

Dan Moseley. *Healing Relationships: A Preaching Model*. St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2009. 147 pages. \$16.99.

Dan Moseley begins his book by confessing, as a preacher, he had lost his words: “My words sounded like noisy gongs and clanging symbols” (8)... “They had become ashes in my mouth” (66). In this devastating experience, he made a poignant discovery: “I concluded that words alone do not have power. If preaching has something to do with conversion, transformation, reformation or change, it is not words that make that happen. I have come to believe that it is relationships that change us” (9).

With this revelation, Moseley claims that the transforming power of preaching lies not in communicating information, but in facilitating healing relationships between the characters in the sermon, the listeners in the pew, and God. Written by a practitioner of preaching, this book speaks a word to experienced preachers, seminary students learning how to preach, and even those who find themselves speechless, wondering about the power and purpose of their words of proclamation. He begins each chapter with a sermon and then seeks to analyze what was done in the practice of preaching as relational. Moseley admits he cannot teach people how to be in relationship with one another. Instead, he seeks to describe the contours and illustrate the content of relational preaching. He is faithful to this task.

First, Moseley attends to healing relationships – those that connect people to the divine sense of wholeness and salvation. Healing relationships are loving, living, physical, and honest; they have memory, boundaries, mystery, future, and hold us. Preaching that is born out of such characteristics and seeks to facilitate healing relationships has great power for transformation.

Moseley then calls for attention to the multiple contexts that shape listeners. In the post-modern “liquid” context, in which humans are in a constant state of flux, he makes a strong claim for the place and purpose of the church: “Liturgy is like the lap of the parent. It holds the listener in a safe and secure setting while the preacher introduces them to the strange and scary world of what it is to be a person of faith who serves the God of the Hebrew people and the God of Jesus Christ...In the safety of the familiar, the preacher can introduce the stranger” (68).

Having described the relational content and context of preaching, Moseley turns to “developing a strategy for creating sermons that honor the relational dimensions of transformation and healing” (17). How? By drawing a parallel between relationships and sermons, Moseley is able to offer profound and practical ways of introducing people in sermons, deepening the relationships throughout the sermon, and ending sermons with an invitation to continue the relationship. “I now imagine the ending of a sermon differently. My job in the sermon is not to convince people that they should believe me and motivate them to embrace my way with the actions of their life. My job is to invite people into a relationship with one or more characters. It is to give enough information about the persons I am introducing them to that they will pursue their own relationship in their own time” (127). And ultimately, trusting that with God, all things, including transformation, are possible, Moseley claims, “The sermon must end in the hands of mystery” (128).

This book is concrete and challenging, instructive and inspiring, sermonic and substantive. It is written with integrity and wisdom and opens up possibilities for preaching more purposefully and powerfully. Moseley not only presents a “preaching model,” he expertly models it in his sermons. Despite having lost his words, he finds them again – thanks be to God – and we, who preach and care about preaching, are blessed by them. His carefully chosen words both instruct and invite readers to a transforming encounter with ourselves, others, and

God. “When we are driven into caves of our lives and struck speechless...all of a sudden that which at one point felt like a tomb becomes the womb of new life” (77).

While I appreciated Moseley’s personal stories and understood their relational purpose, I wondered if there were too many. I fear the number of personal stories may give the false idea that this model is based on preacher-personal stories, rather than the preacher serving as the one who facilitates the relationships between the congregation, our ancestors in faith, and God.

Moseley ends his book as he began, with a word of truth and grace: “You are not their savior. Their saving relationships are those you help facilitate by your preaching” (139).

Donna Giver Johnston
Vanderbilt University
Nashville, TN