

**PREACHER: WHAT SORT OF LANGUAGE DO YOU USE?**

To what kind of language do you prefer to listen? How do you use language in your own preaching? Here's a quiz for you to take (Schlafer, David J. *Your Way with God's Word: Discovering Your Distinctive Preaching Voice*. Boston: Cowley Publications, 1995). How do you react to the following ways of using language? Rank each on a scale of 1-5, with 1 = "go to sleep" and 5 = "pay close attention":

- \_\_\_\_\_ a. prove a point?
- \_\_\_\_\_ b. create a visual scene / evoke sensory awareness?
- \_\_\_\_\_ c. produce a music-like effect?
- \_\_\_\_\_ d. describe a tense situation?
- \_\_\_\_\_ e. explain a position?
- \_\_\_\_\_ f. connect one image with another?
- \_\_\_\_\_ g. bring everyone up-to-date on what happened?
- \_\_\_\_\_ h. set matters in context?
- \_\_\_\_\_ i. evoke or express an emotion?
- \_\_\_\_\_ j. celebrate a special event?
- \_\_\_\_\_ k. remove an objection?
- \_\_\_\_\_ l. define an important idea?
- \_\_\_\_\_ m. tell a joke (not a riddle)?
- \_\_\_\_\_ n. explain how a certain situation came to be?
- \_\_\_\_\_ o. take the listener on a journey?

OK, now total the following together:

(1) a + e + h + k + l = \_\_\_\_\_

(2) b + c + f + i + j = \_\_\_\_\_

(3) d + g + m + n + o = \_\_\_\_\_

If your highest score was in set (1), you tend towards using language in the "essay" mode; if (2) is your highest score, you are more "poetic" in your use of language; a high score in (3) is associated with "storytelling."

In the essay mode, words used primarily to summarize, analyze, and criticize concepts; language is reflective, abstractive. The preacher wants to teach (an appeal to truth). In the poetic mode, words used for their sensuous or evocative potential; they are used to foster an encounter and delight or inspire the listener (an appeal to beauty). In the storyteller mode, words used to convey action, interaction, drama; in other words, a narrative. Language (both words and the person of the preacher) is used to persuade (an appeal to goodness).

What's the take home here? First, realize that just as you have your preference – so does everyone in the assembly. If we are always preaching *only* in the way we are most comfortable, we will – over time – lose a certain part of our community. Not only can we vary the way we use language between homilies, but even in the same homily, language can be used in different ways. As Pope Francis has taught us, "[i]n the homily, truth goes hand in hand with beauty and goodness" (*Evangelii gaudium* #142). In other words, don't be one-sided.

Second, recent church documents – from the US Bishops, the Pope, and now the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments from the Vatican – have all commented on how we use language in preaching. They make it clear that while homilies teach, they are not lectures – so, especially those of us who prefer the essay mode, need to be careful. Homilies need to be doctrinally sound; but they are neither extended readings from nor commentary on the *Catechism*, nor are they Bible study sessions. There is also a warning here for those who prefer the storyteller mode. Those of us who gravitate in this direction have to guard against turning the homily into a form of entertainment, or making it about ourselves instead of Christ.

Pope Francis in particular has stressed that the language used in preaching needs to be concrete, grounded in images from day-to-day reality, in order to foster an encounter with Christ. So, those of us who are more poetic in their orientation are reminded that the use of images in preaching is not just window dressing, an end in itself. Since homilies deals with questions of God, who is beyond human language, the language we use will need to be strongly metaphorical – but it cannot be abstract, divorced from normal life. Such “imaginal” preaching will be the topic of our next column.

In the meantime, here’s a list of texts that deal with the issue of language, in general as well as specifically in the context of preaching:

Resources:

Boyle, Elizabeth Michael. *Preaching the Poetry of the Gospels: A Lyric Companion to the Lectionary*. Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2003.

Geary, James. *I Is an Other: The Secret Life of Metaphor and How It Shapes the Way We See the World*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2011.

Lord, Jennifer L. *Finding Language and Imagery: Words for Holy Speech*. Elements of Preaching Series. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010.

McClure, John S. *The Four Codes of Preaching: Rhetorical Strategies*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1991.

McKenzie, Alyce M. *Novel Preaching: Tips from Top Writers on Crafting Creative Sermons*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010.

Ramshaw, Gail. *Reviving Sacred Speech: The Meaning of Liturgical Language*. Akron, OH: OSL Publications, 2000.

Taylor, Barbara Brown. *When God is Silent*. Boston: Cowley Publications, 1998.

Willabee, Sondra B. *The Write Stuff: Crafting Sermons that Capture and Convince*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.

Witherup, Ronald D. *A Liturgist’s Guide to Inclusive Language*. Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1996.