

Mark Allen Powell. *What Do They Hear: Building Bridges Between Pulpit and Pew*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007. Paperback, 107 pages, \$12.00.

Mark Allen Powell is not only attempting to build bridges between the pulpit and pew, but at the level of scholarship he uses this text to build a bridge between the sometimes obscure world of literary criticism and the more demotic parlance of preaching pastors. And I'm inclined to believe he's built a pretty good bridge: not only can preachers learn a thing or two from this text, so can seminarians and teachers of preachers.

The first and shortest chapter of Powell's book focuses on the phenomenon of polyvalence which he calls "the capacity . . . for texts to mean different things to different people" (3). If the phenomenon of polyvalence is going to be meaningful in a tradition of biblical preaching, then the text itself will need to be active in setting the parameters of possible meanings. Powell describes these as meanings that are invited by the text (4-5). In the same way, sermons invite more meanings than one, and this can be either bane or blessing. Powell's goal is to help preachers realize the polyvalence possible in texts, both biblical and sermonic, as blessing. To do this, he says, an introductory knowledge of literary criticism, with its attentiveness to "different elements within texts" and "different factors within readers" can be instructive to preachers who craft sermons (7).

The bulk of Powell's work is devoted to chapters two, three, and four, each of which include a collation of respondent answers to selected texts and questions, his analysis of those responses, and some practical suggestions for "bridging the gap" between pulpit and pew. Chapter two is a fascinating demonstration of how listeners sort, prioritize, remember, or forget details within a narrative as they make a series of interpretive decisions that lead to the re-telling of a narrative, in this case Luke's story of the Prodigal Son. Comparing the story as told by groups of Eastern Europeans, Americans, and Tanzanians, Powell draws our attention to the way each group told the story in ways that revealed as much about their social location as it did about the text in question. For example, Americans, living in the "bread basket of the world", ignored 15:14 ("a severe famine took place throughout that country"), while the Russian group, which could remember hunger in World War II, identified the famine as crucial to the story (15-19). The Tanzanians responded to 15:16b ("no one gave him anything"), describing the text as a commentary on societal obligations, specifically hospitality (27).

What's at back of these differing interpretations, both arguably invited by the text itself? According to Powell, it's the reader's empathy choices: readers choose characters or situations through empathetic identification. But not all empathies are alike. Powell distinguishes between "realistic empathy choices" (empathy choices that are based on analogy) and "idealistic empathy choices" (choices that are based on what ought or should be the case) (28-30). With this tool in hand, using a cross section of fifty lay people and fifty clergy, he asks the participants to answer the question, "What does this story [Mark 7:1-8] mean to you?" According to Powell's analysis, forty of the clergy responses were in the form of idealistic empathy (i.e. "we ought to be like Jesus"), while none of the laity identified with Jesus. By contrast, laity tended to employ realistic empathy, identifying with the negative members of the Markan cast, the disciples, and Pharisees (55).

From Powell's analysis, there is a disconnect between clergy who base their sermons on idealistic identification with Jesus and the laity who are more inclined to begin with a realistic identification with different characters in the story. Powell suggests a few bridge building strategies, among these that preachers should "cast the scriptures" in terms of a dramatic play:

determine who readers identify with and why. Then widen the interpretive circle: “force yourself to empathize with a different character and to experience the story from that character’s point of view” (60-1). The fourth chapter continues in the same spirit as chapter three, this time attempting to sort out how laity and clergy construe the meaning of meaning, whether it is a “message” or an “affect” (67). As in his previous studies, Powell offers his readers illuminating glimpses into this important topic through evidence and analysis.

Part of the charm of this text is its brevity and simplicity, not to mention Powell’s conversational style. More importantly, Powell offers an accessible account of polyvalence to people who may not be used to, comfortable with, or entirely trusting of the vocabulary of literary criticism and reader-response theory. From the standpoint of the classroom, the inclusion of the individual responses made in the field tests is invaluable, sure to get students engaging the topics of this book and more. Sometimes his suggestions for “bridging the gap” are not as substantial as they could be. For example, telling his readers that they should “force” an empathetic identification raises more questions than it answers, among them, “Can empathy be forced?” Some practical strategies that would foster (rather than force) this kind of identification would have been helpful. That said, Powell gives an empirical edge to his homiletical suggestions, something that may be lacking in more theoretically weighted works. Indeed, after reading this text, many of my students were asking for more – even better, they were engaging the phenomenon of polyvalence at the practical level of sermonic craft and biblical interpretation, attempting to build their own bridges, one interpretive decision after another. As a secondary or supplemental text to an introductory course of preaching, it’s a fine choice.

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