

Preaching to the Heart and Mind: A Sermon-Writing Workshop for All of Us

Rev. Laura Horton-Ludwig
Minister, First Unitarian Universalist Church of Stockton
Email: minister@stocktonuu.org
Church tel: 209-466-7743
Church website: www.stocktonuu.org
My sermon blog: drinkfromthestream.blogspot.com

A word of introduction: I created this class to support lay preaching in my congregation, motivated partly by budget cuts in our congregation which have limited our ability to bring in paid guest preachers, and also, more deeply, by a felt desire among laypeople to be able to lead meaningful worship themselves as a way to share their creativity and spirituality with others. I taught the class over four weeks in August 2010. Eight energetic, committed students signed up, and it was an absolute joy to work with them. I thank them all for everything they taught me about how to teach this craft of preaching.

Textbook: *Thematic Preaching: An Introduction*, by Jane Rzepka and Ken Sawyer (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2001)

Space needs: The workshop should be held in a space that can accommodate the large group all together as well as room for small groups to spread out occasionally. You will also want access to your worship space for Sessions 3 and 4.

Think about accessibility needs for your group too. Are there mobility needs to be accommodated? Hearing issues?

Supplies needed for each session:

- Chalice & matches
- Copies of the syllabus
- Nametags & marker
- Sign-in sheet and pen
- Extra paper & pens for participants
- Flip chart & markers

One week prior to first session: contact participants and remind them to bring their copy of *Thematic Preaching*, plus pen & paper, to the first class.

Session I: August 9, 2010

Welcome and introductions (10 min)

Ask participants to sign in and make nametags as they arrive.
Begin with chalice-lighting and opening words.

Suggested opening words:

Unlike almost every other thing we do with purpose, worship makes nothing, accomplishes nothing, sells nothing, yields nothing.... Of the 168 hours in a week, we set one aside precisely for this work that is not exactly work, this activity that isn't very active (neither is it passive) and that yields no product—except sometimes a kind of deepening. A shifting of perspective. An interior transformation. A revelation. Sometimes, by luck or grace, we may glimpse something invisible: a sense of reassurance, acceptance, comfort, or peace—whether peace of mind or peacefulness of spirit—sufficient for the hours and days ahead. We may feel gratitude, forgiveness, resolution. We may feel an unwelcome and uneasy challenge to calcified conviction, an unexpected stirring to more concerted courage, or a call for actionable outrage, when outrage is what's needed in the world beyond the self. These feelings are immeasurable, intangible, and yet are not felt by everyone at once. Worship for us is communal and yet essentially private. Who knows how far anyone may travel between the Prelude and the Closing Words?

—Victoria Safford, “Worship,” in Thom Belote, ed., *The Growing Church: Keys to Congregational Vitality* (Skinner House, 2010), pp. 33–34.

Ask participants to go around and say their names, why they chose to participate in this class, what they hope to gain from it.

Thank them for being here! Remind them that attendance is to be taken seriously. Please be here each week, or let the leader know in advance if you can't make it.

Cover logistics as needed: location of restrooms, are snacks permitted, etc.

Pass out syllabus and go over what will be happening each week.

Discussion (30 min)

Lead discussion touching on these topics:

- Memorable sermons—what made them that way?

Invite participants to think back to one sermon that lingers vividly in their memories. Ask them to describe to the full group (or in small groups, if group is over 8 or so) what they remember: what was the sermon about, what was the preacher like, what was the context, what was going on in their life—what made it memorable?

- What is a sermon? How does it differ from other kinds of speeches or writing?

Present this idea:

The purpose of a sermon is to invite people into an experience of transformation, hope, renewal, and connection to the holy, which may inspire them to understand life in a new way and act accordingly.

Sermons are not primarily about conveying information, but rather touching, inspiring, and motivating people. Again, the goal is to help listeners have an experience that changes them! (Note: the preacher can't make this happen—only do their best to create conditions where it *may* happen.)

Ask the group: how does that resonate with your experience of hearing sermons?

Brainstorming sermon topics (10 minutes)

Introduce the idea that *anything* can be the focus of a sermon. In our tradition, all of life is holy; no subject is so secular or trivial that it can't bloom into a sermon. At the same time, some themes are big and timeless—how are we supposed to live? How do we deal with suffering and loss and the necessity of death?

Invite the group to brainstorm sermon topics—first as a group; then, for a few minutes, on their own.

- As a group
- On your own

Fleshing out topics (15 minutes)

With the group, choose 1–2 topics from the brainstorming list and do more brainstorming about examples and stories that could help support the topic. What sub-themes might be developed? Is there research that has to be done?

Brainstorming: what else does the group want to cover? (10 min)

Are there other topics/concerns/questions the group wants to make sure we cover during the class? Brainstorm on flip chart. *If so, figure out how to address as many as possible in later sessions.*

The most urgent question that came up when I taught this class was, what about the rest of the service? How do we find hymns, readings, etc.? You might plan some time to discuss how worship planning happens in your context, and bring a few planning resources to share.

Homework for next time (5 min)

Present homework assignments & take any questions that arise.

1. Read in *Thematic Preaching*:
 - a. Chapter 1: “What Matters in a Sermon?” (pp. 9–14)
 - b. Chapter 3: “Whence Ideas?” (pp. 22–28)
 - c. Chapter 9: “Shaping a Sermon” (pp. 58–67)

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- d.* Chapter 10: “More Than a Message” (pp. 68–75)
2. Spend a few minutes brainstorming sermon ideas and bring notes for two ideas to next week’s class.

Closing (5 min)

Invite people to go around the circle and share one thing that they appreciated or learned during this session, or one thing that didn’t work so well for them.

Thank participants for coming and extinguish the chalice.

Session 2: August 16, 2010

Welcome and opening words (5 min)

Ask participants to sign in and make nametags as they arrive.
Begin with chalice-lighting and opening words.

Suggested opening words:

What should we who dare to assume the role of preacher tell those who have gathered in the pews? What should we say out of the infinite possibilities of the silence? When our fragile and fleeting words finally break that potent stillness which fills the hushed church, will our sermons speak to our listeners' lives...or pass them by?

...Believe whatever else you will about these people who fill the pews, but first believe this: they have come with great expectations. Every Sunday morning, each and every one of them has gone to the elaborate trouble of stumbling out of bed, arranging face and wardrobe, turning aside the temptations of the Sunday papers or a lazy brunch in bed, and has found his or her way to church. They do all this out of the hope, largely unconscious and unspoken, that something of lasting personal significance just might happen to them on Sunday morning.

—Scott Alexander, *The Relational Pulpit* (Boston: Skinner House, 1993), pp. xiv–xv

Check-in (5 min)

Invite participants to go around and say their names and a few words about how the homework went for them—something they enjoyed, or maybe something they would like help with.

Discussion (20 min)

Lead discussion touching on these topics:

- Should I preach from a written text or notes or memory?

Present these ideas: There's no one right answer. Each person has to find what works for them. I always preach from a manuscript, but I also strive to know it well enough that I can improvise here and there too, especially when I'm telling a story. I greatly admire preachers who can speak extemporaneously and well. Remember the goal: communication with the listener, inviting and enabling them to have an experience of transformation and connection with the holy. *However* you can do that best—*however* you can be most present, *however* you can best function as a vessel for creative energy—is how you should preach.

If you choose to preach from a manuscript, it will be vitally important to practice and know it well enough that you're not just reading the words, but communicating them with your voice and face and total presence!

If you choose to preach from notes or memory, it will be vitally important to think through in advance what you want to say, and especially how you will conclude. For more on this, see *Thematic Preaching* chapter 5: "Trusting Instant Inspiration, Words on Paper, or What?"

Ask the group about any previous experiences of public speaking. What styles have worked for them in the past?

- How long should a sermon be?

UU sermons are typically 15–20 minutes, or perhaps 2000–2500 words (that’s the word count that works for me, but each person’s rate of speaking is different).

Ask the group: as listeners, what sermon length do you think is best? Do you start drifting off if it’s too long? Are you left unsatisfied if it’s too short? What makes a sermon work for you? (I’ve heard boring short sermons and thrilling long sermons—it’s not just about length!)

Also mention to the group: though we are focusing on the “classic” sermon form in our tradition, people who preach for children and youth have often found shorter sermons, perhaps broken up into several pieces, work better. Sometimes adults like this better too! It’s OK to be creative about form and length.

Small-group work (30 min)

Each participant should have brought two sermon ideas to share. Now invite participants to form groups of three and take turns sharing their sermon ideas and inviting constructive feedback. No one is required to incorporate others’ ideas about their sermons, but it may be helpful and inspiring to hear them. Each person should have 10 minutes to present their ideas and elicit feedback from the others. The facilitator should ring a bell or verbally announce when it is time to switch.

Here are a couple of possible questions for discussion of each sermon idea (these could be written up on a flip chart or handed out to each group):

- As you hear about this idea, what stories or examples come to mind?
- What questions or different viewpoints about this idea would you want the preacher to address?

Silent reflection (10 min)

Invite participants to take a few minutes to journal/brainstorm/reflect on their sermon ideas in response to the small-group conversations. Which idea has the most “juice” and passion for you right now?

If the class is predominantly extroverted, you might instead invite them to gather in the large group and have each person share a little about their topic.

Q&A (10 min)

Re-gather the full group and invite any questions on preaching that may have arisen.

Homework for next time (5 min)

Present homework assignments & take any questions that arise.

1. Read in *Thematic Preaching*:
 - a. Chapter 7: “Preparing a Sermon” (pp. 46–51)
 - b. Chapter 23: ““Can I Tell the Story about the Time I...”: The Question of Self-Revelation” (pp. 202–207)
 - c. Chapter 12: “Sermon Delivery” (pp. 83–92)
2. Choose one of your sermon topics, sit down, and start writing! For next week’s class, bring at least 500 words or so (if you want to preach from a script) or notes for at least 5 minutes of speaking (if you want to preach from notes or memory).

Closing (5 min)

Invite people to go around the circle and share one thing that they appreciated or learned during this session, or one thing that didn’t work so well for them.

Thank participants for coming and extinguish the chalice.

Session 3: August 23, 2010

Welcome and opening words (5 min)

Ask participants to sign in and make nametags as they arrive.
Begin with chalice-lighting and opening words.

Suggested opening words:

[L]isteners are active participants in preaching, whether vocal or silent in that participation.... Sermons should speak *for* as well as *to* the congregation.... This is in no way even a suggestion that one is to preach what people want to *hear* but rather a declaration that occasionally one should preach what people want to *say*. If a minister takes seriously the role of listeners in preaching, there will be sermons expressing for the whole church...the faith, the doubt, the fear, the anger, the love, the joy, the gratitude that is in all of us. The listeners say, “Yes, that is my message; that is what I have wanted to say.” ...[T]he people say in their hearts, “Yes, that is it; that is our message; that is our faith.”

—Fred Craddock, *Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), pp. 25–27, 44

Check-in (5 min)

Invite participants to go around and say a few words about how the writing process went for them—something they enjoyed, or maybe something they would like help with.

Special issues: self-revelation and confidentiality (10 min)

Lead a discussion on *Thematic Preaching* ch. 23 “Can I Tell the Story about the Time I...?: The Question of Self-Revelation” (pp. 202–207). Invite participants to consider when is it OK to share personal stories about themselves or others. Key considerations:

- Stories about other people: always ask permission. Consider how you would feel if someone else shared something like that about you in public. Assume other people’s stories are confidential unless they give you permission to share them.
- Stories about yourself: consider how you will feel after everyone hears the story you are going to tell. If you wouldn’t feel comfortable seeing it printed in the newspaper or posted on YouTube, don’t tell it.
- The Big Question: Who is being served? Ask yourself why you are telling this story. How will it motivate people to act? Don’t tell it to get *your* needs for care and compassion met, legitimate as those needs are. That is a misuse of the pulpit.

Diversity in the pews (20 min)

Display a flip chart with the following text:

- Someone who has just lost a loved one
- Someone who has been diagnosed with a serious illness
- Someone who is bursting to share wonderful news
- Someone who is visiting a Unitarian Universalist congregation for the first time
- Someone who is of a different faith
- A teenager
- A young adult
- A 90-year-old
- A recent immigrant
- A person of color
- Someone who is gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered
- Someone who is politically conservative
- Someone with a disability
- Someone who hasn't attended college
- Who else?

Introduce this list with a few words about the diversity of people in the pews and the preacher's obligation to consider who may be present on any given Sunday. It's all too easy for us to create sermons for an imaginary congregation of people who are just like us. Yet, for our message to be heard, for a transformative experience to be offered to as many people as possible, we must consider the diversity of people in our congregations.

Invite people to look at this list and consider each of these imaginary people. Lead a discussion touching on these questions:

- What might they need from a sermon?
- How can we use language and story and example to include them and their life experience?

Now invite participants into a few (5?) minutes of silent reflection and journaling on how they might incorporate these learnings into their own sermons.

Sermon delivery (25 min)

If possible, move the group into your sanctuary/worship space for this part. Your sound system, if any, should be turned on. Ask them to bring their sermon text or notes and choose a brief passage (1 or 2 minutes at most) to practice.

In the worship space, review tips for sermon delivery:

- Dealing with stage fright: Breathe. Focus on the message. Remember, it's not about you, it's about your message and creating a chance for others to have an experience that is meaningful and holy. Remember, people are rooting for you—the congregation will be very proud of you and cheering for you all the way!

- Before the service starts: take time to center yourself. Right before you begin to preach, it might help to say to yourself a silent prayer or mantra like “May I be a vessel for creative energy” or “It’s not about me” or “May these words touch others.”
- Dress: wear something that conveys respect for the congregation and the sense of the holy/meaningful you wish to invoke. Business casual at least.
- Make sure your sermon text or notes are big enough for you to read easily from the pulpit.
- Speak loudly enough to be heard. Project to the back of the room. Especially if you tend to speak rapidly, speak slowly and clearly enough to be understood.
- Practice looking up and communicating!
- Notice what you are doing with your hands. Relax your body.
- If there are moments of emotional intensity in your sermon, practice those parts beforehand so that you can understand what emotions may arise within you. If you allow yourself to experience them deeply in practice, you may be less overwhelmed in the moment of actual preaching. If you think you’re going to cry, avoid direct eye contact and breathe deeply.

Invite a few questions on sermon delivery.

Now invite everybody to take turns speaking their sermon excerpts (1–2 minutes each, or adjust as time permits) from the pulpit. If you have a handheld or other moveable microphone, you might invite participants to use that microphone and move around instead if that is their preference. Applaud each person and offer coaching as seems appropriate.

Q&A (10 min)

Return to the regular teaching space and invite any questions on preaching that may have arisen.

Homework for next time (5 min)

Present homework assignments & take any questions that arise.

1. Read in *Thematic Preaching*: choose one chapter in Section 2 that is closest to your own topic
2. Keep writing! For our last class, try to finish a rough draft of your sermon (full manuscript or notes).

Let participants know there will be time for each person who wishes to give a portion of their sermons in front of the class and receive constructive feedback. Consider setting up one or more additional preaching/feedback sessions if there is interest.

Closing (5 min)

Invite people to go around the circle and share one thing that they appreciated or learned during this session.

Thank participants for coming and extinguish the chalice.

Session 4: August 30, 2010

Welcome and opening words (5 min)

Ask participants to sign in and make nametags as they arrive.
Begin with chalice-lighting and opening words.

Suggested opening words:

Today's opening words come from a story by Judith Hoehler about a preacher and a businessperson who was known to disagree with the preacher on most issues:

After one particularly disconcerting sermon, another member of the congregation approached the industrialist with the following question: "Why do you come so faithfully when you so often disagree with what the minister says?" "Ah," smiled the industrialist. "Let me tell you. About a year ago I was very depressed, on the verge of suicide. I went to see the minister, spent over an hour in the parsonage study, but, when I left, I was still intent on ending my life. It was early in the evening and I walked to the bridge over the river. As I prepared to mount the rail, I was aware that I was not alone. I turned and there was the minister, about thirty paces behind me. 'Go away,' I called. 'I don't want your company.' 'I'm not accompanying you,' the minister replied, 'I'm simply out for an evening stroll.'

"Angrily, I plunged deeper into the park. Seeing that I was still being followed, I turned back into the city. All night I walked the streets. Every time I turned around, there was the minister, a discreet distance behind me. Finally, morning came. Exhaustion overtook me and the urge to kill myself left. Only when I put the key in my own door did the minister turn and go home. Let me tell you: Whatever the minister wishes to preach about, I will listen."

—Judith Hoehler, quoted in Scott Alexander, *The Relational Pulpit*, pp. 81–82.

I chose this story to remind people that the preacher's relationship with the congregation is just as important as the words of the sermon, if not more so. Remember the ties of trust you have already built with your congregation. When deep trust and love are present, the words of the sermon may be heard deeply too.

Check-in (5 min)

Invite participants to go around and say a few words about how this week's writing process went for them—something they enjoyed, or maybe something they would like help with.

Preaching practice (70 minutes)

Bring the group into your worship space, with the sound system (if any) already turned on. Divide up the time evenly for each person who wants to preach. Invite volunteers, one at a time, to preach an excerpt from their sermon. After each person is finished, invite the group to offer constructive feedback, perhaps based on the following questions. (You might choose to create handouts or post the questions on a flip chart.)

- What in this sermon spoke to you or touched you particularly?
- Was the train of thought easy to follow? Could any transitions be improved?
- Any helpful feedback on the delivery?
- Anything that didn't work as well for you?
- *Ask the preacher:* What kind of feedback would be helpful to you?
- *Finish with this:* What affirmations would you give this preacher—what did they do especially well?

Note: If there is time, you might consider adding enough sessions so that everyone who wishes can preach their entire sermons, not just an extract, and receive feedback.

Evaluations (5 min)

Ask participants to fill out the attached evaluation form, which includes the question “Would you like to preach your sermon at a Sunday worship service?” Explain what support will be provided if they accept the invitation—e.g., does your congregation have a Worship Associates program? Are you available to serve as coach and/or worship leader? Who generally chooses and leads the other elements of the service—hymns, readings, etc.?

Collect the evaluation forms.

Closing (5 min)

Invite people to go around the circle and reflect briefly on what they've learned.
Thank participants and extinguish the chalice.

Follow-up

Follow up as needed to schedule preaching dates for those who would like to preach their sermons in a worship service.

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Evaluation form

To help our congregation improve our programming, we invite you to reply to the following questions. Thank you!

Your name: _____

What did you hope to gain from this class? Were those expectations met?

What did you like about the class?

What do you wish had been different?

Would you like to preach your sermon at a worship service?

Yes, please contact me to arrange a date.

I'm not sure.

No, thanks.

Is there anything else you would like us to know?

May we have permission to quote you anonymously in publicity materials for the church?

Yes, go ahead.

No, please don't quote me.