Excerpt Preaching and the Human Condition – O. Wesley Allen, Jr.

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No preacher ever brought the gospel to bear on the lives of those in the pews in a way that was truly salvific while wearing floaties and standing in the baby pool of life. If our sermons are to be effective in

leading toward transformation, we have to put on our secondhand scuba gear with a half-filled oxygen tank carved out of the cross of Jesus Christ and dive down to those places where humanity really dwells and is drowning—where if you come up too quickly trying to escape, you’ll get the bends. We must dive down into hospital rooms, the therapist’s office, war zones, dysfunctional families, funeral parlors, and the hungry belly of an impoverished child. We must swim through waters polluted with hatred, loneliness, frailty, despair, physical pain, mental illness, fear, and spilled blood. We must sink into the deepest crevice of the ocean, find the foundation of the Wailing Wall where all the prayer notes of all the generations are stuffed into the crack, pull them out, and read them aloud in our sermons if those sermons are to bring the gospel of Jesus Christ to bear on the depths of the state of humanity. The distance from the depth of human existence to the shores of God’s grace is as far as that from Golgotha to the empty tomb—an eternal, three-day’s journey, which preachers are called to recount Sunday after Sunday after Sunday. (3-4)

[I hold to] a light postmodernism, because I would also argue that the cornerstone upon which the church’s biblical preaching is built is the assumption that our ancient texts still speak to contemporary existence *because* the underlying structure of human existence is persistent. (5)

Shock and awe is not an effective homiletical approach. (9)

Repeatedly tapping the congregation on the shoulder to point out the situation of our existence will hold more potential for us being raised to the top of that situation than popping the congregation on the nose with a rolled-up newspaper and sending them howling out of the sanctuary. (10)

[W]hen we think about the human condition in the pulpit, we should be thinking cumulatively. I preach on a small (but deep) element of the human condition this week that adds to a different small (but deep) element I preached on last week and the week before and next week. (11)

We start with the command to *love God*. When turned on its head, the command to love God completely—physically, emotionally, and spiritually—intimates that there is a broken relationship between God and humanity. Something is wrong with the vertical dimension of human relationality. The vertical relationship between humanity and God can be said to be broken when, for various reasons, that divine will is not actualized in the world. This brokenness is experienced from the side of human responsibility and from the side of divine responsibility.

The second dimension of the human condition can be viewed through the command to *love your neighbor*. This command intimates that there is a broken relationship between human and human.

Something is wrong with the horizontal dimension of human relationality. We have moved, in other words, from the realm of faith and devotion to that of ethics. The horizontal relationship between humanity and humanity can be said to be broken when the divine desire for peace, justice, and mercy is not actualized in the world. And this brokenness is experienced from the side of our responsibility for the other (sin) as well as from the side of our victimization by the other (suffering).

The third and final dimension of our heuristic model for the human condition is suggested by the closing phrase of the second command, love your neighbor as yourself. When the qualification of loving others as we love ourselves is turned on its head, the implication is that the human condition is characterized, in part, by a broken relationship between a person and her or his self. In the metaphor of three dimensions, we are turning to the dimension of depth. What we really mean is that something is wrong with the internal dimension of the human being. The internal relationship between a human and her or his self can be said to broken when, for various reasons, God-gifted meaning of an individual’s finite existence is not fulfilled. It is the state of self-estrangement. Because this dimension of the human condition is viewed as a psychological, existential state of being, the two sides of sin and suffering are not simply related in an inseparable fashion as in the previous two dimensions; here they collapse in on one another. Sin against oneself causes and in turn is caused by self-suffering. (12-13)

[W]hen we [preachers] name or show some element of the human condition in our sermons, we should expect some level of discomfort on the part of both us and our hearers. (21)

We must name whatever element of the human condition we are addressing in a sermon with honesty, with clarity, and without blinking. (21)

Preachers need to offer their hearers mirrors that reflect their lives and their world with the guilt and pain they know (but try to deny) are inherent parts of reality. (23)

Preachers do not preach the human condition. That is not our goal. We preach the gospel *in light of* the human condition. (23-24)

This book attempts to offer a suggestive model for doing a better job of bringing the different dimensions of threats and damage to the well-being of individuals and communities into our preaching over time so that we can do a better job of offering a myriad of perspectives on the good news of salvation and baptismal vocation to those who need saving and long for direction and meaning in their all-too-real human lives. (25)

We need sermons that are simple but not simplistic. (40)

Telling people to quit being idolatrous is not good news. Showing them ways God overcomes our idolatry is. (40)

Our suffering is not the last word on this dimension of the human condition. In some way or another (depending on the preacher’s hermeneutical approach to Scripture and history), the story of Christ’s resurrection reminds us that God gets the last word. By raising Christ from the dead, God addresses the absolute limit of human finitude and suffering: mortality. An empty tomb trumps theodicy every time.

By this last claim, I do not mean to suggest, however, that we turn suffering into a trifling matter. The claim that the resurrection is part of God’s answer to suffering does not solve the problem of theodicy. We continue to suffer and even die in spite of the fact that our faith states emphatically, “Christ is risen indeed!” The claim simply asserts that suffering, whatever one’s theological orientation, can only be understood from a Christian point of view *in light of* God’s salvific concern and care for us, which is demonstrated ultimately in the story of Christ’s resurrection.

To deny or ignore the reality, depth, and breadth of human suffering is to be theologically and existentially dishonest. Individuals face physical illness, including pain and injury, as well as emotional struggle, including mental illness and spiritual distress. At the corporate level, we are inflicted with economic and social inequality, war, and natural disaster. We experience diverse examples of such suffering, witness forms of suffering beyond our experience, are always aware of the possibility of more and new forms of suffering just around the corner. Sometimes our suffering is mild and manageable, and other times it is intense and unbearable. To ignore or deny such suffering in our theology and sermons is to make claims of God’s salvific love into cheap sentimentalism. We trust in the resurrecting God enough to question God when our experience in the death-dealing world seems to contradict our understanding of God as just and merciful. (51)

Our failure in our horizontal relationships with our neighbors, however, is not the last word on this dimension of the human condition. Our sinful nature is answered by God’s character. The God of justice speaks louder than our injustice. God’s mercy is stronger than our lack of compassion. God’s peace outlives our tendencies toward violence. And God’s love is wider than our hatred. (71)

If acknowledging a problem is the first step to addressing it, a sermon must acknowledge our guilt in order to help the congregation be delivered from it. If hearers do not experience guilt, they cannot experience the joy of repentance. And if they do not repent, it is doubtful that they will eventually act individually and corporately in any more ethical fashion than they did before they heard the sermon. (78)

Our failure in terms of sinfully causing our own self-suffering is not the last word on the inner dimension of the human condition. Our sinful nature is answered by God’s desire for our individual well-being. (104)

Too many preachers turn to pop psychology and self-help approaches to deal with the inner dimension of the human condition. Pastors should always be ready to refer people in need to professional psychological help, and they can find thousands of self-help books on Amazon.com on their own. But we should avoid playing the role of Dr. Phil or motivational speaker in the pulpit. There is a radical difference between sermons that invite hearers into the transforming effects of the good news of Jesus Christ on the inner life of the individual and those that offer advice on enriching your marriage, seven steps to success in life, the Beatitudes’ approach to better attitudes, the power of positive thinking, or the Bible-based approach to losing weight. People love these kinds of sermons—they resemble the some forty-five thousand self-help books available at any given time. Popularity, however, does not assure the message is of the gospel. We preachers do not offer advice to our hearers out of the fact that our lives are so well put together. In relation to the inner dimension, our task as preachers who also sinfully suffer in the inner dimension is to examine the dimension theologically and help hearers experience God addressing it with grace and purpose.

First, we must help our hearers escape the brainwashing they have received from the world that tells them they are “less than.” This is best done by helping them develop a theological anthropology affirming they are made in the image of God. We do not pretend that everything they have done is pleasing to God—this would be to deny the other two dimensions of the human condition. But we do remind them, over and over again, that they are of God, that God created them on the sixth day and said, “Very good.” There is nothing we have done nor anything we can do that can strip us of God’s image. There is nothing, therefore, that can separate us from God’s love including how others view us or how much we hate ourselves. Helping people see themselves as God “sees” them, ontologically speaking—that is, as they are at the core of their created beings—will help them connect their view of their self-worth with God’s eternal view instead of with the temporal views of us flawed and finite beings.

Second, we must show our hearers glimpses of moments when God has empowered people to decide to live authentically instead of living as defined by negative and unhealthy forces in the world. These are moments of *kairos*. Whereas *chronos* is the passing of normal, everyday time, the Greek word *kairos* can mean “opportune time,” or “the right time,” and this is the way it is usually used theologically.

In this sense, *kairos* is not linear time (history) or cyclical time (the passing of the seasons). It is a moment in *chronos* when the extraordinary is possible/happens. It is a juncture in time when the right decision can change the course of one’s history. It is extraordinary time. It is God’s eternal time invading human time. *Kairos* is ahistorical, eschatological even. Yet every moment, in some sense, holds potential for *kairos*. Whether in this small or huge moment we choose to be the one God made us and calls us to be, or we choose something less, something regrettable: that is what is at stake. Left to our own abilities and reasoning, we will almost always choose the less. But thankfully, we are never left to our own devices.

God is present in every moment, calling us to the good, offering us the good. When we show our hearers imagery in which others have received God’s gift by responding in a positive, healthy, and transforming way in a moment of *kairos*, we offer them that same gift from God. (108-10)