
Pass the Mic: Expanding Pulpit Privilege

The Rev. Dr. Shauna K. Hannan

Associate Professor of Homiletics

Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary (of California Lutheran University)

My primary claim in this essay is that it is no longer faithful for a preacher to craft a sermon in isolation and then on Sunday proceed to “the pulpit” (literally or metaphorically), preach, and on Monday start the process over again. Preaching is not primarily a solo endeavor. We should pass the mic—literally and metaphorically.¹

I hold this fundamental conviction both as a preacher and as a preaching professor.

I have not always had this conviction. I wasn’t taught it. Rather, what I learned was to do deep biblical exegesis, to craft a coherent, tidy, and (one hopes) poignant gospel message, and to proclaim it with feeling and conviction so that it connects with hearers and their lives of discipleship.

After all, the preacher is the one in the congregation who is seminary-educated, has extensive experience, and is called specifically to this task. Giving up what has worked well entails risk. It also entails the critical questioning of privilege and the willingness to lean less on it. Carefully guarding an unquestioned power and privilege to preach has worked well for many ordained ministers. But at whose expense?

In this essay, I suggest that preaching is not a solo endeavor, but rather the ministry of a community—ideally, of the whole congregation. The proclamation of the gospel is the responsibility of the baptized rather than the privilege of pastors. Any person ordained into word and sacrament ministry or otherwise called to preach is not the sole owner of either that privilege or that responsibility. As a colleague once reminded me, pastors don’t *own* the pulpit, they *steward* it. As stewards, they bear responsibility for faithful proclamation in accordance with the scriptures, creeds, and confessions. They bear responsibility to equip others to fulfill their baptismal call to proclaim.

The difference between the responsibility of stewarding the pulpit and the unjust privilege of owning it is intensified in denominations that are historically and persistently white. In the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), not to pass the mic means that we privilege white, male, straight, financially well-off, and educated leaders, while marginalizing the voices of

Preaching is not a solo endeavor, but rather the ministry of a community—ideally, of the whole congregation. The proclamation of the gospel is the responsibility of the baptized rather than the privilege of pastors.

others. Key questions then become: Whose voices are not being heard? Whose bodies are not being seen? Which perspectives are given a central place through the marginalization of others?

Before I lay out how a preaching ministry might include more voices, certain clarifications are in order. First, “pass the mic” does not mean “open mic.” Second, certainly everyone is not required to preach. There are other ways to participate in the preaching ministry of a congregation. While preaching need not be an open-ended, free-form process, and while not everyone is required to preach, extending the responsibility for proclamation can open up the possibility for more people to preach.

Feedforward: sermon preparation

As Tom Long reminds us, “Preaching preparation is not preparation *for* ministry, it *is* ministry.”² Ministry is not a solo endeavor. And if preaching preparation *is* ministry, that’s not a solo endeavor either. Preaching preparation, or what many call “feedforward,” entails a three-fold hermeneutic.

First, preachers interpret the congregation and the broader socio-cultural context, thereby also interpreting privilege. To exegete a preaching context is not a preliminary task to get out of the way; it is an ongoing process. Unfortunately, some rely on interpreting contexts rather unintentionally. Instead, preachers should make it part of their intentional practice and weekly rhythm.

1. This essay introduces themes that I flesh out in my forthcoming book with Fortress Press, provisionally titled, *Stewarding the Pulpit*.

2. Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 3rd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2016).

What is more, those of us called to preach have not earned the privilege to say, “the way I see the world is right.” It certainly is not the case that the way I see and experience the world is the way others see and experience the world. The more I can find out which understandings are only assumptions, the better. Communication experts remind us that to move beyond our assumptions is key.

Second, while preachers no doubt spend much energy interpreting lectionary texts, these too cannot be separated from the social world of scripture, itself replete with privilege. Thus, again, being the sole interpreters of scripture is unfaithful. The assumptions a single preacher makes about how a particular biblical story impacts her congregation are just that—assumptions. It is an unrecognized, unearned privilege to assume that others should see things the way I see them—that the way I interpret is normal and normative. So what do we do about this?

Minimally, preachers should diversify conversation partners they engage. In my pastoral and professorial experience, “conversation partners” usually means clergy text groups or reading commentaries. But consider who is privileged in each of these: ordained clergy, the highly educated, those who have been published, North American and European perspectives.

If, minimally, preachers are called to diversify their preaching preparation discussion groups, the “higher calling” is to ask and carefully listen to how a particular pericope impacts others, creating a community of interpretation. When only a single preacher digs deeply into the exegetical process, we miss the opportunity to honor that God’s word is to be accessed by all. Just as the preacher has been equipped to engage deeply in biblical exegesis, so the preacher equips the hearers to do the same. Preachers are encouraged to pull back the curtain and reveal the preparation process. They should tell their congregants, “I need your help to do this work faithfully.” They should invite them into the process. (And I don’t mean inviting them to a Bible study where the preacher tells the congregants what the pericope means.)

Besides being faithful to the Reformation commitment of the priesthood of all believers, there are other benefits to this work. For one, when preachers listen deeply to fellow hearers of scripture, they need not scour the internet for relevant and poignant illustrations (which are usually neither poignant nor relevant because they don’t come from the community). Instead, the content of the sermon will emerge from and reflect the lives of particular people. Additionally, hearers who have been a part of the preparation process will listen differently—indeed, more intently—to the sermon.³

Such *feedforward* groups are just one way to intentionally move toward inviting all to partake in a preaching ministry. I can testify that it makes a difference. Every student in every preaching class I facilitate has had to do this. They’ve discovered that most of their assumptions—most commonly, that congregation members don’t

The “higher calling” is to ask and carefully listen to how a particular pericope impacts others, creating a community of interpretation. When only a single preacher digs deeply into the exegetical process, we miss the opportunity to honor that God’s word is to be accessed by all.

have time or a desire to engage in creative and collaborative biblical exegesis with them—have been wrong. There is a yearning of congregants to do this ministry—a hunger that people sometimes are not even aware of until it is finally fed.

Failure to democratize sermon preparation legitimizes one perspective, or even makes people think there is only one perspective when it comes to the biblical text. That is not true. Those of us who have had formal training in biblical hermeneutics know it is not true. Ironically, though, we are granted a privilege that we do not deserve—that of having the right (normal, normative) interpretation of scripture—whenever we keep our knowledge about diverse interpretations to ourselves, however unintentional that protection is, and even (especially?) when it is done to save work for others or live out our “special” callings.⁴

Third, preachers continue the interpretive task through the crafting of the actual sermon—a process that deepens in context of a community. As the preacher puts words to paper, she or he can test certain sections with people, carefully observing whether and how impact matches intent. The fact that this is also practicing the delivery of the sermon is only an important byproduct. The main benefit is to listen to how others hear the sermon draft. If I preach “come and die” for people who are just trying to live and thus hear it as excruciating law (or worse), the sermon will need to be reheard, reevaluated, and revised.

Feed: preaching the sermon

A sermon that has engaged the feedforward process will use illustrations, stories, and perspective that come from the congregation. Since they have helped shape the sermon, they will hear the sermon differently on Sunday. For example, one student opted to try an exercise with her feedforward group. The biblical story was that of the bold (Yes: *bold*) Samaritan. She invited her partners to write from the perspective of one of the characters in the story. In just

3. The emerging discipline of audience studies can be helpful here. See, for example, <https://australianmuseum.net.au/audience-research-what-is-audience-research>.

4. Guy Nave, New Testament scholar and Professor of Religion at Luther College, explores some of the ironies of biblical scholarship and the diversification of authority in, “What Good is a Ph.D. for Reading the Bible.” Available at: https://www.luther.edu/ideas-creations-blog/?story_id=508034

5-7 minutes, there were numerous “first person perspectives” ready to be shared with the group. The result was a newfound connection with the man lying on the road. The student remarked, “we really began to see the guy lying on the road.” With that exercise, the momentum picked up for a likely sermon trajectory; a trajectory from the perspective of one who was typically ignored.

It could be that the perspective of a particular member of the congregation—let’s call her Theresa—is so impactful that her piece of writing should be part of the sermon. Of course, the preacher would acknowledge that Theresa has given permission to use her story as a window into God’s story. Better yet, at the relevant point in the sermon, instead of inserting the example, pass the mic to Theresa.

As David Lose declares convincingly in his book, *Preaching at the Crossroads*:

If our people have spent their entire lives watching others (the preacher) talk about faith but have never themselves had an opportunity to do so, where will they have developed the competence and confidence to do it themselves?⁵

When they pass the mic, called preachers in a congregation become preaching professors. They mentor and equip others to competently and confidently proclaim in their lives and perhaps even from the congregation’s pulpit. This is a testament to the power of the gospel when congregation members who have been solidly equipped to preach, step up when, for example, the called pastor is on vacation.⁶

The identity of the preacher preaches just as much as the sermon content. The opportunity to hear from and see a variety of people in the pulpit, with the microphone, is incredibly important. I recently heard another story that affirms this claim. A young boy—we’ll call him Jake—had grown up with a female pastor. So, when it was announced that their new pastor would be Scott, the young boy was aghast, “Mommy, a man can’t be a pastor, can he?” The example also shows that, while preaching should be the calling of all believers, we should intentionally pass the mic to those who are not traditionally heard.

The biggest charge against the preaching of laity is the potential for disseminating “bad theology.” Remember, though, that I am not arguing for “open mic” time during which people say what they will. Rather, called preachers must steward the pulpit by equipping others to preach, and to do so faithfully. Remember, too, that bad theology can and does come from ordained ministers, which is exponentially detrimental when assumed to be the *only* theology.

5. David Lose, *Preaching at the Crossroads: How the World—And Our Preaching—Is Changing* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), 104-105.

6. The title “supply preachers” or “pulpit supply” is an anomaly, its origins unknown. It is akin to having a “supply surgeon,” which no one would want. While I think it is faithful and beneficial occasionally to have an “outside voice,” it is more faithful and beneficial to equip people within a community to be preachers.

When they pass the mic, called preachers in a congregation become preaching professors. They mentor and equip others to competently and confidently proclaim in their lives and perhaps even from the congregation’s pulpit.

Finally, objectors should notice that lay preaching is already a reality in Lutheran churches around the world. Even in the United States, one of the most robust lay preaching contexts occurs in the chapels of our Lutheran colleges and universities. The task now before us is to equip these preachers, to equip all the baptized, to proclaim faithfully and confidently.

Feedback: closing the loop

Most preachers likely engaged a feedback process when in seminary preaching classes where classmates fill out feedback sheets after hearing their classmates preach. This process lives on in some contexts with “sermon notes” required for confirmation students. But why get feedback only from high schoolers? Why not ask for feedback from all generations (including those high schoolers, of course)?

It is commonly said that the preacher’s task is not only to preach the gospel, but to get the gospel heard. Feedback groups assist preachers in understanding *how* their words are heard. This process has everything to do with the Lutheran emphasis on Law and Gospel. How will we know if God’s word and our proclamations are received as liberating or condemning if we don’t ask? Feedback groups keep preachers honest and aware of what “sticks.”

One clear benefit of gathering feedback is obtaining a sense of the message that is actually reaching hearers. Every preacher thinks everything s/he says is relevant—otherwise it would not be said. And yet, most hearers are quick to say preaching is not relevant. Minimally, our task is to do whatever we can to avoid such communication breakdowns. When a communication breakdown happens, as it inevitably will, seeking feedback opens up the possibility to respond, which thereby opens up possibilities for pastoral care and Christian education.

In *Sharing the Word*, Lucy Atkinson Rose suggests that a “sermon is a proposal that invites counterproposals.”⁷ Feedback groups invite congregation members to fulfill their roles as hearers of sermons. Feedback is less about evaluating or rating the preacher and more about continuing the conversation. At the same time, the

7. Lucy Atkinson Rose, *Sharing the Word: Preaching in the Roundtable Church* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 100.

hearers begin to practice using theological language and articulating the gospel. To my own feedback groups, I ask questions such as: According to this sermon, who is God? What in this sermon prompted you to tell something to someone? And why? Who is the person? What should the title of this sermon be? (Since I do not title sermons, asking hearers for a title is another way I hear what lands for them.) Notice how this set of questions invites neither ego strokes nor ego strikes. What the list does do is 1) lets the preacher know if and how the gospel is being heard, and 2) develops a culture of preaching conversation, granting permission for people to offer such feedback and equipping them to fulfill their baptismal calls as proclaimers of the good news.

Is it Lutheran?

Conversational preaching is not simply a good idea, it's biblical. Recall Luke 24, which depicts Jesus accompanying fellow walkers on the road to Emmaus. What were they doing as they were walking? They were talking. That word, "talking" or "conversing," in Greek is *homileo*, the word from which we get "homiletics." In other words, homiletics is conversation.

While a number of ELCA documents reflect the commitments outlined in this essay, it's worth noting two documents in particular. First, from the section on "Preaching" in *Principles for Worship*, Principle 12 states, "The church entrusts specific people with the ministry of preaching and equips them for continuing growth in this responsibility."⁸ Each principle includes a number of possible applications. Application P-12C is especially apt:

When those who preach prepare with others, preaching is enriched. Listening to the people given to the preacher's care, studying the word with those who will hear it, exploring the texts with other preachers—all these strengthen the ministry of ...preaching.⁹

Principle 14 begins the section that highlights the all-important contextual nature of preaching. Application 14-C specifically invites the involvement of all:

We invite and expect all members of the assembly, including children, to listen to, respond to, and share in the proclamation of the word in all its forms. Those who preach respect all members of the assembly, especially children, by preaching the word clearly and not manipulating or trivializing any individual or group.¹⁰

To hear and proclaim the good news of God in Christ is a baptismal calling, not a special, privileged calling of ordained ministers alone.

Second, Lutherans have likely encountered the liturgy for the Affirmation of Baptism more often than *Principles for Worship*. The liturgy describes the faith practices that grow out of our baptism. We are to:

live among God's faithful people; *hear* the word of God and share in the Lord's Supper; *proclaim* the good news of God in Christ through word and deed; serve all people following the example of Jesus; and strive for justice and peace in all the earth.¹¹

To hear and proclaim the good news of God in Christ is a baptismal calling, not a special, privileged calling of ordained ministers alone.

A lay preaching movement would not simply be a response to a shortage of preachers, but rather a response to the call for all the baptized to proclaim. The sooner we begin to recognize this claim, the sooner we begin to train and equip people for this call. Without it, we are privileging some voices and turning down the volume on all of the voices we fail to hear and all of the bodies we fail to see. We can do something about such unearned and unfaithful privilege.

8. Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), *Principles for Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002), 47-66, available at: https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Principles_for_Worship.pdf

9. Ibid., 60.

10. Ibid., 62.

11. Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis, Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 236. Emphasis added.