COMFORT

By

Dr. Michael Vander Weele
Professor of English
Trinity Christian College

I should keep a Sunday journal, a place not so much for sermon outlines as for the ideas they have generated. It strikes me now that the best ideas I’ve had--too many quickly lost again--have come through agreement or disagreement with what I’ve heard when stationed in the pew. I’m reminded of poet Wendell Berry, who took many Sunday walks on his back 40 before he had the sense to write a book of poems called Sabbaths; I don’t think I have that in me, but I should at least have been collecting ideas—places where God’s word and that filament of life He’s given me have met, and met with greater clarity than I usually experience. Maybe I’ll begin a Sunday journal now.

Ideas aren’t the whole thing, of course, but good ideas bring with them certain advantages for life. And those advantages might have been claimed better if remembered longer. Still, when I think of persevering in the pew, I think first of the sermon’s role within the liturgy and of the ideas that have settled into place during its preaching. But that’s not all I think of.

A long white banner flapped above our fifteen-foot patio. On it were the names of people from our church who had brought meals; brought our kids shopping for new school clothes; sent us on vacation; sent flowers, cards, and other forms of well-wishing; prayed for us. The banner finally took so much ink that the names began to form constellations, not only stars—a church as much as individuals.

We were hosting a thank you for the people who had helped pull my wife, Albertena, and our family through the stem cell transplant she had gone through in January of 1996. After her immune system and energy kicked back in, we decided to throw a thank-you party in our backyard, a late-spring, early-summer barbeque. These were the people I wanted to sit in a pew with as well as meet outside of church.

Nine, almost ten years later, we join many of these same people in the fellowship hall for the annual Christmas dinner on a Sunday evening. I don’t take a hand in preparing this food, but they usually let me help serve, one of the perks for having a spouse on the Activities Committee. Between dinner and dessert, we gather in the sanctuary for some favorite Christmas carols. We huddle together near the back, where the best sound waits to be struck, and on this night anyway we sound almost as good as the church choir.

Three weeks earlier, in this same sanctuary, our grandson was baptized and a community development missionary who works in Haiti came up to us afterwards to welcome him into the church.

Much as mind and heart tell me this is what the church is all about, and much as I believe that the sermon is only part of the whole liturgy, a liturgy through which we hear God’s Word and respond to it in gratitude and repentance, in my heart of hearts I think I persevere in the pew for the same reason my father and his father did: for the sermons. I remember coming up to my grandfather’s modest home in Sheboygan, Wisconsin,
usually arriving around dusk. My grandpa would be sitting in the front room, with hardly any lights on, greeting us with “Are you here then, Edward?” To which my father would regularly reply that no, we were still on our way. Grandpa either didn’t remember the jest or never tired of it. But what I remember is my coal-shoveling grandpa carrying some church publication in his left hand, his index finger reserving the place where he had been reading. I think he most often read sermons, as if he hadn’t gotten enough of them—some of which he of course disagreed with—at church. Must have been a twentieth-century, immigrant left-over from the nineteenth century’s interest in reading sermons—and the *Congressional Digest*. This is not to diminish the rest of it. I remember Harry Wierenga, in Sarnia, Ontario, foreman of my landscape crew & artist whose palette became darker as winter wore on. It was the songs, he said, that got him through the long winters. And, indeed, on those few occasions where I have had to walk out of church it was because a song was so achingly beautiful that my emotion-laden head needed venting out of doors. Baptisms and communion services have sometimes seemed to transfigure life and made me reluctant to leave. Sometimes the written liturgy, the congregational greetings, or the singing of the choir has delivered the most important message before the sermon begins. For a while it was the prayers of an otherwise ineffective preacher that kept me returning to the pew.

Sometimes it’s the people—Bob Monsma, the Pella, Iowa, rock quarry man who bent his strong neck to the task of junior-high catechism teaching; George Alsum, the Randolph, Wisconsin, farmer who endured the loss of a teenage son in a drunk-driving accident and who told my dad that we were not called to happiness but to faithfulness—in which, after a long while, we might find some happiness still; the plumber/electrician two pews over from me who got my welder friend on a bike when he was going through a difficult divorce; the welder, who got me biking when cancer’s grip on our family turned chronic; the girls group and their leaders, who recently swooped in after Adult Sunday School to host our church’s AARP group for a Sunday dinner; the high school group, which has started its own tradition, hosting an adults-only Valentine’s Day dinner, with Comedy Sports for entertainment. Or it’s the women who seem, after years of practice, so easily to take on the tasks of nurses, or housecleaners, or advocates, or gift-givers. Woe to me if I ever separate myself from such people. And yet, I think it’s the sermon that keeps me coming back, and that against almost all odds.

Why against the odds? Because sermons can only come from people, and other people, especially people elevated above but also often dismissed from real life, can do things that are as stupid as the things I can do. Some of those things are aesthetically or psychologically stupid, but sermon-creating people can do things that are spiritually stupid, too. On the seventh or eighth day after Al’s stem-cell transplant, for example, our pastor, probably trying to be psychologically alert, didn’t pray with us; but he did take me out into the hall and tell me it was okay to be angry with God, even really angry with God. I knew that was true and could have heard it in a sermon on the Psalms, say, or fifteen minutes into a coffee, or over beers; but as it happened I had never felt God’s presence more clearly than in that hospital room and had recently finished building a small cross out of litmus paper and pipe cleaners and other hospital room paraphernalia. What I could have used was a prayer. (It must also happen the other way round, that one makes psychological blunders by trying too hard to be spiritually right—or maybe the pastor’s blunder was more psychological than spiritual.) A few pastors I’ve heard are so
committed to my need to hear Jung that they neglect to tell me where God fits in—or rather, where Jung fits in with God. Some pastors can sound so religiously secure that I wonder if they have never felt the ravages of time, or of doubt; others can strive so hard to make their preaching conceptually near that it begins to sound like the personal journal of an only child. And yet, for all that, I think I persevere in the pew primarily because of sermons.

So what is it about the sermon? Again, I need to tell a little history. The first minister I remember—someone whose tendencies toward schism I could never have abided in a Council Room—had a diagonal scar that came down the left side of his face and then turned in, toward his mouth. To my young eyes, he was marked somewhat as the angel had marked Jacob’s hip. I never trusted myself to take my eyes off him, except during prayer, when I could not have imagined opening my eyes before his final AMEN. In fact, my early ministers sound like a litany of the best conservative preachers of the CRC—P. Y. De Jong, John Piersma, John De Kruyter—and much as I could not easily inhabit their pews today I am forever thankful that I had them then. It is out of respect for them that I say now that a good sermon is one you can learn from in agreement or disagreement. I remember Rev. Piersma, especially, telling us in catechism class not to think small—that eight (maybe it was fewer) dedicated, bright young Christian people could change the world. I remember his being light on his feet despite the fairly large body he positioned behind the pulpit, often bouncing a little on the balls of his feet, like a good Jewish musician, preaching the Word through his body (nothing that could be taught in a speech class). Later, I would see and hear Rev. Louis Tamminga do the same. Rev. Piersma was marked, too—not by a World War II injury but by the early death of his younger brother. When he told us from the pulpit that you had to know something about death before you could really know life, we knew this came from the deepest source within him, intermingling with God’s truth. It was no surprise that he began his tenure at First Pella CRC with Lord’s Day 1, “What is your only comfort in life and death?” and taught with his whole heart the Catechism’s response that we are not our own but belong, both in life and in death, to our faithful Savior, Jesus Christ. Maybe it’s under that banner, unfurled during the sermon, that the people in our backyard met, and all the others meet, too.

Apart—for just a moment—from its being a conduit for God’s Word, there are other advantages we can mark for sermons. I have long noticed that a middle-aged adult who stopped going to school after graduating from high school but continued going to sermons might as well receive credit for two years of college. Where else are we given such responsibilities for life-informed thought? And where else does the emphasis on our life outdo the emphasis on my life? In the church circles of which I have been part, the sermon may be the closest thing we get to a group reading of a cultural review, or at any rate it can be. But that requires a greater trust of audience than many pastors will risk, especially bright pastors who worry overly much about leaving their parishioners behind and so let repetition begin to take the place of thought. One of the best alternatives I ever heard came from a minister in Hull, Iowa, by the name of Marvin Heyboer, whom we would chase north to hear some Sunday evenings when we lived in Orange City and worked at Northwestern College. Somewhere past the half-way point but before the conclusion he would walk out from behind the pulpit and launch a five-to-seven-minute improvisation, a man with a prophetic voice talking amongst his fellow
congregants, before returning to a pretty carefully scripted text. The sturdy platform he built and the dive he took off it both seemed Spirit-led, but the two different, if answerable, discourses seemed to make incorporation of God’s Word into our lives more possible, too. And that was exciting! But there are so many different ways we are blessed by good sermons. We had two interim pastors recently, one of whom had a keen mother’s sense of just what we had to hear, without ever sounding as if she were mothering us. The other had a sharply prophetic voice, even in retirement, that only stopped short of stridency by working its way carefully through texts. Together with God’s Holy Spirit, they healed our church.

I wish now that I had kept a Sunday journal, a journal of analogies or corollaries that a sermon, or prayer, or song had discovered in my life. Where else but in church could I hear on the second Sunday of Advent, with news of more bombs going off in Iraq and of an older parent preparing to see her forty-something daughter die, that God’s comfort means eternally righting the world—and learn, with assent, that we are called to join in that tortuous work? It strikes me now that only through church could I hear this comfort from the son of a man who mentored me into the teaching profession and whose courses I had the bittersweet privilege of completing—it kept Ron with me longer—after he was murdered in a church parking lot in Chicago. It’s Ron’s son who is teaching me about comfort! As long as he can stand in the pulpit, I sure better be able to sit in the pew.

In 1997, a good friend of mine, John Terpstra, wrote something like Berry’s Sabbath collection of poems, but for indoor services. It’s called The Church Not Made with Hands, and every pastor and liturgist ought to have a copy and mark in it the inspirations of the church calendar. (Other readers should, too.). Nearly a decade later, Terpstra is re-visiting the subject of church. In a new chapbook just out, he writes a poem called “Needlecraft.” Let me end with its words. But before I do, just let me say to any ministers who may be reading these words: yours is a sacred and vital task. God’s blessings to you—also for the sake of us, your parishioners, who regularly require such blessings. Here’s Terpstra:

**NEEDLECRAFT**

In the church where we go to now
the words of the preacher
begin innocently enough
to thread through the fabric of our lives.
They draw together shapes
not previously recognized,
and connect portions of the narrative
as yet unread, or not yet readable,
a pattern not apparent,
as though written and stitched
by a random hand.

The church where we go to now
is, and is not, the church
of our fathers and mothers.
The old words do not come easily,
here, the songs have faded and frayed,
they have been crushed and ground
by the lives of our forebears,
the weight of history.

The preacher is not innocent.
She is both fearful and full of joy.
She would unburden us,
but the slim silver sliver that she guides
will prick
as it moves through,
and there is blood n the pattern,
the page, on the hand,
as well as healing,
just as there was for our mothers and fathers.

She pulls the thread, taut,
then snaps it between her teeth.
Amen. For now and forever
amen to this bite of a new
dispensation, ancient
and exact
as needlecraft.

from Brendan Luck (Kentville, Nova Scotia: Gaspereau Press, 2005)