

**DELIVERY: VERBAL AND NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION**

Over the last eleven articles, we've explored the "what" of preaching – attending to the content of a homily: what message do we want to convey, what words do we use, what form should the homily take, what do we need to do if we are going to be heard by our particular assembly? In this twelfth article, I want to turn our attention to the other part of the equation: the *how* of preaching.

The art of communication is complex; preaching is no exception. On the one hand, we need to attend to the verbal (voice) aspects of communication. For example, what is the quality of the preacher's voice? Is it loud enough and does s/he project? Does pitch vary, or is the preacher monotone? Is the preacher able to be easily understood, or does s/he have problems with sound production (technically, articulation and phonation)? Does s/he have a pronounced accent or dialect that may make it hard for some to understand?

One key area that we tend not to pay much attention to is what speech experts call "fluency". In the extreme, this can mean problems with cluttering or stuttering; more commonly, we're talking about rate and the use of pauses. A common error in preaching is speaking too quickly—that's especially a risk if we use a manuscript (we tend to read faster than we speak). If folks can't keep up with us, they will stop listening. When Dr. Rick Stern, the homiletics professor from St. Meinrad, presented to Deacon Class VII in December 2015, he mentioned that pauses are among the most underutilized and effective strategies in preaching. Teresa Fry Brown (35) puts it this way:

The rate and duration of speech expresses emotion—for instance, slow indicates sadness, fast indicates joy. The use of action verbs, the length and types of sentences used in speaking (that is, declarative, exclamatory, or interrogatory), and punctuation set the intonation of vocal production. The use of a pause in speech is an indication of control and transition. The speaker may use the pause as a means of allowing the listener to catch up, integrate what has been said, or satisfy expectations of the homiletical event. At times preachers are reticent to pause. They feel the need to fill a void, resort to repetitions, or fear waiting even briefly for the communication to be transmitted. The pause, however, indicates the completion of a thought, timing for vocal variety, maintenance of interest, and allowing the listener to reconnect or attend to the content of the message.

On the other, we also need to attend to the non-verbal. According to Brown, the preacher also "embodies" the word. She states that embodiment "occurs when someone speaking uses their physical self to transform an abstract, mental idea into a concrete form, shape, or representation in order to assist in establishing its meaning for the audience" (60). Preachers have a particular "presence" in the ambo; but such a presence needs to be authentic – not a caricature or stereotype – if there is to be a congruence between message and messenger (60). For example, "[f]acial expressions are an important external part of embodying and transmitting emotion" and "[u]se of hands can either aid or distract from the way hearers receive the sermon" (61). Facial expressions and quality of voice should match the message being preached; otherwise, we will come across as insincere. Eye contact may communicate trustworthiness; the lack thereof may communicate that the preacher is lying or afraid (79). Open gestures (smiles, open hands, relaxed posture) invite the listener in; closed gestures (frown or poker face, fidgeting, rigidity) the opposite (80). Finally, a preacher needs to attend to how s/he "fits" in the ambo (height, ability to see the assembly, constraints on movement) as well as to how the sound system works (using a microphone, quality of the system) (62).

Some Reflection Questions (from Brown 32, 69)

- Is my voice pleasant to hear?
- Does my voice reflect the message I intended to convey in thought and feeling?
- Does my voice have characteristics that I would consider undesirable in another preacher?
- Does my voice reflect my personality?
- Do I want to express the pastoral or the prophetic personality?
- Is my articulation (diction) up to my own standards/expectation?
- Is my diction similar to that of my peers or listeners?
- Is there something in my voice that needs improvement?
- Are the changes in pitch, loudness, duration, and quality appropriate to the changes in thought and/or feeling that I am trying to convey?
- Would I listen to this voice if I were not the preacher?
- What emotions do I feel before, during, or after the proclaiming moment?
- Consider your posture and use of space: What does the congregation see?
- Consider your facial expressions: How do I transmit emotions?
- What are my body language, eye contact, and energy level like?

Resources

Brown, Teresa L. Fry. *Delivering the Sermon: Voice, Body, and Animation in Proclamation*. Elements of Preaching Series. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008

Rang, Jack C. *How to Read the Bible Aloud: Oral Interpretation of Scripture*. New York: Paulist Press, 1994.

Webb, Joseph M. *Preaching Without Notes*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001.