

Seven Working Assumptions for Preaching in a Missional Church

- *Edwin Searcy*

What difference is there in preaching for a missional church? The congregation I serve notices that my preaching has changed. But what has changed? It is not simply the way in which these sermons are constructed. The change has less to do with technique (with the 'how to') as it does with the intent (with the 'what for') of this preaching. The biggest difference in preaching for a missional church rests in the assumptions that are made by preachers facing this new context. Missional preaching is not a new method of preaching. Missional preaching is a different genre of preaching (within which a variety of methods and styles may be faithfully employed). Once the preacher and congregation change their operative assumptions about the purpose of the sermon and the role of the preacher and the calling of the congregation, everything about the occasion of preaching shifts. The following seven working assumptions currently govern every sermon that I preach. And, according to the testimony of the congregation, this changed preaching accounts for significant change within our life together at University Hill Congregation.

1. The once mainline church finds itself in a new location in North American culture. Now each congregation is called not to send missionaries beyond but to be a missionary people here. This **missional** context requires a new genre of speech in the pulpit that reframes the mission of the church within the “*missio dei*” (mission of God). Dying to the categories of mission that have long been dominant is a painful ending of old ways and assumptions. Conversion to the gospel begins within the church and its preachers. Coming to trust that YHWH (“*I am what I am up to*” - Exodus 3:14) is saving creation (including the church) is at the heart of this wilderness pilgrimage.

2. In its new location on the margins of acceptability the now sidelined church rediscovers the devalued language of **testimony**. The pulpit becomes a witness box, the congregation a jury and the preacher a daring witness (Greek: *martyr*, Latin: *testis* - risking life & progeny) to the confounding truth that YHWH is engaged in a redemptive mission of cosmic proportions in Christ. The preacher’s voice is now filled with the unmistakable urgency, risk and passion of one giving dangerous testimony to the activity of God that otherwise goes unspoken. The church gathers to hear the truth and nothing but the truth about its living witness as a sign of the kingdom of God.

3. In this genre of preaching the preacher proclaims the truth of an alternative way of figuring things out. The cruciform pattern of Good Friday, Holy Saturday, Easter Sunday provides the coherent narrative that is rehearsed in sermon, in liturgy and in all aspects of the congregation’s life together. This movement from aching loss (Friday) through forsaken absence (Saturday) to astonishing newness (Sunday) stands in stark contrast to the dominant figural narratives provided by a culture of satiation and self-reliant success. In other words, the church’s testimony is pre-figured. The **figural** preacher is like a figure skater whose sermons are practised movements through the patterned figure (or ‘type’) of the cross.

4. In giving their testimony preachers in a missional context move from the practice of translation and illustration to a practice of language **immersion** in a different language world (note Ephesians 4:20 - “*the way you learned Christ*”). Translators give priority to relevance, seeking to correlate meaning from the biblical text with the categories of contemporary culture. Immersion preachers, on the other hand, assume that human experience and ‘common sense’ is inevitably rooted (from the Latin: ‘*radix*’ - root, thus ‘radical’) in particular narratives that lead to peculiar ways of speaking and radically different ways of living. Immersion preachers give priority to the oddness of the biblical narrative so that the church sees the ways in which contemporary living is irrelevant in light of the ways of God revealed in Christ.

5. Sermons that seek to immerse the church in the peculiar logic of the biblical narrative are disciplined attempts to stand under (to **under/stand**) - not over - the texts that provide its sustaining memory. Preachers who adopt this stance live as hosts who provide hospitality to the strangeness of texts that confound and trouble. Instead of working to resolve and ‘find meaning’ in these texts, sermons in this genre intend to give these ancient strangers a living voice. Text by text, the church learns its radical ways of speaking about and to the God met in Jesus Christ.

6. Learning Christ is a communal activity. Yet in an individualistic age we regularly imagine that the church is essentially a gathering of individuals and forget that it is inherently a **communal disciple**. Preaching in a missional context makes the fundamental assumption that the “you” it addresses is primarily plural (“*y’all*”). These sermons are preached to the church as a single body, rather than to individual circumstances. This preaching assumes that the gospel for individuals is about becoming a member of the Body of Christ. Every sermon in this mode intends to build up the congregation (gathered and dispersed) as a disciple of Jesus in its own right.

7. The North American church’s move from centrality in culture (where its role was maintenance of core, foundational values) to a marginalized location involves a massive shift of identity. Now the church learns and rediscovers **practices** that keep alive an alternative memory and way of being. In this it learns from ancient Israel’s exile and the long Jewish history of life in the Diaspora. The church is a movement that resists the corrosive effects of the powers and principalities that strangle hope and birth despair. Preaching is one of the crucial practices in which even the church’s own resistance to the gospel is addressed. Then the church turns to the One who is the source of the power to reject the idols that masquerade as life eternal but that lead, instead, to death. In this turn the church stewards five marks of faithful witness to God’s mission in the world: *kerygma* (proclaiming); *didache* (teaching); *koinonia* (fellowship and community in Christ); *diakonia* (serving); and *liturgia* (worshipping).