

That was a “strategic sermon”

By Bob Young

I was not surprised by the comment. I had already recognized this sister in Christ as a careful and analytical listener. I was serving as interim minister; she was a member of the search committee. Her observation as we greeted one another after my sermon, “That was a ‘strategic sermon’.” As our conversation continued, she spoke her appreciation—for the sermon, for my ministry, and for the search process.

I was concluding six months of interim ministry. It was Sunday evening—the last sermon I would preach as part of the interim ministry. The new preacher was in place—we had gone through a meaningful installation process the previous Sunday, and on this Sunday morning he had preached his first official sermon.

It was true. My sermon was strategic—designed to help cap the healing process after a difficult time in the life of the church. What should the last sermon in an interim ministry look like? What should it say? How does one conclude? This sermon said it was time to move on, and here is how a church moves on with healthy relationships and mutual support. This sister recognized the goal and identified with the strategy.

Over the last quarter century, several authors have reminded us that sermons should have a plot. In this article, I maintain that sermon planning should also reflect an overarching plan or plot, so that not only is each sermon going somewhere, but the entire preaching enterprise is designed to move the hearers from where we are to where we ought to be.

In the early years of my preaching, I did not understand this. I was happy to find something to preach about—a borrowed sermon idea or a biblical text that jumped out at me during my personal Bible reading. I eventually discovered that sermon ideas are all around me—some beginning in the text and moving toward application in the culture, others reflecting a cultural or societal need and pointing me to Scripture. Certainly this connection (or bridge) that brings the word of God and the world together is a step forward from a kind of sermon that addresses what the text meant but never gets around to what the text means.

There is another important step in the sermon preparation process which is prior to the preparation of any individual sermon. It is a step overlooked by or unknown to many preachers. There is an initial step that develops a sermonic progression so that each sermon is not an independent unit that stands alone, but rather is part of a larger scheme, much as the university classroom teacher does not present 45 disconnected presentations during the semester with the order of the presentations being unimportant. Rather, the effective teacher presents 45 progressive classes that cohere and work together and complement each other, designed to move the student toward the goal reflected in the class objectives.

In the same way, a preacher does well to ask, what is my goal for this church? What objectives would I write for my preaching during the coming year? What kinds of sermonic diet will help move my hearers toward that goal?

In a certain sense, then, every sermon is a strategic sermon—addressing a specific need at a specific moment in the history of the church. That was my goal in the final sermon of my interim ministry. I was blessed that someone noticed. This understanding broadens the preaching task. The local preacher must be concerned about more than the sermon of the

moment, or the moment of the sermon. The minister who is charged with feeding the flock as a representative or delegate of the elders must ask, how is the diet going? Is it balanced? Is it healthy? Does it contain all of the food groups? Does it build strength and endurance? Is it tasty and desirable? Does it leave people wanting more? And above all, is it sufficient to help the church reach its goals and its potential? Does each sermon, and the sermon plan, point toward the specific needs and goals of the church?

Here are my concluding words for those of us who preach and minister. Know and understand the power and importance of the strategic sermon. Learn how to preach well, so sermons are proactive and not reactive. Develop a long view of the preaching task, and involve yourself in a sermon planning process that is going somewhere, and is designed to help the church come along also. The truth is this: if you and your sermons aren't going anywhere, your congregation isn't likely to go anywhere either!