Facilitating dialogue in a monologue world

by Bob Ekblad

from Just Preaching, Edited by André Resner Jr., Chalice Press, 2002

Many a pastor, priest and rabbi strive to preach and teach in ways that will inspire their parishioners to live lives marked by compassion and service to the poor and excluded. This prophetic task is highly complex, made especially difficult in mainstream circles by a myriad of nearly insurmountable obstacles.

Before considering some of these obstacles and strategies for preaching that empowers, I will briefly present my context and understanding of the role and objectives of the preacher followed by a dialogical sermon on John 9.

For the past twenty years I have read Scripture with people on the margins of the dominant culture who at the same time find themselves outside the institutional church. This ministry began in rural Honduras in the early 80's, where my wife and I worked for six years with a team of Central Americans to promote sustainable agriculture, preventative health and lead Bible studies in fields and homes with impoverished campesinos.

We currently serve as pastors of an ecumenical ministry to immigrant migrant farm laborers from Mexico -- many of whom are undocumented. I also serve as part-time chaplain of a county jail. I regularly gather with Hispanic inmates and immigrants both inside and outside the jail to talk about our lives and the Scriptures. In addition I often preach and teach in mainline Protestant churches, and teach Bible courses to Seminary students who were preparing for ministry.

Of all the people I read Scripture with, I find mainstream, mainline, English-speaking parishioners least able to engage in open dialogue about their lives, the Scriptures and the larger world. I often witness a notable contrast between raw, honest dialogue in Spanish about faith and life with Mexican inmates and more guarded, reluctant discussion with educated, English-speaking, Caucasian Presbyterians, Methodists, Lutherans and Roman Catholics.

Those with the least experience inside the institutional church appear less inhibited when it comes to participating in theological discussion than regular churchgoers, who tend to be more passive. While there are certainly numerous factors that could explain this contrast, I regularly return in my mind to one.

I am seeing a direct link between mainstream Christians' difficulties participating in discussion about their lives and the Scriptures and their lack of life-giving action on behalf of people on the margins.

How might the Scriptures both preached and studied finally empower mainstream Christians?

Envisioning the preacher's role

Clarity about the preacher's function and objectives go hand in hand with an understanding of the most appropriate means of communication.

Brazilian pedagogue Paulo Freire has deeply inspired my teaching and preaching both in Honduras and in North America.(1) Freire's participatory, problem-solving model did much to empower the base community movement in Latin America.

Peasants and workers who were once passive receivers of monologue-style preaching, teaching and liturgies began to read and discuss the Scriptures for themselves- becoming subjects of their own liberation process with the help of priests, pastors and lay leaders who functioned more as facilitators than authorities.(2)

In my preaching and teaching I envision my role as that of a facilitator and midwife. As a facilitator I seek to do everything possible to set up an encounter between God and the people through assisting them to reflect on their own lives, the Scriptures and each other's experiences and viewpoints.

As midwife I assist during the birthing process recognizing that the work is done by the Spirit in intimate communion with people in the depths of their beings. I seek to be present as appropriately as possible -- getting out of the way or intervening when necessary. I set up the birthing room as it were, making sure that the interpreting process gets off to the best start with a given group and text.

Trust must be established between myself and the participants, the participants and each other and the group members and the Biblical text. The chosen Scripture must be introduced in a

way that gives people a place of entry into the foreign world of the Bible. Barriers between reader and story must be addressed through introductory remarks and questions that invite the people to ponder and discuss the Biblical story.

Simultaneously I labor to help people identify contemporary equivalents to the Biblical narrative (location, characters, verbs and other details) in their own lives and world. I strive to bring people to understand the deeper meaning of the Biblical stories as these stories illuminate their own lives and surrounding world.

My objective is that people would find themselves inside the text as met or addressed by YHWH, Jesus, one of the apostles -- or whoever mediates the message or saving action in the Biblical story. I see myself as one who pulls people together for a potential encounter: a life-giving meeting between individuals and God that may result in comfort, healing, a change of heart, call. I am an unknowing midwife at best -- not knowing what the encounter will birth.

My hope is that this meeting will lead others to discern God's call on their life, when they will discover their highest vocation. People receive their vocation as they begin to follow Jesus, who turns common people into disciples and followers into recruiters of yet more disciples, who are sent into every nook and cranny of the world.

The dialogical sermon

For many years I have been developing a way of reading the Bible with people that is clearly different from a typical Bible study or sermon yet similar to both. I will call it a dialogical sermon here, though it's exact genre may be other.

I seek to engage individuals in groups of two to twenty-five in a theological conversation by helping them see themselves in the stories of struggle and liberation in the Scriptures.

I seek to formulate questions that draw people out about issues that directly affect them. Most often I begin with a question about people's lives, and then introduce a Biblical story and ask questions that help uncover the deeper truths of the text. Other times I begin with the text-which is most often the case on Sunday, when I am using the selections from the Common Lectionary.

In preparation for my dialogical sermon I seek to first determine what questions or issues the Biblical text appears to be addressing. This is often the most difficult task, requiring both careful exegesis and spiritual discernment regarding the text and group participants.

The questions that guide my preparatory reading include:

What is the heart of the matter in the text?

What question does the Biblical text appear to be addressing or in some way answering? (3)

Since most texts can be read to address numerous issues, I attempt to identify the multiple levels of meaning, prioritizing the issues apparently addressed in the text. (4)

The following description of a Bible study on Jesus' encounter with the man born blind and subsequent power struggle with the Pharisees in John 9 represents an attempt to begin with text. This particular story fits the purposes of this essay in that it places three ways of embodying God side-by-side.

The disciples, Jesus and the Pharisees each in turn communicate through their words and actions distinct understandings of God and ways of being present to one particular marginalized person -- the man born blind. While the following dialogical sermon/Bible study happened in a county jail, this sort of "encounter" can happen nearly anywhere where people can turn and face each other.

After briefly presenting this jail encounter, I will present some reflections on preaching and ways of being present that empower.

Learning together of Jesus' liberating pedagogy in John 9:1-41

Two guards usher me into the jail's multipurpose room on this Sunday afternoon at 3:00PM.

The English church service has just ended, and the plastic blue chairs are in neat rows before a wooded pulpit standing like a commander before the troops. I quickly slide the pulpit against the wall beside the television and arrange the chairs in a big circle-making sure a larger, more comfortable, plastic easy chair is reserved for someone other than myself.

The thick doors noisily open as guards lead red-uniformed inmates from their cells and pods into the room. I welcome seven men at the door with a handshake. Tattered, coverless books

lie strewn about on the table. I collect the ones I recognize as Bibles and pass them out as the men take their seats. I spot the oldest inmate and invite him to take the most comfortable chair.

Once everyone is seated I introduce myself and invite each person to introduce them self by their first name and where they are from -- an empowering moment there in the heart of an institution that classifies inmates as "male" or "female" and addresses them by their last name or inmate number.

I invite people to feel free to share their views on the Biblical text we are about to read, insisting that their questions and comments are critical if we are to truly understand the text. After an opening prayer calling on God's Spirit to show us the deeper meaning of the story I invite a volunteer to read John 9:1-2.

As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

In this story Jesus' disciples are looking at a blind man -- one who has been afflicted adversely by a calamity. I invite the inmates to consider how they themselves, functioning in this case as the contemporary equivalent of the disciples, might view people like themselves who end up in jail or prison -- as possible equivalents of the blind man who is considered punished for someone's sin.

"Many people outside the jail think that people who end up in jail may be there because of the way their parents raised them," I say, looking around the circle of men in red jail fatigues and rubber sandals.

"In fact," I continue, "over the seven years that I have served as chaplain here in this jail, many men and women have told me stories about their upbringing. They tell me about being neglected by their parents, severely punished and even sexually abused. Do any of you think that you are here now in jail in part because of the way you were raised?" I ask.

The men look up, surprised. Some appear alarmed.

"No way man," says Dominic, a white man in his late twenties looking at 25 years for charges of several counts of assault with a deadly weapon. "I've got no one to blame but myself."

Others nod their heads in agreement.

"So there is nothing about your upbringing that might have led to some bad decisions on your part that may have eventually gotten you into trouble with the law?" I ask, probing.

"That could be homes (5)," says Arnold, a Mexican American man in his mid twenties who's been active in Latino gangs. "I'm not saying it's all them, but I'm sure it didn't help for me to see my old man always laying around drunk and shit, man. I didn't have no male role model. I was pretty much on my own, roaming the streets all night since I was 12 years old," he continues.

"So this may have led to you eventually getting into trouble?" I ask.

"Yeah man, I think so. If I had had a positive male role model, someone I could look up to, things may have been different," he says.

"What about the rest of you guys," I ask, looking around.

Nearly everyone is nodding in agreement. Some talk about being raised by single moms, who were absent due to their need to put in long hours so they could support their family. Others tell how their mothers neglected them due to their addictions to drugs and alcohol, and of their difficulties finding stable partners. Nearly all tell of being punished severely, but often qualify these accounts with "but I'm sure I deserved it."

"Seeing my jefito (dad) beating up my jefita (mom) all the time didn't help," recounts Juan, a heavily-tattooed Mexican American man in his mid twenties who has been in an out of juvenile detention and jail since he was 15.

"I never learned from him how to treat a woman (6) with respect," continues Juan. "He never disciplined me. It was my mom who hit us. She would wail on me with a garden hose. I think that I've got a lot of anger, and maybe take it out on other women because of this. I'm sure that has something to do with why I'm here right now."

We talk on about other external factors leading to their lives of crime: getting expelled from school, experiencing discrimination from the general public and law enforcement officers, poor treatment by landlords, low wages for stoop labor as farm workers. The men are all looking down, lamenting their upbringings, until Dominic calls everyone to attention:

"Wait a minute man, maybe we weren't raised all that well and shit, but one thing I know, I can't blame my old man for my predicament. I ain't no victim, man. In fact I've victimized plenty of people. I fucked up man, and I'm to blame for getting my ass into trouble."

Others nod in agreement, and the conversation moves in the direction of personal responsibility. The men talk about the allure of the easy life: drugs, alcohol, women, easy money selling dope. They talk about choosing the easier path that they knew rather than the narrow path yet unknown.

"I fell into a drug addiction -- heroin," says Miguel, a Mexican American man in his late thirties. "No one ever gave me help. Now I'm waiting for a bed date [in a drug treatment facility]. I have a little girl that CPS (Child Protective Services) took away. Hurts me a lot. I have a drug addiction. It's me that has a problem."

"Okay," I say, "so at first you all agreed that you might be in jail in part because of your parents mistakes. Now you are focusing more on your own responsibility. You've been trying to answer the question the disciples asked Jesus: "who sinned that this man was born blind- this man or his parents?"

The Blame Game

Let's look closer at this question. What image of God does this question assume? What is God like according to the disciples?" I ask.

"A punisher," answers Juan. "They think of God as the one who is making the man blind and shit, either because of his own sin or his parents sin," he continues.

We discuss the disciples' image of God as retributive, celestial law-enforcement chief, which continues to reign often unchallenged on the streets of the U.S.A., Latin America and many other places.

God is envisioned by most inmates and Hispanic immigrants with whom I work from a perspective of negative hyper-sovereignty. Since God is understood as in control, calamities, punishments and other negative events are seen as being allowed to happen, and thus are understood as God's will.

The disciples' question is not whether the man's blindness was a punishment or not, but concerns the attribution of blame: is this blindness due to this man's sin or to his parents sin.

We talk at length about the disciples "us-them" attitude. They appear to look out from a place of comfort beside Jesus and seek Jesus' judgment on the blind "outsider." Many of the men have experienced this judgment from religious family members and from their churches. Most have internalized this judgment, and assume it to be true.

I ask the men how many of them see their time in jail as a punishment from God. Nearly everyone naturally assumes and even believes they must accept this. After all, critiquing fate is equal to judging God himself.

At this point I invite the men to look at how Jesus responds to the disciples' question, and how he might in turn respond to our question. The men are ready for this turn in the conversation. I invite one of the men to read John 9:3.

Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him." (9:3)

"So what do you make of Jesus' answer?" I ask the group.

"It doesn't say that God made him blind," observes Juan.

"Wow man, so it's like Jesus isn't into the blame game," says Dominic.

The discussion moves to Jesus' positive approach. Rather than worrying about guilt or innocence, questions upon which the courts of law and judges that will try the men are concerned, Jesus sees the man's situation as providing the occasion for his liberating work: "he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him (9:3).

Arnold wants to keep reading to see what will happen in the rest of the story -- now that interest is at an all time high.

We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, saying to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see.

We talk about how Jesus is not in any way associated with blindness, with night. Jesus is light -- the light of the world. He refuses to passively label or judge the blind man, but shows

a proactive attitude. Jesus leads his disciples, including them in his "we must work the works of him who sent me."

"So what might this story mean for you guys here in the jail?" I ask.

Since the men hesitate here to hope for anything too good for their undeserving, incarcerated selves, I actualize the text by suggesting that we read Jesus' response to his disciples as: "Neither you guys nor your parents are to blame for you being here: you are in jail so that God's works might be revealed in you." (7)

We talk about watching and waiting for God's positive work in their lives, and move into a discussion on the blind man's role in the healing process.

"So what did this man have to do to get Jesus' attention?" I ask, trying to alert the men to a narrative gap giving them another, more hidden sign that further subverts the dominant retributive system.

"He wasn't doing nothing," says Dominic. "He was just sitting there begging."

I invite the men to read verse one again: "As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth." It is Jesus who took the initiative, he saw the man, then did the rest.

"But he told the man to go wash the mud off his eyes in the pool," someone notes.

"It's like us," reflects Arnold. "We're blind. God opens up our eyes. It's like him putting us in here. He spits on the ground and opens our eyes; so we can open our own eyes, go to treatment, or whatever we need to do. God opens up our eyes so we can see what we can do. Otherwise we're blind; don't know what we can do. Here we think clearly, cuz we're sober."

At this point in our dialogue hope is being restored. The men are seeing a way out of debilitating fatalism. While in some ways the meeting is over, interest is still high.

We read on and look briefly at the Pharisees' reaction to the newly-seeing blind man and Jesus. After all, newly seeing inmates will still have to face the judge, probation officers and their family responsibilities, employers and other "authorities" on the outside. The rest of the story alerts them to what may still await them once they "see."

We observe the in contrast to Jesus' taking the initiative in his encounter with the blind man, the neighbors have to bring the healed man to the Pharisees -- who aren't about the business of looking for "lost sheep." In contrast to Jesus' liberating image of God, the Pharisees are more concerned that Jesus has broken the law by healing on the Sabbath. They reflect an image of God as an omnipotent law-enforcer and judge more concerned with laws than people (9:13-16).

The blind man shows increasing boldness before the judging Pharisees, eclipsing even Jesus as the preacher in this story (9:24-33). Finally the Pharisees, unable to tolerate this newly-empowered layperson's insubordination, throw him out of the synagogue (9:34), where he was in the first place.

"So where was this man the different times that Jesus met him?" I ask the men.

We notice together that Jesus first met the blind man outside the synagogue (8). We read together John 9:35-38, noting that it is also outside the institutional church that Jesus once again finds him, revealing his identity to him in a respectful, dialogical way:

Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" He answered, "And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him." Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he." He said, "Lord, I believe." And he worshiped him (9:35-38).

"Even though the religious leaders have kicked this guy out of the church, this does not keep Jesus from meeting him there outside," I observe.

"He's better off outside the church," notes Dominic. "Who would ever want to be inside dealing with those judgmental religious dudes."

We observe together how John ends this scene with Jesus' strongest words yet in support of a relationship of equality between insiders and outsiders, preachers and parishioners:

Jesus said, "I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind." Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, "Surely we are not blind, are we?" Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains." (9:39-41).

Jesus reverses the power relations in this story through his surprising judgment. He freely opens the eyes of the man viewed as punished by blindness and empowers him to preach truth to insiders -- those with the power. The blind man is given sight, becoming the teacher of the Pharisees.

At the same time, Jesus shows that the institutional religious leaders are still in the dark because they claim to see. John's Gospel presents the religious peoples' refusal to acknowledge their equality with blind "sinners" as the primary obstacle to true vision.

Finally, the location of preacher and parishioner, Jesus and the blind man, are both outside the institutional church -- hardly a hopeful image for pastors, priests and rabbis today. Yet while Jesus' focus is on the blind man, the bulk of the text recounts the interface between the newly-seeing man, the disciples and the religious authorities embodied by the Pharisees.

John's Gospel shows both a brutally honest assessment of the religious barriers to Jesus' ministry of proclamation and liberating presence, and a modeling of what it might take for disciples and Pharisees to join Jesus' redemptive ministry without restraints -- outside of the bounds of the institutional church.

Obstacles to the empowering word

My work with inmates and with others on the margins has given me a unique perspective on the barriers that get in the way of the efficacy of the spoken word to empower. People's perception that they are inferior and unworthy (or that they are viewed that way) may be more clearly visible in a jail setting than in a middle class congregation.

However, mainstream people can also perceive themselves as insignificant and even radically lacking -- feelings that may be especially present when they find themselves "before God" during Sunday worship. Too often the very physical location, setting, protocol of Christian worship together with the manner of dress of the preacher and delivery of most liturgies and sermons subvert the highest espoused objectives.

The preacher's persona

As spokesperson for God the minister inevitably reinforces or subverts the helpful or unhelpful images of God through her/his dress and demeanor.

If parishioners are to learn to respectfully anticipate Jesus' presence and voice in the hungry, thirsty, foreigner, naked, sick and prisoner (Matt 25:31-46) or among those who are not wise, powerful, of noble birth but are foolish, weak, low and despised (1 Cor 1:26-29) then should not these characteristics be incarnated in our very presence and demeanor?

When week after week parishioners hear the Scriptures read and proclaimed from white-gowned clergy with colorful stoles or pastors in the black robes of judges or academics (9), the opposite message may be inadvertently given: that those called as God's spokespersons are the pure, holy, wise, powerful and nobly-born (10).

A sports coat and tie may reinforce prejudices that associate clergy with professional classes or the elite, supporting the fallacious view that business dress makes one appear more successful, worthy of trust and respect.

Titles such as reverend, doctor, professor or father further distance clergy from the common people, disempowering those of lower social standing through reminding them of their perceived inferior, dependent status.

Rather than wearing the trappings of the institutional church (robes, albs, fancy crosses, clerical collars) that reinforce hierarchical power structures, today's preachers should perhaps experiment with preaching in jail uniform and handcuffs, hospital gowns, an apron or in rags.

Jesus' scathing critique of some of the professional religious leaders of his time must be heard freshly and heeded if the people are to take to the streets with liberating words and actions:

They do their deeds to be seen by others, for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. They love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have people call them rabbi.

But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students. And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father--the one in heaven. Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah.

The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted (Matt 23:5b-12 NRSV).

Preachers desirous of engaging congregants in lives committed to social justice and works of mercy do better to imitate Christ's humble posture as suffering servant. Yet the fanciness of our places of worship and apparent holiness of their religious décor exert their pressure on parishioners and clergy alike to dress appropriately for the out of the ordinary setting.

The location and pedagogy of preaching

Jesus' call to go out into the whole world to preach the good news is most convincing when given on the streets -- or anywhere but the comfortable confines of most churches (11).

Most churches and synagogues have a formal (sometimes sterile) and otherworldly aura that hardly illustrates the scenes of most of Jesus' deeds and teaching. The single file pews place congregants seated and facing the front-- the perfect posture for passive reception of a monologue (12).

Paulo Freire critiques what he calls the "banking method" of communication -- which corresponds in many ways with the religious system embodied by the Pharisees in John's Gospel. According to the banking method, knowledge or information is disseminated to passive recipients in ways that reinforce comfortable and oppressive patters of dependency.

Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiqués and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat. This is the "banking" concept of education, in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits.

They do, it is true, have the opportunity to become collectors or cataloguers of the things they store. But in the last analysis, it is people themselves who are filed away through the lack of creativity, transformation, and knowledge in this (at best) misguided system.

For apart from inquiry, apart from the praxis, people cannot be truly human. Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry people pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other (13).

Freire argues that people on the margins have internalized the oppressor mentality, which is conveyed through nearly every means of communication.

In contrast to the banking method, a truly liberating pedagogy happens best using a dialogical approach. The pedagogue must deliberately subvert the system of dependency. This is done

by creating an environment of trust whereby the voices of the "voiceless" are sought after and elevated -- a first step in education for a critical consciousness and empowerment.

While parishioners in mainstream churches are hardly the voiceless poor, banking-style education certainly has led to a noticeable passivity that must be deliberately combated if middle-class Christians are to be empowered for life-giving, active service.

According to Freire the vertical, teacher-student [read professional clergy-parishioner] contradiction must be reconciled (14), replaced with a dialogical, problem-solving pedagogy.

Whereas banking education anesthetizes and inhibits creative power, problem-posing education involves a constant unveiling of reality. The former attempts to maintain the submersion of consciousness; the later strives for the emergence of consciousness and critical intervention in reality (15).

According to a dialogical, problem-solving model a circle of chairs or benches and a smaller group of participants as in the jail Bible study above are clearly superior to rows of pews and large numbers of people. Many clergy understandably feel trapped by the buildings, pews and traditions they have inherited, lacking the resources needed for the ideal overhaul (16).

However, church leaders must be courageous in their championing of new places and forms of worship as important ingredients to help achieve the desperately-needed empowerment of people for mission (17).

Does the church have the courage to be the Church outside of the church -- the body of Christ with and for "the damned?"

Deliberate moves away from hierarchical models of leadership will help move congregations from passive receptors to active subjects in mission. Dialogical sermons, small group Bible studies, new forms of participatory liturgies and attempts to bridge the gap between comfortable places of worship and harsher realities of the streets and people's lives all will contribute to empowering people for social justice.

However, more importantly than any technique is the genuine humility born out of struggle and encounters with the humble God of the Scriptures. This God comes to us stripped of all means of power -- a vulnerable one whose authenticity is disarming. This God is a respecter of persons in ways that inspire trust and invite authenticity.

This God-with-us is finally the only Teacher, Rabbi and Father who can lead us down the narrow path, causing us to become "fishers of people" as we humbly follow. Without this continual divine mentoring, even the most revolutionary pedagogy is futile.