Give Sorrow Words: Sermon Form in Trauma-Aware Preaching

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Naming the problem

"I have never heard a preacher say that word before." It was a Sunday morning as parishioners were streaming out of the Episcopal church near Washington, D.C., where I was serving as the interim rector. A dark-haired woman who always sat in the front row stopped me. She had not spoken with me before, but she had nonetheless stood out to me. Her stillness and solemnity had always been noticeable among this intimate and gregarious congregation.

I paused, not quite knowing what she was talking about. She finally filled in the awkward silence: "I've never heard anyone say 'rape' in church."

Certain words—words that name difficult realities, like "rape"—are infrequently named in public, and they are spoken of only rarely and tentatively in the pulpit. I had used the word in my sermon, not as a description of a biblical story but as an example of the kind of trauma many women experience. It turned out that the woman talking with me was among those who had suffered such trauma.

Our encounter led me to ask deeper questions about the language preachers use in our sermons, and particularly our willingness to name painful and shameful experiences in a direct way. I became curious about the places in my own preaching where I held back from describing human experiences of violence, suffering, or abuse—in particular, experiences that carried any kind of stigma. Whom was I trying to protect, and why? Did my reticence help or hurt the people who were listening to me? I began to wonder what it does to treat an experience as unspeakable—particularly in a church setting.

Our society is full of people who have experienced trauma, and our churches are no exception. These people come to church looking for what churches are supposed to provide; they are looking for redemption, however that might be understood. Theologian and trauma scholar Jennifer Baldwin captures the dynamic:

> Each holy-day, survivors of trauma gather in our communities to make sense of their experience/s in the world. … experiences of traumatic overwhelm are far more common than generally acknowledged and generate questions that span all dimensions of personal understanding, interpersonal connections and relationality, and divine intention agency. Survivors of traumatic experience grapple with the questions initiated as a consequence of trauma in every nation, congregation, synagogue, healing circle, and dinner table. To neglect the presence of trauma-induced questioning and the consequent spiritual exploration hoping for a path to resiliency would be a failure of congregational care and leadership.[1]

In my experience, however, the average sermon is largely inattentive to the presence of trauma. None of the preaching courses I took in seminary talked about how to address trauma from the pulpit. Many sermons seem to be written for people who have not had to wrestle with moral injury or the compromise of their agency, people who retain their psychological and spiritual faculties of memory, imagination, and hope intact. These sermons and the pastors who preach them assume what Baldwin refers to as

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1. Jennifer Baldwin, *Trauma-Sensitive Theology* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2018), 63.

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the privilege of a non-traumatized viewpoint.[2] In doing so, they neglect the many searching and wounded hearts that come into the sanctuary every Sunday.

Do our sermons pay enough attention to traumatic wounding to be able to offer what might in biblical language be called balm—or, in our contemporary language, be thought of as resources toward resiliency? I'm not sure that they do at present. But the need is clearly there. If preachers were to attend more intentionally to offering such resources, just *how* might they give that soul medicine?

The potential and limitation of words for both the survivor and the preacher

Preaching has a unique opportunity to help cultivate resiliency for the trauma survivor. And "resiliency" is a key word here. I borrow it from Jennifer Baldwin in order to be explicit about the future we seek for those who have experienced trauma. Resiliency gives honor to the work survivors do, and at the same time it suggests the possibility of work that can be done not just in response to a specific incident but as the larger fortification of human character. It hints at the possibility of trauma-resilient communities, places where people might be formed to withstand and resist the worst damages of trauma. Resiliency can come not only in response to but perhaps in anticipation of trauma. Resiliency might even be prophylactic. Congregations have the opportunity to develop knowledge of trauma, not only among clergy but at the parish level—and in so doing build up the tools for dealing with the aftermath of a traumatic experience.

In the work of resiliency, words play a key role. Narrative reconstruction is a primary therapeutic goal for the trauma survivor. This re-telling contributes toward resiliency by not merely repeating events but granting the survivor agency. He or she can take what is fragmentary and give it order; he and she can take what is all-too-present and narratively locate it in the past. The power of imagination can be harnessed to generate hope. The goal of this work is not to remove the memories, but to make them bearable—"integration rather than exorcism."[3] Most crucially, it allows the social reconnection that is the culmination of the healing process.[4]

One of the paradoxes, however, of re-telling the story is the limitation of language. Trauma is understood, neurologically, to take place at a preverbal level, and thus language is limited in its ability to reach the heart of the problem. How then can a medium (such as preaching) that relies on words contribute to trauma resiliency? Language is a necessary condition for resiliency—but not a fully sufficient one. Preachers have a challenging but vital task in establishing safety, aiding in the integrating of the trauma story, pointing toward communal reconnection.

Serene Jones explains it this way:

> [P]reaching assumes a particular importance in relation to the traumatized individual for whom the narrative of grace has disappeared or withdrawn from the world of their lived experience. Violence has a traumatizing effect on one's capacity to imagine grace, particularly in relation to language. Trauma can fracture our speech, and speech without the right tone or attitude, language without gesture, hampers our capacity to think expansively about life in general because it puts us in spaces marked by fear and constructed for protection. As such, fractured speech can profoundly hamper our capacity to imagine a reality that runs counter to the logic of traumatizing violence, the logic of a grace that opens, that secures, that invites one to wholeness.[5]

Knowing that there are people in our congregations who struggle to employ their imagination to generate hope, we as preachers have a particular job to support the work of creativity and vision.

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Understanding how preaching forms attend to trauma

In my own preaching, I have experimented with form by preaching intentionally in different modes and then reflecting on those modes with members of my congregation. I have engaged not only those individuals who casually comment on the way out the

2. Baldwin, *Trauma-Sensitive Theology,* 67.

3. Baldwin, *Trauma-Sensitive Theology*, 181.

4. Baldwin, *Trauma-Sensitive Theology*, 183.

5. Serene Jones, *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World* (Louisville: John Knox, 2019), 92.

door, but also those who are known to me as having a history of trauma. Together, we have spent time noticing what effects different sermon forms have on them, particularly on their efforts to marshal their own internal resources for resiliency.

While there is perhaps an infinite number of preaching forms, I focused my inquiry on three:

- *Didactic Preaching*, sermons containing significant teaching content—in this case, both about the Bible and about trauma.
- *Inductive Preaching*, sermons which do not begin with a clear thesis but instead endeavor to engage the listeners' cooperation in making meaning through question and imagination.
- *Ritual Preaching*, sermons influenced by and inviting an active participation in the liturgical setting.

I was curious to see what response the different forms cultivated. I believed that the specificity and naming inherent in instruction might have power. I suspected, too, that more evocative sermons might open up some of those nonverbal places where hurt is story and allow access to spiritual resources for resiliency.

In talking about each type of sermon individually, we discovered some of the answers I anticipated, as well as some surprises. Didactic sermons did, indeed, provide relief through plain language and the erasure of taboos. And inductive and ritual sermons, by the use of silence and open-ended questions, did indeed create opportunities for emotional responses. I was, however, surprised to discover that the most powerful gift of ritual preaching was not, in fact, in the resulting embodied, liturgical action but simply in the invitation to act. Both the inductive and ritual sermons left hearers feeling as if something was "unfinished"—and they the responded positively to loose ends of thought and meaning.

Taken together, our work with one another pointed toward two primary conclusions.

The first is this: *preach it*. Just say the words. This, in fact, was the first response that one member of my community had after I preached deliberately and in plain language about trauma: "At last, someone is saying these words." Naming the taboos, it seems, robbed them of at least some of their power to harm. Bessel van der Kolk likewise suggests that speaking about trauma is a holy act, part of our nature as given by God:

> Silence about trauma also leads to death—the death of the soul. Silence reinforces the godforsaken isolation of trauma … We may think we can control our grief, our terror, or our shame by remaining silent, but naming offers the possibility of a different kind of control. When Adam was put in charge of the animal Kingdom in the Book of Genesis, his first act was to give a name to every living creature.[6]

Breaking silence is an act that restores the human soul. In psychological terms, we know speech has a therapeutic effect. In

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theological terms, speech restores to humans who have struggled with trauma the power and agency of naming that is the human birthright. And in pastoral terms, speech builds trust. The preacher, giving voice to the painful truth of human experience, becomes reliable narrator and a potential conversation partner. Joni Sancken describes how the bond of trust is forged: "When survivors hear their truth spoken from the pulpit, it legitimizes their experiences, humanizes them, and highlights their worth to God and the church."[7]

Speaking is also an act that allows us to respond ethically in the face of trauma and encourages the work of social justice. Herman points out that "public truth telling is the common denominator of all social action."[8] When we name aspects of trauma, then we educate ourselves and our communities about the many ways in which violence, abuse, and neglect (to name only some factors at play in traumatic experience) can harm individuals. Baldwin notes that "knowledge requires us to continue to learn about the ways in which trauma impacts persons and communities."[9] Once we have released the first fetters, we and our communities become both obligated and enabled to work for lasting freedom from suffering. Naming trauma creates a point of vulnerability—and, like other moments of vulnerability, it opens opportunity for significant change and connection.

The second conclusion of this study is paradoxically, the opposite of the first: *Don't* say any words at all, sometimes. As much power as naming has, my congregation and I discovered that silence might have even more. The trauma-aware preacher can use the gaps in the sermon—for example, silence or questions without ready answers—to allow space for listeners to make meaning themselves, drawing on their own intellectual, emotional, psychological, and spiritual resources. In this view, the sermon is not so much a vehicle to carry meaning but rather a construction which can be used to protect open space, space that rightly belongs to the listener rather than the preacher. The sermon opens

6. Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York: Penguin, 2014), 234.

7. Joni Sancken, "Preaching Amidst Global Trauma," *Ministry Matters*, March 25, 2020, https://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/10190/preaching-amidst-global-trauma.

8. Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 208.

9. Baldwin, *Trauma-Sensitive Theology*, 54.

opportunities for hearers to discover meaning, not simply for the preacher to impart a single message. Trauma survivors value the chance to engage with the sermon on their own terms, allowing personal, differentiated loss to find a personal, even unique space in the worship setting.

Silence and questions are, of course, two notable examples of homiletical space, but liturgy—particularly sacramental or eucharistic liturgy—also provides a powerful way of creating space for meaning-making, by linking the sermon to embodied and wordless action. My congregation's worship centers on the eucharist each week, and when I connected sermon to the sacrament either through direct reference or simply by echoing diction and theme, listeners had a profound, embodied opportunity to make the meaning and employ their imaginations.

Or, perhaps more rightly, the Spirit could work in those listeners to make meaning. The work of resiliency, in the Christian understanding, is always tied up with the redeeming work of the Triune God. In this view, the preacher steps in and then steps aside. Rather than filling the air with words, the preacher can also clear human words and judgments out. Rather than building a wall of verbiage, the preacher can allow one or two words to resonate in the space, an invitation to divine self-disclosure.

The implication here for sermon form is toward minimalism. Sermons that offer silence, invitation, ritual, and questions ultimately offer freedom and agency. They leave ample room not only for the activity of the listener but also for the sometimes unpredictable activity of God. If preachers are aware of the work that trauma survivors are doing toward resiliency, then they need to respect the space and time that such work takes.

The phrase "safe space" has taken on political meaning in our culture. I believe that the preacher is creating safe space, but perhaps not in the way it is often defined, as a space where potential threats are walled out. The sermon cannot be this sort of protected space if it is to speak meaningfully about suffering and redemption. It cannot be an escape. It needs to be a site of encounter, where words are said that matter and where openness is left when words become inadequate. And yet, while the sermon allows such high-stakes encounters, it absolutely also must be a space where no further harm can happen.

If traumatic wounding happens when our resources to deal with injury are overwhelmed, then the sermon has an obligation to faithfully and reliably offer the hearer an abundance of coping resources. This abundance comes not from the preacher's own talents—which are always finite—but (in the words of the Episcopal ordination vows) "from the riches of God's grace," from the community's foundation of compassion and hope.

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Last words

Preachers tend to talk about the sermon as *their* work: My sermon is done. I finished my sermon on Thursday afternoon. I keep a notebook of my sermons.

But ongoing attentiveness to preaching amid trauma reminds me that sermons—especially sermons preached to survivors who come to church so desperately hungry for hope, meaning, and redemption—are not the work of the preacher alone.

They are, of course, the work of the congregation, too. As homiletician David Schlafer offers:

> When is a sermon 'done'? … Is the sermon finished when at last there is silence in the sanctuary after the concluding sentence has sounded forth? No, for then the most important work of the sermon has only just begun. The sermon enters ongoing conversations in the minds of listeners and starts to reshape the direction of their lives.[10]

That work is not just conscious, intellectual work. It is also the deep soul labor—the cooperation with the Holy Spirit, the availability for healing by Jesus Christ.

As preachers, we are blessed to work alongside people of such unintentional bravery and such deep faith. And we are blessed to have a God who uses us as an instrument for fullness of life, for resiliency and flourishing.

10. David Schlafer, *Surviving the Sermon* (Cambridge: Cowley, 1992), 30.