

. To provide some background information I am including excerpts from an article called *Preaching Across the Political Red-Blue Divide: Using the Sermon-Dialogue-Sermon Method in the Purple Zone* by **Leah D. Schade** (10/01/2019).

[1] *Parts of this article are adapted from Schade's book Preaching in the Purple Zone: Ministry in the Red-Blue Divide (Rowman & Littlefield, 2019).*

[2] In the first two months of 2017, I conducted a survey of mainline Protestant clergy in the United States to assess how preachers were approaching their sermons during this divisive time in our nation's history. The 60-question online survey entitled "Preaching about Controversial Issues" ran for six weeks, from mid-January to the end of February. I received responses from 1205 participants in 45 states (with an almost equal number of male and female respondents).<sup>[1]</sup> The survey explored a range of topics, including the following:

- The difference the 2016 presidential election made in preachers' willingness to address controversial issues in the pulpit
- Topics clergy intended to address in the six months following the presidential inauguration compared with the topics they addressed prior to the election
- Reasons for either engaging controversial topics in sermons or avoiding them
- Types of training and support pastors desired to foster healthy dialogue about public issues in their congregations

[3] The results from this comprehensive empirical research yielded insights for both clergy and congregations regarding the intersection of religion, culture, and politics with faith and public life. For example, one question asked preachers to rank reasons for avoiding sermons about issues of public concern. Thirty percent of respondents indicated that the principle of the "separation of church and state" was a valid reason to avoid preaching about controversial social issues in the pulpit. "Separation of church and state" is a phrase based on Thomas Jefferson's metaphor of a wall of separation between religion and government in his interpretation of the First Amendment that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof..." To be clear, while there is ongoing debate about the relationship between government and religion, the First Amendment was intended to prevent the establishment of a state church. It did not state that churches could not address issues that involve government. Thus, it would be inaccurate for someone to accuse a preacher of violating the separation of church and state by preaching a sermon that addresses contemporary issues of public concern – as long as the sermon was not taking part in partisan politics and advocating for a particular party or candidate.

[4] However, when people cite “separation of church and state” as a reason not to engage public issues from the pulpit, there is likely a theological aspect to their objection to “political” sermons. This theological principle has to do with crossing the boundaries between what Lutheran theology identifies as the “two kingdoms” – the earthly realm and the heavenly realm. Article XXVIII of the Augsburg Confession (the founding documents of the Lutheran Church written in 1530) put forth the notion that the earthly kingdom is the realm of politics, a realm best left administered by government officials. The heavenly kingdom, in contrast, is the spiritual realm of God and, thus, the purview of the church.

[5] Some believe that the two kingdoms should not intermingle. They insist that clergy must limit their focus to caring for people’s souls and preparing them for salvation. This view holds that ministers are only to offer care and comfort when people suffer injustice in this life, not raise questions about why injustice is occurring or what the church should do about it. Some justify this stance by referring to Paul’s instruction in Romans 13:1-7, which begins, “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God.” Or they may cite Jesus’ words in Matthew 22:21, “Render therefore unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and unto God the things that are God’s.” These passages are used to justify a clear delineation between the church and human governance.

[6] Unfortunately, both the Two Kingdoms doctrine and the principle of the separation of church and state have been used to rationalize either quietly acquiescence to whatever happens in the realm of government or uncritical support for the state on behalf of the church. The problem with both is that they can lead to the church refusing to serve as a voice of moral and ethical accountability for the state. Throughout history, the church’s refusal to engage in the earthly realm of politics, let alone critique those in power, has had devastating consequences (witness the Lutheran Church in Nazi Germany). When the church – and preaching – refuses to admonish, proscribe, and criticize corruption, negligence, or abuse of power by the state, it reneges on one of its major functions as an instrument of God in the world. That function is to provide prophetic critique on behalf of the marginalized and oppressed.

[7] To avoid a theological and ecclesial dereliction of duty, we can help our congregations deconstruct the rigid application of the Two Kingdoms doctrine by showing that there are both biblical and theological counterbalances that can guide our preaching, teaching, and engagement of social issues. For example, the second table of the Ten Commandments has everything to do with human relationships, and thus authorizes people of faith to engage in

discussions about how those relationships are attended to on personal, community, institutional, and policy levels. God's Law is the primary force driving human beings to seek justice in their interactions with each other.

[8] As another example, the Bible is clear that the recognition of ethical norms is intrinsic to human knowledge. In scriptural parlance, God's Law is "written upon the heart" (Romans 2:15; Hebrews 10:16), so that even atheists and agnostics have a sense of right and wrong, even if they do not recognize or worship God. But the strongest argument for the church engaging in the earthly realm is Jesus' instruction to "love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:39). These words have ramifications beyond individual interactions. The concept of "neighbor-love" is the standard for the Beloved Community (also known as the Kingdom of God), providing the ethical norms for the just distribution of that which sustains life, health, learning, joy, the planet's ecosystems, and human relationships.<sup>[iii]</sup> In other words, the core of justice is care for the neighbor. Consequently, Christians (including preachers) can confidently make the case that God is still active in the world and that God can work through political processes to bring about God's will, just as God did throughout biblical history (see the stories of Joseph in Genesis, Esther, Daniel, John the Baptist, and Jesus, for example). Thus, there is no need to enforce an artificial gap between the realm of God and the realm of human earthly existence.

[9] Despite these biblical justifications for preaching about issues of public concern, the reality is that there are emotional and relational dynamics that carry great weight in a congregation when a pastor is considering a sermon that touches on one of these issues. In her book *Prophetic Preaching: A Pastoral Approach*, Leonora Tubbs Tisdale suggests the following seven reasons that make clergy hesitant to engage in prophetic preaching:

1. An inherited model of biblical interpretation that marginalizes the prophetic dimensions of scripture.
2. Pastoral concern for parishioners.
3. Fear of conflict.
4. Fear of dividing a congregation.
5. Fear of being disliked, rejected, or penalized for prophetic witness.
6. Feelings of inadequacy in addressing prophetic concerns.
7. Discouragement that prophetic witness does not make a difference.<sup>[iii]</sup>

[10] My preaching survey provided some quantitative data that fleshes out Tisdale's theories. The data indicates that nearly a quarter of mainline Protestant preachers in the United States rarely – or never – preach about controversial justice issues.<sup>[iv]</sup> As I examine the data, it appears that for the

pastors surveyed, the reasons for not addressing issues of public concern boil down to four main fears:

- Fear of harming or dividing their congregations
- Fear of compromising their pastoral ministry
- Fear of receiving negative push-back for being “too political”
- Fear of loss – loss of members, money, and their own positions

### **The Sermon-Dialogue-Sermon Method**

[12] These were the questions that concerned me and my colleague Gregg Kaufman, a retired ELCA minister and research associate at the Kettering Foundation, when we first worked together to train a group of Lutheran clergy in the Upper Susquehanna Synod (Pennsylvania) at a bishop’s retreat in 2016.<sup>[v]</sup> To help the pastors prepare for what was likely to be a contentious political climate in light of the presidential campaign and election, Gregg trained the pastors in the process of deliberative dialogue developed by Kettering and the National Issues Forum Institute. Then I worked with these pastors on establishing scriptural and theological principles for engaging controversial issues in their sermons with strategies for preaching in the Purple Zone. Together, Gregg and I began to see how preaching, discipleship, and citizenship intersect in a way that strengthens democracy through implementation of the church’s role as servant in the world.<sup>[vi]</sup>

[13] I now serve as a member of several of the Kettering Foundation’s research exchanges focusing on-deliberative dialogue used in faith-based settings. Through my work with them and in teaching seminary courses on the sermon-dialogue-sermon process, I have found the deliberative dialogue approach and the NIFI issue guides to be ideal tools for helping congregations engage difficult social issues. There are, of course, other organizations that specialize in civil discourse and dialogue.<sup>[vii]</sup> But I believe the NIFI deliberative dialogue approach and nonpartisan issue guides are easily adapted to a congregational setting. In addition, there is potential for deliberative dialogue to help congregations discern how they can best respond to the needs and concerns of their communities thereby answering Jesus’ call to care for “the least of these” (Matthew 25:40). In this way, clergy can help their parishioners to find the purple zone within the red-blue divide of their churches and communities.

[14] One of the keys to Purple Zone preaching is approaching both scripture and the sermon itself with a “dialogical lens” for interpreting the Bible which is informed by a public theology for preaching. It is preaching that stands at the crossroads of church and society, finding ways to create dialogue through listening, understanding, discernment, and finding common values. This dialogical lens tills the soil for the *sermon-dialogue-sermon method* – a process I have developed for helping preachers name and frame issues of public concern together with their congregations. Rather than a once-and-done approach to

addressing social issues, this method requires the preacher to think expansively and more long-term in their preparation and planning.

[15] In this process, the pastor begins by choosing a social issue they want to address with their congregation and introduces it with the first sermon, the Prophetic Invitation to Dialogue. In this sermon, instead of taking a stand on an issue, the preacher acknowledges its complexity, considers many voices and perspectives, and frames it within a scriptural and theological context. Listeners are invited to participate in a deliberative dialogue about the topic, assured that the Holy Spirit's gift of discernment is part of this process within the Body of Christ.

[16] Deliberative dialogue involves small groups of diverse individuals in face-to-face round-table discussions using non-partisan issue guides available from the NIFI. Moderated by a facilitator, participants begin with ground rules for how they will conduct themselves in the dialogue. They then share what is at stake for them in this topic and how it has touched them personally. Next, they weigh the pros and cons of three different approaches to the issue. Together they discern what common values emerge. These values provide a basis for "next steps," such as continued dialogue or specific actions to engage the issue within the congregation or in the larger community.

[17] The follow-up sermon after the deliberative dialogue is called the Communal Prophetic Proclamation. This sermon is informed by the "collaborative/conversational" form described in John McClure's *The Roundtable Pulpit*.<sup>[viii]</sup> By incorporating aspects of the deliberative dialogue and lifting up different perspectives that were explored, the sermon highlights the shared values discerned by the group as well as possible next steps the congregation could take to move forward on the issue. In this sermon, the preacher raises up a prophetic witness as arising from the dialogue, rather than from just her or his own position on the issue. This sermon emphasizes God's presence in the midst of the complexity and the Spirit's guidance within the dialogue. This enables the congregation to see beyond partisanship in order to move into more genuine community. Thus, the culture of the church begins to transform from that of divisiveness or avoidance to one of healthy conversation and faithful engagement with the issues that concern the common good.

[18] In workshops and seminars, seminary courses, as well as individual consultations with parish pastors, I have introduced over one hundred clergy, seminary students, and laity to the sermon-dialogue-sermon method. Forty of these students and clergy received intensive instruction in the method. Based on their feedback, I have found that preachers emerge with new insights and healthier relationships not only within the church, but for civic and public discourse in our communities and our country.<sup>[ix]</sup>

[19] Currently, I am researching the effectiveness of the sermon-dialogue-sermon method in more detail through a grant funded by the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Religious Education. My project is bringing together a

group of pastors and laity to be trained in the method and then carry it out in their congregation. We will follow these pastors, lay leaders and congregations for a year to see what changes result in their willingness to engage in civil discourse and social justice. This, in turn, will help us gain insight into how seminaries might structure or restructure their pedagogy to incorporate deliberative dialogue. In this way, we hope to bridge the divide between theories about social engagement and the actual practice of these pedagogical strategies in classrooms and ministry settings.

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