (Ephesians 2:1-10; Titus 3:4-8a) ; Deuteronomy 6:1-9 & Matthew 22:34-40 (Mark 12:28-34; Luke

10:25-28); John 13:34-35; Romans 8:31-39; Psalm 136. Read and/or listen to these passages often during the next two weeks.

Preparation: these are meant to “prime the pump.”

Come to the first meeting with your own definition of love (this is not a right or wrong exercise; it is a collaboration of meaning).

Reflection: what is the *power* of love?

- Come with a list of three places where you see the power of love at work in the Bible.
- Come with three stories of how you have seen the power of love at work in the world (your life or others). Think of books or movies where the power of love is illustrated (fiction or non-fiction).
- Ponder the juxtaposition of the power of love/the love of power. Does this contrast add anything to this sermon?
- How would you draw the power of love (make an effort, even if stick figures)?
- Listen to song “The Power of Love” by Huey Lewis
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wliVp3poe2c> performance)
<https://genius.com/Huey-lewis-and-the-news-the-power-of-love-lyrics> (lyrics)

Is there anything in the lyrics of this song that could apply to this sermon?

Sermon Café 2 (2/6/2022)

This Sermon Café is a textual study. The sermon will come from 1 John 4:7-21. We will be exploring the meaning and implications of the simple statement, “God is love.” Read the passage over as many times as possible. Other related passages: 1 John

2:1-16; 3:1-24 (“In fact, within 1 John 3:1—5:12 we find the largest clustering of ‘love’ language anywhere in the New Testament, and notably, in no book of the New Testament except the Fourth Gospel does the verb *agapaō* occur half as many times as here— Ben Witherington, *Letters and Homilies for Hellenized Christians*, vol. 1, 526); see also John 3:16-21; 10:11-18; 13:1-38; 14:15-24; 15:1-17; 17:20-26 (please read these at least once)

Question #1: Is there a difference between “God *is* love” and God has love or God does/acts in love? What is the significance of “God is love”?

- a. “We might be inclined to think that ‘God is love’ simply means that God is loving and so is defined by his loving activities, and while that much is true, the phrase seems to mean something more...love is a term to embrace all that God is.” (*Witherington*, 529)
- b. “Love is of God”—God has an unending supply. (*Witherington*, 527)
- c. “Love constitutes the foundation of the author’s thinking about God and Christian community.” (William Loader, *The Johannine Epistles*, 51)
- d. “The energy of love discharges itself along lines which form a triangle, whose points are God, self, and neighbor [*sic*], but the source of all love is God, of whom alone it can be said that He *is* love.” (*Witherington*, 535)
- e. “Our loving is a participation in the loving which first came to us and enabled us to love.” (*Witherington*, 530-31)

WORD STUDY

You have probably heard the Greek word *agapaō* (verb) and *agapē* (noun) are THE great Christian terms for “unconditional love.” I know I am treading on “holy ground,” but the usage of *agapē* is not that exclusive. The words *agapē* and *philē* (“brotherly love”) are at times used interchangeably (see John 3:35—*agapaō* & John 5:20—*phileō*/ John 17:23— *agapaō* & John 16:27— *phileō* / John 20:2— *phileō* & John 21:20— *phileō*). *Agapaō/agapē* existed in the Greek language prior to the New Testament, but its importance grew in the Bible.

“It is a fact that in Greek literature before New Testament times the verb *agapaō* has nowhere near the importance or even the connotations that it has in the New Testament itself. How can we explain the usage in the New Testament? C. H. Dodd puts it this way, “The noun is scarcely found in non-Biblical Greek . . . It is a comparatively cool and colourless [*sic*] word. It is this word, with its noun, that the translators of the Old Testament used by preference for the love of God to man and man’s response, and by doing so they began to fill it with the distinctive content for which paganism, even in its highest forms, had not proper expression. In the New Testament this fresh content is enlarged and intensified through meditation upon the meaning of the death of Christ. It is interesting, in addition, that when pagan religious writers do speak of a god loving, they usually use the word *eros*, which normally refers to sexual desire and love. This is precisely what the New Testament writers do not want to say about God’s love for humankind or God’s character.” (*Witherington*, 528)

What is your reflection on this?

Fill in the blank: The New Testament may not have invented the word,
but it _____ its meaning.

Question #2: Can a person love without knowing and abiding in God? Explain.

- “Loving is a way of getting to know God or getting to know better what God is really like.” (*Witherington, 527*).
- “Human love, however noble and however highly motivated, falls short if it refuses to include the Father and the Son as supreme objects of its affection.” (*Witherington, 527*).
- “It might be said, then, that even the power and the ability to love are a gift from God. This is not a human trait . . . The point is that our entire capacity to love anyone comes from God’s prior pouring out of his love into us.” (*Witherington, 538*).

Question #3: In what two ways is the love of God seen and expressed in this passage?

- “Exhibit A of the loving character of God is, paradoxically enough, that he sent his Son to die for a sinful and ungrateful world . . . unique or one of a kind . . . the apostle can convey no idea of love to anyone except by pointing to propitiation . . . If the propitiatory death of Jesus is eliminated from the love of God, it might be unfair to say that the love of God is robbed of all meaning, but it is certainly robbed of its apostolic meaning.” (*Witherington, 529 & 530*).
- “...it is only when a person loves his fellow Christian . . . that he fully experiences the love of God in his own heart and knows the presence

of God with him . . . Instead of physically seeing the Father, our author stresses that if we fulfill the commandment to love one another, we know and experience the presence of God in our midst . . . ‘let us love one another, and then we may be sure that He is not only *with* us but *in* us, and not merely *is* but *abides*.’” .(*Witherington, 532*).

- “There is something fraudulent about the person who makes a claim to love God while hating a brother or sister in Christ . . . this person’s hatred has short-circuited or disabled the ability to love God.”

(*Witherington, 537*).

Question #4: What is the relationship between love and fear? Do we stop fearing God if we love Him?

- “Real love, he claims, which results in spiritual boldness, ‘flings fear out of doors’ (a quote from Robert Laws, *The Tests of Life: A Study of the First Epistle of St. John*, 1909). *Steven Smalley, 1, 2, 3 John, Word Commentary, vol. 51, 247*.
- Think about this relationship in light of the life of Jesus. He should live this out fully and completely.

Sermon Café 3 (02/13/2022)

This is a textual study. Read or listen to Matthew 22:34-40; Mark 12:28-34; Luke 10:25-29; Deuteronomy 6:1-15; Leviticus 19:1-18. In Matthew and Mark this passage occurs in a context a series of questions being thrown at Jesus to test him (Luke puts it in a different context). From Mark 12 it appears to me that this was an often-asked question. I can imagine each of the different rabbis with their own answers. “Ahh, honoring the

Sabbath is the most important because it is said to be holy to God.” Another might say, “Honor your father and mother because this shows mutual gratitude for all the love, they gave you as children.” Another might say, “Don’t commit adultery because this is the foundation of marriage and family and society.” Still another, taking the high road, says, “You shall have no other gods before you because without His deliverance we would have nothing.”

What’s interesting is that Jesus goes outside the Ten. He combines a text from Deuteronomy 6 and Leviticus 19 (see above).

Read these texts and think about how they are similar to Exodus 20:1-17. Many commentators see the Ten Commandments as five commandments honoring God and five honoring others. Jesus sees life in this way here in the Gospels; the greatest commandment is divided into two parts, loving God and loving neighbor. What do you think about Jesus boiling it all down to one commandment?

Loving God is a quote from Deuteronomy 6:5. *Do you see a relationship between it and Deuteronomy 6:4? How important is it to have this in first place in your life?*

On one hand, to “love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength” is a metaphor for “*with all your being*” (this is the *lumper* approach). *What does loving God with all your being mean to you?*

On the other hand, I’d like to explore the different parts (this is the *splitter* approach):

What does it mean to love God with all your heart?

What does it mean to love God with all your soul?

What does it mean to love God with all your strength/might?

What does it mean to love God with all your mind?

What do you make of the order? Heart and soul are always first. In Deuteronomy it followed by might/strength. Luke adds “mind.”

What can get in the way of loving God with all your being; with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength, all your mind? What encourages you to love God with all your being?

Which are the best biblical examples of people who love God with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength?

Are there any personal examples of people you would say love or loved the Lord God with all their heart, soul, strength, and mind? What is it about them?

Sermon Café 4 (02/20/2022)

This is a textual study. Key passages: Luke 10:25-37; Matthew 22:34-40; Mark 12:28-31; Leviticus 19:1-18.

This week’s Sermon Café will pick up with the second part of Jesus’ “2-in-1” Greatest Commandment. It is significant that Jesus said “Loving the Lord you God with all you heart, soul, mind, and strength” as *foremost*. He then pivots to include “Love your neighbor as yourself” (a quote from Leviticus 19:18). I would like you to concentrate on the Luke reading. It is in a different place than Matthew and Mark and has a famous story that illustrates this command. Here are a few things to think about as we prepare to come together this Sunday.

1. In Matthew Jesus says this second commandment is “like” the first. What do you think Jesus means? The Greek word is *homoios* (this is sometimes used as a prefix in compound words such as “homogeneous”) and means “like, similar, resembling (it is often used in Jesus’ parables; “the kingdom of heaven is *like*...).

2. What do you hear Jesus saying when He says that all the Law and the prophets “depend” (NAS) on these two commandments. Look up other translations for “depend.” Go to https://www.blueletterbible.org/nasb20/1ch/1/1/s_339001, type Matthew 22:40 in the search box, choose the translation you use, and hit enter. Click on the box titled TOOLS and the Greek words used in the text will appear. Scroll down to the word kremantai and click on G2910 and peruse the definitions given there.
3. How does Luke 10 answer the question of “who?” is my neighbor?
4. This second commandment is set in the context of loving yourself. How does this come into play? How should we love ourselves? Can the way you love yourself get in the way of loving my neighbor?
5. List the last 10 neighbors you loved.

This will get your thinking started!

Sermon Café 5 Preview (02/27/2022)

The last two sermons in this series will transition from the theological to the practical. In sermon #5 we will converse about the Love of Jesus. He is our example and in this café, I want us to consider how we see the love of God in Jesus’ life and ministry, but I do not want to detach this from how you have experienced the love of Jesus in your own life. Here are some questions to reflect on in preparation for Sunday.

Key Texts: Mark 10:21; John 13-17; the Cross narratives; Romans 5:1-8.

1. What stories in the Gospel demonstrate the love of Jesus to you, explain?

2. Not surprisingly among the Gospels, the Gospel of John (the most theological of the Gospels) uses the word most often in connection with Jesus (i.e., John 3:16). Scan through John 13-17 and list ways Jesus shows His love to the disciples.
3. How do the stories of Jesus death on the cross show the love of God to us?
4. Do the resurrection narratives show Jesus' love, too? If you think so, give examples and explain.
5. Identify personal stories when the love of God been poured out in your heart (Romans 5:5).

Sermon Café 6 Preview (03/6/2022)

Well, my fellow-sermon crafters, we have reached the end. This Sunday will be the last in this series of Sermon Cafés. Let me again take a sentence to thank you with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength for you collaborating with me in this sermon making experience. It has been a joy for me and, I hope, for you, too. In this last session the Café considers how we might live out the love of God in our world today. I know I said we would be turning to more practical lessons about love, but, for Christians, ethics emerges out of theology. This looks like a lot of verses, but many of them as very short and probably total less than some of the previous previews. I have highlighted the verses I find most important for this collaboration.

Texts: John 13:34-35; 14:15, 23; 15:10-12; 17:22-26; Romans 12:9; 13:8-10; 15:30; 1 Corinthians 8:1; 13:1ff; 16:14, 22, 24; 2 Corinthians 5:14-21; Galatians 2:20; 5:13-14, 22-23; Ephesians 3:14-21; 4:2, 15-16; 5:1; Philippians 1:9-11; 2:1-11; Colossians 1:3-8; 2:1-4; 3:12-17; 1 Thessalonians 1:3; 3:11-13; 4:1-12; 5:8; 2 Thessalonians 1:3; 3:1-5; 1 Timothy 1:5; 2 Timothy 1:7, 13; 2:22; 3:10; Philemon 1:4-7;

Hebrews 10:24; 13:1; James 2:8; 1 Peter 4:8; 2 Peter 1:5-7; 1 John 2:15-17; 2 John; 3 John; Jude 1:17-23. Also, Ephesians 2:9-11 & Titus 2:11-14.

1. Which verses do you think are most important for this lesson of living out the love of God in this world? Why? (Knowing the over-achievers, you are for Scripture, limit your answer to no more than five).
2. Discuss how loving one another (other Christians) is evangelistic. Can it be prone to turning inside to ourselves to the neglect of the world? Explain.
3. Describe what the phrase “zealous for good works” means to you?
4. How do we love the world for Christ? Is it simply by doing good or must it include sharing the Gospel?
5. How did you live out the love of God this past week
6. What would a church that is living out the love of God look like in the world?
7. Is there a mission statement for the church that emerges out of this sermon series?

If so, write it down.

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