

## 11

## Four Pages of the Preacher

Paul Scott Wilson proposes that the preacher think of the sermon as a manuscript with four pages. Each page has a different theological and homiletical task. The motif of “page” is figurative. A page is a part of the sermon. A page usually comprises 20–25 percent of a sermon. Wilson discusses this approach to preaching primarily as a way of preaching from a biblical passage. However, it can be adapted to preaching from a doctrine, a Christian practice, or a personal or social situation.

Wilson mixes metaphors slightly to combine the notion of filmmaking with that of the four pages. Each sermon has one dominant image, and each page is much like a film clip that pictures the theological task of each page. The preacher “films” the central task of each page. A page may actually be a film clip, that is, the purpose of the page may be fulfilled by an image without accompanying analytical discourse.

**Page 1** focuses on the biblical text or the topic. This page names the theological problem that gave rise to this text. The preacher describes the manifestation of sin in the world of the Bible for which the text is a response. Often the preacher summarizes the text and acquaints the congregation with aspects of the literary, historical, and theological context of the passage or topic that are necessary for understanding the sermon. In addition to discussing the trouble that generated the text, the preacher films this trouble.

**Page 2** moves the action from the world of the Bible to our world. On this page, the preacher helps the congregation identify ways in which

we experience difficulties that are analogous to those in the world of the biblical passage. How are we complicit in the sin that gave rise to the text? How do we experience brokenness in ways that are similar to those of the biblical community? The sermon films trouble in the contemporary world.

**Page 3** shifts focus to the good news of God’s presence and purposes. The theological purpose of this part of the sermon is to help us recognize how God’s grace redeems the situation described in Pages 1 and 2. This page identifies God’s action in the world of the Bible. The preacher identifies the good news at the center of the text. This page contains a film clip of grace in biblical community.

**Page 4** returns to the contemporary world. The preacher helps the congregation recognize, experience, and respond to the good news of God’s grace in today’s world. How is God at work in our setting in ways that are similar to God’s work in the biblical setting? This page films grace in today’s community.

In addition, some sermons require a short beginning and ending. The beginning helps the congregation focus on the text or topic. The ending helps the congregation continue reflecting on the text or topic after the sermon concludes.

Most sermons unfold in the sequence just discussed. However, the preacher can arrange the pages in different sequences. For instance, Page 1 could focus on trouble in the Bible. Page 3 might then follow and could articulate the good news of the text. Page 2 could name trouble in our world, with Page 4 correlating the good news of the Bible with us.

In addition, Wilson envisions a practical relationship between sermon preparation and these pages. The preacher can prepare a certain page on a certain day. Monday: researching the text and planning the sermon. Tuesday: prepare Page 1. Wednesday: prepare Page 2. Thursday: prepare Page 3. Friday: prepare Page 4.

This pattern of preaching puts God’s grace at the center of the sermon while looking sin in the eye. It can serve almost any occasion. The congregation should find it clear and easy to follow. It incorporates intellectual precision with evocative imagery so that it speaks to head, heart, and will.

Paul Scott Wilson preached this sermon in chapel at Emmanuel College during Lent, as the academic term was coming to a close. The preacher hopes to encourage students in preparation for ministry to name the fact that they sometimes feel that aspects of their ministries—and their studies—appear futile. Yet, Wilson hopes that the congregation will recognize that God’s grace can transcend and even transform their service and their study. Indeed, actions that seem futile to them can mediate divine grace.

The preacher refers to “First Nations,” a Canadian way of speaking of Native Americans.

**PAUL SCOTT WILSON** is professor of homiletics at Emmanuel College, University of Toronto, in Toronto, Canada. His complete discussion of this approach can be found in *The Four Pages of the Preacher* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999). He is the author of the important textbook, *The Practice of Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), which is noted for its incorporation of literary and rhetorical criticism into the homiletical task, as well as *A Concise History of Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992) and *Imagination of the Heart: New Understandings in Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988). He is editor of *Word and Witness*, a journal containing materials to help with preaching from the Revised Common Lectionary. He is also editor of a series of books discussing the relationship of preaching to other theological disciplines, *Preaching and Its Partners*, to be published by Chalice Press beginning in the year 2000.

#### PAUL SCOTT WILSON

### *Futile Acts of Faith*

#### John 12:1–8

(Page 1) Mary walked around the edge of her dining room. Martha was busy in the kitchen. Their brother Lazarus was here, reclining, eating with the guests, their legs radiating from the table like rays of the sun. At last, sure there was enough of everything, Mary paused to study the faces in the candlelight, Judas—now suspected of theft—Peter, James, the others, and Jesus. O the face of Jesus. The conversation continued but suddenly for her it stopped—it was as though it was winter again and a chill came over her, and she realized what was happening. The threats of the religious authorities when Jesus raised Lazarus, Judas breaking rank, Jesus’ own words predicting his death: Jesus was approaching his death now.

She really had no plan when she bought the nard. In a scene that the Gospel of John never recorded, only a week ago she had been in the market in Jerusalem buying embalming myrrh and aloes for Lazarus. The merchant had shown her a beautiful alabaster box inlaid, with ivory, containing a pound of pure nard direct from India, brought by camel over a space of months. “It’s what royalty use,” the merchant laughed. “Costs a year’s wage.” When she smelled the seal, so beautiful was its fragrance that even in her grief she imagined she was on the green slopes of the

Himalayan mountains in India that he described. After Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, she had been looking for some gift that would be appropriate thanks to Jesus. Her mind kept coming back to that alabaster box in the marketplace, fit for a king. Then she knew a cheaper gift would not do. She went to a neighbor and sold the field her father had left her then returned to Jerusalem and bought the nard from the surprised merchant. Then with the box clutched tightly in her bag, she rushed from the city and, outside the wall, she sat down, shocked at what she had just done. She did not even know when she would give it. She just knew she wanted Jesus to have it for his ministry.

But now, with Jesus actually present in her house, her gown brushing his feet each time she brought in food and drink, she realized how near his death might be. She brought the box. She might have been remiss: She did not go from guest to guest asking, “Excuse me, do you have any allergies?” But then, in the ancient manuscript of the New Testament that I read, it says that this was hypoallergenic nard. The others at first did not notice anything. In fact, the first they knew, the room was filled with the sweetest fragrance they had ever smelled, not a whiff, but a wave of scent so powerful and compelling that their ears began to boogie, their teeth began to sing, and those who were nearsighted became farsighted—just for a moment. Some said later it smelled like myrrh and frankincense, or flowers from mountain meadows, or orange blossoms and cinnamon with honey. Mary, in tears, was cupping the oil in her palm, spreading it on Jesus’ feet and ankles as she would if he was actually dead, in the way that she had done so recently with Lazarus. Only Lazarus had been dead. Now, she did not count the cost—Judas was already frowning. She did not care what he or others thought or would say. And then she was reaching behind her head to let down her hair, biting her lip, and taking her hair and wiping off the extra oil, not caring that she was improper or what anyone thought. Her Jesus was dying. Her Jesus was dying. She would have given anything to save him.

(Page 2) Would that our own ministries could be so extravagant, so spontaneous, so beautiful, so memorable. Every time I think of doing an extravagant thing, like quitting my day job and going to Calcutta to work as a Sister of Mercy, I start thinking of why I shouldn’t. That is one of the dangers of education, you start thinking too much. Gregory Baum, the Roman Catholic theologian, once said that he was glad that he had never studied psychology, for in analyzing his reasons for doing what he did, he might never have become a social activist. Some people did a survey some years ago in the United States. The surveyors asked alumni/ae to comment on their schools. The graduates of the best schools, like Yale, Harvard,



Cornell—Emmanuel College—were the most critical of their alma mater. At first this puzzled the people doing the survey until they realized that the alumni of the best schools were most critical because they had been taught to think critically by their schools. It is hard to be spontaneous and extravagant in one's love for Christ if you always have to think about it first.

One could wait one's whole life for exactly the right cause to which to dedicate one's life. Like the man visiting Toronto who kept waiting for a clean taxicab and never found it. In 1986, then moderator of our denomination, the Right Rev. Bob Smith, picked one main cause to highlight his term in office: an apology to the people of the First Nations for the hurt the church native residential schools caused. Some said it was a futile gesture, too little, too late. And maybe it was. But it made an important difference to some people. Then he helped start up the Healing Fund, dedicated to providing funds for First Nations projects to give concrete expression to that apology. Some said that it was a futile gesture, too little, too late. And maybe it is. But it is making an important difference to some people.

When we know this, why is Judas still in us looking on what others are doing and judging them negatively? Perhaps we are aware how little difference in this world we can make to the suffering of others—if you are like me at the end of this term, you are so tired you are not sure if you have anything to offer others. Or perhaps we are afraid to trust that God might make something of whatever small offerings of justice and kindness we can offer to others.

*(Page 3)* As the disciples lay at the table with Jesus, they must have been as surprised at Mary's action as Mary was herself. There was no mistaking the value of the perfume, apart from the alabaster and ivory box itself. If any of them had been near members of the royal court or attended a royal funeral, they would have smelled this before. And Mary was not measuring it in small amounts—when she was not ladling it with her cupped hands onto Jesus' feet, she was pouring it directly from a height above his feet. It was an extraordinary act of surprising beauty and exceptional dedication, futility and waste. Poor Judas was unable to join in the excess of the moment; he was after all, a treasurer, and treasurers are to be concerned about these sorts of things. If the other disciples in that moment were filled with the Holy Spirit as Mary herself was, they would have seen in Mary the picture of discipleship, giving to the world, giving as a servant, giving up all pride, giving out of love, getting nothing in return but the welfare of the other. Who but God could inspire such an extraordinary act of service? When Judas complained this perfume could have been sold for the price of a Cadillac and the money given to the

poor, Jesus merely responded, "Leave her alone." Jesus did not attack Judas for betrayal. Rather, Jesus blessed Mary. Because he was dying—his own death was at hand. "She bought this . . . for the day of my burial." Only the Holy Spirit could have told her that.

Judas' question is ours as well: How could such an extravagant gesture be justified? But before we go too far down that road, we might thank Judas. His is exactly the question we should be asking. If we ask how Mary's gesture could be justified, worth say \$50,000, how much more should we ask it of Jesus' journey to the cross, for which Mary prepares? How could Jesus' extravagant gesture be justified? Jesus giving his life for the sake of all who seek to know God, dying for the likes of Judas and you and me. God places unlimited value on any human life. Mary knew that her gesture was not too great but too small. Her brother who was dead was alive. God places unlimited value on any human life. Jesus' going to Jerusalem, to the cross, to his death is such a stupid act—so extravagant, such a futile gesture. "Don't do it, Jesus," we shout again in Lent, "your ministry has only just begun. There is too much stupidity in this world. We will kill you." But he is going to Jerusalem to his death. And yet when we look to Christ on the cross we see what Mary anticipated Jesus giving to the world, giving as a servant, giving up all pride, giving out of love, getting nothing in return but the welfare of the other.

*(Page 4)* By the power of this futile gesture, this wasted life, this stupid deed, this extravagant act of love, you and I have been plucked from death, restored to life. For what purpose have we been plucked from death? Our purpose is also giving to the world, giving as a servant, giving up all pride, giving out of love, and getting nothing in return but the welfare of the other. As St. Paul says, "For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing" (2 Corinthians 2:15); the Anointed One has anointed us with his perfume. We are the aroma of Christ.

So much in ministry seems futile. Sunday night. The youth group. So often it seems a futile gesture. Some weeks there are seventeen; other weeks there are six. Finding a time to speak of God or Christian ethics is never easy and rarely smooth. It's the embarrassed glances more than the stony silence. They seem to smell religion coming from a long way off. And you speak again of Jesus' love for all, for the Judas in us and the Mary in us. A futile gesture? A thirteen-year-old boy speaks out for the first time: "My daddy has cancer. My Mom says its going to be okay." And suddenly there was a sweet fragrance of perfume in the room.

So much of ministry seems futile. A person came in off the street, foul smelling, just prior to the service. The student minister was asked to

escort the person out. The student was preaching that day on “do unto others...” The words of the sermon suddenly seemed futile. With some trepidation he looked into the sanctuary to discover that members of the congregation were already taking care of the person in appropriate ways—the chair of the session was seated talking with him. A woman was just leaving to make him a sandwich. Most moving, however, was a little seven-year-old girl who brought him a pair of socks—her daddy’s socks.

And what about you? You are devoting all these years and all this money to education for ministry. You do not even know what will await you at the end. Just getting to the end of this term may seem impossible, a futile act writing useless papers. Is your act futile? It may seem so, especially when you are in the midst of it. And yet yours is an extravagant act, offering your life to God and your neighbor. It has the aroma of Christ and the power of God’s love.

## 12

### Sermon as Plot and Moves

David G. Buttrick conceives of the congregation as a community. The congregation is not a collection of individuals, but is a body of persons who are related. The sermon as an event shared by the body and that is designed to form communal consciousness. Communal consciousness functions more slowly than individual consciousness and calls for certain ways of speaking that differ from the ways in which individuals talk with one another.

In this approach, the sermon is a plot composed of a series of elements called moves. By plot, Buttrick refers to the selection and sequencing of the various parts of the sermons so that they can work together to help the sermon achieve a particular intention. The plot is made up of moves—small segments of the sermon. A move lasts from three to four minutes. Consequently, a twenty-minute sermon would consist of a beginning, four to six moves, and an ending.

While the preacher creates a fresh plot for each sermon, Buttrick proposes three basic plots that form sermons. (a) A sermon may be in the “mode of immediacy.” In this plot, the sermon follows one’s immediate participation in the world of a biblical text, especially narratives. The sermon is made up of moves that follow the movement of the biblical text. However, the preacher does not simply retell the biblical story. The preacher explicitly helps the congregation relate the biblical and contemporary worlds. (b) A sermon may be in the “reflective mode.” In this approach, the plot follows the movement of the preacher’s reflection. The moves of