

In search of perfection, grace and calling

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My education in preaching aligns with the tradition of excellence in manuscripts. It is the tradition of the crafted phrase and the choice of the perfect word at the perfect time.

After using an electric typewriter for a few years, I graduated to word processing on a Commodore 64. I remember the absolute marvel I felt the first time I cut and pasted dotted-green letters on the screen and pasted them into another point in the sermon where I thought they were better suited.

It was a significant milestone on my quest for the holy grail—the perfect sermon. The flawless manuscript delivered perfectly: one where I included everything in the pulpit that had been on paper in the order it was written; nothing left out; a sermon where I anticipated the illustrations or quotations offered by church members at the door; a sermon that said it all and said it well.

The elusive perfect sermon

I keep every preached sermon in a file folder with all the research that went into its writing. Almost every sermon had notes and file clippings added to the folder *after* the preaching in the hopes that if I ever tried to massage it into condition suitable for publication, I would have all the material to make it a perfect sermon.

After 40 years of trying, I still have not written, nor have I preached the exact sermon I planned during the week. No matter how captivating I think

the idea is, no matter how good or how powerful the illustrations seem to be, no matter how profoundly I think I have explained the text, all my sermons leave something out.

All my sermons seem like the sentence crafted in the study, but forgotten in the preaching moment; the story found in the Sunday paper after the sermon was preached, but would have made a much better introduction; the new understanding of a text rendering all my past sermons on that text pointless.

Perfection always has been beyond my reach.

Tantalus' fate like seeking the perfect sermon

I often felt as Tantalus must have felt. Tantalus is the half-human son of Zeus who was uniquely favored among mortals and who committed a food-related crime.

The stories vary in recounting the specifics of what Tantalus did, but in the end, he was punished by being “tantalized” with hunger and thirst in the afterlife. Tantalus was immersed up to his neck in water, and whenever he bent to drink, it all drained away. Luscious fruit hung on trees above him, and whenever he reached for it, the winds blew the branches where he could not grasp the fruit.

The myths say he starved and thirsted for eternity, with satisfaction just out of reach. Likewise, the perfect sermon seems always out of reach.

Freedom: Trading perfection for life

An artist said: “I used to strive for beauty. Now I strive for life.”

I saw a parallel between seeking beauty and perfection. I quit striving for the perfect sermon since I wasn't going to write it anyway. I started placing a priority on life.

I engaged the congregation more. I no longer focused on the words, the outline or the manuscript. I focused on the people, the lives they lead and the faith to which they aspire. It was freeing. The result was the sermon seemed more alive to me.

The manuscript became a discipline for preparation, not a master. I left it in the study after reducing all my preparation to as few notes as possible. I became comfortable when—during the preaching moment—I left out illustrations that seemed important or forgot phrases I worked hard to craft. I accepted they were part of my preparation more than a necessary part of the sermon.

The perfect sermon question

There is no task into which ministers inject more of themselves than preaching. Consequently, preparation styles are personal, with each of us using the methods that work best for ourselves.

Whatever your method, my advice is to work hard. Prepare well. Most importantly, ask yourself if the congregation will recognize their lives in the message? Will they see how the Bible relates to their lives?

If the answers to these questions are “yes” and you’ve prepared well enough, forget about perfection, put the manuscript aside and trust the Spirit. Perhaps you will experience the grace of reclaiming the joy of your calling.

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