

HOW TO HEAR A SERMON

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A short time ago I read a summary of an article entitled “How to Survive a Sermon”. The article was written by the Warden of the College of Preachers at Washington Cathedral, a man whose job requires that he listen to hundreds of sermons every year. Because of this perhaps, the article had a tone of jaundiced humor and long-suffering patience but was really short on practical advice. Nevertheless, it got me thinking about the problem we all share — after all, I’ve spent most of my years in the pews on Sunday morning, not the pulpit — and I want to talk to you today on the subject - not how to survive a sermon: that prejudices the issue in a prejudicial way; but rather how to hear a sermon creatively. I think what I have to say can apply also to other situations — college lectures, for example — when you find yourself part of a quasi-captive audience on an occasion that may not be your first choice of a way to spend your time.

So here are some principles you might use to learn the skill of listening creatively: how to hear a sermon.

First of all, listen expectantly. There is every reason to believe that somewhere something worthwhile will be said. Often the preacher gets in the way of the word of God; and often the professor gets in the way of his subject. And have you ever noticed how the obvious points tend to be carefully explained, but the really hard conclusions, difficult transitions, or mysterious concepts are somehow hastily, sometimes slickly, made without a convincing argument or appeal? Both preachers and professors tend to do this — get in the way of the subject, or explain the obvious and neglect the difficult points.

But if one is patient and listens expectantly, some truths will break through. In a sermon it is often when the preacher turns to his texts in the Bible. In a lecture it is often when the professor quotes the thinker or expert he is talking about. And remember, preachers and professors are only human: they do what you do; explain carefully what you understand clearly, but slip hastily over the knotty points that you still somehow believe must be as you feel they ought to be.

And remember: there is a truth to be discovered, some revelation to help our ignorance, some insight to save us from our error or sin. As the preacher, Ecclesiastes, Koheleth said — and I’m sure you agree — “Of the making of many books, there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh, (but) let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.” The task of the preacher is to teach the people this knowledge. Says Ecclesiastes, “The preacher ought to find out acceptable words, upright words of truth.” And Paul who is concerned that the people hear the saving word of the gospel, the good news, asks, “How shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher?”

The first rule then, is to listen expectantly. There wouldn’t be the occasion of the sermon, or lecture, unless it was expected that some truth is there to be proclaimed. And if the preacher or

professor sometimes gets in the way, remember you, the hearer, get in the way of the truth if you do not listen expectantly when it is proclaimed clearly. This is the problem of the preacher, the teacher, the prophet. And so Isaiah asked, “Who has believed our report?”, for not everyone hears, listens to, the good news. The first rule then is to listen, to hearken, to listen expectantly — eager and willing to learn.

There is a second principle to follow, especially if you find following the first one is not working out fruitfully. And that is to listen actively. By this, I mean to react to what you hear, consider it actively, examine what it means and see how it fits into the context of your beliefs and convictions. Perhaps you don’t think that what is being said is being said well. Then one should consider how it might be done better to be faithful to the word of God — or (and this still applies to lectures) to the subject matter being presented. I once knew a fine old gentleman who faithfully attended a country church every Sunday even though his advanced age made it increasingly difficult to do so. I asked him why he kept coming. “Well,” he said, “first of all I like to think I set an example for younger ones. Then, too, I always get something out of a sermon, even if it is only seeing how not to do it.” He really meant this not in an unkind way. What he really meant was that the sermon was an occasion to proclaim or reaffirm religious truths, and if it was not being done well, he supplied ideas for improvement in his own mind. He responded actively even to a bad sermon, supplying himself ideas about how the truth could be made more clear, so that he could really say when leaving the church, “It was a good sermon.” His creative listening had made it so.

And one can listen creatively to a bad lecture, looking for the truth that is being clouded by a bad presentation and supplying for the sake of that truth sympathetic ideas that could help clarify it in your own mind.

In a lecture you can always ask a question for clarification of a point, or to express disagreement. One can do this in a Sunday School class, and should. One should feel free to do this with a preacher, if one is listening actively. Sometimes classes are held after a sermon to formalize this kind of activity. But this isn’t necessary to express some kind of reaction.

For example, a week ago Friday I preached at Stetson Chapel a sermon entitled “Be Not Anxious”. You College Singers heard it and many of this congregation heard something like it last fall, the same sermon in another form. After the sermon, a colleague called me and said it was a very good sermon, but — (repeat) “but I don’t agree with your third point that anxiety is Unchristian, irreligious, a failure of faith”. Now he was not concerned to refute me; his disagreement was occasioned by an honest question about how one could suffer anxiety and still be a Christian. The point I was trying to make was not that religion would protect one from anxiety — even Paul cited his anxiety about the churches as a daily occasion for suffering — but that Christian faith gives hope for overcoming it, so that one need not rest in anxiety. Jesus said, “In the world you will have tribulation, anxiety — but I have overcome the world.” This was an example of creative, active listening and it gave us both an opportunity to clarify a point of faith, a spiritual truth.

The same creative, active listening should be used in the classroom or church school. And I think it is, at K College anyway, for the most part. But again it works best as a collaborative effort to get at the truth, and not as a narrow attempt to react against a view, or refute a point. And this can be misunderstood. Again, one of my colleagues came to me early this Quarter asking about one of my freshman counselees. He reported that she was hostile in class. I said, “Nonsense. I know her. She just wants to get things clear. If she pushes hard, that’s why. It’s not hostility.” His reply was, “You’re a kind man, but I know hostility.” I would like to think I am kind, but I was speaking truth and my colleague was indeed wrong, and he later found out he was. I am pleased to report that she is now rated as one of the best students in that class. Obviously they began to agree on the subject matter of the class and to see differing views as collaborative attempts, not hostile opposition.

This principle of listening actively is, of course, simply the rule of Protestant Christianity. It is the principle that the pastor as a teacher does not have a corner on the truth; he does not hand it down from on high; but rather, the whole congregation is involved in understanding the revelation of God and is trying to see how the example of Christ operates to guide our lives here and now — in seeing actively how the eternal truths of revealed religion apply today. And, I might add, this is a principle and ideal shared by Judaism and liberal Catholicism.

One final principle — listen expectantly, listen actively, but listen reverently, for there is an impressive, fundamental truth to be heard, a spirit to be encountered — namely, the truth that one is a creature of God, part of a larger spirit, and that very spirit can be encountered in worship. The classroom parallel is not exact, but reverence for learning, respect for truth, commitment to truth, is the academic counterpart of the religious commitment to God as the creator and sustainer of our being. The teaching is that learning should be revered for its own sake. It is the spirit of wonder that Aristotle pointed to when he said all men by nature desire to know. It is this desire turned to the source, the Creator, the first principle of our being, which is the religious impulse seeking the spirit, the presence of God. The church service should give opportunity for seeking this spirit. Periods of silence help. Quaker silent worship has much to recommend it. But there are opportunities to seek or explore the presence of the Spirit in meditative moments of quiet music — or to sense the splendor of God’s creation in the stirring, full sound of music, or the spirit of silent prayer.

And in almost every form of Biblical worship service, there is some ceremony — quiet, reverent, aimed at communion with that spirit of God. For the Christian, it is the presence of God through Christ in the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. We are about to celebrate this service. All fellow Christians are invited to participate. But if this service is unfamiliar or foreign to your experience, pass the elements on but use the service as an occasion to meditate on your own approach to the Highest in quiet prayer.

How to hear a sermon? Listen expectantly. Listen actively. But above, listen reverently. Try to sense the presence of the spirit of God, beyond the words, beneath the ceremonies, outside the symbols — within us all if we but hearken: the still small voice of God.