

Kay L. Northcutt. *Kindling Desire for God: Preaching as Spiritual Direction*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009. 160 pages. \$16.00

In *Kindling Desire for God*, Kay Northcutt seeks to move away from questions of homiletic method to questions of purpose. What, she asks, is the goal of preaching? Her answer to this question is found in the long history of Christian spiritual formation and guidance. Northcutt thus proposes that "...preachers become as spiritual directors to their congregations, that preaching itself be a formational, sacramental act of spiritual direction, and that sermons *do* for congregations what spiritual direction does for individuals" (2). To this end, the Desert Fathers and Mothers are Northcutt's primary sources, and the spiritual disciplines that they encouraged – *lectio divina*, meditation, and prayer in particular – form the bulk of her practical recommendations to preachers. Northcutt is rightly concerned that this tradition has been largely overlooked as contemporary homiletics has been predominantly concerned with therapeutic models (exemplified by Fosdick) and questions of sermon method rhetoric.

One of the most beneficial components of this book is Northcutt's reassessment of the role of the *person* of the preacher in the sermon. Beginning from the very first chapter, she outlines a model of "formation by attraction" in which the preacher exemplifies for the congregation an entire existence lived before and with God. The primary purpose of the sermon is not communication, Northcutt argues, but the act of the preacher putting him- or herself forward as a guide who is knowledgeable in the ways of God and can help others discern God's activity in their individual lives and the world. Such a focus places a much-needed emphasis on the way in which preachers are themselves formed and implies that we may need to revise homiletic curricula to include the relationship between spiritual disciplines and the task of preaching. If Northcutt is right, then holy living is just as important to preaching as rhetoric – perhaps even more so.

Much of Northcutt's program is hermeneutically-oriented. She proposes that preachers approach the biblical text from the outset with the goal of formation in mind. Preachers will thus be looking for ways in which the biblical text calls us to holistic attentiveness to the work of the Holy Spirit, provides images of Christian vocation, evokes a sacramental understanding of all existence, and calls us to see others and the world as God sees them.

The book concludes with a selection of three sermons that exemplify Northcutt's approach to preaching as spiritual formation. Each sermon is prefaced with a helpful introduction that outlines its context and aims. This is followed by two appendices. The first is a brief summary of a process for sermon preparation that moves from precritical naïveté through the process of interpreting a text. The second appendix summarizes the *lectio divina* approach to reading Scripture. With much of Northcutt's work emphasizing the work that must undergird the preparation of any particular sermon, these three sections comprise the bulk of the practical advice related to sermon preparation itself.

Northcutt is attempting to bring balance back to preaching by lifting up neglected elements in the Christian tradition. As can often happen, however, this can result in a new imbalance. Two such imbalances linger after reading *Kindling Desire for God*. First, despite Northcutt's intention to avoid questions of rhetoric and the "hows" of preaching, it seems that the move from giving spiritual direction to *individuals* to guiding entire *congregations* through preaching necessitates some rhetorical adjustments. Traditionally, spiritual direction happens in one-on-one or small-group encounters that are quite dialogical. Some *explicit* advice added to the example sermons would be most welcome in this regard.

Second, Northcutt's focus on the Desert Fathers and Mothers leads her to emphasize what she calls the "passive" or "receptive" spiritual disciplines of prayer, meditation, and *lectio divina*. The more "active" disciplines (visiting the sick, missions, etc.) are criticized as a means of avoiding silence and thus escaping confrontation with our inner selves (105). The "receptive" disciplines are characterized as "being with God" while the "active" are "doing for God" (106). While "busyness" is a real risk for congregations, one could argue that these active disciplines are also a way of "being with God" as one encounters Christ in the faces of the poor and vulnerable.

These two imbalances, however, are easily forgiven in light of the overall task of this book. Northcutt successfully makes the case that formation should be more important to preaching than therapeutic problem-solving, that preachers' overall spiritual life matters immensely, and that the Desert Fathers and Mothers are welcome guides for preachers and the congregations they lead.

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