

Pardon Me, Your Slip is Showing...

Authenticity is the flavour of the month. But WILLIAM WILLIMON asks how much of your own struggle you should share from the pulpit...

I take as my text a statement by the great theologian Oscar Wilde: 'About the worst advice you can give anybody is, "Be Yourself."'

For clergy, that aphorism may be especially true.

Recently, I heard a church-growth consultant urge pastors to "be authentic." He noted that boomers, busters, and Gen X-ers all like preachers who "share themselves," who are willing to peel off the clerical masks, break out of the stained-glass enclosure, and share their humanity with the congregation.

"If you've had a tough week, tell them," he advised. "If you have trouble believing a certain piece of Scripture, tell them."

Authenticity is a great virtue. The phony, stained glass voice and the insincere ministerial demeanor are a true turnoff for many. The congregation rightly expects us not to talk the talk unless we walk the walk.

And perhaps there was a time when we preachers needed to demonstrate to the congregation that, despite the M.Div, the backward collar or the gold crosses on the collar, we were, after all, just poor struggling sinners like them.

I wonder, though, if that day has passed.

Lately, there have been so many opportunities for the laity to utter the truism, "Well, we must remember that pastors are only human," that I see little need for us intentionally to share ourselves, expose ourselves, strip down, open up, or let it all hang out, in the name of "authenticity."

Show me a lay person who needs us to expend time in Sunday worship convincing folks that we preachers are, after all, only human, and I'll show you a lay person who has been neglecting the gossip section of the local newspaper.

The Truth Thing

Have you ever *decided* to act authentically? That's as dumb as deciding to act humbly. When it comes to being authentic or humble, you either are or you aren't. To intentionally pepper my sermon with doses of predetermined authenticity is to be... well... inauthentic.

An elderly woman complained to me that she could tell when her pastor had not had time to prepare a sermon, because he would begin crying at the weakest point in the sermon.

"Crying?" I asked.

"Yeah, crying," she said. "He says something like, 'When I think of what Jesus did for us, I just, well, I... I... forgive me, I'm just overcome with gratitude.'" He usually is overcome with gratitude about once every month, usually related to his fishing schedule."

We need more of that?

I'm all for pastoral honesty, to let the people know we stand among them as a redeemed sinner who struggles. But the sermon may not be the best place for such sharing. There, we have our hands full proclaiming the gospel, pointing to Christ, telling *the* story; there may not be much time to waste pointing at ourselves, sharing our story. John Wesley loved to counter his preachers' tales of how well they had done in the pulpit by asking them, "But did you offer Christ?"

I must never become confused into thinking that people are in church because of me. True, we preachers preach through our personality. When a colleague and I edited an encyclopedia of preaching, we noted that the most quoted phrase was Phillips Brook's classic definition of preaching as "truth communicated through personality."

We contemporary preachers have got the personality thing down fairly well. It's the *truth* thing that may be in peril in our preaching.

Some time ago, when we preachers were first being urged to "share your story" and to lay ourselves bare before the people, I heard a sermon that began, "Prayer is a problem for me." From there, the preacher went on about his misgivings, doubts, and dilemmas with prayer. At the time, I thought it was refreshingly honest.

On the way home from church, my wife said, "I suppose there was a time when a congregation would be shocked, or at least titillated, by having a pastor admit that he was inept at prayer. Nowadays, it might be more exciting to hear a pastor stand and say, 'I may have problems with

prayer, but thank God we Christians have resources greater than my limited experience." Then he could have quoted someone who knew more than he did."

See why I am grateful to be living with this woman?

In a society where the emotional strip-tease is the standard stuff of daytime television, in a culture drowning in narcissistic excess, where we are encouraged relentlessly to scan our egos, as if there is no help for us other than that which is self-derived, do we preachers need to be "authentic"?

Authenticity is more than a matter of being who I am; it's a matter of being who God calls me to be. For preachers, authenticity means being true, not just to our feelings, but true to our vocation, true to God's call.

We serve God's people by laying aside ourselves and taking up the cross and preaching Christ and him crucified, whether we feel like it next Sunday or not.

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