

“Audience Analysis”

May 21, 2017

A Sermon by the Rev. John C. R. Silbert at Trinity Presbyterian Church; Butler, Pennsylvania
The Sixth Sunday of Easter, Year A

Texts: “Then Paul stood in front of the Aeropagus and said, ‘Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way.’”
Acts 17:22, NRSV

“Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence...”

1 Peter 3:15b-16a, NRSV



(Image credit: “St. Paul in the Areopagus” by Mariano Fortuny (1838-1874, Spain))

Let us pray: Our Father and our God make us masters of ourselves that we may become the servants of others. Take my lips and speak through them; take our minds and think through them; take our hearts and set them on fire, for we would see Jesus this morning, in his name and for his sake, we pray, Amen.

After a long political season leading to an election and with the new Presidential administration of the United States now on an unprecedented tour of the Mid-East and Europe we are used to hearing the word rhetoric tossed into any number of contexts covered by the media and their pundits.

"Rhetoric" is a good word that has suffered from its various connotations in history. Like the word "myth," which today is about as far from its real meaning as possible, rhetoric, unfortunately, has suffered a similar fate: We are, by and large, skeptical of "rhetoricians" and their "rhetoric" as those who believe that a myth is something fundamentally untrue. We think there is a snake oil salesman behind every political promise and much that is said is in order to please a particular constituency if not to serve as a handmaiden to truth-telling.

It is too bad. The word "rhetoric" has a good history. Rhetoric, according to Aristotle, was the capacity of a speaker (speechmaker) to know in every case the possible means of persuasion. In the hands of the scrupulous, the word is meant to define the best ways to gain the support and favor of an audience.

Otis M. Walter, who taught the art of rhetoric, put it more simply. He said, *"The practice of rhetoric is in knowing how and when communication ought to proceed."* This is the definition I was taught as a PhD student at Pitt decades ago and it is the one I teach my undergraduate charges at Robert Morris University today.

Rhetoric is a noble task – or ought to be – that is the scrupulous reference I just made. What you have to communicate must be of value – of such importance and worth that you will search for the best means to communicate its message to another. Such is the burden we bear in truth-telling always: how do we get the message across to others with urgency, with hopefulness, with conviction, and zeal?

I wrestle with this every weekend . . . sometimes as I am making my last few steps to the pulpit – my burden is nothing less than being a steward of the mysteries of God's grace . . . Preachers are servants of the Word – Look at the heading in the bulletin for this part of the service: *"God speaks to Us!"* – We are handling HOLY things . . . We must take care always.

A young Scottish preacher, fresh out of seminary at St. Andrews, made his way boldly into the pulpit full of the froth and vinegar of a young soul on fire on his first Sunday as an ordained minister . . .

In the pulpit of the Kirk in Aberdeen shire he proceeded to declaim loudly and forthrightly. Unfortunately, as he proceeded he noticed one, then another, still another, falling away from him; turning him off. By the end of the sermon, he practically crawled down out of the pulpit to make the way to his seat, humbled by his ineffectiveness . . . After the service; he noticed that one old lady hung back from the others who were polite in their greetings still. She came to his side in the empty quiet of the sanctuary, placed her hand on his shoulder and spoke directly in her distinct brogue: "*May I offer ye a wee bit of advice, minister? Had ye gon oop as ye cum doon, ya widda cum doon as ye went oop . . .!*" (And for those of you who may have missed it, she said, "*Had you gone up as you came down; you would have come down as you went up;*" another way of saying: "*Had you gone up into the pulpit with humility, you might have come down out of it in triumph.*")

We handle holy things – God’s truth – not just in our words, but in our lives as well. We are always communicating – in fact, this is a truism: "*We cannot not communicate.*" But what are we saying? And what do people hear in our speaking?

What is sure is that a crucial aspect to what we say is the people to whom we say what we say. As a professor of public speaking – ground zero for the modern practice of rhetoric – one of the essential components I teach in speech-making is audience analysis: the people who will hear your message; who they are, what they believe, what they care about, what they know about you and your message.

Speaking blindly, unknowingly, to an audience is a recipe for disaster. Consider this:

Dateline Boston, May 25th, 2010 – When "Today" show news anchor Ann curry delivered the commencement speech at Wheaton College in Massachusetts, she named a list of distinguished alumni, including the Rev. Billy Graham, Wes Craven, and Dennis Hastert.

The problem is the evangelist, the horror movie director, and the former U.S. speaker of the House all attended the Wheaton College in Illinois, not the one in Massachusetts.

It would have been impossible for Graham, Craven, and Hastert to attend the school in Norton, Mass., about 30 miles south of Boston. It was founded in 1834 as a women's college and did not start educating men until 1988. It has about 1,500 students.

The suburban Chicago school, founded as a co-educational institution in 1860, adheres to Christian values and has about 2,500 undergraduates.

Ooops . . . ! But then there is this:

Dateline Boston's Fenway, May 22, 2011 – I was one of 25,000 or so attendees at my daughter's graduation from Boston University, a different news anchor gave the commencement address, then CBS' Katie Couric – a former "Today" show alumna.

But unlike her counterpart of a year before, Ms. Couric analyzed her audience well and did a splendid job of relating to her audience. She not only said she was glad to speak at BU instead of her "safety school", rival Boston College, but she reminded graduates that as a highly criticized news anchor, she came to realize that "Sometimes you are the pigeon and sometimes you are the statue." She was tremendous!

In order to be an effective communicator, one has to be a good audience analyzer. This is evident from the passage in Acts 17. So effective was the Apostle Paul in his speech on Mar's Hill – the Aeropagus – the very place where Socrates tried in vain 300 years earlier to make his case against charges of preaching foreign divinities; a charge that resulted in his execution – that many who heard Paul, instead said, "We will hear you again about this . . ." So brilliant was his analysis of his audience and the means he used to reach them that my professor – a confirmed secularist – used this passage as his introduction to audience analysis in his published textbook on public speaking.

The Rev. Hardy Kim, a pastor at the First Presbyterian Church of Atlanta, GA has said this about Paul in Acts 17:

"We Christians need to pay attention to what Paul accomplished at the Areopagus--how he engaged the Athenians. Christendom has been declared dead; Christian cultural values are no longer the undisputed norm. Mainline Protestant communities no longer dominate American political life. The fastest growing religious affiliation is "none." Can we deny that we need to develop new ways of speaking to a skeptical world? It's not hard to imagine we're in Paul's place--that we're visitors in a new city and we must learn how to proclaim Christ before a new Areopagus."ⁱ

Let me suggest to you that Paul did several important things that helped him reach out to his audience with the gospel message; we do well to imitate him in what he did.

- ***He listened to what the culture around him was saying:*** even though he was distressed with what he saw in Athens, Paul tried to understand what the culture was saying. An earlier version of Paul would have been furious and contentious – the Paul who had once been Saul, persecuting Christians, had a different way of confronting contrariness . . . What was Athens saying in its forms of worship, its idols and statues? We are often shaking our finger at culture in our outrage of what we think it does wrong, but how well do we do at listening to what it is trying to say, or what it is trying not to say?
- ***He identified with aspects of that culture's conversation and entered into it:*** rather than judge harshly what he heard in his listening, he identified the points of contact he could relate to and understand. Paul was able to quote Greeks known to his hearers: the Stoic poets, Posidonius and Aratus. How well versed are we in our culture's speech and what it knows? The late preacher, Fred Craddock, entitled one of his books on preaching, **OVERHEARING THE GOSPEL**, saying in essence that so much of the proclamation of our faith is in the conversations we overhear in the day-to-day living that we do. The Word of God is at its best in season and out and in overhearing in the culture those ideas and concerns and hopes and dreams with which the heart of faith in the person of Jesus is able to identify. What is it that your neighbor, co-worker, bowling buddy, spouse, daughter, nephew, and adversary are saying that you can understand and relate to? What do you hear in them that resonate with the gracious good news of Jesus you have come to know and believe?
- ***He spoke graciously and with conviction about the hope that was within him:*** In the passage from 1 Peter, we are exhorted to **"Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence."** Do you notice how so much of life tends to be combative and argumentative? Do you notice that much of the programming that we see on TV is one form or another of confrontation? Do we enter into the encounters with others with chips on our shoulders or with claws out ready to scratch? The gospel – the great hope that is within you – is wrapped up in the person of your self-presentation to everyone you meet. How well do you adorn the gospel in your dealings with others?

As you make your defense of the accounting of the hope within you, do you do it with a smile or a smirk? Do you have a word to say at all? How do you account for your hope in Christ in relation to others? Our call is not to shut up in silence when our hearts burn with the love of Jesus for another; we are not meant to be silent when there is an opportunity to reach out and proclaim the hope within us; Do you offer the good news of the God of grace who loves you through Jesus Christ when you are met with the longing of someone else for a god – *unknown* – but still wanted?

Can you reach into their life's conversations and find there a place that you can inhabit with them? As you do, will you offer to them a good defense in gracious words of love and grace an accounting, beautiful and true, of the hope that is within you, that God might just have meant for them (through you)?

I pray this happens to you this week. You need it as much as others around you need Jesus.

In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.

¹ The Rev. Hardy Kim, Atlanta, GA in "Proclaiming Christ in the new Aeropagus" at Day1.org.