

Give the Sense

Sunday, January 23, 2022 at The First Congregational Church of Marshalltown, Iowa
Nehemiah 8:8

- Introduction: the little girl asks “why”

A pastor, after the church service was over, found a bulleting with several comments in the "notes" section written in the hand of a young lady in 5th or 6th grade. Here are a sample of her many comments: "Why is the sermon so long? Why is it so boring? Why? Why does it take forever? Why? Why? Why? You're still talking? Is this ever going to stop? Why? Why does it take so long?" The pastor addressed her questions in the following sermon, allowing that listening to a sermon can take some concentration but there is so much in the Word that a preacher share what is in the text with just a few brief comments. The passage today is set in an event in which the Scriptures were read, with commentary, for hours, and in the key verse we find that the priest spoke to "give the sense" of the passage. I think that is what every sermon tries to do, and so this is a sermon about sermons.

- Set the stage

Seventy years plus had passed since the fall of Jerusalem and both Nehemiah and Ezra had worked hard to re-establish the city and the cultural and religious life of Israel. Ezra was heavily involved in rebuilding the temple and Nehemiah, a former advisor to Cyrus the Great, over saw the reconstruction of the city walls. In the Hebrew Bible Ezra and Nehemiah are combined into a single document.

Moses had declared in Deuteronomy 31:10-13 that every seventh year, during the Feast of Tabernacles in which Israel was to leave their homes and material possessions behind and focus on the spiritual, the entire Law (the Torah, the first five books of the Bible) were to be read to everyone assembled with commentary. The people stood for hours as this tradition was honored for the first time in over seventy years. During this time the priests spoke to the people and gave them the sense of the text and helped them to understand. It is the very definition of a sermon.

- In the sermons the priests gave the sense and helped people to understand

Here's what verse eight of Nehemiah, chapter eight says: "So they read distinctly from the book, in the Law of God; and they gave the sense, and helped *them* to understand the reading." Apparently, translating "gave the sense" is hard, it does have the idea of revealing the intelligence, the knowledge, the policy, the prudent course involved and the wisdom involved to aid to the success in life of the listener. To use an overused phrase, it "unpacks" the information of the passage and there's always more there than what can be presented in the translation.

- to understand the reading.

God speaks through, and sometimes in spite of, the preacher

The priest's goal in "giving the sense" is to cause or increase understanding in the listener. At its root the verb means "to separate" or to distinguish and thus understand, analyze. It has the connotations of eloquence, feeling (it is good to pay attention to how the Scripture makes you feel as well as what you learn) and discernment. The idea is not only does the listener have a better understanding of the text, but the listener's abilities to read and learn from all the texts of Scripture increase. Put plainly, the idea behind every sermon is this; we consider a text, why that

text is in Scripture, what is the point (or the point we consider for today. There may be many points), and what we are supposed to do about it. That final point may have to do with how we act, but also how we speak, pray, think or understand God or the world. There's a wide variety of applications. The amazing thing is that God can speak through the sermon, sometimes in spite of the preacher. Over the years I've had people tell me of life-changing insights from my sermons that I know only did not know were in my sermons, I didn't think that particular sermon was very good. The Holy Spirit can touch peoples' hearts through the Word that is preached. The practical result, I propose, is increased care and unity among the community. The standard of care in 1 Corinthians 12:25-26 is encouraged by the preaching of the Word of God. There is power in sermons. Martin Luther, and Charles Spurgeon, two legendary preachers, had this to day about the preaching of Scripture.

- Martin Luther had this to say about sermons

"What is Luther? The teaching is not mine. Nor was I crucified for anyone ... How did I, poor stinking bag of maggots that I am, come to the point where people call the children of Christ by my evil name? ... I simply taught, preached, wrote God's Word; otherwise I did nothing. And while I slept, or drank Wittenberg beer with my friends Philip and Amsdorf, the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that no prince or emperor ever inflicted such losses upon it. I did nothing; the Word did everything."*

Spurgeon was once asked by a seminary student how to defend the Bible against its many critics. He responded by asking how the student would defend a caged lion that was under attack. When the student admitted that he did not know, Spurgeon replied, 'You don't. Release the lion and it will defend itself.'

Conclusion

In conclusion, I can think of no better passage to explain sermons than Nehemiah 8:8 in which the priests, shortly after the re-establishment of Israel after seventy years of exile, read the Scriptures to the community and gave the sense to increase understanding. Sermons throughout the world attempt to do the same every week, these many centuries later. The Holy Spirit works through the preacher, sometimes despite the preacher, to use sermons to build the community and give the sense.

*<https://www.csl.edu/2017/03/luther-the-word-did-everything/>