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# GOD'S FRIENDS

JOINING AUTHENTIC CHRISTIAN WORSHIP  
AND LIFE EXPERIENCE

## **PREACHING AT SAINT GREGORY'S: IN LISTENING SILENCE**

*by Donald Schell*

## **COMPLETING THE SERMON**

*by Leesy Taggart*

## **BARE FEET AND EMPTY HANDS: PREACHING WITH THE BODY, MIND, AND SPIRIT**

*by M. R. Ritley*

## **JESUIT GUEST PREACHER ON STAFF**

*by John Baldwin*

# PREACHING AT SAINT GREGORY'S: IN LISTENING SILENCE

by Donald Schell

## WHEN A ST. GREGORY'S PREACHER INVITES PEOPLE TO SHARE EXPERIENCES THAT THE SERMON STIRRED UP, PEOPLE SPEAK FROM THEIR HEARTS.

On the cover:

### ALTARPIECE

*Triptych: oil on panel, gold, graphite, and acrylic, (Private collection), ©1992, by Michael Schrauzer of Coronado, California. For more information and examples of Michael's art, visit <http://sd.znet.com/~mshroud/index.html>*

Opposite, on page 3:

### NEW JERUSALEM

*Oil painting by Tanja Butler, ©1991. Tanja is a painter and printmaker in Averill Park, New York. Her work focuses on the intimate personal connections in Bible stories.*

*The artists whose work appears in this issue are members of a national network, Christians In the Visual Arts (CIVA), which exists to explore and nurture the relationship between the visual arts and the Christian faith. The CIVA Seen online exhibition, "On Triptychs," celebrates the various ways that artists approach the traditional three-panel format used in medieval altarpieces. For more information about the group, and to view the online exhibition, visit [www.civa.org](http://www.civa.org).*

But when I began noticing how people seemed to avoid explicitly Christian language and that any mention of "God" was tentative or gently ironic, I began to wonder whether our preaching was taking the Christian faith out of our practice. Are Christian prayer and faith — "knowing Jesus" or "being in Christ" — simply verbal or intellectual interpretations we impose on experience?

I am grateful to the College of Preachers for a fellowship that allowed me to begin working on those questions in early 1998. During that month and a half of writing and reading, I asked the people of St. Gregory's to send notes about how we hold Jesus and what makes our congregation Christian.

More than fifty people offered a wonderful outpouring of questions, faith, uncertainty, and experience, almost a hundred pages' worth. St. Gregory's is not a homogenous gathering of "believers," though it includes many who are believers, devout Christians including life-time Episcopalians, former or still-practicing charismatics, Roman Catholics, and fundamentalists, all looking for a way to have faith with a more open mind. St. Gregory's also includes some who identify themselves with another religion and practice (notably Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism), and a number of intellectually cautious skeptics, agnostics, and atheists. What makes such a gathering Christian? What's it got to do with Jesus?

Over and over again in their notes on their encounter with Jesus or the work of God or the Holy or the Other, people came back to our congregation's shared silences and the ways we listen to one another. Though I had asked about preaching and sharing, both seemingly forms of speech, people's responses kept returning to our experiences of shared silence and listening to one another. With those responses in mind, I've continued to watch and think about the question of how we hold Jesus at St. Gregory's.

It appears to me that we weave our common faith from this silence and listening. I have come to see this throughout the process of preaching. What we do is share silence in its ambiguity and listen openly. As I read the congregation's notes and pondered the approach to preaching that has evolved at St. Gregory's, I heard them saying that this mix of silence and listening points to Jesus.

This article is a chronicle of our discovery of a preaching that leaves behind telling, explaining, interpreting, and indoctrinating, a preaching that hopes for direct experience and encounter, a preaching that begins in silence and that counts more on listening than speaking.

## I. IT BEGINS AND ENDS IN SILENCE

The first liturgical silence I endured was imposed as a hostile protest in the late sixties. I was a first-year student at Princeton Seminary. Factions within that fractured learning community regarded those outside their group with suspicion or scorn. Chapel wasn't required, but I was attending daily, which put me in "the chapel group." At least once a week, one or another senior (none of whom attended chapel) would lead us through a chapel service conceived of as a "prophetic witness" against a gathering of students he considered too conventionally pious.

One such morning a senior walked forward when it was time to begin, sat on the top step to the platform, and stared back at the congregation. He held his gaze for 25 minutes as people squirmed, wondering what was happening. Some left. At last he ended it with an angry "AMEN." Then he explained that we had just proved that people who came to chapel didn't understand contemplative silence. With that he walked out. The divisions in the place and that chapel service contributed to my decision to leave. I transferred to General Seminary in New York City, where students seemed to regard daily chapel as one thing that bound us together across theological and political divisions.

My second liturgical silence appeared more gently but also without explanation. One morning in the General Seminary chapel, a silence gaped after the first Bible reading. The reader was finished, but he didn't move from the lectern. Was he waiting for something? He seemed quite still

and relaxed. Was the organist daydreaming? I glanced at him and he seemed to be patiently watching and waiting. Between them these two held the flow of our ritual, and both had simply stopped. After a minute or so the organist began and we sang. There was another silence after the next reading.

I tried to like it, but over the coming days, as these silences continued to appear, I grew quite frustrated with myself. I learned how very little I could recall of a reading I had just heard. Even when a bit of it stayed with me, it might not always be particularly apt for meditation. When I caught myself daydreaming, I would try to pray. But sometimes, even when I snagged something to meditate on, I discovered I had more energy for just keeping still or for studying the light and darkness in the carved wooden ceiling so high above us.

Two years later I went to work with Rick Fabian at the Episcopal Church at Yale. The daily liturgy that he created there in 1970 began the evolution of practice that led to our St. Gregory's liturgy. As deacon, my role for the first several months, I was responsible for timing silences after readings. When the reader stopped, I would check my watch and begin timing two minutes. I would end the silence by announcing the canticle and inviting us to stand and sing.

Timing people's prayers by the clock felt odd to me. I felt more like a manager or a coach than part of the congregation. I watched the slow sweep of the second hand and glanced up at each little sign of restlessness — one student muffling his cough, another stirring in her seat. The people were still, but I was not. Over several days I timed my own steady breathing, six breaths a minute. Then I quit using my watch and began counting twelve breaths on my fingers as I prayed the Jesus Prayer to my breathing.

Like the congregation, I continued to cough or stir in my seat, but I quit worrying about it. Often my mind wandered. Sometimes I got bored or impatient, but my doing-and-not-doing felt good alongside whatever the other people were doing-and-not-doing. Occasionally silence felt healing or surprising, joyful or full of longing.

In 1976 I became rector of a small parish in Idaho. Among many other changes, I introduced liturgical silences after the readings. The Sunday our bishop visited he cautioned me, "speaking as an old radio man," that silence in liturgy was nothing but "dead air time" that would drive people away. Over the following weeks, I asked various parishioners how they found our silences. People who disliked the new Prayer Book AND my preaching AND

children receiving communion thanked me for the silences. One woman told me that she used the silence to say the Lord's Prayer to herself, "IN THE OLD WORDS!"

In 1979 I was invited to design and lead liturgies for a conference of Episcopal Christian educators in the Pacific Northwest. I was excited for the opportunity to work with people who would be adventurous enough to try things like unaccompanied singing, congregational dance, and shared silence. In his opening address, John Westerhoff, our keynote speaker, said educators must learn that, "We act ourselves into ways of thinking, we don't think ourselves into ways of acting." Perfect, I thought. What better encouragement for our conference liturgies? And people did try things. The liturgies went well.

In the final meeting of our leadership team, a fellow planner surprised me when he commented, "I know you meant well, but those dreadful silences in your liturgies only perpetuate clericalism. Don't you see? It's the old church at its worst: Father knows best all over again. We just wait quietly watching you and wondering how long before you let us go on." He explained that a real leader would announce the purpose of the silence and the exact length of the silence, something like, "Now we will keep a two-minute liturgical silence. Please use that time to reflect on the scripture reading we just heard." Thinking about his response to the silence and his proposed solution through twenty-some more years of liturgical silences, I have found the questions he raises about restlessness and control quite useful, though I come to different conclusions.

Silence demands that we let go of control. Our way through silence is to be still as we can and allow the silence to shape itself. People's restlessness, coughing, and each random noise from a baby's cry, a passing bus, or airplane overhead stirs others' restlessness. If most of the people in the group are new to silence, it's easy to feel the questions, "Should we stop?" or "Are we done?"

Because silence is fragile, we count on a leader to protect its beginning and ending. With the beginning and ending out of our hands, we can follow the silence through whatever impatience and distractions may come up and let silence strip from all of us our powers



*The silence after our readings and our preaching is for letting those gasps of astonishment simmer awhile on the low flame of our deeper consciousness. In silence this whole community is present with the echoing of the text in our hearts. When someone speaks, something shifts, and the fecund potentiality of all that memory, all that human suffering and questioning and longing, focused on a few verses of scripture, is "fleshed" in the limited, particular experience of Parishioner Jane.*

*Daniel Green*



## PREACHING AT ST. GREGORY'S

*Continued from page 3*

of knowing (or figuring out) what to do next. But the leader who has marked the beginning and will mark the ending cannot shape, force, or lead the silence. Leading is only holding the boundaries and trying to keep still like everyone else. Even the leader must rest or at least wait with the group in or through the silence. Between its marked beginning and ending, liturgical silence belongs equally to all. Or perhaps all belong equally to the silence as it claims us.

Through the first part of a St. Gregory's liturgy, between readings and after the sermon, we share a total of six minutes of silence together. We have learned to mark the beginning and ending simply and explicitly. Our cantor strikes one or more large Japanese meditation bells the moment the reading ends. Our silence begins in the bell's decaying ring. Newcomers rest into the group's practiced ease in the silence. After two minutes the presider strikes a small Tibetan bell, its pure high ringing marks the ending.

This carefully framed (clear but not interpretive) invitation into silence's unpredictability matches other invitations and shared actions throughout St. Gregory's liturgy. Inviting our numerous visitors and regular members to sing together without accompaniment, to walk together in informal procession of the whole congregation, to speak up after the sermon, to touch the Gospel book, to place a hand on someone's shoulder as we dance to the altar table, or to dance the final hymn, creates more such unpredictable moments. We have scripted and planned our deacons' words of invitation and instruction to create a level of clarity and safety that invites people's patience with letting go of predictable comfort and controlling certainties to risk something together.

So silence is a shared act that moves preacher and congregation toward new trust and more surprising relationship. After silence, unexpected and powerful words may come forth like God's creative Word at the beginning of Genesis. Silence moves us into Genesis' chaotic, frightening darkness, the expectant place where creation takes place. In Genesis God speaks a word that opens silence to possibility. Light bursts out and worlds spin into being.

In a moment of speech after silence great beauty and huge suffering become possible. As a word resonates in silence, life meets and embraces both beauty and suffering, and love hints its unspoken presence in both. With silence still near us we may feel or catch a scent of the vast love beneath everything. In the end

we face another silence — death — and sometimes near a death, we also hear the silent presence of love.

## II: LEARNING TO PREACH IS LEARNING TO LISTEN

Structured liturgical silences create a context for speaking while still listening. The power of such speech, formed by silence we have shared, rests in listening and responsiveness more than in utterance. Structured liturgical silences prepare us to welcome not just unscripted words, but also unscripted holy moments when the preacher or the person sharing pauses in silence for a moment of not knowing what's next, waiting in self-forgetfulness to hear their own next words or other people's encouraging, unspoken questions. Preaching lives and gives life when it is a practice of listening. This discovery was slow for me because I thought I had so much to say.

In three years of seminary I managed to avoid taking any preaching course. I came to seminary feeling wholly ready to preach. Preaching, I was convinced, was not something to study, but charismatic, archetypal, mythic, in the blood. A preacher was anointed or not. I believed I was anointed and imagined I had nothing to learn. For a preacher who had the gift, words, message, and delivery were already in place. All I lacked was a congregation to preach to.

My first shot at one came in the summer of 1969 right after my first year of seminary. I was preaching at the Presbyterian church where I had grown up, preaching from a carefully crafted manuscript, "delivering" the sermon. I don't remember it and don't know that any of my hearers did either.

A few days later, while I was visiting my Uncle Ted in a nursing home where he lay dying of cancer, he asked me to read the sermon to him. Ted was my heroic great-uncle by marriage, an engineer and lay missionary who had spent most of his life in the French Cameroon in Africa, founding a trade school, building huge churches, and preaching in them without any amplification. He had faced death threats from the colonial authorities and had suffered grave personal losses over forty years. Now he was old and hurting and frightened as I would never have imagined him.

I started to read by his bedside. He took my hand and squeezed hard as I continued. His palpable fear almost overwhelmed me, but I finished the sermon. Ted was quiet for a bit. Then he asked me if I'd written it all myself. I told him I had. "Praise God," he said. Hearing and feeling Ted's deep fear gave me a freedom to hear others' fears many times since. Hearing

*Yesterday I was at  
church and I found  
almost everything said and  
everyone saying it, off,  
obnoxious, obfuscating. That  
was a pretty good day. At  
least I noticed a pattern  
(hard to miss, when it is  
everyone!) I realized that  
there was something wrong  
with me and resolved to  
take the day off as much as  
possible. Community, in the  
best sense, then, is what we  
apprehend as we forgive  
ourselves and others, even as  
we love God AS we love our  
neighbors more and more.  
Or something like that. As  
long as there is room for  
crankiness, I can buy it.*

*Lee Thorn*

and feeling how Ted welcomed and enlarged my naive, confident words and brought life to them by his hearing is what I hope to remember until I lie dying myself.

Senior year I entered the competition for the preaching prize in complete confidence that I would win. I knew how to write a sermon. So, I wrote a Lenten sermon on the Genesis story of Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac and the Gospel of Mark's description of the Spirit driving Jesus into the wilderness after baptism. I was proud of my text with its dense poetic paradoxes and the mystical refrain, "God wills himself to die in us." I was one of two finalists. My opponent climbed the pulpit first, preaching to me and our teachers from 15 steps above us. I listened with the fierce confidence that I would win. But as I climbed the steep steps to the pulpit, my knees were shaking badly, and they continued shaking as I struggled to read the text, hardly even looking up. I did not win. Later one of the contest judges, a favorite professor, told me that they had liked my written text but had feared it would be unpreachable. They were right.

In 1972, when I went to work as Rick Fabian's assistant at the Episcopal Church at Yale, I was still delivering sermons from a complete manuscript. Writing one took me about ten hours of careful preparation, drafting, and rewriting. I had consciously given up writing fiction or poetry to save my creative energy for crafting sermons. At Yale, Rick preached sitting, just as we do at St. Gregory's, with people facing one another to the preacher's right and left, choir-style, and he preached without a manuscript or notes. He asked me to do the same. I liked sitting to preach, but was very reluctant to sacrifice my finely shaped phrases and simply speak into the people's listening. Rick insisted I try, so I began distilling my finished texts into "notes and quotes" that filled both sides of a 4x6 index card. Gradually I got my notes down to both sides of a 3x5 card, and then to one side of a 3x5. Finally I had only my quotations on the card.

My literate quotations from Dostoyevsky, Simone Weil, and William Blake didn't impress Rick. All he seemed to hear was that I read the Bible as though everything in it were newsreel and eyewitness reporting. I wasn't particularly attached to literalism, but I had taken no Gospel criticism courses in seminary, thinking that such courses, like preaching, were something I didn't need. So my introductory Gospel criticism course was two years of listening and

learning from Rick's preaching ease in identifying what Jesus probably did and didn't say. My intermediate course began when I finally asked him to recommend some books that I could read so we could talk about critical skepticism and lively faith.

After four years I left Yale to lead a small-town church in Idaho. My first couple of Sundays in a pulpit, I felt trapped in that odd little fortress that hid from sight the preacher's heart and everything below it. I started preaching from the center aisle of the church, where I could hear and see and feel the people. People who liked it said my pacing and turning to face particular people gave the sermon a life that they valued. I got one of the best compliments I've ever received as a preacher, when a parishioner told me that though my predecessor was a

much better preacher than I was and had preached beautifully, she liked my sermons because she understood them. She'd never understood a word of his.

Coming to St. Gregory's in 1980, I found it hard to re-adjust to preaching from a chair. After pacing as I spoke, sitting felt confined. Hearing myself preach, I heard sermons that were constrained and heady. Partly it was a president's chair that I found quite uncomfortable. After about a year, we found a new preacher's chair

that Rick and I both liked (our Thai howdah). Its height felt much better to me than the old chair's and I discovered to my great relief that when I felt more at home in my body, life and energy returned to my preaching. In a more comfortable, lively posture, my words and voice seemed to come from closer to my body's center. A more natural physical presence allowed me to preach more personally, and a greater freedom brought deeper ease with uncertainty and with listening. I found a new freedom to stop speaking for a moment and listen to the congregation and to the silence to find the next words.

### III: SHARING

When we participate in a listening silence our speech becomes a sharing between preacher and congregation. When I arrived at St. Gregory's, what we call "sermon sharing" was already the norm, though it wasn't clear yet what it would become. From 1978 to 1980 Rick and our tiny congregation struggled through such predictable pitfalls as people attempting discussions of theology, arguing

*When people stand up at church to share their stories, I feel I am holding them like I would one of my children, on my lap as they tell me something really important. I come to church longing for that moment when I am holding either the preacher or the sermon-sharer in my lap, looking into his or her eyes and listening closely for something powerful, a story that makes my blood course with the sweetness and sorrow of this life—then I am holding Jesus.*

*Tracy Haughton*

## PREACHING AT ST. GREGORY'S

*Continued from page 5*

points of scriptural interpretation, and helping and comforting other people who had shared. We were still looking for something.

Then one Sunday Mark Oldstrom, a member who was also a priest in training as a hospital chaplain, preached a heart-rending sermon like none of us had heard before.

When I wrote Mark recently he supplied his own recollection of that startling sermon from twenty years ago:

"I had always been told that my father and my mother had been married, and that he had suddenly died of a heart attack a few months before my birth.

Then in Clinical Pastoral Education (the chaplaincy training program) I began to grieve the loss of never having had a father. My search at first was to learn more about him. As I pursued that, my mother resisted my efforts and then finally, just days before I preached that sermon, she revealed that my father had broken off their relationship after learning my mother was pregnant with me — and that I was born out of wedlock."

As I recall, Mark also told us how, as a kid, he comforted himself by thinking that Jesus too had grown up without a father. Mark described that constant obsessive imagining of what his father had been like. Through all this, no matter what he imagined him to be, his longing to know that father wouldn't go away. He concluded the sermon with an abrupt announcement of his commitment to find his father, promising to keep at it until he either succeeded or concluded there was no hope of finding his father. If he could conclude there was no hope, he would let it go.

Our sermon sharing that Sunday was electric. All of our own uncertainties hung in the air, and no one dared offer an easy out. No one tried to help Mark feel better or take a more reasonable course. No one promised Mark that he would certainly find his father. Instead people shared difficult stories of great personal hopes and longings. Some described moving forward through fear. Others told of choices they were still living out. Some talked personally and specifically about risking and experiencing huge disappointments. It was the first time I remembered seeing tears at St. Gregory's. Our love and our prayers for Mark were palpable. We knew that something holy had happened among us. The next day Bob Shearer, another clergy volunteer at St. Gregory's, called Rick and me and said, "You heard the sharings. What Mark did yesterday is what St. Gregory's preachers will have to do to

make this work. What if all of us preachers agree to include some unfinished personal sharing in our sermons?" We decided to try it.

Rick shaped Bob's proposal, adding that St. Gregory's sermons would begin with critical commentary on scripture (the ongoing work of freeing the Bible from red-letter "Jesus said it so it must be true" literalism). After unshackling the text, we'd look for an immediate, living question that we heard in the particular scripture, and then tell an open-ended personal story that struggled with the same question.

Mark's sermon transformed our preaching as well as our sermon sharing. We began from our experiences of uncertainty and not-knowing. We had entered territory where conclusions were premature because God was at work. Preaching with the questions and from experience wouldn't take us to a settled conclusion.

What we began to leave behind was a more conventional use of experience to "illustrate a point." I'd call that preaching "with" experience, finding an experience that can guide people to the preacher's concluding point or principle. Preaching "with" experience begins at the conclusion and looks for its illustration. When we really preach in or from experience, our lives (and the scripture) begin to break free of our need to interpret and to control by interpretation. Sermons (and the sharing after them) become alive and unfinished.

Hearing the ambiguity in the Bible, hearing even the earliest Christians struggling and arguing to make sense of Jesus, and hearing the preacher's open-ended personal sharing of experience invite people into a dynamic present beyond the settled comfort of an interpretative conclusion.

The pattern and process we developed from Mark's sermon continues every Sunday at St. Gregory's in our 10 a.m. service. The preacher offers a critical exploration of Scripture and an open-ended personal story that parallels a question in the text. We sit together in another silence. Then people from the congregation share their own open-ended experience. In all this we listen for God present in our joys and our suffering, our choices and our surprises, our uncertainties.

As a teacher Jesus used everyday experience, apparently preferring to teach from experience instead of quoting scripture, making logical argument, or invoking official authorities in witness. His parables and sayings pushed people to consider what they actually did and felt in particular circumstances. Consider the ordinariness of these two instances: "If someone keeps banging on your door in the middle of the night, do you ignore them?" or "What parent among you would give your child a scorpion or a rock if they asked you for bread?"



### SILENCE ASCENDING II

*Handmade paper sculpture  
by Martha Chatelaine, ©1995.  
Martha's sculptures reflect her  
reverence for creation and invite  
the viewer to travel through the  
surface into realms of memory  
and imagination.*



Jesus our teacher asked his listeners to cut through what they had been taught, what they had figured out, and all their careful doctrinal constructs and formulations to meet God in the wildness and immediacy of life. Preaching at St. Gregory's we follow our teacher's pattern. We are not telling one another how to look at life or how to think about the hidden or underlying truth that seemingly contradicts our life. We ask each other to listen to our lives as they are — and feel, see, hear, intuit, and move our way to God's dynamic presence.

The things we do following Jesus mark our assembly as Christian, whatever opinions, interpretation, and even experience we bring to that assembly. These core practices — hearing Jesus' teaching and sharing his feast, imitating his work of teaching and creating his welcome to the messianic feast where all are welcome — are enough. In them God acts among us. ☸

*Donald Schell is rector of St. Gregory's Church and a fellow of the College of Preachers in Washington, D.C.*

## COMPLETING THE SERMON

by Leesy Taggart

*"We share the work of preaching at St. Gregory's."*

These words are as familiar a part of our liturgy as the Sanctus or the Lord's Prayer. The preacher ends his or her sermon. The cantor signals silence by striking Buddhist meditation bells. As the reverberation dies, the congregation settles into two minutes of deep quiet. The preacher calls us out of the silence with the clear tone of a Tibetan bell, then invites our spoken experience to complete what she or he has just said. "God speaks in our experiences, and also in the silences between our sharing." Sometimes several hands shoot up for recognition. Sometimes we continue to sit in silence. Waiting.

I don't know what draws the preacher to recognize a particular person, but urgency probably has something to do with it. There have been times when an experience of mine that is touched by the sermon is as insistent as childbirth. Visitors speak often, and with a power that sometimes makes it hard to remember that sermon sharing isn't standard practice in most churches. Sometimes "frequent sharers" are asked to hold back, even if the result is a very long silence.

Where the words come from, I also don't know. Perhaps they are drawn from the silence. Certainly, there are glib or seemingly composed responses, but for the most part, the words and the experiences arise from deep within, drawn from the real, the not-yet-finished, the still-vulnerable. Some experiences point clearly to God at work, a moment of graced seeing, finding the face of Jesus in another person. Other experiences hold up a pain and a glimmer, or simply a hope, that God might be present there.

Recently a woman in her early twenties stood up to speak in tears. I don't recall the specifics of her experience, but she ended by saying that when she shares, it is not to ask for help or a solution, but simply to be heard. There are words and experiences that must be offered, and that must be held with love in the listening.

Another Sunday, an older woman stood to share. She had worshiped with us for several weeks while on a family visit from Venezuela. As she started to speak in Spanish, her son translated for us. Soon, though, what poured from her heart could not stop for his translation. So we listened to her heart from our hearts. Later, I asked her to write what she had wanted us to hear. Some of her words are included in the reflections that appear throughout this issue.

While the preacher might say a word or two in response, most often he or she simply says "thank you" and waits for another experience to be offered. At the end, no matter what has come before, the whole sermon — given by preacher, five or six worshipers who share an experience, and all of us who sit and hold them in our silence — ends with the congregation singing Alleluias. ☸

*Throughout this issue are reflections on the silence and sermon sharing from people who worship at St. Gregory's.*

*Leesy Taggart has been a member of St. Gregory's Church for fifteen years, where she has taught courses and served on the vestry. Formerly a banker, she now balances her life between parenting and managing investments.*

*Esa conexión tan maravillosa que he logrado con la gente, aun cuando no hay un lenguaje común para lograr lo que comúnmente se llama comunicación, se debe justamente, a que en esta iglesia se inicia el culto dándole la primera oportunidad a Dios. Las palabras pronunciadas o las palabras oídas, para que lleven el mismo mensaje, tienen que percibirse en silencio. El sermón, que puede hacerse entendible a la vez en todos los idiomas, es el "Silencio" mensajero de la voz de Dios.*

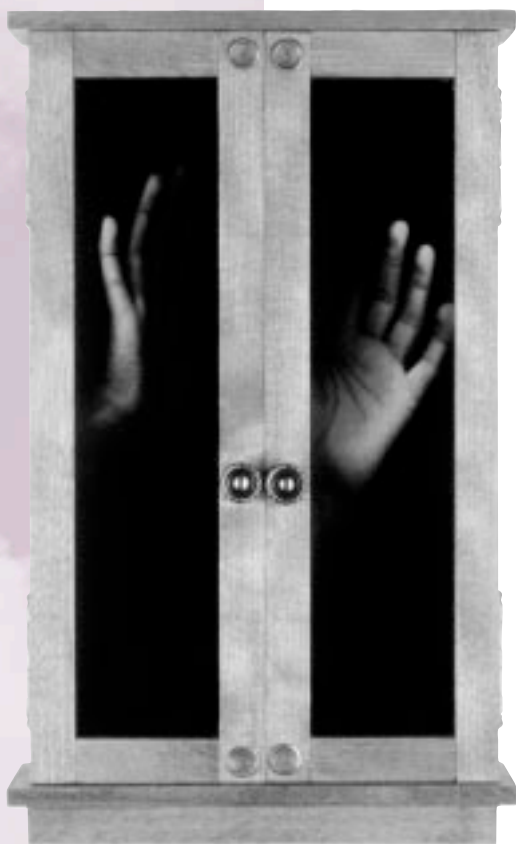
*Translation: This marvelous connection that I have been able to make with the people, even though there is no common language for what we usually call communication, was possible because in this church the sermon starts by giving God the first turn to speak. Spoken words or listened words must be perceived in silence. The only sermon that can be understood in all languages at once is "Silence," the messenger for God's voice.*

*Margarita Redonet viuda de Fernandez, translated by Jose Alberto Fernandez*

# BARE FEET AND EMPTY HANDS: PREACHING WITH THE BODY, MIND, AND SPIRIT

by M. R. Ritley

FOR YEARS I PREACHED WITH MY SNEAKERS  
PEEKING OUT BELOW THE COLORFUL  
VESTMENTS WE WEAR AT ST. GREGORY OF NYSSA.  
APPARENTLY I WAS QUITE A SOURCE OF  
AMUSEMENT TO SOME MEMBERS AND VISITORS.



**TRIPTYCH  
(TO BE OPENED  
ON THE LAST DAY)**

*Triptych: oil on panel, by  
Michael Schrauzer, ©1990.*

Well, wait till they see me now. I have gone back to my past, reverted to the world of Islamic mysticism that nurtured me for almost two decades before I became an Episcopal priest, and have begun to preach and preside barefoot. Now my praying toes no longer have to make themselves heard through socks and rubber soles. The truth is, I have been wanting to do this for years, wondering how real I could be, how true to myself, when I had shoes on.

During my years as a student of the Hanafiyya way, a way similar to classical Sufi schools, I simply conformed to the custom of studying, teaching, and preaching shoeless, usually sitting on the floor along with everybody else, and certainly not pretending to be thundering the Law down the crags of Sinai. But it was more than simple custom. It pointed to a profound truth, a truth I recognized at St. Gregory's from the first time I worshiped there. It has to do with turning the Word loose to speak for itself, trusting that it will sooner or later make itself heard when people listen to each other.

The sixteenth-century Christian Reformers tried to give the Word a more central place by changing first the shape of worship and eventually the shape of the churches themselves. They set the Word (in the form of reading and sermons) at the center of worship. The pulpit was moved to the center of the church and raised ever higher — in many places the preacher had to climb a flight of stairs to get there.

It made the point, of course: without speakers or lapel mikes, the preacher could be heard throughout the church, and there was no doubt in people's minds as to the main show. The unfortunate thing was the other message it delivered. Standing up there in the lofty pulpit, the preacher did look a lot like someone who was thundering the word down from Sinai, while the parishioners huddled miserably at his feet, necks craned up to hear the Awful (and sometimes Awful) Word.

From time to time I've preached in churches with those pulpits, and it's always unnerving. I find myself feeling that I must thunder forth words worthy of Moses, Martin Luther, or, at the very least, Father Mapple in *Moby Dick*. And I'm convinced that everybody, preacher and congregation alike, goes away with a crick in the neck. Preaching has never really recovered from these sixteenth-century innovations. The very word "preach" evokes the worst of fire-and-brimstone sermons. Think of Jonathan Edwards' "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," with its morbid Puritan excess. Think of authority figures in your early life "preaching" to you about misdeeds. I say that looking look up at the preacher inevitably reduces listeners to the status of children hearing the adult "lay down the law."

At St. Gregory's, there is no pulpit at all. The preacher sits in the midst of the people, holding the Gospel book in her lap. Nothing — no furniture, no pulpit, no modesty panel, no barrier — separates her from the eyes, the faces, the bodies, the lively presence of the listening congregation.

It is the pattern Jesus himself would have recognized. In the New Testament, whenever Jesus sits down, it is a signal to those around him that he is about to begin teaching. They, too, sit down around him to listen. This is precisely the way in which teaching and learning are carried out in the living spiritual teaching traditions of the Middle East today: the group gathers together, sits down together, learns together.

In this setting, the speaker, or teacher, or preacher, is not separated from or elevated above the others. The only authority implied in this setting is the authenticity of God's presence in the learning



group (and yes, both “authority” and “authenticity” come from the same word, the Latin “auctor,” which means author or creator). The preacher, in that sense, is simply one of the learning community, chosen perhaps for her gift of articulating their common experiences or more simply because she is obviously in love with the very act of learning. The preacher is not God’s Holy Mouthpiece, but God’s Remedial Learner, who knows he or she has to keep going back over and over the lesson.

All this is doubly articulated in the fact that, at St. Gregory’s, once the preacher has finished speaking, it is time for others to speak. During what we call the Sermon Sharing, the people of the congregation are invited to stand and share their own experiences stirred up by the sermon or the lesson. Whatever the preacher has said is by no means final: equally important is what happens in the hearts, minds, and actions of the listeners, when the Word connects with their lived lives. When preaching is practiced in this way, every listener is a fellow preacher.

So what indeed is this peculiar form of speech called the Sunday sermon? If we are not thundering God’s own revealed and unalterable truth, what exactly is it that we try to do in preaching? Some images come to mind.

**TUGGING AT THREADS.** I think, for instance, of the day in tenth grade when I found a loose thread dangling from my sleeve and gave a good yank to pull it off — only to watch in horror as my cheap, machine-knit sweater unraveled halfway up to the elbow, much to the hilarity of Pat McCloskey, who sat next to me. That, I say, is what preaching is like. You find an interesting thread in the lessons, and give it the merest tug, only to find most of your carefully thought-out sermon unraveling merrily (and sometimes publicly) in your hands. You never know what’s going to happen when you start noticing those little threads.

**GETTING NAKED.** There is another, even less dignified image, suggested to me years ago by a preacher I much admired, which is the vulnerability of being naked. I cannot invite my listeners to make themselves vulnerable to the life of the Word unless I first demonstrate the act. When David danced naked before the Lord, it humiliated his poor wife, who after all was trying to protect her queenly dignity. The preacher who dares to get naked risks embarrassing some and angering others, in order to lead the way so that all the congregation can feel free to come to God, as Julian of Norwich said, “nakedly and pleylnly and homely.” To the extent that I can give up my “queenly dignity” and pretense, I demonstrate a life lived openly before God.

## **PULLING RABBITS OUT OF HATS.**

I recall a passage in one of my favorite Harry Potter books (a resource no preacher should be without), in which Harry goes into a shop to buy an owl. Sitting on the counter, the narration goes, “a fat white rabbit kept changing into a silk top hat and back again with a loud popping noise.” Often, the preacher wrestles clumsily with a gospel reading that simply refuses to keep its shape, and keeps passing into all kinds of new directions while she tries to cram it back into the box Preaching sometimes feels like slight of hand, the preacher sitting there as astonished as the congregation, wondering, “Now how on earth did I do that?” I will refrain from mentioning the times where the preacher thinks she is on the verge of giving the masterful poof! only to have the rabbit refuse to appear.

**THE OBSTINATE LIFE.** The Word, in other words, has an obstinate life of its own, which we invite into the preaching process at our peril. By turns it will bemuse us, bewilder us, and dazzle us. But beyond all it will remind us that we are never really in control. I don’t mean, by the way, that we don’t prepare as best we can, that we don’t keep studying, reading, learning, and honing our skills. But all of these are secondary. The ultimate skill the preacher possesses is the willingness to be naked, pervious, unarmed, and undefended, ready to let her old understanding unravel in plain sight of others in the hope that they will find the process so engaging that they, too, will let their tidily constructed worlds disintegrate a bit in order to give God room.

**THE BAREFOOT PREACHER.** Preaching at St. Gregory’s barefoot and empty-handed is a way of reminding myself, over and over, that I am simply one more member of the community, confronted with the task of making sense of life, of God, of my own self. I cannot pretend to be the expert with the answers; I am only one more person who has asked the questions. All I can do is model what it’s like to live in the midst of the questions, now wrestling nose-to-nose with an unlikely parable, now lighting up from inside with one of those dazzling flares of insight that ignite when least expected, now simply listening, listening from the very bottom of my bare feet to hear those softest of soft voices in which God sometimes speaks. ☉

*M.R. Ritley is a priest associate at St. Gregory’s Church where, in addition to preaching and presiding at liturgy, she frequently teaches from her previous training and experience as a master teacher in the Sufi Hanafiyya tradition.*

*I listen to the readings and sermon and hear the voice of God. I then feel an overwhelming compulsion to share something way too friggin’ personal with the entire church. After I have spoken, I am washed over with shame for having such a big mouth. Inevitably, the hallelujahs and the dancing restore me to some sense of equilibrium. Then the astonishing part happens. Without fail, someone will walk up to me at coffee hour and tell me that my experience has prompted them to think of an experience of their own. People’s sharing of tremendously personal things with me on these occasions has healed shame that nothing ever touched before. Remarkably, the worse I feel about opening my mouth to share, the more intense the response from that person will be.*

*Maitreya Badami*

## JESUIT GUEST PREACHER ON STAFF

by John Baldovin

FROM 1984, WHEN I ARRIVED TO TEACH AT THE JESUIT SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AT BERKELEY, UNTIL LAST YEAR WHEN I MOVED TO CAMBRIDGE, I WAS INVITED ONCE OR TWICE A SEMESTER TO PREACH AT ST. GREGORY'S. RICK FABIAN ONCE TOLD ME THAT I SHOULD CONSIDER MYSELF GUEST PREACHER ON STAFF AT ST. GREGORY OF NYSSA CHURCH.



*When I have an experience that brings me closer to an awareness of God, I have an actual physical reaction to it. Most often I recognize it as a rush of energy down to the pit of my stomach and a feeling of warmth. Something has come in and filled me with a kind of nourishment that I want to hug to myself and treasure. Other times I feel a release of muscle tension, an opening up of some stuck place inside me, sometimes a place that I don't even know is tight.*

Tonia MacNeil

I took this oxymoron as a lovely compliment since it seemed to mean that I belonged or fit in — even as a Roman Catholic Jesuit. I'm gratified not only by the number of times I was asked to preach — but the occasions: Rick's ordination anniversary (twentieth, I think), the patronal feast of St. Gregory, a baptism, Good Friday vespers. The last stands out particularly because I'd been caught forever in Bay Bridge traffic and rushed in well after the liturgy had begun. Preaching on the patronal feast was also a challenge. It pushed me to read Gregory's *Commentary on the Song of Songs* and his *Life of Moses* so that I could understand the fresco on the wall of the apse depicting God the Mother presiding over the nuptials of Christ and the soul.

Preaching is certainly one of the fascinating and intriguing aspects of the liturgical life of St. Gregory's. In my twenty-five years of preaching, I have always enjoyed having a literate and well-educated assembly to share my interpretation of the Gospel. St. Gregory's fits that description, with a great twist. Normally you have to wait until the end of the liturgy to have a sense that what you said is what was heard. But at St. Gregory's I have a good idea of what I have just said from the "rest of the sermon." For a long time homiletic theorists have lamented the absence of dialogue in homilies and sermons. At St. Gregory's the sermon is literally not complete until the people who have listened to the preacher can have their say.

I must add that the seconds after I have finished preaching and before someone stands up to share his or her experience are filled with dread: "What if they don't like what I said?" Or worse, "What if what I said didn't make a difference to anyone?" Or, "What if just an embarrassing and dead silence follows?" As you can imagine, to the preacher — at least to this preacher — those few seconds before someone stands up seem like eternity.

One thing a preacher learns rather quickly is that what you think you said is not always what is heard. For me the hardest part of having others complete the sermon is keeping myself from saying: "Yes, but that's not what I meant." I can now better understand what modern literary theorists mean when they say a text has a life of its own. Once I have given it, in a very real sense my sermon is no longer my own — and its meaning is not related exclusively to my intentions.

At St. Gregory's, in order not to turn the "completion" portion of the sermon into an intellectual debate, the assembled are invited to respond to the sermon and/or the readings from their experience, not theoretically. Though I do remember once being challenged by one of the "completers" on something I had said in a sermon. It was an uncomfortable moment, but on reflection I am grateful for it since it afforded me the opportunity to realize that as a preacher I really don't have the last word. I can be wrong about my interpretation of God's word. Or to put it somewhat more mildly, no matter how convinced I am by what I am saying, I have a limited point of view.

Experience is tricky to preach. The challenge is relating to real life without succumbing to the temptation to make myself the center or the paradigm of the gospel. I regard it as a temptation to make myself the center of preaching. Perhaps I am hypersensitive to this since I have heard so many preachers talk about themselves in self-serving ways.

I guess I'd put it this way — all preaching must come from our experience, but is not necessarily about our experience. And, if I do use my own experience, I need to be careful about not making myself paradigmatic. If there's a weakness in the sermon event at St. Gregory's it's that at times people make it an opportunity to pat themselves on the back. That said, I would rather run the risk of having people do that than do away with the relational aspect of the sermon.

Since sermons at St. Gregory's are a dialogue, I think (and now I am speaking not only as a preacher but as an occasional member of the assembled) that the sermon becomes more real, more engaging. Preaching in the African-American tradition achieves that by response throughout the sermon. St. Gregory's achieves that by sharing reflection on experience.

I have been dealing mostly with the form of preaching at St. Gregory's and my own personal reaction to the form as an event, but now I turn to the content of my preaching there. A number of years ago a friend in the congregation said that he found my occasional sermons to be more Jesus-centered than the usual preaching at St. Gregory's. He regarded this as a particularly Roman Catholic approach. And I take the comment as a compliment. I do find the center of the gospel in the person of Jesus — as the embodiment of the reign of God that Jesus preached — just as I find the center of our worship in the living Christ into whose body we are being formed by our participation in his life, death, and resurrection.

I find that having changed coasts I miss preaching at St. Gregory's almost as much as I miss participating there on a semi-regular basis. If I have been able to give something to the assembled there, it pales in comparison with what I have received. Come to think of it, give and take is not a bad image for the Christian life. ☸

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### WALL OF BREATH

*Triptych: encaustic, steel, and 23K gold, ©1999, by Erica Grimm Vance of Vancouver, Canada. For more information, visit [www.civa.org/gallery/civa\\_seen/grimmvance.html](http://www.civa.org/gallery/civa_seen/grimmvance.html)*

**GREGORY OF NYSSA**, a fourth-century bishop, theologian, and patron of St. Gregory's Church, saw life as unending progress towards discovering God at work among humanity, and sin as refusal to keep growing in this discovery. In this journal, which takes its name from his writings, we aim to further Gregory's vision by featuring two kinds of work:

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NOT TO AVOID A  
WICKED LIFE  
BECAUSE WE FEAR  
PUNISHMENT,  
LIKE SLAVES; NOT  
TO DO GOOD  
BECAUSE WE EXPECT  
REPAYMENT, AS IF  
CASHING IN ON THE  
VIRTUOUS LIFE BY  
ENFORCING SOME  
BUSINESS DEAL.  
ON THE CONTRARY,  
DISREGARDING ALL  
THOSE GOOD THINGS  
WHICH WE DO HOPE  
FOR AND WHICH  
GOD HAS PROMISED  
US, WE REGARD  
FALLING FROM  
GOD'S FRIENDSHIP  
AS THE ONLY THING  
DREADFUL, AND WE  
CONSIDER BECOMING  
GOD'S FRIEND THE  
ONLY THING TRULY  
WORTHWHILE.**

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### A NOTE FROM THE ISSUE EDITOR

This issue of *God's Friends* was born from six weeks' writing at the College of Preachers in Washington, D.C. I want to thank Erica Wood (warden of the College) and Judith Gooch and Duncan Newcomer (resident fellows with me), whose questions there helped shape the project. Two more years of preaching and many other conversations carried it forward.

Mary Grove, Margaret Lukens, and Leesy Taggart read all I had written in Washington, offered their experience of our preaching and sermon sharing, and also gathered what others at St. Gregory's said about preaching's power to touch, convert, form and make us Christian. When I was past deadline, and obviously up to my neck with guest-editing this issue and writing the lead article, Tracy Haughton mobilized our editorial board to the specific tasks they all do so well: article-editing, issue composition, design, and proofing. Seeing the possibilities of this issue, all board members gave generously of their time and skill. I extend to Dave Hurlbert special thanks for chiseling my unshapely lead article down from twenty-three pages to the stronger, clearer article we present here. Dave offered me (and you, the reader) a gift of love.

Everyone who helped create this issue was moved by the power of our best preaching and listening. We hope our discoveries will enrich your own experience of preaching, hearing, and listening for God at work in your own life.

—Donald Schell

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