Excerpt from Chapter 2 for Ministry Matters (800 words)

Preaching Truth in the Age of Alternative Facts
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The clearest message of the last national election is a deep and abiding sense of alienation from the electoral process, a distrust bordering on disgust of elected officials (although only in general, with high ratings for one’s own representatives), and a constant refrain that the electorate feels it is not being heard. Nobody cares, nobody takes me seriously, and above all, nobody listens! This distrust of institutions and those who work in them and speak for them sounds familiar to students of history . . . .

We need to acknowledge that many who hear our sermons neither are angry or frustrated, nor are so frustrated they are discouraged and disengaged. Instead they come to church to escape politics and problems. Other people are genuinely anxious and afraid, and while one might judge their attitudes to be exaggerated, their feelings cannot be dismissed. They, too, need to be heard because there is more than enough to be anxious about. However the stock market may be doing, economic insecurity is a genuine issue, the attacks on health care and other corners of the social safety net are real, and the threatened status of immigrant families touches many, many church families.

At the same time the fears of what may fairly, and definitely not pejoratively, be described as older, whiter parishioners cannot be dismissed by preachers who sincerely want to hear and not just be heard. They, too, need to experience that their pastor cares for them even though they know they did not vote for the same candidates last time. Or the time before that. One might dismiss their acceptance of a news story easily discredited by the facts, but as pointed out in the last chapter, it is inevitably a losing argument, made on the wrong terms from the start. **Experienced preachers long ago learned that what most want is not to be agreed with but to know, to feel, that they have been truly heard.** When that is what we want for our sermons how can we not do the same and listen carefully to our listeners?

. . . On our best days, and often on the most important days of the liturgical and pastoral year [weddings, funerals, Easter], we will find ourselves preaching to the uninterested, the unconvinced, and the unimpressed; and if we are to preach to them effectively we have to find a way to listen to them as well. . . .

How does one begin to preach for an audience that we hope includes those who are uninterested, unconvinced, and unimpressed? . . . By taking them seriously, listening to them, imagining and asking their questions, and doing so humbly and sincerely, connection is possible. **What is needed in approaching all these varied groups of listeners is what I have elsewhere called “dialogical preaching.”** **Dialogical preaching is preaching turned toward the listeners, preaching that has learned to anticipate and answer their questions, even if the preacher remains the only one speaking.**

Our very preparation for the role of pastoral leader and preacher may be one of the greatest obstacles to connecting with the uninterested, the unconvinced, and the unimpressed. Preachers have spent so much time answering the church’s biblical and theological questions they have forgotten that the unchurched may have a very different set of questions on the same topics. **While we are pontificating on the deutero-Pauline authorship of the Pastoral Epistles, they are wondering what an epistle is.** While we worry about forgetting to get gluten-free bread for communion, they wonder why it smells like grape juice or cheap wine, what to do with the plate of money someone just passed to them, and if they will have to stand and say who they are before they can escape. . . .

Get involved. Go to meetings. Join something. Talk to strangers. And listen to them, to the sound of their lives and hopes and fears, to their questions, frustrations, opinions. How can the hope of the gospel be shared with those whom you hope will come for worship, and not just with those who do?

**. . . listening is imaginative.** Knowing what you know about those in the pew and those you hope will join them, how do you imagine them responding to the scripture readings assigned or chosen for this Sunday? What do they likely not know that will help them understand the text? Where may they be resistant to the implicit claim of the reading, and where may they say, “Exactly!” when they hear it? Dialogical preaching means asking the questions of your listeners throughout the sermon preparation process so that the sermon responds to the listeners’ questions, real and imagined. There is more to it than that, but it starts with showing that you want to listen as much as you want to be heard.