

A Forgotten Context in the Reading and Preaching of Scripture

No preacher of the gospel can be taken seriously if she does not pay close attention to the traditional contexts of the task: the ancient contexts that produced the text, the long Jewish and Christian contexts that have interpreted the texts, through the centuries, and the contemporary contexts in which the sermon is now to be heard and evaluated. These three areas of contexts are certainly daunting enough for any preacher!

But I wish to add a fourth context for our preaching, one that in my mind lurks in the background of each of the other three. That context is that of the self: just who is it that is doing this preaching anyway? Who is this person who is reading the ancient text? Who is this preacher who is considering the long history of that text's interpretation and proclamation? Who is this homiletician who is speaking this word at this time in the world's history? Until we continue to search for just who we are as people, the other contexts will be at the mercy of an unknown self, an undiscovered country of a person that imagines she is just a "typical" religious interpreter.

There are no typical religious interpreters. There are only individual, unique, singular interpreters, cut from the cloth of God's rich and complex tapestry of human beings. The implications of this context for interpretation are among others: all preachers must be ever on the search for their unique selves. Through continual work with a spiritual director or capable therapist, any who would preach the gospel must be on the lookout for one's own deepest and best and real self.

I learned this fact the hard way. I was for a time an interim minister in a very large congregation whose eighteen-year pastor, a beloved figure in that community, had been

accused of multiple acts of sexual harassment over a very long time. The accusations were all too true, and the congregation had to come to terms with the reality. My role in their healing was perhaps slight, though I hope helpful, but the learning for myself in the maelstrom was immense. I learned that I knew far too little about just who I was. It turned out I was rather a different person than I imagined myself to be, not nearly so courageous, not nearly so innocent, not nearly so distant from the dangers of power in the pastoral setting. This was painful but crucial education for me. Though I had a graduate degree in the Hebrew Bible, I did not know just who I was as the reader and appropriator of that great series of texts until I confronted my own complex self in that pastoral work. It set me on a lifelong quest for further self-discovery.

Never forget that God has called you, all of the unique you, all of your complex self to preach. Without that context, the other more familiar ones will not sound with the clarity and truth that every sermon attempts to present.

John C. Holbert, Lois Craddock Perkins Professor of Homiletics Emeritus

Perkins School of Theology

March 4, 2015