

BEGGARS OF THE WORD

A preacher is a beggar at heart. We are doomed to live with hands outstretched before the world, pleading for a piece of the gospel. If we do not beg we cannot preach. We cannot pretend to know how the life-giving message of Jesus manifests itself in the lives of everyday folk unless we first risk sitting at their feet with ears wide open to listen, patiently, begging for a morsel of their story to feed our hungering preacher-hearts.

Begging, however, is a risky business. Sometimes the noon hour passes by and nothing, not even a lone copper coin, has fallen into our hands. It is a frightening feeling to see a preaching deadline approaching and feel that inner emptiness in which hunger pains roar like a lion waiting to be fed. We have been asked to speak in the name of God, and there is nothing to say. No manna has fallen from heaven. The easiest way out is to impress the listeners with talk of eschatological hope and exegetical insights into the soteriology of Saint Luke. "That'll fool 'em!" Yeah, it will -- for awhile. But it can't fool the preacher. The preacher will still have to go to bed that night plagued with a spiritual emptiness far greater than ordinary hunger. Hunger in the depths of one's spirit is the worst kind of hunger of all.

Good 'ole fashioned hunger pains, though, are different. They force the beggar to be creative and clever. When we feel hungry for the Word we go looking for it, and that is what makes life exciting and fruitful for the mendicant preacher. No stone is left unturned by the passionate prophet in search of a piece of bread that can be formed into a word of Good News. And Oh! What a feast it is to find that bread and to have been fed at that table! What a joy to spot the Word clad in earthly attire at precisely that moment when the inner lion is roaring for its prey. To feast at that banquet table is sheer delight. We are nourished and can in turn nourish others. "Take this and eat... in memory of me."

So how do we go about this begging in a creative, clever way? How can we be sure that we are being faithful to this vocation of Word-hungry beggars, and not be out just to fool God's people? It seems that there are three basic ingredients which we must be careful to mix into our dough as preachers. The first is contemplative silence; it works like yeast for a preacher. Contemplative silence for a preacher is *not* the eyes-tightly-shut-in-my-room-with-the-door-closed kind of contemplation. That kind of withdraw has its place in a life of mystical prayer, but not when the preacher is hungry for God's Word.

The kind of contemplative silence needed by the preacher is wide-eyed silence. It lives on the crumbs which fall from the world's table, so it is necessarily a silence lived in the midst of the world. It is the silence of the beggar who sits quietly amidst the hustle-bustle of a busy subway station playing the violin, saying nothing, but noticing everything and everyone. We desperately must re-conquer the place of silence in our lives, for without it we will never be surprised by the sudden, gratuitous Word falling into our laps at the moment least expected. Many words fall into our laps each day, but we brush them off like messy crumbs because we are not quiet enough to recognize them as gift. Contemplative silence is a must.

The second ingredient is curiosity. A preacher who is a beggar must be curious, a bit nosy and unafraid to ask lots of questions. Journalists share this part of the mendicant vocation with us. A good journalist never waits to be invited to the party. She naturally assumes that the world is depending on her to divulge all the social gossip afterwards! Well, the same goes with us preachers. We have to *hang out* and watch and notice little details. We have to sneak into the party called *life* and observe everything that is happening. We delight in the carefree laughter of children and we overhear old folks telling their stories, sometimes in whispers. We learn to taste the beauty of creation and to understand the uniqueness of human faces. We stare as deeply at a lovely orchid as we do at a teenage face marked with sadness or resplendent with joy. We know how to recognize the people who are sitting on the sidelines of life, and we risk asking them to tell us their story. Why are there people excluded from the fullness of life? What dreams do they have hidden in their hearts? Curiosity leads the preacher down the path toward truth.

A good journalist takes pictures of faces and jots down tid-bits gathered from conversations. A preacher takes pictures and jots down words, too, but in this case engraved on the tablet of the heart. The preacher sees and hears from inside out. We observe with the inner eye as a mother kisses her daughter's scraped knee, and says to her, "Honey, no matter how many times you fall down, Mommy will always love you." After glimpsing such a moment, the preacher-beggar knows almost immediately that God's bread has rained down from heaven and filled that place of inner emptiness with Good News.

The third ingredient for a Word-hungry preacher might best be likened to the wisdom of a painter. Like the painter, a good preacher must know how to mix different colors of paint together -- not with a brush on a pallet -- but with words. The preacher who sits on a park bench quietly contemplating an old man dressed in a tattered coat and tie feeding pigeons is the same one who that morning poured over the gospel account of Jesus' miracle of the loaves and fishes. As he sits there, the warm sun on his back, he feels that the old man has unknowingly fed *him*, as well. He has been fed by the Word of God hidden beneath a tattered coat and tie in a park filled with laughter and bicycles on a Friday afternoon. So simple. So everyday. So important.

And now the preacher has to blend the colors on the pallet of his own tongue. Once we have been fed by God's unsuspecting angels, we must let the artist within us create something beautiful for God's people. This is a most important part of the process, and it takes time. We have done our begging. We have sat quietly, contemplating God's Word-made-flesh, and we have been surprised by a gift of bread from heaven -- a word spoken through the silent gesture of an old man feeding pigeons in a park.

To the vibrant colors of this word-gift we add the primary colors passed down to us by our ancestors: the text of sacred scripture. And we blend the colors, carefully, until they become Good News. Our task as preachers is to mix words with Word, so that what appears on the canvas of our oral art piece unveils for others, in some simple way, the face of God. By blending stories collected through holy begging with the Great Story of God's love affair with the world we paint in verbal pictograph the gospel of salvation. And then we give the art back to the very people who gave us the stories in the first place. Yes. The surprise of the preacher is that every word which has been begged along the journey is returned to its rightful owner. In the end the beggar is empty again, but it is an emptiness filled with vibrant color and the taste of fresh-baked bread.

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