

“And the Preaching Award Goes to...”

“This year’s recipient of the H.A. Ironside Award for Preaching goes to... Rod Casey.” This was the announcement I dreamt of in my head as I headed into my final year at Dallas Seminary. Just to be clear, these words were never spoken from any platform, it never happened, but I desperately wanted them to. If I had won the coveted “best graduating senior in the academic field of homiletics” back in 1987, I’m pretty sure I wouldn’t be telling you about it. Doing that would label me a “narcissist.” It’s bad enough to be a “codependent” with a generous helping of “paranoia” than to have to go around obsessing about whether others think I’m “too obsessed with myself.” Though I do think about myself a lot. Don’t you? Back to the point...

Graduation was the following May and preaching courses were my fourth love. I have to say “fourth” because all true believers know Who should be our first love, and family is supposed to be next, “I’m third” as the silicone wristband reminded us, and then, and only then, you get to fill in the blank after that. Preaching was the reason I had risked applying to DTS in the first place. I say “risked applying” because my college gpa didn’t meet the minimum requirement this prestigious institution demanded. I have no idea why they agreed to let me come on academic probation. They must have built a new building with a mortgage that needed my tuition. Or did somebody in the admissions department make a mistake? Oh no, is my degree legitimate? Never mind, there’s paranoia sneaking up on me again. Regardless, they let me in, and I found an academic home in the pastoral ministries department with an emphasis on the rhetorical tools available to communicate Bible truths. Common folk simply call it preaching. Those of us in the know call it homiletics. What it takes to deliver homilies that keep people from snoring. And if those homilies are good, the rabble might ‘be and do’ what you say the Good Book says they ought to ‘be and do.’

I grew up listening to a lot of homilies... mostly from my dad. He was a preacher and he did it three time weekly. But I don’t remember much of anything he said. Sorry, dad. Guest preachers were better because they told more stories. Jim Hylton was polished and nice to kids... I liked him. Ben Rogers was an evangelist. He yelled and hit the pulpit sometimes... that helped keep my attention. David Ring was barely twenty-something when I heard him with slurred words and muscle jerks tell his story about being born with cerebral palsy and rattling my comfort zone when he asked, “I have cerebral palsy, what’s your problem?” Undoubtedly, these and others made an impression and shaped my “saying yes” to Jesus. But it wasn’t until Chuck showed up that I encountered the wonderful and wacky world of expository preaching.

During my college years, a friend and I had rebelled by covertly listening to Moody Bible Radio. Moody Radio was off limits at Tennessee Temple University, a school that prided itself in taking the fun out of fundamentalism. The music on WMBR included toe-tapping tunes of Sandi Patty and Larnelle Harris, and we were having none of what “touched your feet before it touched your heart.” And if “the King James Version was good enough for the Priscilla and Aquila...” you know the rest. Can you give me that ole’ time religion? But we were rebelling and didn’t care, so it was there, through the wonder of radio, I discovered “Insight for Living” and the expositional teaching of Chuck Swindoll. And the toe-tapping tunes of Sandi Patty and Larnelle Harris.

Radio preacher Chuck Swindoll had me at “call me Chuck.” His communication was like nothing I’d heard up to that point in my life. Humor with an infectious laugh. Sometimes he couldn’t finish a story without cracking himself up, insisting we wait on him until he was composed. His command of the Bible gave me God-bumps. When he quoted secular, pop culture assertions to illustrate ancient truths I had to steady myself. He borrowed the language of the streets to illuminate words that had been written on papyri. “Can you do that?” I asked as I collected myself. “He just did.” So, when my mom asked me what I wanted for graduation from college, I told her I wanted to visit a school in Dallas where a guy I listened to on the radio went. When she asked why, I said, “If I’m going into the ministry, I want to learn the Bible like he knows it and I want to be able to communicate it half as well.”

John Martin taught me the Bible and Don Sunukjian taught me how to preach it. I’m not blaming either of them for my inadequacies though and neither should you. Back in my day, as they say, every ThM student was required to take two years totaling four semesters of preaching courses. The final semester included the SENIOR SERMON. Of the four hundred or so graduating seniors, the best of those sermons were evaluated by the faculty of the Pastoral Ministries Department. Four of those sermons were then shared during Preaching Week during chapel to the entire student body and the faculty. From those four presentations, a winner was awarded the “gold medal” of preaching... the Harry A. Ironside Award for Preaching. Andy Stanley won the distinction “the best student preacher” the year before, just to give you a hint of this award’s prestige. To say I aspired to hear my name called at my graduation the following May is an understatement. I wasn’t merely hoping to hear my name called, I was already rehearsing the moment.

All the above is the backdrop to this piece of prose. I started preparing for my senior sermon in August, even though sermon wouldn’t be delivered and evaluated until the following spring semester. My text was Psalm 78:72 (NIV), “And David shepherded them with integrity of heart; with skillful hands he led them.” Solid intro, two moves, relevant illustrations, application, and stirring conclusion. Nailed it. The following February I preached it to fellow classmates and the instructor. It was recorded and that recording was chosen as one of **only fifteen** of the four hundred or so that was reviewed by the entire pastoral ministries faculty to be one of the four chosen for preaching week described above.

I was not one of the final four chosen and my name was not called on graduation day to receive the coveted Preaching Award. That honor, however, did go to my friend Tim. Tim and I were close. We lived in adjacent apartment buildings. We carpooled regularly to campus. We went to the same “not so fun” fundamentalist college, I mentioned earlier. We were in a small group together on Friday mornings. We both loved preaching. The sermon he delivered was “money,” as the kids say. We are friends still. Tim is naturally gifted as a communicator, and he works hard to prepare. He shepherds his sheep with integrity and pastoral skill. I was happy for him. Really. He was worthy of the honor. The day I heard he’d won the Preaching Award was the day I first remember experiencing the truth it is easier to “weep with those who weep” than to “rejoice with those who rejoice.” Are you pickin’ up what I’m layin’ down?

The day I heard Tim had won the commendation I had so desperately wanted was a day I had to walk more than one time around my neighborhood block. Suffice it to say, I wore holes in my soles. Now before you judge me “petty” or worse yet, “narcissistic;” here’s the rest of the story. Remember how I told you I started preparing in August before presenting the following spring. Because of our close relationship, I knew something few did. Tim started preparing for the sermon that won the preaching prize on Sunday the same week he gave it in class. I began in August. He started preparing on Sunday.

I had this experience nearly forty years ago. A reflection on it is this... our motivation for preaching is the love of it. We encounter the Transcendent while we are studying the Holy Text. It asks us questions that we never knew we needed to answer. Its assertions make explicit the implicit longings of our soul. We discover for the first time or remember for the nth time the kind of person our new creation in Christ aspires to be. And because our Christian formation is always also for the sake of others, we are eager to share what we experienced in private publicly with others.

The experience of not getting what I wanted and the work of truly celebrating my friend’s giftings played a necessary part in my soul’s maturity. Providentially, we both got what we needed. I studied and meditated on a pericope I can still quote by memory; Psalm 78:72. The experience invited me to explore my motivations for the ministry of preaching and teaching. My awareness of the pitfalls of comparison came into full view. My human temptation to all or nothing thinking surfaced because of this experience.

- I can’t preach. Who am I kidding?
- I’m not that good at anything.
- Why do I even try?
- Everything I do takes a lot longer than everybody else.
- Nobody wants to hear what I have to say.
- Nobody likes me. Everybody hates me. Guess I’ll eat some worms. Big fat juicy ones. Long, thin juicy ones. See how they wiggle and squirm?

I bring this “thorn in the flesh” to Jesus again and again and again. I wish somebody reading could give witness to what I’m writing. I guess it’s just me. The prize in preaching is not the transactional, performance-based accolades of recognition. That’s nice if you get it. The prize is the character formation the discipline works in us. A clear conscience, a life of integrity, and the privilege of translating words originally written to ancient culture and applying them into real life situations of the people we shepherd.

I suggest a fitting analogy is basketball. I am physically suited for the game of football. The frontline kind, not the wide receiver kind. Regardless, hoops is my jam and has been since I can remember myself. I live under the ridiculous delusion that if I’d had better coaching, I could have played in the NBA. Blame the coach. That’s my go-to. Before I hung up my kicks a few years back, I played pick-up games at the local rec center several times a week. We kept score, yes. But for most of us, we weren’t interested in stacking the teams. We didn’t hand out a trophy for top scorer and most rebounds. We sweated, called our own fouls, helped each other up off the floor, celebrated each other’s steals and chided easy layups missed. Why? Because if you can’t make a lay-up you deserve to be made fun of. No, really, why did we do it at all? Because

anything worth doing is worth doing poorly. We didn't want to play poorly, but what does that mean anyway? You do your best. You play your part. We trust the process, we release the results.

Now back to preaching. We work the process. We release the outcomes. Can you believe we get to do it at all? Do we really have some rabble who listens to us ramble on about ox laws, asses that speak (King James baby), and how it matters to them on Tuesday? Is it possible that we've ever heard someone say, "You've been reading my mail, preacher. That really helped me. Thank you." Let's focus on faithfulness, not outcomes. Let's prepare. Let's preach. Let's place the outcomes in God's providence. Prepare. Preach. Providence. Now throw in a poem and you've got a homily.

And I'm betting on God that someday, in the not-too-distant future, you're going to get a heavenly award for that. "And the award for preaching goes to... you, and you, and you!" It'll be so worth it. Keep preaching, preacher.

Rod Casey is the Director of the Theological Education Initiative, a resource center for ministry leaders in Central Missouri and the author of a ministry memoir entitled, "The Power of a Whisper: My Unexpected Journey and the Everyday Wisdom It Holds."