



Forum for
Theological
Exploration



Training for Student Preachers

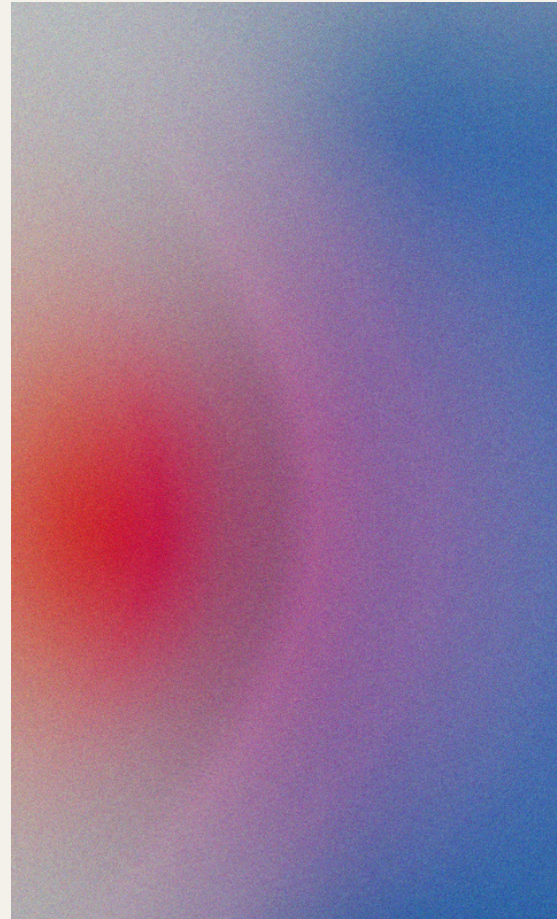
Pres House at the University of Wisconsin-Madison
Nii Addo Abrahams

Part of the UKIRK Launch Series

INVITING STUDENTS TO DISCOVER WHO THEY ARE,
WHO GOD IS,
THE GIFTS GOD HAS GIVEN THEM,
AND HOW THEY ARE CALLED TO SERVE AND LEAD

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Training for Student Preachers

Pres House - University of Wisconsin, Madison

Rev. Nii Addo Abrahams

Basic summary of the program:

At this training, we introduce students to the theology of preaching, some basic sermon frameworks, and the idea of a “core affirmation.” In the training, students practice reading a text, identifying possible core affirmations for a sermon, and moving from a core affirmation to a sermon “map” using one of two sermon frameworks. Students who participate in preaching training then have the opportunity to preach at Pres House during Sunday worship. They draft and write their sermon in stages, receiving feedback from a pastor along the way. The training itself is 1.5-2 hrs. Students who are asked to preach then have another timeline specific for their preaching date. We also encourage our student leaders to participate as a leadership development opportunity.

Materials and other resources needed

- Definitions of preaching
- Core affirmation worksheet
- Four-page sermon
- The homiletical plot/five-stage sermon
- Sermon beginnings and endings
- Markerboard and/or large post-its
- Bibles
- Writing utensils/pens

Basic summary of the program (cont.):

All students who participate in the training complete a brief survey immediately after the training. If a student is given a preaching date, they are required to have at least three meetings with a pastor throughout the writing process and receive feedback on their progress between meetings.

Brief description of why the program is designed or organized the way it is:

We want students to understand preaching as a technical practice (e.g. using good transitions, writing for the ear vs. the eye, repetition, etc.) as well as a spiritual practice (e.g. prayer, discernment, listening for God's voice, being a witness). This training teaches both. It has the added bonus of giving students a taste of how challenging it can be to write a sermon!

What do you hope the students discern, discover, or reflect upon during their participation?

We hope they learn how to discern multiple "words" from any given text, rather than just one, and that through that discernment, they gain experience in approaching a text with curiosity and openness. We hope they discover their preaching voice and what it means to listen for the Spirit's voice through Scripture (as opposed to approaching a text having already decided what it means). We hope they reflect on their own assumptions about Scripture, preaching, and their role in bearing witness to God's work in the world.

What action(s) do you hope their participation inspires after the program or experience is over in both the short-term and long-term?

We hope all of the students who participate have the opportunity to preach, but sometimes the calendar doesn't allow that. In the long-term, we hope that the skills and wisdom they gain through the process impacts the way they speak about God outside of our community; that they become better attuned to God's presence and work in the world and feel more confident telling others what they see.

What have you discerned, discovered, seen or reflected upon as you have engaged students in this program/practice?

The thing I've reflected on the most is probably my own preaching. Teaching others how to preach has made me a better preacher because I'm constantly returning to the basics and thinking about what is actually essential.

Some Descriptions of Preaching

- 1) "*preach* -- To give moral or religious advice, especially in a tiresome manner."
-- Webster's New World Dictionary
- 2) "Preaching is the bringing of truth through personality."
-- Phillips Brooks. *Lectures on Preaching*.
- 3) "Preaching intends to re-enact in the lives of preacher and hearer the saving acts of God in Christ as witnessed in Scripture."

-- Don Wardlaw

- * 4) "The best of gospel preaching is at once proclamation and celebration . . . Celebration is both the literal and the symbolic or ritual expression of praise or joy . . . A part of the genius of Black preaching has been its capacity to generate this very kind of celebration, despite the hardest of circumstances."

-- Henry Mitchell. *The Recovery of Preaching*.

- 5) "If asked for a short definition of preaching, could we do better than *shared story*?"

-- Steimle, Niedenthal and Rice. *Preaching the Story*.

- * 6) "Preaching is quite different from oratory. The Christian preacher is not the successor of the Greek orator, but of the Hebrew Prophet. The orator comes with but an inspiration. The prophet comes with a revelation."

"The one great preacher in history, I would contend, is the Church. And the first business of the individual preacher is to enable the Church to preach."

"True preaching is the 'organized Hallelujah' of intelligent faith."

-- P. T. Forsyth

- * 7) "What is preaching? Christian preaching tells a story and names a name. If narrative consciousness confers identity, the preaching transforms identity, converts in the truest sense of the word, by rewriting our stories into a God-with-us story -- beginning, Presence, and end."

-- David Buttrick. *Homiletic*.

- * 8) "Preaching is finally more than art or science. It is alchemy, in which tin becomes gold and yard rocks become diamonds under the influence of the Holy Spirit. It is a process of transformation for both preacher and congregation alike, as the ordinary details of their every day lives are translated into the extraordinary elements of God's ongoing creation."

-- Barbara Brown Taylor

- 9) "Preaching is the event in which the biblical text is interpreted in order that its meaning will come to expression in the concrete situation of the hearers."

-- David Randolph. *The Renewal of Preaching.*

- * 10) "I believe that many women see and experience preaching as a profound act of human connection and intimacy."

-- Christine Smith. *Weaving the Sermon.*

- 11) "Preaching is the gospel prolonging and declaring itself . . . It is an eternal, perennial act of God in Christ, repeating itself within each declaration of it."

-- P. T. Forsyth. *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*

- 12) "Preaching brings the scriptures forward as a living voice in the congregation."

-- Fred Craddock. *Preaching.*

“The sermon’s core affirmation is a sentence that combines two things: (1) a clear announcement of something God has done, is doing, or will do; and (2) a here-and-now consequence of God’s action for our world.”¹

How do you come up with a core affirmation? Ask these questions:

Divine Action	Human Action
What does this text state, imply, or assume that God has done, is doing, or will do to act in redemptive love toward the world?	If God is acting in the ways previously named, what is possible for us? In other words, how does God’s action change how we see our situation as a community of worship and witness? What are we invited or encouraged to do?
What does this text state, imply, or assume about the nature or action of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - God the Creator? - Jesus? - the Holy Spirit? 	What affirmations does this text appear to make about our relationship to the social, cultural, or religious “other” — persons we tend to regard as “foreign” and, in some way, “less” than ourselves?
	What messages of judgment do I hear in this text? How might they be relevant to listeners today? What self-examination is called for, individually or corporately?
	What messages of hope do I hear in this text? If we take this hope seriously, what might we dare to do?

Examples of core affirmations based on Luke 13:10-17

- Jesus opens our eyes to those whose suffering has become invisible to us, urging us to make their healing a priority.
- When our preoccupation with policy and procedure causes us to lose sight of compassion, Jesus seeks to liberate us for worship as an experience of healing and joy, not duty.
- Jesus invites us to live with our dancing shoes on – with eyes wide open to the joy that comes with the unexpected outbreak of transforming grace.
- Jesus seeks out those of us who are spiritually, socially, and physically bent over by forces beyond our control, liberating us for worship and witness.

¹ Sally A. Brown, *Ways of the Word: Learning to Preach for Your Time and Place*, pg. 125-126

Practice! Mark 2:1-12 (NRSV)

¹When he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. ²So many gathered around that there was no longer room for them, not even in front of the door, and he was speaking the word to them. ³Then some people came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. ⁴And when they could not bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him, and after having dug through it, they let down the mat on which the paralytic lay. ⁵When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, “Child, your sins are forgiven.” ⁶Now some of the scribes were sitting there questioning in their hearts, ⁷“Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?” ⁸At once Jesus perceived in his spirit that they were discussing these questions among themselves, and he said to them, “Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? ⁹Which is easier: to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Stand up and take your mat and walk’? ¹⁰But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”—he said to the paralytic— ¹¹“I say to you, stand up, take your mat, and go to your home.” ¹²And he stood up and immediately took the mat and went out before all of them, so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, “We have never seen anything like this!”

Discuss:

1. Divine Action

2. Human Action

Core affirmations:

- 1.

- 2.

- 3.

Wilson's "Four Pages of the Sermon"

1) The four pages: can be literally 4 pages, or understood metaphorically.

2) What happens on each "page" of the sermon is as follows:

Can reverse for public issues or pastoral sermon.

→ 1. Page 1: What is the problem in the text, or the problem in the world of the text with which the text seems to deal? *Show, don't tell.*

→ 2. Page 2: What analogous problems do we encounter today in the world? *Again, show us, don't just describe and explain.*

3. Page 3: What clue is in the text, or its surrounding context, that God is at work counteracting the problem in the text we have named?

4. Page 4: What clues and signs in our world can we discover that demonstrate how God is acting *now* to counteract the problem (analogous to that in the text) that we encounter in our experience?

3) Wilson sermon in *Patterns for Preaching*, "Futile Acts of Faith"

Page 1: Extravagant act of love seems futile

Page 2: Our acts of ministry seem futile

Page 3: God's profound act of self-outpouring in JC made Mary's seemingly futile gesture meaningful, an act of love and worship

Page 4: Despite seeming futility, our outpouring of ourselves in God's service for the sake of the world is an act of love and worship of infinite value.

4) Points to remember about Wilson's method:

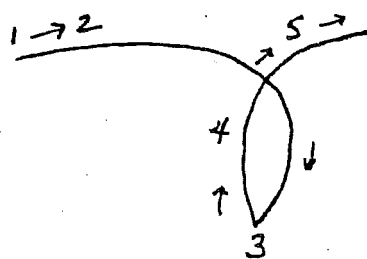
a) The method assumes that God continues to act in the world, and it is this ongoing divine redemptive action that a sermon should reveal.

b) The aim of a sermon is to help listeners "reimagine" their circumstances as the arena of continuing divine action, and to discern and participate in that ongoing redemptive action of God.

5) The four pages can be correlated with the preacher's week. Monday: research; Tuesday - Friday: Pages 1-4. Saturday: practice.

V. A Brief Look at Eugene Lowry's Homiletical Plot

- A. For Lowry, a good sermon is a wound-up spring, which works on the felt tension between the theme of the text and the crisis, need, or tension that it evokes. It will be up to the preacher to work with this tension, teasing out the crises or needs against which the text works, and juxtaposing the text against it.
- B. A sermon is like a good story: it is shaped by a plot, which has a beginning, builds excitement toward the middle, has a turning point, and has a denouement.
1. Lowry speaks of the "homiletical bend" of the sermon: a problem the text raises, an anxiety it addresses, an apparently "impossible" situation that it declares to be true.
 2. Many sermons fail because they start out giving *answers* before they have effectively raised the *questions*. Others fail because they raise all the *questions* but fail to point toward resolution (but this is more rare).
- C. His 5 stages (See diagram below)
- 1) **Oops!** Upsetting the equilibrium, raising an uncomfortable discrepancy between what the text claims and what experience seems to tell us; exposing the mystifying question.
 - 2) **Ugh!** Analyzing and intensifying the discrepancy we have pointed to for the hearers; making it more real, concrete.
 - 3) **Aha!** Disclosing the clue to resolution (the *turning point* of the sermon)
 - 4) **Whee!** Proclaiming the counterpoint: the good news of the Gospel
 - 5) **Yeah!** Anticipating the consequences of this good news: describing it in concrete terms, in real anticipated situations. Answers the questions: What can be expected? What can we do? What is now possible for us?



(Lowry, Homiletical Plot, p. 25)

Beginnings and Endings

What a **beginning** needs to do:

- 1) LOCATE the listener, either in a slice of experience, or within the world of the sermon's biblical text.
- 2) Raise a QUESTION, point to a DISCREPANCY, or otherwise evoke curiosity about something relevant to their experience.
- 3) BEGIN (not talk about beginning)
- 4) Serve a purpose in the total structure of the sermon, not merely "break the ice" or entertain. (Save the warm-up jokes for the church dinner remarks.)
- 5) Have a *more than tangential* connection to the sermon's central focus. (For example, talking about how much fun it was to swim in the ocean last week may not be the best opening for a sermon on baptism. A connection such as, "Most of us enjoy the water ... baptism is important to us, too" is just too tangential and weak. QUES: Can you think of a *better* way to connect these fields of experience?)

What an **ending** should do:

- 1) END; not talk about ending.
- 2) Use short, crisp sentences with active verbs. It should not trail into grand abstractions and generalities; this will weaken any sermon.
- 3) Should *not* take the place of a benediction, or attempt to do everything that the sermon has so far failed to do.
- 4) Can allude to a key phrase in the text, or a key idea or image in the sermon.
- 5) Point to the new way of life, or new mode of mission, that the good news of the sermon now makes possible.