

Preaching in Context

Contextualization is close to the essence of preaching. To proclaim the word is to place the good news in context. The move from study of the biblical text to the delivery of a sermon involves a series of moves toward contextualization. The gospel itself is a claim about the nature of God to contextualize, or as we call it, *Incarnation*. Believing that God refused to be trapped in remote divinity in order to be God with us is to believe that God in Jesus Christ locates, incarnates, that is, contextualizes.

One of the most important theological developments in the past half century has been contextualized theology. “Theologizing from context,” works from race, nationality, gender, and economics toward thinking about God. In thinking theologically, it is necessary to admit that everyone starts from somewhere. To deny my own specific context is to fail to acknowledge the limits, self-interest, and power configurations that help to determine my thought. Context powerfully intrudes upon our thinking and community formation. Acknowledgement of the contextual differences between who I am and who my listeners are is a way of respecting listeners and focusing upon the specific communication challenges we preachers face, a way of honoring the realities of God with *us*.

We preachers have more formal training in exegeting the biblical text than in analyzing the congregational and cultural context. Most effective preachers develop skills in contextual analysis – listening to the people to whom we preach, reading, media surfing, visitation where people live and work, in general, all the means God has given us to listen to the world in order to speak to the church.

In my first parish in rural Georgia, I was impressed by the gap between the ecclesial context in which I was raised (including the seminary where I was trained) and the cultural context into which I cast my voice on Sundays. The way my people talked, the ways they made sense of themselves and the world, including their expectations for their church, were markedly different from my own. A few months into my work there, I made a list of assumptions about my people. My list probably said as much about me as it said about them:

1. *They don't read much and have never read anything that I've been reading for the past seven years.*
2. *They have a sense of powerlessness in the face of economic factors over which they have no control.*
3. *They tend to be more victims than villains.*
4. *Their families are their chief source of affection and personal accomplishment.*
5. *Their church is the one continuing, stable factor in their lives.*
6. *They know a good deal of the Bible and often use the Bible to make sense of their world.*

One of my students complained about the intransigence of his aging congregation: "Like lots of older people, they just don't like to change." As providence would have it, I had just read an article about older adults in our culture. Of the five worst things that happen to you in life, three (loss of spouse, loss of job, loss of freedom and mobility) occur after sixty. That observation enabled me to suggest to the student pastor that it wasn't that his people were merely stuck in their ways; it was that his older adults were facing the most radical, involuntary innovations that come our way in life. The last thing they were looking for at

church was more change. That observation didn't tell him what to preach but it became a good place from which to prepare to preach.

When the gospel is preached, the Word of God is contextualized.

Will Willimon, Professor of the Practice of Christian Ministry

Duke Divinity School

March 3, 2015