

may 2011: creativity in preaching

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My journey into creativity began with doubt and fear. In my childhood there was music and drama and art. But I was hopeless and helpless with each of them. I was not creative and so I stuck with the sciences.

It was not until my thirties, with the help of two colleagues at the Bible College of New Zealand, that my perspective changed. Denise Edwards opened me to the possibility of thinking being creative. Chris Marshall showed me how the development of courses could be an exercise in creativity. I felt freed.

Focused by this testimony of healing in my life, the significance of creativity has featured in my teaching of preaching ever since. And I have discovered that for creativity to flourish in the preacher it needs a few associates.

Creativity needs convictions. The first revelation of God is as someone who speaks a word and has something emerge out of nothing. He is a creator. And being made in the image of this God means that we are creative creators, by definition. Creating is as much a part of being human as having fingers or noses. It is a birthright. Furthermore an echo of this first creative word of God accompanies today's preached word of God. There remains this possibility of life being created out of nothing in the lives of listeners even today.

Creativity needs space. The advertising industry is fascinating. With the print media exaggerated space in the margins draws the eye to the centre of the page. With the aural media silence can seem to shout. In the same way, for a preacher to be creative, there needs to be margins and silences. There needs to be space. And in that space the random thought must be chased. Over the past decade I have restructured my life to recapture that space. For me five minutes in the early morning can accomplish more creativity than five hours at night. Sometimes the creativity flows so fast I am unable to chase it all down.

Creativity needs time. Here the words are all so picturesque. Brooding. Simmering. Lying fallow. Incubating. Each one of these takes time. A key to being creative in preaching is to engage the text as early as possible. Plan well in advance. Allow time to pass. Give the subconscious a chance to fire the imagination. Saturday Night Fever-ish preparation will never stimulate creativity.

Creativity needs study. As we open the front door of our lives to research, the creative thought so often slips in the back door. It can happen even in front of the most dense of commentaries. Exploring the thoughts of those who have gone before stimulates our own thoughts. This diligence is an act of worship for the preacher. Repeatedly I find God honouring the Spirit-dependent study which issues in the cry for Spirit-prompted creativity. The illumination the Spirit brings so often surges with creativity as the divine mixes with the human.

Creativity needs nurture. For creativity to be exercised in our lives, it needs exercise. It needs feeding. Take some risks. Think outside the square. Assail each one of the senses. Train the eye to see juxtapositions, the spiritually significant in the utterly ordinary, as Jesus

did in the parables. Enjoy resources like *A Whack on the Side of the Head* and *The Art of Seeing Sideways* and *Sisomo* (sight-sound-motion).

Opportunities for nurture are everywhere. I plead with students to escape the tyranny of websites in the search for illustration. These are the last refuge of a bankrupt intelligence. Instead invest in swirling thinking, watching, inventing, reading, listening. It may take a decade but the dividend of being able to live an interesting life which generates its own illustration will come. I utilise a cliché coffin in class. Each cliché they hear is buried in the coffin and then at a later time we dig up the grave, paraphrasing the cliché in order to achieve some resurrection. Alongside that critical sermon in a sentence proposition, I require students now to develop a prevailing image which might remain with the sermon from beginning to end. I want them to see something as well as say something when they preach.

Creativity needs community. This one comes from my file because I am ever a pastor again because I have no experience of doing this. Let the preparation of the sermon become a more communal task. It is the value of the brainstorm. It is the synergy of the sum of the total being greater than that of the individual parts. It helps the one with the primary call to live in the word to draw in those whose primary call is to live in the world. Create a small group. Change it every year. Incorporate their creativity into the wrestling for understanding and illustration and application.

But wait . there's more! The bonus of this embrace of creativity is that it leads directly to a heightened spirituality.

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