Introduction

There seems to be a wide disparity between "good preaching" as described formally and theoretically, and what happens on Sunday morning when we leave the pulpit with that certain interior knowledge that our sermon "was a good one." Likely as not we know we violated the "rules" of preaching theory we were taught (or are now learning); yet it happened. The story got told.

We wish we knew what it was precisely that made it happen. Not being able to identify what it is we do when we do well, we are left to happenstance. As Michael Polanyi, the philosopher, describes it: "We know more than we can tell."[1] If we could just transform our intuitions into articulate form regarding what it is that happens in our best preaching, we could *cause* it to happen by design.

Transforming our intuitions into articulate form is precisely the purpose of this book. In order to accomplish this task two things are necessary. First, we have to lay aside—at least temporarily—many of the cherished norms about sermon anatomy. For example, most books on preaching operate on the common assumption that sermonic organization evolves out of the logic of content. That is, one takes

a theme or topic and cuts it up into equal parts (generally three), and then organizes the parts into some kind of logical order. As such the sermon looks like a "paste-up" even before it appears in the pulpit. We do this because that's the way we were taught. Even prior to seminary we were taught this way in speech class. More crucially (and subconsciously) our language system teaches us to think this way. So we have been taught the science of sermon *construction* as though we are a strange breed of architectural engineers. This way of thinking and organizing is one of the "cherished norms" we need to lay aside or even engage in battle. But that's not all!

We need also to form a new image of the sermon—one that is congruent with our best preaching. Truth is, to continue our example, a sermon is not a doctrinal lecture. It is an *event-in-time*, a narrative art form more akin to a play or novel in shape than to a book. Hence we are not engineering scientists; we are narrative artists by professional function.

Does it not seem strange to you that in our speech and homiletical training we seldom considered the connection between our work and that of the playwright, novelist, or television writer? This is most remarkable when you consider that our best preaching does in fact feel like a story. It is indeed *The Story*, and our task is to tell it, to form it, to fashion it—not to "organize" it.

My hope is that whether you are a seminary student just learning the art of preaching and looking for something beyond mechanical rules, or are a seasoned practitioner, perhaps bored and burdened by the regular onslaught on Sunday morning sermon

demands, you will find here a new vision of our common task.

I propose that we begin by regarding the sermon as a homiletical plot, a narrative art form, a sacred story.

Section One

The Sermon as Narrative
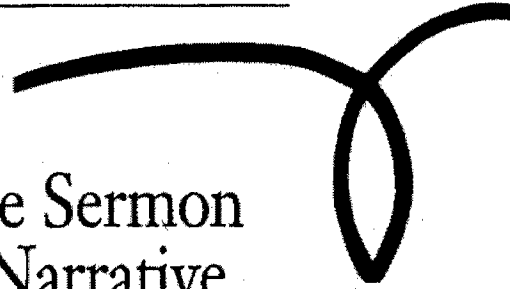
Reading a textbook on how to prepare sermons often is like looking up a word in a dictionary in order to find out how to spell it—you have to have the answer before you can probe the question! So it is that much homiletical advice tends to function in reverse—that is, it works reasonably well in evaluating a sermon already formed, but provides very little help *en route!* We are told, for example, that a good sermon is one that will "command the active attention of every listener." Fine, but you can't tell until it's too late! The dean of homiletical theorists, H. Grady Davis, suggests that a good sermon idea is one which is "generative"[1]—that is, one which has natural unfolding power. Most of us know exactly what he means—*after* we see one! But how do you get one?

How to find a "generative idea" is indeed both "first and foremost"—first because that is where we begin in preparing a sermon, and foremost because once the idea is found, the rest of the sermon preparation is easy by comparison. But the question of how to find a generative idea actually involves two quite distinct issues.

The first has to do with how to get started in preparing a sermon. What is going on inside my mind as I pace the floor of my study, trying to get started? What are the dynamics which mark the extraordinary transition from generalized or fragmented "Sunday morning thoughts" into that intuitively felt sense of having something that is alive and ready to be shaped?

The other issue is even tougher: What is the *form* of a homiletical idea? Would I recognize a generative idea if I found one? I am not asking the question of

the *subject* or *topic* of some particular sermon. I am asking about the peculiar characteristic *form* that any subject takes when turned into a sermon. Obviously this question of homiletical form is preliminary to the other because until we resolve the issue of form, it is fruitless to ask how one begins to work toward it.

The Image of the Sermon

All of us have an image of what a sermon is—that is, what factors characterize homiletical form. We learned it automatically, just by being alive and being in church. We do not think *about* this image—we just use it. So quite unconsciously it shapes what we do and how we do it.

For example, we take our language for granted. We do not stop to consider the fact that our language has individual letters that are collected into words, and words into phrases and phrases into sentences, etc. We just do it that way—and presume everyone else does too. But everyone else doesn't! (For example, many languages such as Chinese use pictures or ideograms instead of letters.) And those who do it differently, think differently.

Our language process of collecting little parts into bigger pieces until there emerges an organized whole is described by McLuhan as "the all-pervasive technology of the alphabet."[2] Considering the impact of the grammar of our "mother tongue," J. Samuel Bois, the general semanticist, observes that "we see the world through the meshes of that man-made filter."[3] Says Benjamin Whorf, the linguist:

> Each language is not merely a reproducing instrument for voicing ideas, but rather is itself

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a shaper of ideas. . . . We cut up nature, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significance as we do largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it this way.[4]

Now what does this have to do with our image of a sermon? A glance at our preparation for last Sunday's sermon will perhaps reveal the answer. In all probability most of us started with scraps of notes—all generally related to a particular theme we hoped to mold into a sermon. And most of us made the same assumption—that if we could just properly organize the scraps of notes, there would emerge an integral whole called a sermon. That's the way we put together our sentences grammatically; that surely must be the way to organize a sermon. Well known to every preacher is the process of looking at a set of preliminary notes and asking "What could I put there?" or "I wonder if an illustration would flesh out this section?" The picture that emerges is that of an amateur carpenter who keeps adding braces here and there to steady a wobbly piece of work. Apparently a similar image occurred to Davis when he noted that this approach produces the "doghouse" sermon.[5] But the problem is not that we are amateurs and with a little practice will master the process. It is that the whole schema is born of an image of sermon-building as *assemblage* which is founded upon our unconscious understanding of reality as meaningfully related pieces. This is the automatic, and I believe, unfortunate "gift" our language system brings to our sermon work. It is as natural a consequence as is the fact that the industrial revolution with its mass production techniques relying on interchangeable parts is also a phenomenon born in the Graeco-Roman

language world. The similarity between Henry Ford's worker reaching for interchangeable nuts and bolts with which to construct a car and the preacher reaching for interchangeable anecdotes and biblical proof-texts with which to construct a sermon is noteworthy.

In short we have been trained to see the sermon as a *thing*, and hence sermonic formation typically has consisted of organizing the constituent ingredients. The pervasiveness of this image of the sermon can be illustrated by noting what it is that we see in the following illustration. Most of us "see" an incompleted wall—a wall made of bricks or blocks. Our education and language have taught us to see this way, but in a literal (and perhaps banal) sense the illustration doesn't show bricks at all; it shows the mortar—but we tend not to see the connectives.
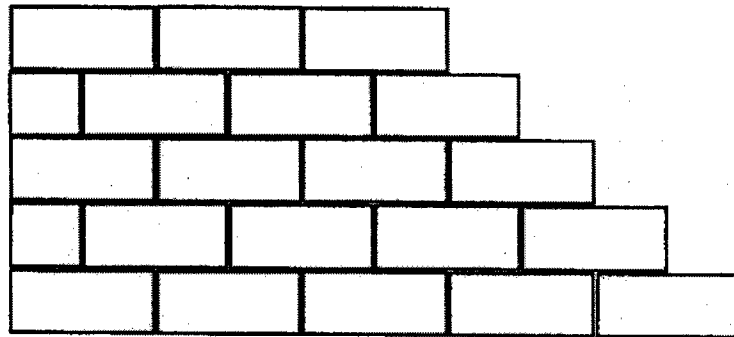
So likewise, our typical college speech and seminary preaching courses taught us to see things in certain ways—and hence not in other ways. Recall that very likely the emphasis regarding organization was upon the principles of outlining. I remember the lectures on how the various sub-points needed to be parallel to each other and equally subservient to the

larger point, etc.[6] The entire matter is parallel to the above picture and how we saw it. To look at any outline is to look at a blueprint of organized ideas (a completed wall)—all fit together by a part-to-whole logic. The underlying mentality of such outlining instructions causes the *organizer* to focus upon the *substance* of the various points, but not upon the *transitions* which are the key to sermonic process. It is almost inevitable that we will concentrate on bricks and not notice the mortar.

In his excellent book *As One Without Authority*, Fred Craddock notes the difficulty experienced when trying to preach from such an outline, and asks:

> How does one get from 2b to main point II? That is a gulf that can be smoothly negotiated only by the most clever. Looked at geographically, a three-point sermon on this pattern would take the congregation on three trips down hill, but who gets them to the top each time? The limp phrase, "Now in the second place" hardly has the leverage. He who has had the nerve to cast a critical eye on his old sermons has probably discovered that some sermons were three sermonettes barely glued together. There may have been movement within each point, and there may have been some general kinship among the points, but there was not one movement from beginning to end. The points were as three pegs in a board, equal in height and distance from each other.[7]

The fact of "three pegs" serves notice that almost without fail this mentality will see substance, not

movement (and will revere nouns over verbs). This viewpoint will impel us toward organizing sermons on the basis of the logic of their ideational ingredients. But a sermon is not a logical assemblage; a sermon is an event-in-time which follows the logic born of the communication interaction between preacher and congregation. To organize on the basis of the logic of ideational ingredients is to miss altogether the dynamics of that communicational reality. (Imagine what the Prodigal Son story would have been like had Jesus organized the message on the basis of its logical ingredients instead of the journey of the son.)

In preaching seminars I ask participants to play a word association game with two terms: *construct* and *develop*. The composite picture that emerges from words associated with "construct" is that of a building site with pieces of lumber, bricks, iron, etc., off to the side of a hole in the ground, with a hard-hatted man standing next to a small building with a set of blueprints in his hand. He is an engineer and his task is to put the pieces together according to the plan drawn by an architect whose expertise is to know how to design buildings that will actually stand up (science) and in such a way as to make the pieces look like they belong together (art).

The composite picture that emerges from words associated with "develop" is something more akin to a several-time double-exposed picture of a rose blossoming. The words used in this case more often than not are words referring to living organic matter (such as "grow," "form," "mature," etc.).

Note that the term "construct" evokes parts-to-whole expressions and "develop" evokes terms associated with living matter processes not separable into

distinct parts. This striking difference of evoked association with the two terms is the difference between a static collection of inanimate parts put together to look like a whole on the one hand, and on the other, an organic living whole which is not divisible.

Certainly I can tell the difference between a sermon I "constructed" and one which I "developed"! Sometimes a sermon idea seemed to emerge on its own, possessed of its own power, and required a developmental process more akin to *pruning* than *putting together*. Such an idea, says Grady Davis, "produces the sermon by the energy, the vitality inherent in it."[8] Like a tree, he continues, its branches are "thrust out by the force of its inner life."[9] Generally, with such a sermon idea I have more than enough material and do not find myself adding here and there. Rather, the task is to shape the idea in such a manner as to keep its direction appropriately focused and its integrity from becoming diffused.

I used to feel guilty about the sermon which seemed to have its own demands and desires. Its flow and movement just would not be restricted to three points, and I knew I was violating the principles of sermon making I had been taught! Yet this organic developmental kind of sermon took less preparation time, and it "preached" better.

Precisely the point! Of course I was violating the rules of sermon making—for many years before I had been taught the engineering science of sermon construction! To change the metaphor, I had been taught sermonic architecture (science), had learned to organize the pieces, and had hoped the parts would look like they belonged together (art). They seldom did! No wonder I then began deviating from my

traditional instructions. In the midst of feeling guilty about my new style of forming sermons I began to ask if perhaps the problem was not so much my deviations but rather the instructions, the theories themselves.

Apparently others have had the same experience. Craddock notes that sometimes preachers who have prepared outlines for sermons will depart from them during the actual preaching experiences:

> Some have even felt guilty about the departure, feeling they had ceased preaching and had begun to "talk with" their people. Lacking a clearly formed alternative, shabby habits, undisciplined and random remarks have been the result of this groping after a method more natural and appropriate to the speaker-hearer relationship that prevails today. Such casual and rambling comments that have replaced the traditional sermon can hardly be embraced as quality preaching, but the instincts prompting the maneuver are correct.[10]

My conclusion is that a sermon ought not be a collection of parts constructed by a preacher, regardless of how we have been taught to think it so. The sermon has its roots in the truth of the gospel which indeed has a life of its own. Our task is the same as that of any artist whose act of discovery, as Eliseo Vivas describes it, is to "extricate the import and order of his experience and body it forth in language."[11] Calling the poet a "mid-wife"[12] Vivas explains that:

> The creative process thus involves a search for language [and form] that adequately captures in

and through itself the object that, somehow, until it is successfully captured by language, lies tantalizingly just beyond the reach of consciousness.[13]

Our task in preaching is to facilitate the homiletical birth and development of such an idea grounded in the gospel. Rather than feeling guilty about violating the rules we once learned, we could bring judgment on these principles, recognizing that they are born of a mechanical image of reality. Rather than perceiving ourselves as engineers or architects, we view preaching as an art form and see ourselves as artists. We may be amateur artists or poor artists—but inescapably artists. What is needed badly is a different image of the sermon—one which can do justice to the developmental nature of the homiletical process. If our task is not to assemble parts but to facilitate a process, is there another image which might help us learn better how to do it?

Anyone who has happened to notice that the parable of the Prodigal Son is easier to handle homiletically than 1 Corinthians 13, or that often it is easier to preach from the Old Testament than the New, is not far from discovering another image of the sermon. The reason many Old Testament passages are more easily translatable into homiletical form is that the Hebrew language is a verb-based language and utilizes fewer adjectives and adverbs. Says Robert Roth in *Story and Reality:* "For the Greeks . . . words were definitions. . . . For the Hebrews, on the contrary, words were descriptions."[14] Hence there is more action or natural movement in *describing,* for example, a God who walks in the garden in the cool of the day than in *defining* a pre-existent Logos. Both

the Prodigal Son narrative and 1 Corinthians deal with the qualities of love, but Jesus' parable uses story form to describe it by means of a father who "had compassion and ran and embraced him and kissed him" (Luke 15:20) while Paul defines it with the adjectives of "patient and kind" (1 Cor. 13:4). Says Roth: "Stories begin once upon a time. They move through episodes to a climax and then come to an end. . . . Stories move. *They have a plot.*"[15] (Italics mine.)

Suppose we were to ask a playwright to describe what would constitute an idea in that field. The answer would be: "Plot." A drama is an observed process in which a basic discrepancy or tension obtains resolution. The playwright sets us in the middle of an issue which "demands" some kind of remedy. "Propositions with subjects and predicates enter into these stories in an ancillary way," notes Roth, "but meaning arises from the experience of personal involvement in the dramatic action."[16]

Likewise, a sermon is a plot (premeditated by the preacher) which has as its key ingredient a sensed discrepancy, a homiletical bind. Something is "up in the air"—an issue not resolved. Like any good storyteller, the preacher's task is to "bring the folks home"—that is, resolve matters in the light of the gospel and in the presence of the people.

Plot! This is the key term for a reshaped image of the sermon. Preaching is storytelling. A sermon is a narrative art form.

In the introduction to his book of modern parables, G. William Jones notes the difference between the story and propositional statement:

The usual tendency for going about this process [of preaching] comes much more from

our Greek progenitors than from our Semitic progenitors. In order to head off all possibilities for misunderstanding, to make the message as "clear" as possible, we shuck it of its lifelike, experiential wrappings and lay it out as an abstract, propositional statement.[17]

On the other hand:

[T]here is almost always a sudden change whenever the speaker launches into a narrative. The audience becomes suddenly quiet, forgetting even to cough, sniff, or squirm, as the tale is spun. When they understand that it is over (and that now the speaker will draw his moral, make important announcements, etc.), the change back to coughing, sniffing, and squirming is equally as sudden.

Actually, it hardly matters what kind of story, how good, how funny it is, how moving it is, or how well it is told. There is something almost automatically captivating about a story that catches our minds and makes us forget to breathe until it is over.[18]

But his sharp delineation between story and "regular" preaching is unnecessary. Why not conceive *every* sermon as *narrative*—whether or not a parable or other story is involved? Remembering back to that sermon of yours that really went well: Is it not true that the key to its success had something to do with the terms "plot" and/or "narrative"? Perhaps it was that you put aside your carefully organized notes and simply "talked with the people." You began wrestling with the issue *with* them. You moved from what

Jones calls "propositional statement" into story. (Note I did not say *a* story.)

Although Grady Davis probably did not intend it so, I believe this is the underlying truth of his statement that "the proper design of a sermon is the design of a time-continuity. And so I shall prefer to speak of the *continuity* or the *movement* of a sermon, rather than of its outline."[19] The terms "continuity" and "movement" in fact describe a narrative plot. The working through of a sensed discrepancy is what gives a sermonic idea its expansive or generative power.

Recall if you will when you first felt a homiletical idea "happen" to you. There was an excitement you felt, a tension which took hold. And you *knew* even before the sermon was formed, that you had it! At that time the tension perhaps was only latent to the actual sermon, but the tension was evidence of a discrepancy perhaps known only implicitly. In whatever way the sermon worked itself out, it was a matter of a plot moving toward resolution.

A sermonic idea is a homiletical bind; a sermon is a narrative plot!

There is more to be said about the nature of a plot, the various kinds and dynamics, etc., but now that we have identified what a generative idea is (at least in a preliminary way), it is time to return to our initial question of how to get started in sermon preparation. My hope is that with this reshaped model, vision, or image of a sermon as a narrative art form, we shall be better able to explore the dynamics of sermon preparation.

Getting Started

We can identify two preliminary stages in sermon preparation that typically occur prior to the stage of sermonic formation proper. The first is a state of "wandering thoughtfulness" about the Sunday morning sermon. Likely we have 1) jotted down some notes about possible ideas, 2) read the lectionary passages for the day, 3) pulled out a file containing scattered notes written earlier when planning the year of preaching, and/or 4) checked the denominational calendar. But still we don't know much about next Sunday's sermon. Our task at this point is to gather and sort various possibilities. At best this stage is one of imagination; at worst it is the stage of anxiety.

The second preliminary stage is the stage of decision, when we settle on the idea to be shaped into homiletical form. This stage represents a transition to a very peculiar state of knowing implicitly that a sermon *can now happen*, but not knowing explicitly or precisely *what* the sermon will be. Most of us can identify the successful completion of this second stage as the moment when the question of one's spouse about how things are going can be answered "I think I have one!" More appropriately the response could be "I think one has me!"

After these two preliminary stages have been conquered, we can begin the actual formation of the sermon. But my experience is that these preliminary stages represent the truly difficult portion of sermon preparation. There is an incredible gulf between the "wandering thoughtfulness" stage and the "I have it" stage which is difficult to bridge. Once done, the rest is downhill! Yet strangely, the dynamics of that transition from the first to second stage—from thoughts to sermonic idea—are seldom given the attention they deserve in preaching texts. Instead we are given a geography lesson on *where* ideas can be found, such as in the Scriptures, the theater, in pastoral experiences, etc. Sometimes the question becomes a pretext for a bit of sermonizing about the personal spiritual attributes necessary for preaching. But neither of these deals with the hard question. The difficult issue is to identify what it is that happens in that transition so easily felt and so hard to articulate.

I recall a conversation I once had with an older colleague in ministry who was noted for his powerful preaching. I wanted to know his "secret" and so quizzed him at length. Part of our conversation dealt with precisely the question we are raising here, namely: How do you move from generalized sermon thoughts to a genuine sermon idea. I do not remember his precise answer, but I do recall his difficulty in attempting to answer. The plain fact was he knew *how* to do it intuitively, but he could not articulate *what* it was that he did. Most of us face that same problem. Since then I have asked many pastors what they look for when they attempt the move from the wandering thoughtfulness stage to the stage of discovering a live sermonic idea. Typically I receive two

kinds of answers. First, some will reply: A *theme* or *topic*. Others will reply: A *problem* or *felt need*. But, alas, like that of my distinguished colleague, their answers do an injustice to their actual abilities.

Both kinds of replies are "correct"—but something is missing. The first reply concentrates on the substance of the sermon, the central "message" to be preached. But if this is the central priority in our sermon preparation we will tend to produce lecture-type sermons which are strong in content but weak in establishing contact with the congregation. If we follow the advice of the second kind of reply (focusing on problem or felt need) we likely will establish quick rapport with the listeners but be weak in content. There are in fact preachers who fall into these two camps. Paul Scherer once described them: The one knows what to say but doesn't know how to say it, and the other knows how to say it but has nothing to say.[20]

Our prior discussion on the image of the sermon can help identify why Scherer's description is all too apt, and how in the early stages of sermon development we can avoid being included in his critique.

The illustration of the incompleted wall is instructive. Recall that we are taught to see the bricks—not the mortar. Everything (note the word) becomes a "thing"—divisible into parts. Scherer's two kinds of preachers both fall into this trap. One concentrates upon the *answer* as the "bricks" of the sermon. The other sees the *problem* as the "bricks." Both miss the mortar. (Alfred North Whitehead and other process thinkers have done their best to help us not see reality as substance—as bricks—but it is an uphill battle.)

But back to our problem—of moving from generalized

sermon thoughts to a genuine generative sermon idea. It seems clear that if we begin the sermonic preparation process by concentrating on the "theme" or "topic" the idea remains static—a lifeless brick. Likewise, a "problem" or "need" is also a *thing*—as dead as a "theme." On the other hand, if a sermon is perceived as a *plot*, formed and shaped by the *interaction* of problem and theme, the sermon idea begins to take on life.

The key, then, to bridging the gulf between Sunday morning thoughts and the generative idea is to think relationally. What I need for a sermon to begin to "happen" is for me to pull my thoughts toward an *intersection point* between need and theme. I mean quite literally that I take my jumble of notes and divide them into two stacks on the desk—the one with problem notes, and the other with theme or answer notes. Then I try to link thoughts from one stack of ideas with the other until a relational gestalt happens.

When a theme of a proposed sermon is thrown against a problem, a sermonic idea may be born. When a problem is pushed against the gospel, the interaction may give birth to a sermon. If, for example, I am considering the possibility of a doctrinal sermon on the Trinity, the preliminary question to be asked is: What problem or bind does the trinitarian formula resolve? Likewise, if I am contemplating a life-situational sermon on fear, the question is: What kerygmatic theme provides the clue for resolution? This process—and our identifying it as such—is particularly important to those preachers who use the lectionary for preaching purposes, and whose sermon work therefore begins with biblical exegesis. It

is not enough to probe the question of *what* the text is saying. It is equally important to discover *why* it is saying what it says. The question of *why* is most often the context for the transition into homiletical form.

Every explicit theme presumes an implicit problem; every explicit problem presumes an implicit theme. When this does not hold, there is no sermon! In the tension produced by the interaction of these ingredients, sermons are born. The felt bind between need and theme is central to sermonic form; discovering it is the chief work we do in transforming vague Sunday morning thoughts into a generative sermon idea. This is precisely what my distinguished colleague did week after week (but he didn't know it). And so do we when we do well.

By implication, then, the way to commence sermon preparation is to determine *where* our preliminary thoughts reside—whether they involve a sensed problem or a felt thematic answer. Whichever it is, we must begin looking for its opposite. When they intersect in our mind, a sermon idea is born. One might say that any sermon involves both an "itch" and a "scratch" and sermons are born when at least implicitly in the preacher's mind the problematic *itch* intersects a solutional *scratch*—between the particulars of the human predicament and the particularity of the gospel. It is this intersection point (often *felt* more than known) which produces the sensed certainty that a sermon is in fact about to take shape. (We will explore further these matters in Section Three, after we have considered the shape of the sermon in Section Two.)

Our present discussion also suggests by implication that although we have been taught to conceptualize

differing types of sermons by the nature either of their content or context (such as doctrinal, expository, life situational, etc.), it is important to notice that when defined by *form* they are always problem-solutional—whether the context is expository, life-situational or whatever. In his discussion of secular writing, Foster-Harris in *The Basic Patterns of Plot* advises that "just as a good fiction story is always a parable, so a correct fictional plot, the map of the story, must contain a problem, the solution, and the answer."[21] Likewise a sermon in its essential form is a premeditated plot which has as its key ingredient a sensed discrepancy, a homiletical bind.

It is quite possible that the preacher may have begun to think about a sermon at the point of the conclusion—just as a novelist may begin a novel with the final resolution, and fill in the plot backwards. In sermon preparation one begins wherever one is and moves the other way. In presentation the sermon always begins with the itch and moves to the scratch—from the human predicament to the solution born of the gospel.

We might note in passing (we will return for greater detail later) that it is sometimes true that the situation in which a sermon is presented contains the "itch." For example, preachers who follow a Barthian theological model should observe that Barth's pastoral preaching occurred in the midst of a world crisis. The itch was a given. Likewise, sermons preached in light of the Jonestown tragedy had the issue presented by the historical moment.

It should also be noted that "itches" have a lot in common. The Christian estimate of human nature suggests that sin has a common base—and salvation a

common source. Both preachers and congregations may be assured that although every sermon needs to be particular rather than general, the proclamation of the gospel is not exclusively tied to one person's capacity for critical analysis of each and every personal and corporate itch. Sermons which deal with the doctrine of the Church also by implication may say something about family life, etc.

Not only is the sense of sermonic tension or discrepancy the clue to the formation of the idea, it is also the key for sustaining the idea through the process of the sermon itself *as preached.* I was taught to "tell them what you're going to tell them, tell them, and then tell them what you told them." Nothing could be more fatal for a sermon! Can you imagine a playwright telling in advance how the story will end, or a novelist revealing "who did it?" in the first few pages? Not unless dramatic tension is introduced in another form. The term *plot* is key both to sermon preparation and to sermon presentation.

Plot Forms

Surely there are many options available in defining plot forms. I want to discuss just two quite distinct kinds. The first is the typical movie plot, which begins with a felt discrepancy and moves to an unknown resolution. In the movie *High Noon*, the discrepancy consists essentially in the fact that the town marshal has fallen in love with a woman who is a pacifist. The price of their engagement and marriage is that he will resign his position as marshal, and together they will take up residence in another place and begin a new peaceful existence. The plot thickens, however, with the news that three criminals whom he sent to jail have just been released. They are seeking revenge for what he has done to them and are on the train which will arrive at high noon. The marshal is in a bind. If he continues with his plans to leave town with his bride, he is a coward leaving the village without protection from the vengeance of the desperados. If he stays to face the criminals, he will be faithless to his word to his bride of laying down his guns and beginning a new life. The entire plot is hinged on his dilemma and the painful choice he now must make. The viewers are caught by this basic discrepancy, his bind; their attention is fastened on the

ambiguity of the suspense. The play's plot continues to thicken until it moves finally to a resolution unknown in advance.

The second kind of plot is the television series plot which begins with a felt discrepancy (just like the movie plot mentioned above) but which then moves toward a known conclusion (unlike the movie plot). In this second type of plot, the viewers know the star will survive, of course; he is scheduled for next Wednesday at 8:00! But *how* will he survive? That is the key discrepancy. The plot thus involves an unknown middle process. The hero is placed into such an impossible situation that there is absolutely no way he can survive—but of course a way is found, a way which is unknown to the viewers. Several recent television detective shows alter this second type of plot by having the viewers see the crime, know the villain, and know the outcome. The bind has to do with just *how* the detective will be able to find out what we know already. (The television series "Barnaby Jones" and "Columbo" are examples of this type.) In this case the plot is thickened by having the clue to resolution caught by the detective but missed by the viewers, who then are surprised by their denseness and the detective's cleverness.

In whatever type of narrative plot, the event of the story moves from a bind, a felt discrepancy, an itch born of ambiguity, and moves toward the solution, a release from the ambiguous mystery, the scratch that makes it right.

Sermons tend to involve the second kind of plot. The congregation has gathered to worship God. Symbols of all kinds have already made the central affirmation of the incarnation before the sermon

begins. The congregation expects the gospel to be proclaimed one way or another, and for Jesus Christ to emerge as Savior and Lord—the answer to the sermonic bind. But how? In what way? For what purpose? This unknown middle ground provides the context for sermonic tension.

It should be noted in the context of the parallel between sermons and literary plots that the suspense of ambiguity—the not knowing what or why or how—is the key to the attention of the audience. In the case of the movie *High Noon*, it is obvious that the viewers are not held by their intrinsic interest in the history of the American frontier, in law enforcement, or in noon trains. Information—correct or incorrect—is certainly learned in the process, but these ideational ingredients, as such, do not shape the form of the narrative. The movement from problem to solution of the discrepancy shapes the form of the narrative. Likewise, it is the homiletical bind being moved from problem to solution, from itch to scratch, that shapes the form of the sermon, not the biblical, historical, doctrinal, or ethical content. The set of outline notes of our poorer sermons, however, will likely reveal that they were shaped by the nature of their substantive content, not by the *process* of the narrative experience that is anticipated. One can easily identify the "bricks" but the "mortar" is strangely absent. Little wonder we are tempted to leave our notes and preach it "more naturally."

Note, too, that fiction writers inevitably catch their central characters in situations involving *ambiguities*, not contradictories. The marshal in *High Noon* was being asked to choose *not* between a *good* and a *bad* but between two goods (or two bads, depending upon

your angle of view). The marshal's problem was in fact that he had to choose between his *love* for his bride and his *duty* toward his town. Conversely put, he could be seen either as a *liar* or a *coward* as a result of his decision. Some choice!

Unfortunately many sermons do not place matters in such lifelike perspective. We are asked homiletically to "choose this day whom you will serve" (Josh. 24:15)—with the choice being God or Baal! Frankly, I don't find that a difficult choice! In fact, I have yet to hear that a parishioner has literally decided on evil as a result of my sermon!

People are not caught between a generalized good and a generalized bad. They are caught in the bind of two quite specific goods or two quite specific bads— or (perhaps more likely) among several options, none of which is good or bad. Competent fiction writers understand the human predicament well. As a result, their fiction has the feel of fact—of reality, while our fact—our reality—often has the feel of poor fiction. Often it does not reflect life as people really live it.

The homiletical plot must catch people in the depths of the awful discrepancies of their world— social and personal. It is to these very real discrepancies that the gospel of Jesus Christ is addressed. Sometimes it appears that perhaps there is no redemptive answer to the human predicament. This is the bind felt as ambiguity by people—and this is the discrepancy that is the central question in every sermon. How can the gospel intersect the specifics of the human mystery and come out on the other side in resolution? This question *is* the form of the sermonic plot—which now needs to be seen, first in profile and then in description.

In setting forth a profile of a sermonic plot, I recognize that any generalized pattern is ripe for exception and violation. Yet a generalized pattern is helpful in clarifying the issues and providing the norm from which exceptions are made.

Because a sermon is an *event-in-time*—existing in time, not space—a process and not a collection of parts, it is helpful to think of sequence rather than structure. I propose five basic sequential stages to a typical sermonic process—a plot which may be visualized in the following way:
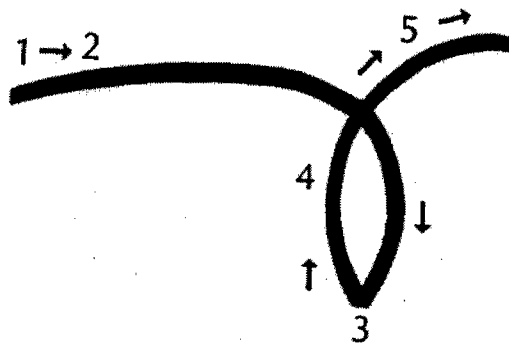
The stages are: 1) upsetting the equilibrium, 2) analyzing the discrepancy, 3) disclosing the clue to resolution, 4) experiencing the gospel, and 5) anticipating the consequences. My students have found it helpful to remember these steps with the following abbreviations: 1) Oops; 2) Ugh; 3) Aha; 4) Whee; and 5) Yeah.

Note that the visualized plot line is forward moving—set horizontally, unlike the outline, which is a vertically imaged static structure. The sermonic plot is time oriented—an event in history with a beginning and an ending. We deal not with parts of a whole but with stages of a sequence. What is necessary now is to explore in greater detail these five stages of a sermonic plot.