**Preaching to the Post Moderns – Part 1**

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A shift is taking place. It is more easily felt than defined. Terms like “modernity” and “postmodernity” have made their way into our vocabulary although there is little agreement on exactly what they mean. What is clear is that yesterday’s ways don’t work as they once did. If the preacher is going to be successful in proclaiming the power of God in this new context, s/he must understand how postmodernity grows out of modernity and how it is a reaction against it. It is especially crucial that the preacher understands the changing visions of truth, authority, and human potential.

Part One - What is truth? Pilate’s enduring question

Walter Truett Anderson tells the story of three baseball umpires discussing their work. The first umpire announces, “There’s balls and there’s strikes, and I call ‘em the way they are.” Another says, “There’s balls and there’s strikes, and I call ‘em the way I see ‘em.” The third says, “There’s balls and there’s strikes, but they ain’t nothin’ until I call ‘em.”

To understand Anderson’s tale is to understand a basic shift from modernity to postmodernity. Each of the three umpires has a very different view of reality. For the first, a pitch is a ball or it is a strike. Its position within the strike zone gives it an objective quality. By virtue of its location, a pitch is a ball or a strike. Our first umpire understands the umpire’s job as that of discerning the objective quality of the pitch. But even more than that, the umpire believes that he is capable of doing so free from bias or subjectivity.

This is modernity at its finest. Things have an objective quality. Truth and knowledge do exist. What’s more, they are accessible and knowable to the rational mind. Through reason, and especially the scientific method, the modern mind is able to objectively discern truth. All people, modernity contends, can (and will) come to the same “knowledge.” In the words of the first umpire, “there are balls and there are strikes. I call ‘em what they ARE.

Modernity’s understanding of truth has had its effect on Biblical study and proclamation. It is not accidental that critical methods of biblical studies developed during the modern era. Critical methods are, at least in part, methods of applying systematic reason to a biblical text. To the modern mind, biblical study is exegesis – systematically approaching a text to draw out the truth it contains.

Likewise, modern preaching was effected by modernity’s focus on systematic logic and accessible truth. Much of modern proclamation took on a logical, even apologetic form. A sermon might follow this kind of logic: Jesus ate with tax collectors. Tax collectors were the worst of first century sinners. Therefore Christ’s love has no limits. If Christ’s love has no limits we can know with certainty we are loved. The modern homily is, as Ronald Allen points out, “designed to speak to conscious understanding. If a change in thinking or acting were desired, the preacher would show, empirically and (or) logically, why the congregation should adopt the change. The sermon appealed to reason as the basis for life perception and action.” (Theology for Preaching: Authority, Truth and Knowledge of God in a Postmodern Ethos, p. 90)

It was an approach fitting in the modern world. The first umpire would have felt very much at home with the view of scripture as the bearer of truth. He would feel quite at home with the systematic approach that scripture affords him by the critical methods of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. And he would feel drawn to a logically structured sermon aimed primarily at the brains of those in the pews.

But what about those other two umpires? What do they have to add to this discussion? They certainly see the world in a different way. Both understand, to varying degrees, that they have a role in “constructing” the call of ball or strike. The second umpire, deemed by Anderson as a “mainstream constructivist” may believe that a pitch has a given quality of strike or ball but admits her limitations in fully comprehending that reality. This umpire knows the power of bias and the limitations of perspective. She has no illusions of her ability to interpret the objective reality before her.

The third, and final umpire makes her calls based solely on perspective. There is no talk of the objective nature to the placement of the ball. Instead of seeking to determine some sort of objective reality, our third umpire constructs reality. The pitch is a strike or a ball when the umpire calls it such. For this “postmodern radical” (in Anderson’s terminology) any claim of truth is simply a human construction. In many ways these three umpires demonstrate the shift from objectivist to constructionist. Or in the words of Richard Rorty, truth simply becomes “truth for us.”

How does one preach in such a world? We preachers have grown accustomed to calling on the timeless truth of scripture. Many of us have been trained to pick apart a text, to mine it like a prospector searching for the nugget of truth in order to apply that truth to the lives of those sitting in our pews. How shall we approach the homiletic task in this new world? The answer requires a new perspective.

The postmodern worshipper invites us to shift our focus from truth to meaning. Truth is aimed primarily at the mind. It is the product of deduction and well-argued and systematic points. While it may have played well in times past, to the postmodern it will be interesting at best, trivial at worst. Meaning, on the other hand takes aim at the heart. It connects text with life in a way that it resonates deep within those who hear. Meaning is the result of connections that are more than simply mental.

At this point, I am reminded of my grandmother. My Grandmother was great storyteller. Once in while my brother and I would stay at my grandparents house overnight. We looked forward to bedtime when we would hear story after story after story. Finally the last story of the night would come. It would always be the same. It was the story of two boys – two boys who did the same things that we had done that day. Grandma would tell the story until one of us would blurt out, “Hey, that story is about us!”

Preaching that focuses on meaning brings about much the same reaction. Consider the text of the ten lepers. Biblical scholarship can provide the facts about the text: the physiology of leprosy, the first century customs regarding what made someone clean or unclean, the textual variants in manuscripts etc… The text can serve as proof that God loves all people, that God is a God of power, a God of healing, or a God of compassion. Few would argue with any of these conclusions.

The focus of meaning, however, takes a different tact. In reading and reflecting of the story of the lepers, one reader might be struck by their experience of isolation for perhaps they too know some sort of isolation. Another might be captivated by their call, “Lord have mercy,” as their call puts words to the reader’s experience. A third might be pulled into the story in yet another way. Suddenly the text is alive and in the here and now. The story is about us. It is about our emotions, our experiences, our hopes, longings and dreams.

Notice what happens. No universal claims are made. Rather meaningful connections between the text and the listener are established, drawing the listener deeper into the insight and wisdom of the text. The goal is not timeless universal truth, but local contemporary (even temporary) meaning. The field of meaning, which develops, becomes “truthful” to the contemporary mind, for it speaks in a meaningful way.

In the end Pilate’s question is one of a fading era. While Pilate asks, “What is truth?” a question well suited for modernity, the wise postmodern preacher will ask a different question, “What is meaningful?”