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Wording the Sunday Sermon

Cornelius Plantinga Jr.
Calvin Theological Seminary

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Neal Plantinga

CICW

A20 Wording the Sunday Sermon

Symposium on Worship, 2016

OUTLINE

The only sermons that matter are the ones people actually listen to and take on board. African American preaching—T D. Jakes, for example, or his sometime guest Dr. Jasmine Sculark from Trinidad—who is known as Dr. Jas
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eCG39XD2-ro>

Barth says, “the difficulty in relation to the existence or non-existence of the [person] justified by God is by no means small. Indeed, if it is not noted, it will at once gain in strength and be fatal.”¹

But Eugene Peterson, Philip Yancey, John Ortberg, Fleming Rutledge, Robert C. Roberts, Tim Keller, Barbara Brown Taylor, Lewis Smedes, C. S. Lewis.

In one of her sermons titled “Beginning at the End,” Barbara Brown Taylor says **I remember waiting in line for the Saturday afternoon matinee at the local movie theater when I was a little girl. It was summertime, and there were always lots of us there. Our parents would drop us off in the heat of the afternoon, giddy at the prospect of a couple hours’ peace and quiet. . . We were loud and boisterous, standing so close together that we could smell each other—that damp healthy smell that children give off in the summertime. Our friends would arrive, and we would shout their names, motioning them over to claim the places we had saved for them. The children behind us would complain bitterly, and so would we when the same thing happened in front of us, but it was all part of the game.**

Where every one of us wanted to be was right up there at the front of the line. That was the best place to be not only because you were the first inside, but because you were there when the moment came, when the doors were unlocked and the timid-looking manager pushed them open, so that a great wave of cold air rolled out of the dark theater and hit you like a blast from the arctic, an icy promise of everything that waited for you inside. That was the moment everyone waited for, and those who had won places at the front of the line got the very best of it.

I cannot imagine anything more disheartening than if the theater manager had come outside and reversed the order, telling us at the front of the line to stay put, while he invited those at the end of the line—those who had just arrived, those who were not even hot yet from standing in the sun—to enter the theater first. I think I would have cried; I certainly would have booed because it would not have been fair. Those of us at the front of

¹ *Church Dogmatics*, IV/1, p. 611.

the line had *earned* our reward; we knew it and so did everyone else. On what grounds would anyone *dare* reverse the order?²

“Are you envious because I am generous?” Taylor: “You bet they are. Like most human beings, they have an innate sense of what is fair and what is not. Equal pay for equal work is fair; equal pay for unequal work is not fair. Rewarding those who do the most work is fair; rewarding those who do the least is not fair. Treating everyone the same is fair; treating everyone the same when they are *not* the same is not fair.”³

Taylor concludes like this: God is not fair; God is *generous*, and when we begrudge that generosity it is only because we have forgotten where we stand. On any given day of our lives, when the sun goes down and a cool breeze stirs the dusk, when the work is done and the steward heads toward the end of the line to hand out the pay, there is a very good chance that the cheers and backslapping, the laughter and gratitude with which he will be greeted will turn out to be our own.⁴

Lewis B. Smedes Somewhere today a woman is saying, ‘I would like to chuck this marriage and start over with somebody who loves me; God knows the clod I married has not given me the love I need.’ But then she remembers a promise she made and decides to stick with her marriage and try to make it work.

Somewhere today a father is saying to himself, ‘I want my impossible daughter to get out of the house; God knows she has driven me out of my mind.’ But he remembers a promise he made to her when she was born, and he decides to hang in with her in hurting love.

Somewhere today a minister is thinking, ‘I am going to give up my calling and find a line of work that pays off in in a little more appreciation; God knows this congregation has given me third-degree burnout.’ But he remembers a promise he made to God when he was ordained, and decides to renew his spirit and stick with his vocation.

Yes, somewhere people still make and still keep promises. They choose not to quit when the going gets tough because they promised once to see it through. They stick to lost causes. They hold on to a love grown cold. They stay with people who have become pains in the neck. They still dare to make promises and care enough to keep the promises they make. I want to say to you that if you have a ship you will not desert, if you have people you will not forsake, if you have causes you will not abandon, then *you are like God*.⁵

² Barbara Brown Taylor, “Beginning at the End,” in *A Chorus of Witnesses: Model Sermons for Today’s Preacher*, ed. Thomas G. Long and Cornelius Plantinga, Jr. (Eerdmans, 1994), p. 15.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁵ Lewis B. Smedes, “The Power of Promises,” in *A Chorus of Witnesses: Model Sermons for Today’s Preacher*, ed. Thomas G. Long and Cornelius Plantinga, Jr. (Eerdmans, 1994), p. 156.

Symploce (SIM-plo-kee) In symploce you hold the beginnings and ends of the units constant and change the middle in each repetition:

William Willimon, “What Time Is It?”⁶ A woman of my acquaintance has thrown away her watch and decided to have nothing more to do with clocks. ‘I have freed myself from the tyranny of time,’ she says. She has had it with bourgeois, middle-class punctuality. She will now live as if every day were a vacation at the beach.⁷

Many of the laborers in the vineyard waited till noon to go to work, or 3 p.m. or even 5 p.m., but the owner of the vineyard bailed them out.

And we love that little parable, says Willimon. Because it means that what we hoped is right: There is still time. So what if you haven’t got your life together today? Don’t worry. The father waits. You may be the eleventh-hour worker who will get as much grace from God as those who have been at it from infancy. God’s kingdom is like that, says Jesus. God is gracious. There will always be a tomorrow for decisions and homecomings. Why trouble ourselves about the present when there is always grace for the future?⁸

But now comes the turn in the sermon. **All would be well if Matthew told only one parable, the one about the laborers in the vineyard. We could let grace be grace, a gift a gift, and drift on through today to an ever-open tomorrow. But Matthew tells other stories. A group of girls are invited to a wedding party. They mean to go get oil for their lamps, but it was first one thing and then another. When the call finally goes out, ‘Come to the party!’ the oil is gone. By the time they go out and buy oil, alas, the door is shut. The party has begun without them. They bang on the door, they cry out, they claw at the door! But no, the door is shut. They had their chance. It’s over now. There will be no tomorrow.⁹**

Young girls with no oil in their lamps: **By the time they go out and buy oil, alas, the door is shut. The party has begun without them. They bang on the door, they cry out, they claw at the door! But no, the door is shut. They had their chance. It’s over now. There will be no tomorrow.¹⁰**

Here’s how the sermon ends: **When I was serving a little church in rural Georgia, one of my members had a relative who died, and Patsy and I went to the funeral as a show of support for the family. The funeral was in a little, hot, crowded, off-brand Baptist country church . . . The preacher began to preach. He shouted, fumed, waved his arms.**

‘It’s too late for Joe,’ he screamed. ‘He might have wanted to do this or that in life, but it’s too late for him now. He’s dead. It’s all over for him. He might have wanted to straighten his life out, but he can’t now. It’s over.’

What a comfort this must be to the family, I thought.

⁶ William H. Willimon, “What Time Is It?” in *A Chorus of Witnesses: Model Sermons for Today’s Preacher*, ed. Thomas G. Long and Cornelius Plantinga, Jr. (Eerdmans, 1994), pp. 103-109.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 105-106.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

‘But it ain’t too late for you! People drop dead every day. So why wait? Now is the day for decision. Now is the time to make your life count for something. Give your life to Jesus!’

Well, it was the worst thing I ever heard. ‘Can you imagine a preacher doing that kind of thing to a grieving family?’ I asked Patsy on the way home? ‘I’ve never heard anything so manipulative, cheap, and inappropriate. I would never preach a sermon like that,’ I said. She agreed. She agreed it was tacky, manipulative, calloused. ‘Of course,’ she added, ‘the worst part of all is that what he said was true.’

First, almost nobody is really good at wording a sermon right from the start.

Second, preachers get verbally more adroit by listening to good speakers and reading good writers.

Third, Preachers get heard as more adroit than they are if they are loved.

Fourth, preachers have to factor in the mysterious work of the Holy Spirit.

