

Raewynne J. Whiteley. *Steeped in the Holy: Preaching as Spiritual Practice*. Lanham: Cowley Publications, 2008. 151 pages. \$19.95.

This book offers a refreshing perspective on the practice of preaching, viewing it not as an isolated act but as a practice integrated into the ebb and flow of daily life. Preaching is not an intrusion into the life of preachers but an extension of who we are and what we do. Whiteley writes, “. . . we tend to view our own spiritual lives as somehow separate from our ministry. One is something we do for ourselves; the other, something we do for the church” (2). Such a division is unfounded. Preaching integrates both realms; it is a spiritual discipline.

The book explores how preaching depends on six spiritual practices and how those practices are incorporated into sermon preparation. These six practices include sacrament, Scripture, hospitality, play, prayer, and embodiment. Whiteley devotes a chapter to each.

Preaching, for example, must engage the spiritual discipline of reading and interpreting Scripture in a lively way. To do so Whiteley suggests we enter the world of Scripture as immigrants seeking to learn its culture and language and participate in its world. However, we enter its world not by ourselves but with the faith community.

Preaching also engages the discipline of hospitality. “Hospitable preaching invites listeners in, welcoming them without reservation, without question” (58). Hospitable preaching knows the various “languages” that members use throughout their weekly activities that are peculiar to their generation, their hobbies, and their ethnic background. Using varieties of preaching forms (e.g., deductive, inductive, narrative, etc.) creates space for people with different listening styles to grow. However, hospitality is not about making everyone comfortable and dishing out soft scoops of grace. Even though, as Whiteley observes, hospitality does offer comfort, “monastic hospitality has also always offered discomfort” (75).

Prayer is another spiritual discipline vital to the practice of preaching. “Preaching is itself a conversation with God” (116). Preaching coalesces the conversations we have with God before and after the sermon (116). Prayer is not the tool we use when we get writer’s block and ask God for ideas. Nor is it the fox hole prayer we pray when we panic before we enter the pulpit. Our sermons are “sacred rhetoric” thus prayer and preaching are closely linked. As a form of prayer, our sermons are directed first and foremost to God.

Finally, Whiteley addresses the act of embodiment. Our physical beings are an important part of spiritual development. Our bodies are a part of our nature and identity and thus our faith is intimately involved with our bodies. We use our bodies to preach; we use our voice, gestures, facial expressions, posture, legs, and feet. Attention must be given to how we use them. Related to this is the principle of incarnation. Incarnation calls on preachers to make connections between Scripture, the world, and our lives. We do not remain abstract. We use the “stuff of ordinary life” as an occasion for preaching (139).

Though Whiteley does not claim that these six are the only spiritual disciplines related to preaching, I would like to have seen her add the discipline of journaling. The practice of journaling enables the preacher to record life experiences and most importantly reflect on those experiences in connection with other spiritual disciplines and in light of the task of preaching. The two sermons that conclude each of the chapters, though related to the chapter’s theme, do not add a lot to developing the thesis of the book.

I have never picked up a book on the spiritual disciplines that included preaching as one of those practices. After reading this volume, I’m convinced that preaching must be included (at least it should be for preachers). Whiteley approaches preaching neither as a technique nor

simply as the application of theology but as a lifestyle. Preaching flows out of a way of life that is steeped in a relationship with God. While Whiteley speaks of the more conventional elements of preaching (e.g., exposition of Scripture, language, cultural context, form, and delivery) these elements flow naturally out of the daily routine of life as one prepares the sermon. Such a perspective gives substance to the task of preaching.

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