

Catholic Women Preach: Taking a *Life to Text to Life* Approach

Recall a memorable sermon you have heard that has stayed with you. Most likely it personally engaged your own life with the spiritual wisdom of the assigned texts and in ways that you could take to heart and put to work. An effective sermon engages people's lives from the beginning, rather than with "let us" toward the end. Then, it gives ready access to the spiritual wisdom for life from the assigned texts. Finally, it enables people to integrate such wisdom back into daily life as lived faith.

Upon reflection, we might discern a similar dynamic in Jesus' approach to preaching. Almost invariably he began with themes from people's ordinary lives – fishing, farming, bread-baking, storing wine, poor widows, etc. He encouraged listeners to reflect on these themes of their lives, often challenging their taken-for-granted world view. Then, into the midst of their everyday reality, Jesus taught his Gospel of God's reign. Finally, all his preaching called to discipleship, to lived faith.

As you prepare your reflection for *Catholic Women Preach*, we encourage you to take such a *life to Text to life* (in faith) approach. Without being rigid or lockstep, this will lend a common style throughout this program of preaching resources.

Before Crafting Your Reflection: As with any approach, this one requires prior preparation. So, read carefully the assigned readings, pray with them, and consult a commentary as helpful. However, the first task in preparing a *life to Text to life* reflection is to find in the readings a generative theme that will be relevant and engaging for people's lives. Second, you will discern the spiritual wisdom and truths that the texts offer for people's lives apropos the life-theme. Third, you need to imagine how to encourage people to integrate the spiritual wisdom from the readings back into their own lives in faith. Then, to craft your reflection, you can imagine a *life to Text to life* approach unfolding as three cumulative movements.

Movement One: *Establishing and Reflecting on a Generative Theme*

Begin by establishing a generative theme for people's lives, something that is likely to engage their personal interest, touch their hearts. This can be done by a question, a summary statement, a story, an example, something from contemporary culture or events, from entertainment or sports etc. – as long as it appeals to people's interests and "get's them listening" (nothing *happens* if not!). Having established the life-theme in an engaging way, offer some reflections upon it, why it is important, the challenges of its socio-cultural context, etc.

For example: The Gospel reading for the day on which these suggestions are being crafted is from Matthew 13:44-46, the two short parables of the person who discovers a *treasure in a field* and the merchant who finds a *pearl of great price*. A generative theme might be to appeal to the deepest longings of the heart. This could be

established with a story, or an example, a summary statement, or just a question – e.g., “I wonder what is the deepest longing of your (or my) heart at this time?” Then follow with reflection on the longings of the heart, where they come from, how they can be guided aright or astray - by contemporary culture, advertising, etc.

Movement Two: *Spiritual Wisdom from the Texts*

Here in the body of the reflection, the task is to access for people the spiritual wisdom and truths from the texts that might be relevant to and resonant with their lives. The purpose is not a scholarly exegesis, and yet good scholarship here (readily accessible in scripture commentaries) can enhance the spiritual wisdom of the text. The key is to appeal to the heart and to keep focused on “what this might mean” for people’s lives-in-faith now – around the generative theme.

For example: In these parables, Jesus is clearly urging disciples to make the reign of God the very center of their/our lives. It asks us to invest “everything” to possess this treasure and pearl of great price. It should define the very purpose of our lives, determining our values and commitments. Such living for God’s reign will be its own reward – lending us the treasure and pearl for which we long, even now.

Movement Three: *Bringing the Text’s Wisdom to Life*

The closing task of the sermon is to move back to *life* again, encouraging people to integrate the spiritual wisdom from the text(s) into their own daily lives as a lived-faith. The key is to encourage their discernment and decision making for themselves apropos such wisdom. Of course you can make suggestions, personal or in general. However, the task to achieve is that people go away embracing some spiritual wisdom or truth of faith with a sense of how to live it out.

For example: You might volunteer your own renewed commitment to God’s reign in Jesus, and give an example of something specific this will demand of your life at this time. Then good questions can invite similar discernment and decision making on the part of your listeners. The key is to encourage all to imagine what will be their best treasure and pearl of great price as disciples of Jesus and what this asks of their lives now. As always, appealing to imagination is a key resource here.

A Rule of Thumb for Each Movement

- 1) Beginning with “In today’s Gospel reading” is rarely engaging, and certainly not by then repeating what people have just heard;
- 2) Establishing a generative theme for people’s lives from the readings will help encourage an interpretation that uncovers the texts’ spiritual wisdom for life;
- 3) Moralizing to bring the wisdom of the texts back to life is seldom effective; avoid the “let us” be good, be kind, etc. Be concrete and challenging instead.