Eight Tips to Preach in a Divided Culture

Few of us have done this before.

If your experience is like mine, you’ve never preached in a political and cultural climate as volatile and unpredictable as the one we face in the U.S. right now. I’ve preached my share of social justice sermons, but they were issue oriented. I’ve never needed to preach when an entire country was in foment, when families were separating over political views, when trust was so low to expect common courtesy.

Many of us wonder how to preach the unifying love of Christ while many are divided; the ways to preach peace in the face of vitriol; how to preach dignity when displays of disrespect are sought as badges of honor.

Here are eight tips to help. I hope you’ll tell me what works for you to preach across the divide at lisa@backstorypreaching.com. I’m glad we’re in this together.

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1) Pray and Read Scripture

Without ceasing

I’ve practiced contemplative prayer for years, but I’ve had more trouble lately settling into the silence, into the peace of God that surpasses all understanding.

All the more reason to renew or create habits of prayer and scripture reading. We need to remember that ultimately we have nothing to fear, nothing over which to be anxious (but also, see Tip #7 below). We need to dwell not only in the words of so many messengers from God, "Do not be afraid," but also, the in Wisdom, Compassion, and the Alpha and Omega of God.

- Set your clock.
- Find a prayer group or friend to pray with.
- Make your prayer time something you don’t even have to think about.
- Don’t sacrifice it for anything other than the most dire of true needs, and then pray anyway.
- Try something different, like walking meditation or mixed media art journaling so your mind is occupied while your body brings your heart into the stillness of God’s presence.
- Do a word study or a study a theme like “Be not afraid," or pray the psalms of lamentation or pleas for deliverance.
- Find new friends in the saints and mystics who also went through trying times and spoke out.
- Practice perpetual prayer, focused breathing, and/or mindfulness.
- See a spiritual director regularly.
- Go away on retreat, even if those are micro-retreats (e.g., one day per month) if an extended time away isn’t realistic.
2) Empathize

*We all have something at stake.*

There's something we need to "win" or something we fear to "lose," and things we hold dear that could be wrested away forever:

- safety, an income, a language, a dream, a career, our family,
- our routines, the familiar, the rules of the road;
- our nation as we believe, value, and understand it,
- the way things have always been done;
- and the relationships that would be affected were our minds to be changed.

It's imperative that we listen. That we hear. That we get inside the heads and hearts of our congregations and of the nation. None of us listens when we feel our views are discounted, devalued, or not heard. Let your listeners know you see them.

- Read or listen to news sources that make you squirm.
- Take someone out for coffee you know is on the "other side."
- Imagine yourself as an immigrant, a politician, a business owner, someone with and without health insurance, a different race or gender.

How do imagine they hear the rhetoric? How do you imagine they hear the Good News that God loves and forgives them completely...and equally?
3) Scripture Is a Mirror

*Hold up what is and what could be.*

Describe the way we live now, our culture, words, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors, then hold up scripture. When God’s ways are followed:

- Orphans and widows are the first to receive care and attention.
- Strangers receive hospitality.
- Enemies become friends.
- The most despicable are held in highest esteem.

Hold “What Is” in one hand, and what the Lord says “Could Be, and Is Now,” in the other. Without spelling out the conclusions, step back and ask, “Hm. What do you notice?”
4) Tell a Story

*Show, don't tell.*

This isn't the time for lectures. When emotions run high, we don't have the capacity to make rational decisions. When on edge, our hearts are not predisposed to be quickened by reasoned arguments, lectures, or when "preached to."

We need to know what the Gospel *feels* like.

Tell a story.

- We need to *sense* unity during disagreements.
- We need to *see* peace offered in exchange for vitriol.
- We need to know deeply, *deeply,* that God makes us capable to offer dignity when another is sparing no effort to attempt to show us we are lesser than.
- Help us *see and know* the human beings affected by policies, bigotry, and fear.

Help us get live the lives of others for a few minutes, the lives of those with whom we agree, those with whom we disagree, and those whose lives are foreign to us, literally and figuratively.
5) **Point to the Way of the Cross**

*We haven’t heard the Gospel yet.*

Remember that old urban church legend about the congregation who was being nasty to each other, so for six months straight the new preacher preached the same sermon every week: “God Loves You?” When the complaints came in asking when she would change the message, the reply was,

“You haven’t heard the first one yet.”

Love you neighbor as yourself.

Be kind.

Walk justly.

Love one another as I have loved you.

Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do.

Love is patient and kind. Love is not arrogant or boastful.

Share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.

Be not afraid.

You are forgiven.

You are loved.

Go and do likewise.
6) Know Your Stuff

Do your homework.

Scripture

There are few in your congregation who have studied scripture as much as you have. Few know (or know how to access) the Greek and Hebrew translations. Few know how to exegete a passage. When Scripture is misused by our parishioners or the wider culture offer the bigger, more accurate picture in sermons, Christian ed., and parish communications. Plus, we can teach parishioners how to conduct exegesis for themselves. Hold bible studies with people who are guaranteed to bring different perspectives to the table.

The Issues

With the overwhelming number of complex issues in front us it can feel paralyzing to find out what's really happening. A start, however, is knowing how to sort fact from "less-than-fact." We need to be able to tell what's true when we hear or read about it, and be sure we're speaking the truth in our sermons. Here are several websites that encourage critical thinking about the news.


https://www.summer.harvard.edu/inside-summer/4-tips-spotting-fake-news-story


https://www.digitaltrends.com/web/how-to-spot-fake-news/

7) Be Afraid.

Preach Anyway.

Jesus’ words got him a lot of pushback— a lot of pushback. (To the point of death if remember correctly.) We can only guess how our listeners will react. No matter how much we prepare for pushback we’ll probably still get surprised. Fools for Christ that we are, we agreed to be Jesus’ very public mouthpiece. In addition to using the tools above, we need partners to help us discern the content and form of the sermon before we preach it, support us during it, and help us deal with whatever comes afterward.

Ronald Heifetz in his book, *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, speaks of the leader’s need to have confidants outside of the organization, and allies within it.

“The confidant is the person to whom one can cry out and complain. A confidant can provide a holding environment for someone who is busy holding everybody else. People attempting to lead need partners who can put them back together again at the end of the day. [They] provide perspective. They help one climb back up to the balcony to understand stand what has happened. They help ask questions like, “What’s going on here? What’s the distress about? What can be learned from the mistake? What are the options for corrective action?”

“The ally is a partner usually operating across a line of authority or organizational boundary. Alliances operate in at least three basic ways: across different organizations and, within an organization, from junior authority looking up and from senior authority looking down.”

Confidants might be a spouse, partner, close friend, therapist, or spiritual director. Allies might be members of the church board, colleagues, and preachers you don’t know but whose courage you admire. Partners like Leah Schade might even help us to fear a little less: “How to Preach When You are Afraid” (http://www.patheos.com/blogs/ecopreacher/2017/08/how-preach-when-afraid).

8) Be Authentic, Be Vulnerable

I'm preaching the best I can by God's grace in a situation I've never faced before, and sometimes that's scary.

Say it in your sermon. For example:

• I don't know how to preach in this climate.

• I admit I'm scared for our country's future and the world's.

• I'm scared of the uncertainty.

• I grieve for all who suffer, all who are afraid, and all who cause harm to others.

• I'm afraid you won't think I don't respect you or your viewpoints, or that if we hold different views I won't love and care for you or visit you at your hospital bedside anymore.

• I don't have the "answers" any more than you do, but what I do know of the Gospel is this: ________

Finally, dear Preacher, Here's what I know. Neither death nor life, nor things past nor things to come, nor anything else in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord. That is why when we go down to our grave, figuratively and literally, we sing, "Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia."

I'm glad we're in this together.

Be Good News to Preach Good News.

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