When the members of the Search Committee told me they were recommending that the congregation call me as their new Senior Minister, Elva Mae looked me in the eye and asked: “Are you going to preach what we want to hear or what we need to hear?” Two years later Elva Mae’s question still haunts me because I know that in times of conflict, and as anxiety builds, it is often easier to avoid the difficult issues than to confront them. Elva Mae’s question remains a persistent companion during my weekly preparation for preaching while I listen for truth and guidance from God as I interact with the lectionary scriptures. I believe that as preachers we are obligated to deal with the serious issues we face as members of the world community. Who else in society, if not the preacher, is more suited to reflect on the religious, moral, and ethical considerations of the events that affect us?

Many listeners like Elva Mae seek answers during worship that will provide some insights to help them cope with troubling situations. If preachers choose to deal with those world or local conflicts that affect the well-being of the congregation, they need to study them in depth, researching them through diverse media sources including broadcast, print, and Internet journalism. However, in order to grasp the big picture of a conflict, preachers and listeners must realize that news sources are not neutral and that news coverage is presented or “spun” in a biased manner. What we see and hear depends on the political perspective of the media outlet’s owner. That is why it is essential to consult a variety of sources. Once we choose to preach in times of conflict, assembling accurate, objective information and relating it to the biblical text and the ministry of Jesus is the next step.

Preaching and Pastoral Care

When the news of the day is disturbing and when our people are confused, anxious, angry, or grieving, the preacher has an excellent opportunity to offer valuable pastoral care within the context of preaching by presenting the issues clearly and setting the conflict within the story of faith. My answer to Elva Mae’s question was that I would do both—I would try to speak the honest and prophetic words my congregation needs to hear as well as the comforting and reassuring words they want to hear in

**Rev. Dr. Audrey Borschel** serves as Senior Minister at Central Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Anderson, Indiana. In addition to ministry, her life has included professional singing, song writing, and teaching.
order to encourage them on their faith journey.

It is normal for listeners to respond emotionally to news that threatens the status quo. Since September 11, 2001, our listeners have been highly concerned with our nation’s security. Some of the largest conflicts have arisen over terrorism. In recent years fear and politics have caused divisions even within congregations as preachers have often disagreed with their listeners over the government’s military and economic decisions (The Pew Research Center, March 19, 2003). Prophetic preachers will present accurate information and interpret the disturbing events in light of the Gospel, even though entrenched politics and ideologies of the listeners may still prevail.

Many situations produce conflict and may upend our listeners. These may include an event or analysis of an event that may be violent, unjust, destabilizing, inhumane, uncharitable, including actions or intentions that harm people and the environment or conflict with moral and ethical teachings of Jesus. Natural disasters and accidents can also produce conflict because they often harm people and the environment (Borschel, 60). The inadequate government response to Hurricane Katrina last summer is an example of a conflict resulting from a natural disaster. The preacher’s task during times of conflict is to locate ingredients of consolation, hope, and resurrection in the news of the day and in the Gospel, pointing out how moving through difficult situations with prayer and the assurance of God’s presence can lead to transformation and the spiritual growth of individuals and congregations.

Sometimes individuals in the congregation will reveal their response to conflict or disturbing news during pastoral visits. Parishioners who watch a great deal of television during national or world crises may internalize their reactions and become depressed. I visited a normally upbeat nonagenarian during the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. She pointed to a plaque on her wall that quoted from Psalm 118: “This is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad,” and she said she couldn’t rejoice. I realized she voiced what everyone was feeling, even if they didn’t name their feelings. We spoke of finding joy in the present moment in the circumstances and people who are around us. I told her she was light for me that day in the friendship of our visit. I reminded her that she told me how happy she was that I came to see her. Even in the darkest circumstances our listeners need to know that they can and should experience positive emotions. Elizabeth’s comment became the catalyst for my preaching on the next weekend. I was sure others were coping with similar emotions.

The Lectionary and Preaching in Times of Conflict

Although it is tempting to change the Sunday scriptures when conflicts occur, most of the time a passage within the group of lections will provide clarity and perspective. Among the values of using a lectionary for worship and preaching is to keep the preacher focused on the biblical text. When the scriptural word is preached in times of conflict it is a ground for preacher and listener alike. Sometimes, even when a conflict may be more chronic than acute, the text itself calls forth prophetic preaching when the preacher is prodded in a particular direction.

That happened while I was preparing for preaching on the July 4th weekend last year. I was drawn to the second reading from the Revised Common Lectionary, Roman 7:15-25a. The passage deals with Paul’s observation that although we know what is right, because of our propensity toward sin we do what is wrong. I am sure
that the majority of my listeners would have preferred a message about God’s blessing of America, the land of freedom. But what I heard in the text, as well as what I was observing in the world around me, moved me to comment on the occasions when government and powerful groups limited the freedom of citizens in the past and how we as Christians need to make sure that the rights of all people are not compromised again by zealous political or religious majorities in the present.

I offered several examples of how political and corporate interests were potentially limiting the freedom of people. A few of my congregants felt I was speaking from a particular political persuasion and should not comment on the policies of government from the pulpit. I also suggested that we need to repent for the excesses of the past, such as tolerating the activities of the Ku Klux Klan. This was met with vigorous protests from some individuals who believed they weren’t responsible and had no need to repent. I discovered that some members of the congregation did not understand the concept of corporate responsibility for the past sins of our country, that is, racial atrocities and other limits of freedom placed on our citizens of color.

Preparing the Congregation for Prophetic Preaching

The feedback from that preaching event taught me more about my congregation than the total sum of responses to previous messages. I learned that I needed to provide my congregation with a foundation in biblical justice so they could receive the messages with openness even when those messages dealt with controversial or divisive issues. Justice education could even help us understand how present-day conflicts relate to events in the Bible.

Preaching in times of conflict challenges listeners, not only when they have difficulty tolerating messages that go against their political positions or when they need more biblical justice education, but also because they respond to preaching based on their theological background and spiritual maturity. In times of conflict, preparation in small groups as well as follow-up dialogue sessions may inspire listeners and preachers to gain more understanding of the conflict they face together.

Conclusion

Preaching in times of conflict is both risky and vital. Our listeners need pastoral support and information. Preachers must assume a great deal of responsibility to speak the truth based on the biblical word and on the factual evidence they glean first-hand as well as from a broad spectrum of media. Pastors can help their congregations deal with conflicts by teaching about biblical justice and advocating for justice in their communities. Just as power and politics played their part in Jesus’ ministry, conflicts will continue to claim victims and rupture relationships in our time. Preachers cannot make conflicts disappear, but they can indeed mediate the disturbing news with the Good News.

References
