

A Waiter at the Table of Holy Wisdom

The Spirituality of a Preacher

Barbara E. Reid, O.P.

Focusing on the task of the preacher as a waiter and the hearers as those feasting at the banquet of Holy Wisdom can help preachers respond to the challenging realities of our day in a way that offers hope, healing, and resistance.

In his book *Preaching Better*, Kenneth Untener took as his first task identifying just what a homily is (Untener 1999). Once one has a clear image of what the task of the preacher is, then one can proceed to speak about the spirituality that a preacher needs to embrace. When Untener had finished writing his book, he confided that he was startled to discover that this very first task of defining a homily was perhaps the most difficult. In Catholic tradition, there are four significant images, as Robert Waznak outlined: Herald, Teacher, Witness, and Interpreter (Waznak 1998). The latter is the prime image put forward by the U.S. bishops in their landmark document *Fulfilled in Your Hearing* (Bishops' Committee on Priestly Life and Ministry 1982). Edward Foley proposes another image: liturgical preaching as “a ritual conversation between the assembly and God with the help of the homilist” (Foley, 8). Mary Catherine Hilker has developed the notion of preaching as “naming grace” in her book by that title (Hilker 1997). Taking all these various images into consideration, Ken Untener proposed another of his own—that of a waiter: one who helps to serve what God is already cooking. Untener carefully

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spelled out that the preacher's task is not to be the cook, not to go into the pantry (the readings) to see what's there, then come up with the menu (the main thought), and put the meal (the homily) together and then serve it. Rather, he says, a preacher comes into the kitchen filled with the smell of something already cooking (God is doing it). God does the menu, the cooking, and the serving; we are simply God's helpers (Untener, 11). James Wallace elaborates this metaphor further in his book *Preaching to the Hungers of the Heart*: the task of the preacher is to feed God's people, as in Mark 6:37, where Jesus says to his disciples who face a hungry crowd, "You give them something to eat" (NRSV).

While each of these metaphors has a great deal to offer, I would like to focus on the task of the preacher as a waiter and the hearers as those feasting at the banquet table of Holy Wisdom. How is a preacher to give people something to eat in light of the present hungers in our world? I suggest a three-course meal—three movements that can help preachers respond to the challenging realities of our day. You will recognize these three movements from classic spirituality as the *via positiva*, *via negativa*, and *via unitiva*. Dorothee Sölle has renamed them: "Be Amazed," "Let Go," and "Resist" (Sölle, 45–51). I focus my reflections on the spirituality of the preacher, with the intent that the hearers also recognize the invitation into these same movements in their own spiritual journey. What follows is relevant not only to those who exercise a formal ministry of pulpit preaching, but to all Christians, as we preach with our lives in both word and deed.

Be Amazed

First, a waiter at the banquet of Holy Wisdom is far more than a simple messenger between the chef and the diners. A good waiter is not a robot that simply ferries the order to the cook and delivers the food to the table; rather, she facilitates an unforgettable dining experience that satisfies physically, emotionally, and spiritually. In the best restaurants, the waiter knows the chef well and is intimately familiar with the menu. A good waiter will have sampled the whole menu and will know from personal experience the exquisite savors and aromas of each dish. Expert waiters are also able to share these experiences with other diners, to read their hungers, and to know what dish will satisfy best. Like St. Paul with the Corinthians, such waiters will know whether a diner needs pabulum or adult fare (1 Cor 3:2). The finest waiters have not just tasted each dish once but repeatedly, in different seasons and circumstances. They do not just take a little nibble on the run but have themselves sat still and relaxed and let themselves be fed by the head chef at a long, lingering banquet, so that on days when there is only time for a snack, the memory and experience of the feast can sustain them.

A preacher in any age, but particularly in our time when there is so much noise, both inner and outer, must be a deeply contemplative person, one who is totally

in love with Holy Mystery and all of divine creation. Only a passionate and committed love affair with the Source of all Love and Life can sustain the preacher for the arduous demands of sharing that love in word and deed with others over the long haul. Whether in fast-food restaurants, internet cafes, or intimate dining rooms, the preacher in love with Holy Wisdom hears and responds to her persistent invitation: “Come, eat of my bread and drink of my wine” (Prov 9:5).

But how do we attune our ears to hear Wisdom’s invitation? Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote, “Awareness of the divine begins with wonder” (Heschel, 46). Wonder, or “radical amazement,” he continues, “has a wider scope than any other human act [in the original Heschel wrote “act of man”]. While any act of perception or cognition has as its object a selected segment of reality, radical amazement refers to all of reality; not only to what we see, but also to the very act of seeing as well as to our own selves, to the selves that see and are amazed at their ability to see” (Heschel, 46). Radical amazement transports us beyond ourselves and our preoccupations, rescues us from triviality, and fuels hope—a contagious hope that ignites awe in the hearers of those preachers who abandon themselves to awe-inspiring grandeur and mystery.

Amazement at the beauty, intricacy, and fecundity of the created world leads us into the very heart and mind of God. Saint Paul says to the Romans, “For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them” (Rom 1:19). He is referring to the Gentiles, who, he insists, have no excuse for not knowing God, even though they do not have the Mosaic Law. Paul continues, “Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made” (Rom 1:20).

Today our understanding of the universe is going through a Copernican revolution, enabling us to be amazed in ways not formerly possible. It is amazing to contemplate the magnificence of the explosion of light by which our universe flashed forth fifteen billion years ago, and it is amazing to know that scientists can now actually see that fireball. As Brian Swimme describes, “the light has always been there, but the ability to respond to it required a tremendous development of the human senses. Just as an artist learns to see a lakeshore’s subtle shades and contours, the human race learns to develop its sensitivities to what is present. It took millions of years to develop, but humans can now interact with

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the cosmic radiation from the origin of the universe. We can now see the beginnings of time—a stupendous achievement” (Swimme 1985).

As preachers who become enraptured in awe at our universe, we realize that every category of how we previously told the story of our God, ourselves, and our cosmos, needs to be rethought and reformulated. If ours is an ever-expanding universe, exploding with life from the center outward, in gorgeously creative, chaotic, irreplaceable patterns, then it no longer makes sense to talk about God as “up in the heavens” or about God “sending Jesus down” to us. Rather, God abides deep within, drawing us inward into love and impelling us outward in mission in ever creative patterns of generative love. As we learn to tell the New Universe Story (Swimme and Berry), it is good to recall Thomas Aquinas’s warning that

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“a mistake in our understanding of creation will necessarily cause a mistake in our understanding of God” (Cannato, 7, quoting Gilby, 76). The New Universe Story is now revealing to us the mistaken notion that has prevailed in the West for the past several centuries, that it was within human-kind’s province to understand the workings of the universe and to gain complete mastery over physical matter. A mechanistic and dualistic view of the universe has had profound repercussions with regard to our notions of God, our bodies, and our organizations, both secular and religious (Wheatley, 17). Models of governance based on command and control break apart as we become attuned to the expansive capacity of humans in an ever-expanding universe (Wheatley, 21). The floodgates to awe and grandeur open up, drawing

us inextricably into participation with the Holy One in the ongoing work of creation.

This radical amazement leads us into radical gratitude, where nothing is taken for granted. Abraham Heschel says, “Taking things for granted, regarding events as a natural course of things,” is alien to the spirit of a religious person (Heschel, 45). He even goes so far as to say that “indifference to the sublime wonder of living is the root of sin” (Heschel, 43).

It would be a mistake to think that living in radical amazement means that preachers simply float along in a cloud of unknowing instead of doing the hard work of critically analyzing the realities of our world and studying rigorously the Scriptures and tradition. As Heschel admonishes, “The sense of wonder and transcendence must not become ‘a cushion for the lazy intellect.’ It must not be a substitute for analysis where analysis is possible; it must not stifle doubt where doubt is legitimate. It must, however, remain a constant awareness if one [in the

original, Heschel wrote “man”] is to remain true to the dignity of God’s creation, because such awareness is the spring of all creative thinking,” and I might add, of all creative preaching (Heschel, 51).

Likewise, radical amazement does not prevent preachers from hearing the cries of suffering in the world; it does not insulate us from grief for the crucified peoples of our world today and for our damaged planet. Rather, beauty and awe can bring about “transformation at the very roots of the beholder’s sensibility” (O’Connor, 53, quoting Scarry). Consider Job, who, after unspeakable losses, is on the brink of despair when God speaks to him out of the whirlwind, the uncontrollable chaos. God is not admonishing Job or trying to put Job in his place when God asks, “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? . . . on what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?” (Job 38:4-7). Rather, God is directing Job to let the awesome beauty of creation turn him away from his pain so he can be directed outward by beauty and awe toward the transformative power that is at the heart of the cosmos. Such heart-stopping beauty can transform us in three ways: (1) it focuses us outward so that we see that we and our troubles are not the center of the universe; (2) it creates sharpened attentiveness to injustices, opening us more fully to care for the world; (3) it incites creativity (O’Connor, 54). “Job’s experience of beauty does not explain his suffering, but it transforms him” (O’Connor, 54). So we, when we cultivate radical amazement, let beauty incite in us creativity and endless joyous labor for justice for earth and all creatures.

Letting Go

Returning to our metaphor of preacher at the banquet of Holy Wisdom, the second course is to Let Go. When we have given ourselves full-heartedly to the first course, to radical amazement, we learn to recognize and let go of false hungers, false wishes and needs, of desires to overeat. We let go of fear that would cause us to hoard everything that is in the pantry for ourselves. We let go the false notions that there is not enough to go around, and we allow Holy Wisdom to teach us her ways of taking a few loaves and fishes and ending up with leftovers after all have had their fill. We let go our desire to feed ourselves first, as we tend to those who do not have the means to feed themselves. And at times we do not feed ourselves at all, choosing to fast with those who are hungry not by choice.

We let go the need to always use our own recipes. We become willing to taste spicy salsa or to try tortillas in place of Wonderbread. We let go our predilection for forks and knives and become adept at using chopsticks. We let go some of our seemingly great inventions, such as genetically modified seeds, as we open ourselves to learn ancient ways of cultivating food from indigenous peoples. We let go our fear of one another, so we can let Holy Wisdom seat us at her table with

people we would never choose to eat with. We let her teach us how to go out into the streets and alleys to find those who are starving and invite all into the feast.

For us in the post-9/11 U.S.A., it is a particular challenge to let go the fear that has permeated our psyche and fueled hostility toward “the other.” As Robert Schreiter says, if we acquiesce to fear, we are likely to respond in two interconnected ways: numbing and narrowing.

Numbing . . . is a way of surviving by shutting down our capacity to feel and be affected by what is going on around us. This shutting down is an attempt to preserve ourselves. What results is a diminishing of our ability to have care, compassion, and empathy with others. Narrowing is a consequence of this . . . we retreat into niches and enclaves of the like-minded, so that we end up being affirmed in our own convictions and escape the give-and-take of living in a pluralist society. [This narrowing]. . . restricts our vision about the world, develops a smaller and more restricted basis for identity. Restricted senses of identity make us more brittle, and less able to adapt to changed circumstances. We are more likely to react impulsively to them rather than engage them creatively. (Schreiter 2008)

Fear, numbing, and narrowing are some of the greatest inhibitors to our capacity for radical amazement.

As our capacity for amazement and gratitude increases, we also let go our desire to be the only or the best waiter. Even as Holy Wisdom transforms us into the very image of herself, we let go any false notions that it is our banquet or that its success depends solely on us. We let go the attitude that no one else can serve as well as we can, as we teach others, especially youth, the joys of serving at Wisdom’s feast.

All this letting go leads us into the ultimate self-surrender to love—where we let go even our desire for radical amazement, and finally, we let go of life itself.

Resist

The third movement is the one that helps us identify what is poisonous, what has not come from Sophia’s kitchen, the arsenics that slowly lead to death for Earth and its inhabitants. It is not only a matter of identifying the poison but also of being about the work of healing its victims. The list of attitudes and actions that preachers should resist and heal is endless. I will name only two: sexism and unforgiveness. I invite you to add your own.

First, in a world and church where women are still considered and treated as second best, preachers and hearers must do all they can to resist patriarchy and

sexism. In a world where women still do two-thirds of the world's work but earn only one-tenth of the world's income and own only one hundredth of the world's property (see Gutestam); in a world where 70 percent of the 1.3 billion people living in poverty are women (see U.N. End Poverty); in a country where one-third of our households are headed by women (see California Department); and where women make up 47 percent of the workforce, but where 62 percent of them are at or below minimum wage (see Clinton); in a country where women between the ages of fifteen and forty-four are at greater risk of dying at the hands of a partner or ex-partner than they are from car accidents, muggings, and cancer deaths combined (see Koop); and in a church where 80 percent of the lay ministers are women and where 90 percent of those parishes that do not have a resident priest as pastor are led by women (Gray and Gautier) and where women who have no opportunity to test their vocations to presbyteral ministry are barred from preaching at eucharistic celebrations—Holy Wisdom reveals the poison of patriarchy. She upholds the equal value of females, revealing that the divine is just as adequately spoken of in female form as in male. For many preachers the invitation of Holy Wisdom to recognize and speak of the Divine in female language and images remains a savory course yet untried. Some think of it as merely a side dish that can be added for a little extra flavor; they have yet to recognize the importance of using these female metaphors for God as main-course standard fare. They have yet to digest fully the implications of how Jesus spoke of himself as Wisdom's child (Luke 7:35) and how he told parables that invited his followers to speak of God as a woman who searched for a lost coin (Luke 15:8-10), who hid subversive yeast in a mass of dough (Luke 13:20-21), and who relentlessly demanded justice from a corrupt judge (Luke 18:1-8) (see Reid 2001).

A second poison is unforgiveness that fuels violent retaliation. As analysts of conflict transformation agree, true peace and reconciliation begin with the aggrieved party being willing to offer forgiveness to the aggressor. In the ideal situation, the wellsprings of compassion are unleashed in those who are deeply aware of how they have undeservedly received lavish compassion and mercy from God, which then enables them to offer forgiveness to another who has hurt them. This ability to forgive springs from the awareness that it is impossible to “repay” God for undeserved compassion; the only response is to “pay it forward” to another. Jesus makes this point graphically in the parable of the servant who does not forgive his underlings in the manner in which he has been forgiven (Matt 18:23-35).

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As the parable illustrates, to refuse to forgive another (the rat in my life) is like eating rat poison and expecting the rat to die.

Today preachers must be willing to try to forgive the church for the hurts we have suffered: the shattered trust in our priests and bishops in the sex abuse crisis and its cover-up; for the wasted talents of women who have not been allowed to exercise their gifts for preaching and leadership; for the vilification of those who commit themselves to love another of the same sex, to name a few. To explore the complexity of processes of forgiveness, repentance, and reconciliation is not possible in this short essay (see Schreier 1992 and 1998). But in a world torn by violence and vengeance, a preacher who does not devote significant time to learning, practicing, and teaching spiritualities and practices of forgiveness and non-

violent resistance to evil runs the risk of offering poison instead of nourishing fare to our hungry world.

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This third course, our practices of healing and resistance, can take us into times of desolation—times when we feel like we are sitting at an empty table—with not even a crumb to hold our hunger at bay and with no companions to share our longing. Even Holy Wisdom seems to have abandoned her kitchen. We reach those times of impasse, that dark night of the soul where none of our efforts seem to have a good effect. Our systems and institutions in which we had trusted and within which we had known our place seem thoroughly corrupt. Our sense of self and our relationships are all in turmoil, and there seems to be no viable way out. All the creative work that our amazement and letting go and resistance has fed is not

having any effect. To continue it seems futile. There is no going back to what was before, but there seems no good way forward. As Constance FitzGerald describes this in her classic essay “Impasse and Dark Night,” “Every normal manner of acting is brought to a standstill, and ironically, impasse is experienced not only in the problem itself but also in any solution rationally attempted” (FitzGerald, 288). Friends on whom we could previously count do not understand. We can no longer depend on leaders whom we used to admire. And there seems to be no consolation even from Holy Wisdom. This death-like experience can last for months or even years. We have learned recently that Mother Teresa suffered this for most of her ministry with the dying.

What is the way out? FitzGerald offers that we must let impasse drive us into contemplation. But, she says, it is hard to believe that this is what we must do. She observes:

We do not really believe that if we surrender these situations of world impasse to contemplative prayer that new solutions, new visions of peace and equality, will emerge in our world. We dare not believe that a creative re-visioning of our world is possible. Everything is just too complex, too beyond our reach. Yet it is only in the process of bringing the impasse to prayer, to the perspective of the God who loves us, that our society will be freed, healed, changed, brought to paradoxical new visions, and freed for nonviolent, selfless, liberating action, freed, therefore, for community on this planet earth. Death is involved here—a dying in order to see how to be and to act on behalf of God in the world. (FitzGerald, 301)

And so we find ourselves returning to the second course, to the letting go, abandoning ourselves to faithfulness, trusting that the only way out of the darkness is to go through it as Jesus has done before us, and as his mother did when she said “yes” to a frightening unknown.

Then we find ourselves returning to the first course once again as the dark night drives us back into contemplation, to radical amazement, to awe and wonder, as a new menu for a new age is being prepared. FitzGerald wonders, “Is it possible these insoluble crises are signs of passage or transition in our national development and in the evolution of humanity? Is it possible we are going through a fundamental evolutionary change and transcendence, and crisis is the birthplace and learning process for a new consciousness and harmony?” (FitzGerald, 300).

Well-Balanced Diet

As we savor these questions we see that the three courses—Amazement, Letting Go, and Resistance—are not appetizer, entrée, and dessert, to be served in sequence. Rather, they are intimately intertwined, a combination platter, if you will, all of which must be tasted and digested in various sequences as we let them do their transformative work in us. Moreover, we will need to experiment with new recipes to feed the hungers of today’s world. While leftovers and comfort food are tempting as tried and true, they alone may not be able to provide the nourishment we now need. As we preach the Good News, it may be helpful to reflect on how well balanced our diet of these three courses is. To which of the three courses do we find ourselves most often drawn? Which course might we need to taste more deeply as we let Holy Wisdom lead us into amazement, letting go, and resistance?

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